

Placement Sufficiency Strategy for Children in Care and Care Leavers

2024 - 2027

Dorset Council, Children's Services

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Foreword

I am delighted to share with you our Sufficiency Strategy for 2024-2027. This is our strategy for how we will continue to implement and deliver arrangements that wrap around our children and families to ensure they receive the right support at the right time. We want to deliver the best possible outcomes for children when they are in our care and as they enter adulthood.

Our aim is always to keep our children close to home and to be the best corporate parents that we can be. Where we can, we want to support families to stay together, but where children and young people do need care, we want to make sure this is in family-based care where possible and that we support extended family networks to be able to raise their children. We will actively seek out and work with a child's direct and extended family and friends in considering the best forms of support. We will prioritise loving relationships for all children in care and care leavers and ensure we have a wide range of care options in place locally through having the right number, type and quality of foster carers, residential homes, and accommodation. Where children cannot return to their birth family, we want to secure timely and successful permanence through adoption wherever this is assessed as the best plan for the child.

Our ambitions for all children and young people in Dorset are set out in our partnership's ten-year plan – [Children, Young People and Families' Plan 2023 to 2033 - Dorset Council](#). This Sufficiency Strategy and its supporting action plan are how we implement the activity required for our Good Care Provision priority.

My sincere thanks to all the families, carers, colleagues, partners, and elected members who all play a huge role in making Dorset a great place to grow up and above all to our amazing children and young people who have told us the importance of belonging and what that means to them – that they want all children to thrive in Dorset. My commitment to you is that we will continue to work tirelessly to make that a reality for every child and young person in Dorset.

Theresa Leavy,

Executive Director People: Children's Services

Dorset Council

1. Introduction

Welcome to Dorset Council's Placement Sufficiency Strategy for Children in Care and Care Leavers, 2024 to 2027.

Dorset Council is committed to supporting a child's right to family life and we are focused on providing services that:

- Support families to care for their own children, preventing the need for children to enter the care system.
- Support extended families to care for children through kinship care arrangements.
- Support children to live in a family setting wherever possible when in care.
- Provide loving and stable homes for children while they are in our care.
- Provide high quality and safe accommodation for care leavers.

When children do come into our care it is important that we are able to offer the right home that meets their needs and enables them to remain in touch with the people and communities that are important to them. As children leave our care and enter adulthood, we want them to have the best possible access to high quality accommodation with the right support that meets their needs.

This strategy sets out how Dorset Council will meet these objectives. It sets out our understanding of current needs, availability of provision, and our plans for development over the next 3 years.

Our ambitions for our children in care and care leavers have informed our '**Strategic Priorities**' for this Sufficiency Strategy.

Our Strategic Priorities are to:

- 1. Support more children to stay with their birth parents or within their wider family networks.**
- 2. Increase the provision of local, high quality foster care so that more children who cannot live with birth family are provided with alternative family-based care.**
- 3. Only place children and young people in residential care where their needs cannot be met within a family, and to increase local provision so that when we do so, we do not place them at distance.**
- 4. Increase and improve specialist provision for children and young people with significant mental health and/or complex needs.**
- 5. Secure timely permanence outside of care through adoption and special guardianship for all children where this is in their best interests.**
- 6. Raise our ambitions for our care leavers and increase the quantity, quality, and range of care leaver accommodation and support to promote stability, safety, and emotional wellbeing.**
- 7. Manage placement resources effectively.**

The Strategy sets out in detail how we will go about addressing each of those seven Strategic Priorities and identifies some high-level success measures. If we are successful in delivering this strategy, we would expect to see:

- Fewer children in care.
- A higher proportion of children in care placed in foster care.
- Fewer young people in residential care and more of those who are, being placed in Dorset.
- Increased provision for young people with mental health and complex needs.

- More children moving to adoption and special guardianship more quickly.
- No care leavers in bed and breakfast accommodation.
- Well managed placement resources.

We will measure ourselves against these high-level indicators, while also setting out more detailed actions and performance measures in an accompanying action plan.

2. Our legal Duties

There are a range of legal duties associated with an overall ‘Sufficiency Duty’ on local authorities as part of the Children Act, 1989, to secure accommodation for children in their care within the local authority area:

- Section 17(1) sets out the general duty of a local authority to provide a range and level of services to children in need and their families in a local area that are appropriate to their needs.
- Section 20 requires local authorities to provide accommodation for children in need within the area if they appear to require accommodation.
- Section 21 requires a local authority to accommodate certain children who are remanded or who are subject to a criminal court order.
- When deciding on the most appropriate placement, Section 22 requires a local authority to give preference to a placement with a relative, friend or other person connected with the child and who is also a local authority foster parent.
- Section 22C sets out additional factors which must be taken into consideration when deciding the most appropriate placement:
 - Allowing child to live near their home.
 - Not disrupting child’s education/training
 - Enabling the child and other sibling to live together.
 - Meeting the needs of disabled children
 - Providing accommodation in the local authority area unless that is not reasonably practicable.
- The Children and Social Work Act 2017, extends the duties on all local authorities to have regard to a set of Corporate Parenting Principles when exercising their functions in relation to children in care and care leavers up to the age of 25.

3. The Dorset Promise

It takes a community to make a difference to the lives of our care experienced children and young people. This strategy is aimed at ensuring a sufficient quantity and range of high-quality care placements and accommodation for children in care and care leavers so that we support improved outcomes. Our Dorset Promise to children in care and care leavers makes a number of commitments to how we will work with and support our children and young people by:

- Keeping our word. Being honest, kind, and reliable.
- Listening to you and involving you.
- Working with you.
- Helping you to be safe.
- Supporting you with your health and wellbeing.
- Supporting you to live your life by providing you with opportunities and activities and celebrating your achievements.
- Helping you to have aspirations for your future.
- Supporting you to be steady and settled as adult.

You can see our full promise on the Council’s website [The Dorset Promise - Dorset Council](#).

4. The Strategic Context

National Strategy: Stable Homes Built on Love

Following an [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#), the government published a new strategy '[Stable Homes Built on Love](#)', which brings forward a range of plans to reform how children's social care is delivered and has changed the national context for social care placement sufficiency. These reforms are being tested through a number of different pathfinders, the most relevant of which to this strategy are the 'Families First' and 'Regional Care Cooperative' pathfinders.

Families First

Dorset Council has been invited to be a pathfinder authority to implement the reforms under the Families First for Children programme, the key strands of which are:

- Family Help – establishing locally based multi-disciplinary teams that work collaboratively with partners to provide intensive, non-stigmatising and effective support that is tailored to the needs of children and families.
- Child Protection – a more specialised service response involving workforce transformation.
- Family Networks – greater use of family care and support, with earlier use of family group decision-making, with support to enable more children to live at home or to transition into kinship care.
- Safeguarding Partners – greater clarity on multi-agency roles and responsibilities, and an increased role for education providers.

We will work on testing and learning from these new approaches over the next 2 years before wider roll out across the country.

Regional Care Cooperatives

Regional Care Cooperatives have been recommended to address challenges with care provision across the country. They are described as a model for providing homes for children where responsibility for planning, commissioning and delivery sits at a regional level, rather than with individual local authorities. The government's intended outcome of this approach is improved planning which increases the available number of care placements and enables local authorities to manage the care market. Regional areas have been invited to participate in these pathfinders. Dorset Council, along with 13 other local authorities in the South-West has expressed an interest in becoming a regional care cooperative and have moved to phase 2. Regional Care Collaboratives will be required to focus on the following activities:

1. Carrying out regional data analysis and forecasting future needs of homes for children in care, in partnership with health and justice.
2. Developing and publishing a regional sufficiency strategy setting out current provision and action to fill gaps.
3. Market shaping, working as one customer with providers to address local needs, improve value for money and commission the care places required from external providers. This should include

responding to the recommendation from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report on safeguarding children with complex needs in residential settings “to improve commissioning for children with disabilities and complex health needs”, in conjunction with health partners.

4. Recruiting foster parents through a regional recruitment support hub and improving the support offer to both new and existing foster parents. The RCC could also include support for foster parents through involvement of regional health partners, e.g. named nurse for children in care, potentially to help address skills needs around providing trauma-informed care.
5. Developing new regional provision where gaps have been identified.

Local Strategies

Dorset Children, Young People and Families Plan 2023-2033

The Dorset Strategic Alliance for Children and young people is a multi-agency partnership which brings together senior people from across the partnership to shape and transform services for children, young people, and their families to deliver our vision which is:

“We want Dorset to be the best place to be a child, where communities thrive, and families are supported to be the best they can be.”

As a partnership we are committed to laying the foundations for improving life outcomes now that will last into future generations, so have developed a new [ten-year plan](#) that provides a strategic framework for how partners work together. Our priorities for the plan are grouped under seven themes:

1. Best start in life
2. Young and thriving
3. Good care provision
4. Best education for all
5. Best place to live.
6. Local family help
7. Safe at home and in the community

Good Care Provision

In delivery of this sufficiency strategy, we will be guided by the aims set out in the ‘Good Care Provision’ theme which states that we will explore different ways to promote family support through family decision-making and new approaches to kinship care, working with the wider family and community to provide safe support for our children and young people.

- Our aim is to keep our children close to home and to be the best corporate parents we can be.
- Where we can we want to support families to stay together. Where children and young people do need care, we want to make sure this is in family-based care wherever possible, and that we support extended family networks to be able to raise their children.
- We will actively seek out and work with a child’s direct and extended family and friends in considering the best forms of support.
- We will prioritise loving relationships for all children in care and care leavers and ensure we have a wide range of care options in place locally by ensuring we have the right number, type and quality of foster carers, residential homes, and accommodation.

- Where children cannot return to birth family, we want to secure timely and successful permanence through adoption wherever this is the best plan for the child.
- We want to reduce inequalities for children in care and care leavers ensuring we improve their health and wellbeing and are ambitious for them to achieve their potential, recognising the important foundation that stability and consistency of relationships with care providers gives.
- In addition, we want to make sure that there are a range of short breaks available to support families with children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities to be able to continue to care for their children.
- Our ambition is that more of our children and young people, who need care, are cared for in Dorset. When a child or young person needs care, if they are closer to their home and community, the people, and the services they already know will be able to continue to help them, this helps to ensure better outcomes for young people.

Corporate Parenting Strategy

Our Corporate Parenting Strategy [Dorset's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2020 to 2023 - Dorset Council](#) sets out the key priorities and actions required to ensure we are providing our looked after children and young people with the best start in life so they can achieve their full potential.

1. Increase opportunities to hear the voice of our children and young people and to take their views, wishes and feelings into account when developing our services
2. Promote better physical and mental health and well-being through improved access to health information and services
3. Have high aspirations for children in care and care leavers in their education, training, and employment
4. When children are unable to live within their family, we will ensure our children are matched to carers who promote local connections, provide safe and stable placements and achieve timely permanence
5. For our children to have a good and enriching experience of care provision and to prepare for adulthood and an independent and successful life.

5. Our Care Family – A Snapshot

Our Care Family: A Snapshot



Our Children in Care

We have **465** children in our care  **399** from Dorset

66 are unaccompanied children and **49** have a Disability

77% of our children in care are White or White British with **23%** from Black and Minority ethnic groups

The Care We Provide

310 of our children in care are living with foster carers (**67%**)

58 children are living with connected carers

196  **42%** of our children in care are living outside Dorset

Half of our unaccompanied children live in supported

53 children are living in residential children's homes



Our Care Leavers

We have **542** care experienced young people in our care leaver family



309 are receiving a service from a Personal Advisor. Of these:

164 are Female  **139** are Male 

52 are Former Unaccompanied Children

33 Have a Disability 

60% of our care leavers are in Education, Employment and Training

Caribbean
Irish
and
Other
White
Black
Asian
African
Bangladeshi
Pakistani
Chinese
Indian
Middle Eastern

79% of our care leavers are White or White British with **21%** from Black and Minority ethnic groups

98% of our care leavers are in Suitable Accommodation

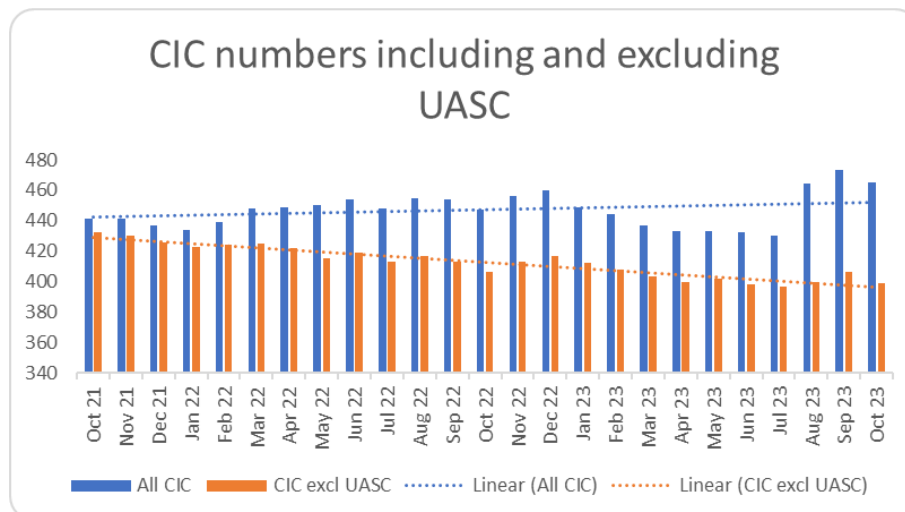
Figures as at the end of October 2023

6. Our Children and Young People

Family help, child protection and edge of care

- There are over 1500 children being supported through Early Help services across the county, the numbers supported this way has been steadily growing over the past 5 years.
- There are around 1200 children being supported by a social worker through a child in need plan. The rate of children in need has decreased over the past year and in line with our statistical neighbours.
- 10% are children who are disabled who are being supported in range of different ways including through Direct Payments and the provision of short breaks.
- We support 133 Young Carers; these are children under 18 who provide significant support to someone who is physically or mentally ill or disabled. We offer guidance and support including short breaks and advocacy [Dorset Young Carers Service - Dorset Council](#).
- We work closely with our Housing Department to undertake joint assessments for all 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless, of which we have 17 currently placed. The accommodation needs for homeless young people are met through our Supported Accommodation Framework.
- The number of children who are subject to child protection plans, and for whom there is a greater risk of being cared for by the council, has been stabilising, at around 300, to a level comparable to statistical neighbours, and reduced again in October.

Children in Care



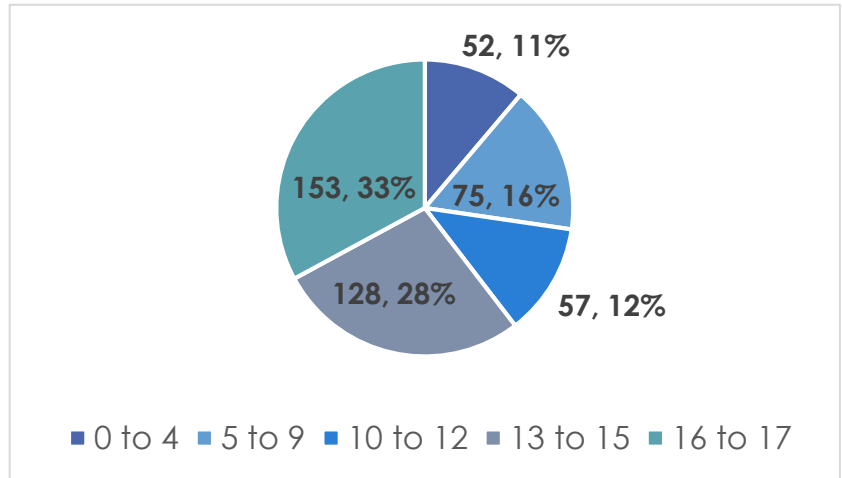
- The number of Children in Care is 465, of whom 399 are children from Dorset and 66 are unaccompanied children.
- The rate of children in care, excluding unaccompanied children, has been reducing over the last 3 years and is now 60 per 10,000 population. This is still higher than the rate of statistical neighbours and we expect our numbers of children in care to steadily reduce over the next 3 years. If we became comparable to statistical neighbours, we would have 375 children from Dorset in our care.
- We have seen a rapid increase in the number of young people in care who have arrived in the UK unaccompanied seeking asylum. This is likely to stabilise at the current level of 0.1 per 10,000 of the child population.

- 80% of unaccompanied children are aged 16 to 17 years old requiring support to prepare for independent living. Most unaccompanied children are placed outside of Dorset.

About our children in care

Sex

- There are more boys (278, 60%) than girls (187, 40%) in our care family. These proportions are greatly affected by the profile of our unaccompanied children, with only 1 unaccompanied girl in our care. If this cohort were to be excluded the proportions would be more equal with 53% male and 47% female.



Age

- There are more teenagers (281, 60%) in our care than younger children (184, 40%). A breakdown of age groups is provided below. Again, this is impacted by the number of unaccompanied children, who are more likely to be older teenagers. There are over 100 children aged between 5 and 12 years.

Ethnicity

- The majority of our children in care (77%) are white, although when excluding unaccompanied children this proportion is much higher at 90%. The table below shows the ethnic backgrounds of our total care family and compares unaccompanied children with children from Dorset.

Ethnic background	All children in care	Unaccompanied children	Children from Dorset
White	77%	0%	90%
Mixed race	5%	0%	6%
Asian or Asian British	1%	3%	1%
Black or Black British	4%	21%	1%
Other ethnic group	12%	76%	2%

Types of homes for our children

- The majority of our children (310, 67%) are living with foster carers. Most of our children are living with stranger foster carers (252, 80%), with 58 (20%) living with connected carers or kinship care. About 50% of unaccompanied children are living in foster care, with the rest living in supported accommodation.
- A further 25 children are placed with parents in readiness for reunification and 14 have been placed for adoption.
- 54 children are living in an Ofsted registered children's home.
- 48 are living in supported accommodation that is registered with Ofsted or in the process of being registered.
- 45% of our children in care are placed with private providers.

Locations of homes for our children

- 196 children in care are living outside Dorset (42%). Although still higher than we would like, this has reduced since 2021/22 when the proportion was 47%. Excluding unaccompanied children, the proportion of our children in care living outside of Dorset is 36%.
- Just over one third (36%) are living more than 20 miles away from home – this has also reduced from previous years.
- Many children living outside the council's boundary are living in neighbouring local authority areas, which can be closer to home. Just under a quarter (24%) of children in care live outside Dorset and more than 20 miles away from home.
- A small % of unaccompanied children are living in Dorset (10%)
- 20 Dorset children and young people currently live in Dorset children's homes. This means that 33 children still live in residential settings outside of Dorset.

Children coming into our care

- Excluding unaccompanied children, on average around ten children from Dorset enter our care every month and they generally do so in a planned way, through care orders, with very few entering our care through the use of police powers.
- The number of unaccompanied children arriving through the national transfer scheme has stabilised for now but could well increase in the coming months and years and this is difficult to predict.

Children leaving our care

- An average of 11 children and young people leave our care every month.
- Children who have been in our care for a long time tend to stay in our care until their 18th birthday.
- In the last 12 months:
 - 55 young people left care as they turned 18 years old (32%)
 - 17 (11%) children were adopted and there are 34 waiting to be adopted
 - 48 children (31%) returned home.
 - 21 (14%) left through a special guardianship order or child arrangement order

Stable homes for our children

- We want to make sure that we provide the right homes for our children and avoid unnecessary moves. Long-term placement stability for those that have been in our care for more than 2 ½ years has increased over the past year, with almost 2/3 in the same home for 2 years or more. The proportion of children who have had 3 or more placement moves in the last 12 months is around 10%.

Wellbeing of our children in care

- Timely Identification of the health needs of children as they come into our care is a challenge, with initial health assessments often taking longer than the required 20 days. This is particularly marked for those placed out of area.
- Children in care in Dorset are more likely to have poor emotional wellbeing as measured through the strengths and difficulties questionnaire.
- Immunisation take-up is good, however, access to dentistry is a particular challenge for our young people in Dorset.

Our children in care have told us:

- Following a good response rate to our Bright Spots New Belonging Survey (in partnership with Coram Voice) and an active children in care council that meets to develop priorities, we have rich information on what is important to them and been involved in the development of the Corporate Parenting Strategy and the [Dorset Promise](#). The following areas of strength were identified and areas for development.

Areas of strength: Children in care in Dorset	Areas for development: Children in care in Dorset
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Trust their carers and most trust their social worker ➤ Feel their carers are interested in their education. ➤ Are more likely to have the same social worker for the last 12 months than the rest of the country. ➤ Spend time outdoors. ➤ Like their bedrooms ➤ Mostly feel safe where they live. ➤ Mostly feel like life is getting better. ➤ Are supported to participate in their children in care reviews and have access to advocacy. ➤ We have low levels of complaints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Need to feel more positive about the future. ➤ Don't always feel good about school. ➤ Are sometimes afraid to go to school because of bullying. ➤ Want to do similar things to their friends. ➤ Don't always have at least one really good friend. ➤ Want to feel happier about themselves. ➤ Would like to see brothers, sisters, and dads more

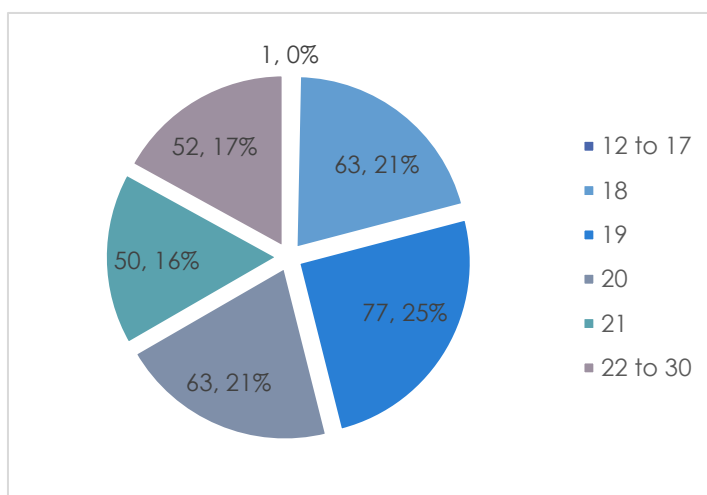
In summary:

- We need to continue to increase the number of children supported to stay with their families.
- We need to increase the number of children that can be supported by their wider family networks.
- We currently have too many children placed out of the local area in residential care and supported accommodation – this is particularly true for unaccompanied children.
- We have a growing population of children within Black and minority ethnic groups and therefore need carers that reflect their cultural diversity.
- We have a growing population of children in our care whose first language is not English, and we need to be able to support them.
- We need to increase the number of children that are cared for by their extended family networks.

- We need to continue to support children to return to their families.
- We need to make sure that the children in our care are supported by their schools.
- We need to make sure that we can support the emotional wellbeing of the children in our care.
- We need to make sure that we support our children in care to make friends and get involved in activities.
- We need to make sure that we support the children in our care to keep in touch with and regularly see the people that are important to them.
- We need to make sure that we enable our children in care to have a strong voice and participate in their plans and reviews and tell us when things aren't working.

Our Care Leavers

1. As most of our children in care have remained in care until their 18th birthday, our care leaver family has been growing over the last 3 years. We now have 542 care experienced young people in our care leaver family, with just over 300 receiving a service from a Personal Advisor. We anticipate that this growth will continue slowly until we reach a peak of around 320 care leavers receiving a service in 2025, when it will begin to fall in line with the reduction of children in care.



2. Of those care leavers that are receiving a service a higher proportion are female (164, 54%) than male (139, 46%). This is different to the current children in care population where there are more boys than girls. There are a similar proportion of care leavers as children in care that have a disability 10 per cent (33).
3. A high proportion of our care leavers that are receiving a service are aged between 18 and 21 years. The pie-chart above shows the age distribution.
4. A slightly higher proportion of our care leavers are white (79%) and 21% are from Black and Minority ethnic backgrounds, but this profile may change as our current unaccompanied children become older and they go through the asylum claim process.
5. 97% of our care leavers are living in accommodation that is considered suitable. Whilst the picture is improving and we have seen an increase in Care Leavers remaining in their foster placement after their 18th birthday, we know not as many of our young people are benefiting from these arrangements as we would like. A high proportion of our care leavers live in supported accommodation (for longer than we would like) as a result of lack of alternative move on provision.
6. The Care leaver service undertakes weekly monitoring for a small number of care leavers placed in unsuitable accommodation, this includes young people who are living in temporary B+B and young people in prison to ensure active plans are in place regarding finding suitable accommodation and planning for release from prison.

Our care leavers have told us

7. Following a 60% response from young people in the New Belongings survey, 'Your Life Beyond Care) we have rich information which supports us in service development and delivery for our Care Leavers. In addition, care experienced young people have been involved in the design and delivery of our strategies and plans across the year – including our Corporate Parenting Strategy and the development of the [Dorset Promise](#). The table below highlights areas of strength and areas for development.

Areas of strength - Care Leavers from Dorset	Areas for development - Care Leavers in Dorset:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have trusted relationships with their personal advisors and find it easy to get in touch with them. • Have people who believe in them. • Are more likely to have had the same leaving care worker for more than 12 months than care leavers elsewhere. • Are more likely to have pets compared to care leavers nationally and get a great deal of emotional support from their pets. • Have coproduced our care leaver offer including the expansion of support for emotional wellbeing through 'Ask Jan' and the care leaver nurse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Told us housing was the biggest priority for them: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Over one third feel that the accommodation they live in is not right for them and don't always feel safe in the area they live. ○ Difficulties in accessing social housing or affordable private provision. • Many report finding it hard to cope financially. • Want to feel more positive about the future. • Are less likely to have a trusted person in their lives or a really good friend than their peers. • Are more likely to have a long-term health problem or disability than care leavers elsewhere in the country.

In summary:

- We need to ensure that we lay the foundations for friendship and the development of lifelong links for children when they are in our care supporting these to endure into adulthood.
- We need to continue to offer a wide range of support to our care leavers both within and outside Dorset, including financial support such as council tax exemptions.
- We need to focus on the provision of high-quality accommodation that feels safe and is affordable.
- We need to work with colleagues and partners to support our care leavers with their health and wellbeing.
- We currently have a growing number of care leavers living outside the county, so we need to develop more local accommodation options – including supported lodgings providers that come from a diverse range of backgrounds to meet the needs of our growing Black and Minority Ethnic groups.
- We need to make sure we are offering a wide range of education and work opportunities for our care experienced young people locally.

7. What we have achieved through our last strategy

In our last strategy we set ourselves several goals, this section describes the progress we have made:

- We have **reduced the rate of children in our care** from Dorset to 60 per 10,000, however changes to the National Transfer scheme and the high court ruling relating to placement of unaccompanied children

in hotels by the DfE resulted in a rapid increase in the number of unaccompanied children being care for by Dorset so our overall rate of children in care is 71 per 10,000.

- There has been a **reduction in children in care placed out of area** from 47% in 2020 to 42% in 2023. Again, this has been impacted by the number of unaccompanied children who are more likely to be placed out of area – if these are excluded the proportion placed out of area is 36%
- We have **increased the number of children's homes** places in Dorset from 16 to 30. This would have been higher, but 2 children's homes operated by an independent residential provider have closed.
- Although the number of in-house fostering households has remained the same, we have **increased the number of children our in-house foster carers are caring for** through better utilisation rates. We have also implemented **an increase in foster carer payments to in-house foster carers** (above inflation) to recognise the invaluable role they play in caring for our children.
- We have implemented a new **evidenced based model of sustainable foster care – Mockingbird**, offering structured support and relationships that mirrors an extended family. The model nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community.
- We have implemented a **new framework contract for supported accommodation** which is supporting providers to meet the requirements of the new regulations. There are five local providers on the framework offering 87 places.
- We have **implemented a new model of support and care for teenagers who are on the edge of care, at risk of placement breakdown or in insecure accommodation** – through the 'Harbour' approach. The Harbour approach is a multi-agency partnership that pools resources to achieve improved outcomes for children, families, and communities, and reduce spending across the public sector and as a result there been a reduction in the number of children placed in residential care, from 63 in 2020 to 53 in 2023. This has a linked 3 bedded residential children's home, College House (rated good by Ofsted).
- We have **converted a range of Dorset Council** properties to develop a range of in-house provision and used this to develop the external residential children. This has included a former office conversion delivering a 3 bedded children's home (College House) and new build 5 bedded home (Chestnut House) on the same site; refurbishing a former supported accommodation unit to provide 12 affordable flats for care leavers and a care leaver hub on the ground floor; repurposing 2 properties formerly let to the public to be registered as children's homes and run by private provider; converted a former bungalow into a residential unit – operated by a private provider; converted a former single placement residential unit into a short breaks home for disabled children, which will be operated by the council and converted a property initially into a single children's home and now transferring into care leaver accommodation.

8. Our Strategic Priorities

Strategic Priority 1

We will support more children to stay with their birth parents or within their wider family networks.

Current position

Locality Model – rebalancing the system

We are successfully rebalancing the system towards earlier help and as a result we are seeing a reduction of children from Dorset entering our care. Our locality model is delivering good services for families and independent evaluation indicates that children and their families are getting the right help at the right time.

Safeguarding Families Together

Our Safeguarding Families Together pilot programme is delivering services to families in the west of the county. This model brings practitioners with expertise in working with adults together with children’s social care in order to provide a whole family approach. This is helping support children to remain being cared for by their families.

Harbour Model

The Harbour outreach model has successfully supported more young people to remain with their families or to go back to live with their families after a period in care. This model has primarily been working with young people living in Weymouth and Portland and the west of the county. There is insufficient capacity to offer services to young people living in the east of the county.

Pause practice

We have invested in the development of a Pause practice in Dorset, which seeks to support women, who have had children removed from their care by offering an intensive and supportive 18-month programme that involves a trusting relationship between a woman and their PAUSE practitioner. Currently 22 women are being supported by the Pause practice.

Parent and child placements

Parent and child placements are placements that can be either foster carer or within a specialist residential assessment facility. The purpose of parent and child placements is to provide parents with the support they need to care for their children or as part of a court ordered assessment.

Dorset Fostering Service has 3 fostering households that are approved to provide parent and child placements and have been utilised on 4 separate occasions this year. Where we are unable to use our in-house parent and child foster placements, we refer to our Independent Fostering Agency Framework, we used independent parent and child placements on 2 occasions this year.

There are no specialist residential parenting provisions within the county of Dorset but there are provisions in our neighbouring authorities. Our need for residential assessments places is low, year to date we have only commissioned one residential unit place.

Outreach support and short breaks for children who are disabled

Strengthening our support offer is a priority to promote family stability and quality of life so that children can continue to live with their birth families. The short breaks offer is key to this.

We commission a short breaks children's home offering four places in the Chesil locality which currently serves the whole county, meaning that some children travel significant distances, and we know we need more provision. We have developed an overnight short breaks children's home in the east of the county (Hayeswood) which will offer two to three places. We also need provision in the North locality offering at least two places. Short breaks with linked host families are also needed to help fill the gap in overnight provision and this is being developed with our Fostering and Shared Lives services.

We have a range of short breaks daytime activities and have been promoting improved accessibility to a range of activities for children and young people with disabilities through our Holiday Activity and Food Programme. There is not currently enough short breaks provision in Chesil and West localities and the offer for those aged 18 to 25 years needs significant development. We are working with NHS colleagues to develop provision for children with physical disabilities and complex health needs.

Families in receipt of direct payments can struggle to find people and/or providers that are able to support them.

Currently we are spot purchasing a range of in-home and community support for families who have children with complex needs and disabilities, and it is not cost-effective.

Reunification

We recognise that overtime birth family's circumstance's change and safeguarding concerns and risks that lead to children becoming children in care may reduce. We will therefore ensure that reunification to birth families is kept under review and take the necessary assessments and support plans to return children to live with their birth families.

Next steps

We will:

1. Ensure, through implementation of our new Family Network Strategy, within our Families First Pathfinder model, that we deliver family led decision making for all families and provide Family Network Support Packages to remove barriers to children staying at home.
2. Devolve money to the voluntary and community sector to encourage and facilitate early community support for families.
3. Extend the Safeguarding Families Together provision across all Dorset localities.
4. Develop a Harbour East adolescent service in East Dorset
5. Extend the Pause programme, and scope the next community of women, up to 24 in total for 2024 who could benefit from the programme.
6. Continue to deliver parent and child fostering placements internally and expand the number of carers who can offer this, and spot purchase where we need residential provision.
7. Recommission short breaks activities and overnight short breaks and extend the offer to 18-25-year-olds.
8. Work with the Dorset Centre of Excellence to develop residential, and activity based short breaks for disabled children in the North of the county.

9. Develop a Lighthouse model of outreach support for children with disabilities and implement a framework of commissioned providers offering in-home support to better manage costs and improve quality.
10. Open Hayeswood short break home to provide overnight short breaks for disabled children and outreach support to their families.
11. Continue to use HAF funding to increase access to community provision.
12. Develop a range of services that can accept Direct-Payments and develop support for families who are in receipt of Direct Payments.
13. Develop a reunification strategy and use kinship care and other family network arrangements to support children to return to birth families.

Strategic Priority 2

We will increase the provision of local, high quality foster care so that the vast majority of children who cannot live with birth family are provided with alternative family-based care.

Current position

In-house fostering

We have 171 fostering households: 112 are mainstream (stranger foster carers) and 58 are connected person (kinship) carers. The demographic make-up of our foster carers does not match the demographics of our care population. There are fewer carers from Black and Minority Ethnic Groups and fewer carers that can care for teenagers. We have improved efficiency by reviewing the availability of our approved foster carers to increase the proportion who are active and able to receive children, improving our utilisation rate from 0.65 to 1.08. This has been achieved both by supporting more carers to provide placements, and by deregistering those carers who have reached the end of their fostering career.

We know that Mockingbird foster carer constellations improve resilience in the system and support positivity, connection, and retention. Since 2020 we have implemented five constellations out of a planned ten, which we are aiming to achieve by the end of 2024. We have restructured the service to support this, with a training programme in place.

Short term placements with mainstream foster carers are more likely to be with Dorset Council than independent sector agencies. We believe that our own provision is meeting more complex and challenging needs than private sector providers. We need more Dorset Council foster carers to improve outcomes for children including being able to live closer to home.

To look after children and young people with complex needs and who are members of sibling groups of 3 or more children, foster carers need properties that have sufficient living space, and we need to support this by offering capital funding support to adapt properties. This will improve the availability, stability and permanence outcomes for the children and young people who are in our care.

We forecast that we need an additional 10 internal foster carers for children from Dorset and a further 20 more internal foster carers for unaccompanied children per year.

<p>Independent foster care</p>	<p>We have 108 children with independent foster carers, which is 38% of our total cohort of children in foster care compared to 45% nationally.</p> <p>We participate in regional commissioning arrangements for the delivery of a fostering framework and hold Independent Fostering Agency Surgeries to develop relationships and seek to support better matching for children.</p> <p>We would like to develop better relationships with local foster carers that work for IFAs and the IFAs themselves so that we can increase the number of these that are available for local children.</p>
<p>Kinship care/connected persons</p>	<p>When a child requires to become looked after we strive to identify and place within existing family networks. We currently have 58 connected person carers.</p> <p>As part of our work through the national pathfinder we are keen to make sure that we significantly increase the number of children that can be cared for in their extended family.</p> <p>We will also explore options for children to leave care through putting place permanent kinship arrangements.</p>
<p>Staying Put</p>	<p>For young people moving into adulthood, the Staying Put scheme offers the opportunity to remain with their foster carer after they have turned 18. We need to develop this further.</p> <p>Most of our care leavers remain in care until their 18th birthday. Whilst the picture is improving and we have seen an increase to 29 Care Leavers remaining in their foster placement after their 18th birthday, we know not as many of our young people are benefiting from these arrangements as we would like.</p>
<p>Next Steps</p> <p>We Will:</p> <p>Increase the provision of local high quality foster care so that more children who cannot live with their birth family are provided with alternative family-based care.</p> <p>We will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Deliver a foster-care recruitment and retention strategy with a particular focus on recruitment and retention of carers who can care for adolescents, children with disabilities and unaccompanied children. Our strategy will ensure our 'offer' to foster carers and prospective foster carers is sufficiently attractive. 2) Thoroughly embed therapeutic assessments for prospective foster carers. 3) Participate in the development and implementation of the Southwest regional fostering recruitment hub. 4) Continue to provide high quality support to all our foster carers. 	

- 5) Develop a policy and process where Dorset Foster Carers can apply for Capital Funds to extend their homes to increase availability to foster more children and to accommodate more children who require specialist adaptations.
- 6) Improve out of hours support for foster carers.
- 7) Develop a permanence fostering social worker post that can help ensure children are achieving permanence fostering.
- 8) Participate in regional IFA fostering arrangements.
- 9) Deliver quarterly provider engagement events with IFAs to build relationships.
- 10) Continue to support the Independent Fostering Agency Surgeries.
- 11) Develop specialist, alternative assessment, and support for connected carers under our 'Families First' pathfinder work.
- 12) Develop a dedicated connected persons team within the Fostering Service.

Strategic Priority 3

We will only place children and young people in residential care where their needs cannot be met within a family, and to increase local provision so that when we do so, we do not place them at distance.

Current position

Residential care overview There are currently 31 children's homes places available in Dorset with 20 Dorset children in care living there. We have reduced the number of young people placed in residential care settings over the life of our previous strategy by 10 and there are currently 53.

Many Dorset children and young people who are looked after in children's homes live outside of Dorset, sometimes in neighbouring counties (15 young people) but too often far away from their families and friends (18 young people). Sometimes this is because their needs are particularly complex and they need specialist therapeutic provision, but sometimes this is because we don't have the right provision locally. We need to ensure that young people have every opportunity to live within Dorset. To achieve this more local children's homes are needed.

In-house residential care

College House was opened late 2022 and can accommodate up to 3 children, the home is currently rated as Good. It is part of our harbour outreach model and has a foster carer linked to the provision.

The Cherries Residential Home for children with learning and physical disabilities can accommodate up to 9 children and is rated Good by Ofsted. It has not been full to capacity for some time and the building itself is quite old-fashioned and not as homely as other more modern children's homes. There we are in the process of moving this home to a more homely new build property in Weymouth, Chestnut House, which will offer homes for up to 5 children with disabilities, from early 2024.

We have invested in workforce development for our practitioners working in our residential provision, working alongside the Mulberry Bush, to deliver a level 4 qualification for all workers.

There are workforce challenges within the children's residential home sector, particularly in relation to registered managers.

Externally commissioned residential care

We continue to strengthen relationships with Dorset providers and where appropriate enter block contract arrangements with providers of Ofsted-graded Good and Outstanding homes to ensure local access for Dorset children.

We monitor the track record of children's homes and find homes for our children where provision is of good quality. Regrettably not all the provision in Dorset sustains this level and we will continue to work with providers to achieve good outcomes for Dorset children and young people.

There are a number of children's homes across the county however we need additional provision for young people with complex needs, which includes single occupancy homes.

We need to develop partnership working and continue to engage with emerging providers of residential care in Dorset.

We anticipate needing a further 5 children's homes places in the next year.

The cost of housing within the county can be a deterrent to attracting new external children's homes providers.

Next Steps

We will:

- 1) Place children in residential provision that is judged 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. If we have a child placed in provision that is downgraded to 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' we have an internal procedure regarding enhanced oversight of the provision to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our children to allow them to remain in their home.
- 2) Progress with de-commissioning the Cherries and the opening of Chestnut House five-bedroom accommodation.
- 3) Implement a workforce development strategy for residential care.
- 4) Undertake a procurement exercise to engage providers to run one children's home (1 place) and an overnight short break home (2 places) using current Dorset properties in the East Locality.
- 5) Support external providers with Ofsted registration of a Dorset owned property in Weymouth, to be a forever home for one of our young people.
- 6) Hold quarterly residential engagement events and residential surgeries.
- 7) Continue to bid for properties within the council's owned estate where a conversion into a residential children's home may be possible and offered to approved providers.
- 8) Undertake market engagement with external providers to encourage the setting up of new provision locally.
- 9) Reopen the provider framework annually.
- 10) Offer 2 x 2 bed Dorset Properties to Supported Accommodation Providers to provide accommodation for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children.
- 11) Continue to work in partnership with our providers in preparation for Ofsted inspections in 2024.

Strategic Priority 4

We will increase and improve specialist provision for children and young people with significant mental health and /or complex needs.

Current position

Children with significant mental health and/ or complex needs

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services are mainly provided by Dorset healthcare University Foundation Trust. This includes Core CAMHS, Intellectual Disability (ID) CAMHS; Forensic CAMHS and Pebble Lodge inpatient service. They also provide psychology services for children in care and support to foster carers.

We are working with NHS colleagues to develop care provision for children with complex needs including mental health and neurodiversity which prevents the need for hospitalisation and supports a return to family life. There is an ongoing review and transformation across the Integrated Care System, 'Your Mind Your Say, making **mental health** services better for young people in Dorset'. This is in response to some significant and ongoing challenges, which include:

- Referral numbers have increased significantly post-Covid, and the services are only funded to meet 41% of the prevalent population, and so access to services for children and families was challenging with unmet need.
- The crisis offer to young people and families is not at the level needed.
- The offer to support those with complex needs, such as those who are neurodiverse with eating issues, who self-harm or with gender identity concerns is not right.

The Wessex and Dorset Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Provider Collaborative is responsible for tier 4, specialised mental health services including in-patient services across the region, eating disorder services and a care closer to home team. There are not enough Tier 4 places for children generally and there are particular challenges for young people experiencing mental health crisis and that need intensive treatment locally. Plans are in place to develop a specialist 8 bedded psychiatric intensive care unit in Bournemouth. We seek to work in partnership with children, their families, and the professional network in these circumstances, to ensure the appropriate exit plans and services are in place. We hold a monthly liaison meeting with colleagues from NHS Dorset, part of this meeting is to review progress of young people in such facilities to understand any issues or barriers to exit plans or future services to be provided.

Birth to settled adulthood (B2SA)

The Birth to Settled Adulthood Programme is progressing, and we are developing approaches and services to support children and young people where there is evidence that transition to adulthood has been particularly challenging for services in their current configurations. This has been the case for children who are disabled, and we are developing a new service to meet the needs of children from birth to settled adulthood, normally 25 years old.

Secure estate

Secure welfare provision is used where we are unable to keep children safe in traditional care placements in the community, placements in such arrangements can only be agreed by the Courts. There is a total of 13 Secure Children Homes across England and Wales which can accommodate up to 113 children however demand for such provision outstrips availability, on average there is a waiting list of 50 – 60 children at any one time seeking such an arrangement.

We have made applications for a small number of children to be placed in Secure Welfare provision however we have not placed any children in this provision since the last strategy this is either due to children's need changing and so no longer meet criteria or we have had to seek alternative placements due to lack of availability in Secure.

If a young person is arrested and remanded to the local authorities' care, we seek to consider where safe to do so a placement within the family network. Where this is not possible, we utilise a specialist remand foster care placement, jointly commissioned with BCP Council. In the past year we have utilised this provision on 4 occasions.

Next steps**We will:**

- 1) Continue to support the transformation work identified through the business plan in 2024 and implement new pathways and a new model of provision in 2025 that will include collaboration between NHS, Dorset Council and the Voluntary and Community Sector.
- 2) Work with regional colleagues and with local NHS partners to develop a residential provision for children with complex needs.
- 3) Maintain our monthly liaison meeting regarding children admitted to Tier 4 provision to ensure post discharge support is in place.
- 4) Review and implement an operational service design to be in place by April 2024.
- 5) Deliver the Birth-to-Settled Adulthood (B2SA) commissioning plan including increasing the number of Shared Lives carers for young people aged 16 to 25.
- 6) Explore regional secure provision through the Southwest Sufficiency group.

Strategic Priority 5

We will secure permanence outside of care through adoption and special guardianship for all children for whom this is in their best interests.

Current position

Adoption

Our Adoption Service is currently provided through Aspire, the Regional Adoption Agency for Dorset and Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole Councils. The service is working well. In 2022/23 15% of children who left our care did so via adoption. This compares to 9% nationally and 14% for good and better authorities.

On timeliness, on average children adopted in the six months to end of October 2023 moved from becoming children in care to place for adoption is 536 days (compared to 376 days nationally and 342 days among statistical neighbours) and from Placement Order to a matching decision in 170 days (178 days nationally and 149 days among statistical neighbours)

Special Guardianship

Our Regional Adopting Agency ASPIRE also hold responsibly for Special Guardianship assessment and support work.

Dorset Council acknowledge that Special Guardianship Orders for some of our children is an appropriate permanence pathway and as such we have a clear special guardianship pathway and finance policy to ensure equitability in support packages offered to prospective Special Guardians. In 2022/23, 9% of children who left our care did so via Special Guardianship Orders. This compares to 12% nationally.

We will be looking to review our financial support offer to Special Guardians and to place our Special Guardianship Service back in-house as part of a dedicated Connected Persons Service.

Next steps

We will:

- 1) Support Aspire to develop and implement an effective adopter marketing and recruitment strategy so that the number of adopters is increased.
- 2) Support Aspire to develop and implement multi-agency adoption support arrangements.
- 3) Ensure that childcare social workers and team managers have quality training on permanence planning and adoption.

- 4) Bring the Special Guardianship Service back in-house from Aspire as part of a new 'Connected Persons Service'.
- 5) Develop a comprehensive multi-agency support offer for Special Guardians,
- 6) Support wider birth family network members to secure Special Guardianship Orders for children in the family early on, once it becomes apparent that this is in the child's best interests.

Strategic Priority 6

We will increase the quantity and range of high-quality care leaver accommodation and support to promote stability, safety, and emotional wellbeing.

Current position

Supported lodgings

We have 23 carers offering Supported Lodgings carers to a total of 21 young people aged between 17 and 23 years old. We have a further 3 carers in the assessment process.

We forecast that we need an additional 5 places in supported lodgings for unaccompanied young people.

Supported accommodation framework.

We have been supporting providers to register with Ofsted and develop good quality services to meet regulatory requirements and evidence the outcomes for preparing for adulthood in our refreshed specification under the 2022 re-tendered framework.

Dorset Council commissions 87 local supported accommodation places (up to 18 months duration) for young people aged 16-25 through its Supported Accommodation Framework, of which 15 are for unaccompanied young people seeking asylum who are in care; 30 places are for children in care or care leavers and 40 are for young people aged 16-21 who are at risk of homelessness, although this division is not fixed, and the proportion is an average subject to variation.

We predict that we may need a further 30 places in line with anticipated increase of care leavers in 2025.

<p>Staying Close</p>	<p>In 2022 Dorset was successful in being awarded a 3-year DfE grant to pilot Staying Close, which can help young people stay in touch with and get ongoing support from Children’s Home carers after they move on.</p> <p>Our Staying Close project has seen young people retain links through formalised support arrangements. We are actively supporting 10 young people under Staying Close arrangements.</p>
<p>Independent accommodation for care leavers</p>	<p>We have worked hard to increase the offer of accommodation, having invested in a care leaver accommodation, however we do not have sufficient affordable local homes for our care leavers, and they have told us that they don’t always feel safe in the areas that they live.</p> <p>Despite our best efforts, we have a small number of care experienced young people in Bed and Breakfast at any one time and we work hard to ensure that they are moved to suitable accommodation in the shortest possible time. Personal Advisors work hard to support young people to maintain their tenancies when they are in independent accommodation.</p> <p>The housing market in Dorset is challenging and more local supported and independent housing is needed for former unaccompanied young people seeking asylum and care-experienced young adults.</p> <p>There is an estimated need for housing for young adults exiting supported accommodation of 50 places per year (25-30 for care leavers and 20 for vulnerable young adults at risk of homelessness).</p>
<p>16- & 17-Year-olds at risk of homelessness</p>	<p>When 16- and 17-year-olds are at risk of homelessness we strive to ensure those young people remain with their family by undertaking mediation. We undertake joint housing and social care assessment to understand need and present options to young people.</p> <p>We currently have 17 young people placed in supported accommodation who are not children in care and are living in supported accommodation. This accommodation is secured through our Supported Accommodation Framework.</p> <p>We can also access Night Stop; a service where young people can be placed in an emergency in a host's home for short periods of time whilst assessment of needs is undertaken.</p>
<p>Support for children in care and care leavers</p>	<p>We have an externally commissioned service in place to provide advocacy and Independent Visitors for our children in care. This contract ends in 2024.</p> <p>Our anticipated use of both advocacy and independent visitors under the current contract was lower than anticipated due to low referral numbers and some challenge in recruitment. We also recognise that the referral process to access the support can be cumbersome for practitioners.</p> <p>As part of the pathfinder and in response to new national standards it is anticipated that our need for Advocacy will grow in future years.</p>

<p>Keeping in touch arrangements</p>	<p>We have an in-house service that provides supervised contact arrangements in a number of locations across the county as well as providing support when there is a requirement to observe relationships within a family as they are being assessed. In many cases another practitioner or a carer will facilitate arrangements for keeping in touch with people that are important to a child in our care such as foster carer, residential children's home provider, family worker or social worker.</p> <p>Some children in our care do not think we are getting the levels of contact right for them at the moment, particular arrangements for keeping in touch with brothers and sisters and/or dads.</p>
<p>Emotional Wellbeing and mental health support</p>	<p>Children in care and care leavers are more likely to experience poor mental health. There is a range of support in place including wellbeing practitioners in the children in care and care leaver nursing service; prioritised access to CAMHs; clinical psychology support – provided directly to children and young people, nut also supporting carers. The council also makes provision for and access to support and activities such as counselling, play/art therapy and therapeutic children's homes and education providers.</p> <p>For care experienced young people the council has invested in 'Ask Jan' to give direct access to emotional well-being support and where required they can access Community Mental Health teams.</p> <p>The clinical psychology offers to children in care and those on the edge of care is currently being reviewed as we have not got the right model in place.</p>
<p>Care experience as a protected characteristic</p>	<p>In October 2023 the council approved that it would treat any person who was 'care experienced' as if it were a Protected Characteristic under the Equalities Act 2010 so that any future decisions on services and polices of the Council would be assessed and considered as to the impact on people with care experience.</p>
<p>Care leaver apprenticeships</p>	<p>We have developed 4 apprenticeship opportunities for our Care Leavers within the council as part of our Pathways to Employment Programme.</p> <p>We have committed to fund the necessary tools and training for our apprentices, i.e., internet access at home or additional tuition.</p>
<p>Befriending and Mentoring</p>	<p>Our care experienced young people have told us through surveys that they are less likely than their peers to have at least one good friend. They have also told us that they would like to be able to access more mentoring opportunities or to develop relationships with trusted adults locally to where they live. Therefore, we need to grow this area of support, both for those that live locally as well as those who live outside the county. We have recently been awarded DfE funding to set up a mentoring and befriending programme for our care leavers.</p>
<p>Interpreters and translation services</p>	<p>There has been a significant growth in our need for interpretation and translation services, because of the growth in our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and for care experienced former unaccompanied children and we are currently spot purchasing these from a range of providers at significant cost.</p>

Next steps

We will:

1. Support more of our foster carers, and independent sector foster carers who are fostering Dorset children, to provide them with on-going Staying Put accommodation once they become 18.
2. Embed Staying Close as part of our mainstream offer to care leavers from 2025 when the temporary grant funding ceases.
3. Continue to recruit supported lodgings providers as well as preparing the service for Ofsted inspections of our Supported Lodgings provision from April 2024.
4. Reopen the Supported Accommodation framework annually.
5. Offer 2 x 2 bed Dorset Properties to Supported Accommodation Providers to provide accommodation for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
6. Work in partnership with our Supported Accommodation providers in preparation for Ofsted inspections in 2024.
7. Continue to explore rent guarantee schemes for care leavers to access private rented property.
8. Develop a three-bedroom property in Portland for care leavers.
9. Bid for Capital funds to acquire and/or build up to 20 self-contained flats for care leavers.
10. Continue to bid for properties within the council's property estate which can be converted for both supported accommodation and residential children's homes.
11. Support the delivery of the Council's Housing strategy.

Strategic Priority 7

We will manage placement resources effectively.

Current position

Brokerage

Our Brokerage Service works closely with our internal fostering and residential services as well as external providers of fostering, residential and supported accommodation as well as referring teams to ensure children and young people are matched to appropriate carers.

The team is also responsible for brokering support packages for both families in need of support and for individual children. They are also responsible for undertaking due diligence checks on new provision not under framework agreements, monitoring, and quality assurance of externally commissioned provision.

The team undertake consultations and notifications for children placed outside of Dorset.

Value for money

We strive to utilise all in house provision for our looked after children and where young people are placed with external providers these placements are commissioned under Framework agreements rather than spot purchased arrangements.

We have various mechanisms to track spend to ensure value for money and costs negotiations are undertaken but recognise that we could strengthen the systems around this particularly regarding negotiations of accommodation and support costs for care leavers who remain in supported accommodation.

We have also identified a need to ensure that we take a more systematic approach to ensuring that the right partners are contributing financially to or commissioning a young people's care.

Next steps

We will:

1. Review the current financial panels and process to identify efficiencies and savings.
2. Introduce a new Joint Commissioning Panel.
3. Publish an annual market position statement.
4. Undertake a redesign of the current referral pathway to ensure a strengths-based approach.
5. Improve data collection using current digital systems.

How we will make sure that we deliver our strategy

Our established Sufficiency Board, chaired by the Executive Director People – Children, will continue and will oversee the delivery of this strategy. This Board will report on progress every quarter to the Strategic Alliance for Children, Young People and Families through the 'Good Care Provision' work stream.

The group will develop and deliver a SMART action plan which will be reviewed annually to ensure that it responds to emerging needs, trends, and legislation, such as the proposed introduction of Regional Care Cooperatives proposed as part of the governments 'Stable Homes Built on Love' Strategy.

Partnership engagement with current and prospective providers of care and support for children in care and care leavers will be essential to the delivery of this strategy.

9. How will we know we have been successful?

We have identified the following as high-level success measures.

Strategic Priority 1 - We will support more children to stay with their birth parents or within their wider family networks.

Success measure

- **The number of children in care (not including UAS children) will decrease.** At the end of October 2023, the number of children in care was 399 (not including UAS children)

Strategic Priority 2 - We will increase the provision of local, high quality foster care so that more children who cannot live with birth family are provided with alternative family-based care.

- **The number and proportion of children in care in foster placements will increase.** At the end of October 2023, the number of children in foster care was 310 and the proportion of children in care in foster placements is 67%.

- **The number of children in care living with Dorset Council approved foster carers will increase.** At the end October 2023 there were 182 children placed with Dorset Council foster carers. (This was 125 with mainstream foster carers and 57 with connected persons foster carers)

Strategic Priority 3 - We will only place children and young people in residential care where their needs cannot be met within a family, and to increase local provision so that when we do so, we do not place them at distance.

- **The number of children in care placed in children's homes will decrease.** At the end of October 2023 there were 53 children in care living in children's homes
- **The proportion of children living in children's homes who live within Dorset will increase.** The proportion at the end of October 2023 was 26%.

Strategic Priority 4 - We will increase and improve specialist provision for children and young people with significant mental health and /or complex needs.

- **We will have developed and opened a residential provision for children with complex needs** in partnership with NHS partners.
- **We will increase the number of Shared Lives Carers** for young people aged 18 to 25. The number at the end of October 2023 was 45.

Strategic Priority 5 - We will secure permanence outside of care through adoption and special guardianship for all children for whom this is in their best interests.

- **We will increase the percentage of children who leave care via adoption and/or Special Guardianship.** In 2022/23 24% of children who left care in Dorset left care via adoption or Special Guardianship (15% adoption and 9% Special Guardianship)
- **We will improve the timeliness with which children move through care to adoption.** In October 2023 children adopted in the previous 6 months moved from becoming children in care to placed for adoption in 536 days on average. The number of days adopted children moved from being subject to a Placement Order to being matched with adopters on average was 170 days.

Strategic Priority 6 - We will increase the quantity and range of high-quality care leave accommodation and support to promote stability, safety, and emotional well-being.

- **We will consistently have no care leavers in bed and breakfast accommodation or care leavers who are homeless.** At the end of October 2023 there were 2 care leavers in bed and breakfast accommodation.
- **We will have significantly increased the number of self-contained accommodation units/flats available to Children's Services for allocation to care leavers.** Currently we have the 12 self-contained flats at Kirtleton Avenue.

Strategic Priority 7 - We will manage placement resources effectively.

- The brokerage service will be a 'one stop shop' for all placement and support resources that practitioners need.
- Partnerships with providers will be strong and effective.
- Oversight of provision quality and financial spend will be robust.