

# Bath & North East Somerset Council

MEETING/ DECISION MAKER:	<b>Policy Development &amp; Scrutiny Panel</b>	
MEETING/ DECISION DATE:	<b>9<sup>th</sup> March 2026</b>	EXECUTIVE FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE: <i>[Cabinet reports only]</i>
		<b>E 9999</b>
TITLE:	<b>Children's Services Sufficiency Programme</b>	
WARD:	All	
<b>AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM</b>		
<b>List of attachments to this report:</b> Please list all the appendices here, clearly indicating any which are exempt and the reasons for exemption		

## 1 THE ISSUE

- 1.1 At the request of members, this briefing sets out the issues relating to placement sufficiency for Children in our Care, and the plans to address these through the work of the Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) Children's Services Sufficiency Programme which launched in 2024.

## 2 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 The Policy Development and Scrutiny Panel is asked to consider and note the work of the Sufficiency Programme Board.

## 3 THE REPORT

- 3.1 The Local Authority is required to publish on its website, a Sufficiency Statement each year. Statement looking back at market conditions and achievements in 2025/26 is being produced and will be published shortly. We are also taking a more strategic approach and are producing a multi-year ambitious strategy through the work of the sufficiency programme in 2026.
- 3.2 The Sufficiency Programme Board (The Board) was established in Quarter 3 of 2025/26 to provide governance in addressing four key areas of sufficiency in children's services: fostering, residential children's homes, provision for disabled children and accommodation for young people aged over years. The Board is jointly chaired by the Assistant Director for Transformation and the

Assistant Director for Children and Young People's Services, and reports into the Children's Transformation Steering Group. The Sufficiency Programme consists of four workstreams:

### **(1) Fostering**

- 3.3 The project aims to review the existing cohort of children and young people in foster care to understand their needs and their reasons for being in foster care. It will also review existing foster care provision, including geographical location, costs, accessibility, needs it can meet, capacity and availability of carers. Finally, it will look at the current offer to foster carers, how this offer compares across our neighbouring authorities and how this could be maximised to improve recruitment and retention.
- 3.4 The project will use this analysis to forecast needs for foster care in the future, and will support, if indicated, the delivery of a business case to further support the recruitment of in-house foster carers for looked after children in B&NES. It will also develop a policy, process and business case for housing alterations for foster carers, to increase the number of children and young people they can support.
- 3.5 Deliverables for this workstream include:
- Development of a strategic needs assessment that assesses the needs of children in foster care and supported lodgings, the existing cohort of in-house foster carers and supported lodgings, and the Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) market, including those commissioned by B&NES to ensure that we are achieving Best Value.
  - A review of our strategy and process for recruiting foster carers and supported lodgings carers through end to end mapping of the current process. Following this, a business case will be developed recommending changes to the process to improve customer experience and recruitment rates and reduce the cost of recruitment.
  - The development of a forward-looking plan outlining future fostering and supported lodgings requirements, including targeted recruitment for specific cohorts (for example, children currently in residential care with a plan to move to foster care), projected demand for in-house foster carers and supported lodgings provision, and a corresponding recruitment strategy to meet these needs.
- 3.6 Specific areas of work that are currently progressing through the fostering workstream are:
- A policy to support housing alterations for existing foster carers has been written and has been agreed in principle by Cabinet at its meeting on 12th February 2026, with full implementation expected by 1st April 2026. This approach provides opportunities to increase the capacity of our existing foster carers.
  - A review of the Council Tax reduction scheme for foster carers is currently underway. This work will assess how competitive the B&NES offer is in comparison with neighbouring authorities. Should the review

identify that our provision is less favourable, further work will be undertaken to develop a case for aligning the local Council Tax rebate with that of comparable local authorities. Strengthening this offer has the potential to support improved recruitment and retention of foster carers.

- A business case is being developed to align special guardianship allowances (financial support provided to special guardians who take on long-term care of a child under a special guardianship order) with fostering allowances. This work aims to ensure that financial considerations do not prevent children from achieving permanency within their wider family networks.

## **(2) Residential Children's Home**

- 3.7 This workstream aims to review the existing cohort of children and young people in residential care to understand their needs and their reasons for being in residential care. It will also review the existing residential care provision, including geographical location, costs, accessibility, needs it can meet, capacity and available free capacity.
- 3.8 The workstream will use this analysis to forecast projected needs for residential care, and will support, if indicated, the delivery of a business case to develop and deliver in-house residential capacity for children in care in B&NES.
- 3.9 Deliverables for this workstream include:
- An assessment of the current need for residential placements for children in care, and what the anticipated future need will be.
  - An assessment of the current usage of residential placements.
  - A Best Value assessment of developing and operating an in-house children's home.
  - A review of the approach to working with the provider market.

## **(3) Resources for disabled children (primarily short breaks and Direct Payments)**

- 3.10 This workstream focuses on ensuring that disabled children and their families have access to appropriate, high-quality short breaks and direct payment support. Local authorities have a statutory duty under the Children Act 1989 and the Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations (2011) to provide a sufficient short breaks offer for eligible families. A strategic needs assessment will be completed over the next six weeks to set out the current position in B&NES and identify future requirements. This assessment will ensure that all eligible children and families can access a varied, flexible and sufficient short breaks offer, supported where appropriate through direct payments

## **(4) 16+ support and care leavers accommodation**

- 3.11 This workstream aims to review the existing cohort of children and young people aged 16 years plus, to understand their needs and equalities profile. It will also review 16+ accommodation provision, including geographical location,

costs, accessibility, needs it can meet, capacity and available spaces. The workstream will consider improvements in recruitment and retention of supported lodgings carers. Finally, it will look at the current accommodation offer to young people who are care experienced, working closely with colleagues in Housing.

- 3.12 The workstream will use this analysis to forecast projected needs for 16+ accommodation and will develop a plan to meet those needs.

### **Profile of children and their placements**

- 3.13 A strategic needs assessment has been completed as part of the Sufficiency programme, the headlines from this assessment are set out below:

- (1) B&NES is generally providing good-quality care for its looked-after children. Ofsted (June 2025) rated services “Good” across all domains, confirming safe, suitable placements and timely permanence planning. However, the overall cohort continues to grow, with the number of children in care increasing at a slightly faster rate than that of our statistical neighbours. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) make up 10% of the cohort, rising to one third of all care leavers in the post-16 cohort.
- (2) While many children experience stable placements, there are areas of focus for Children’s Services around placement stability and missing from care episodes. Education outcomes are positive in the early years and at Key Stage 2, but more mixed at Key Stage 4, where a very small cohort and placement disruptions have affected results. Attendance is broadly strong for children in care at 88%, but persistent absence remains an issue for some. We have 28 pupils with persistent absence (below 90%) and 14 with severe absence (below 50%). Of the severely absent pupils, 3 had reduced attendance caused by placement breakdowns and long-distance moves, 3 showed an upward trajectory over the year (1 UASC, 1 transition to special, 1 Education Health Care Needs Assessment), 1 remains at severe absence, and the others have complex family and care arrangements which are currently impacting their ability to access education. Health checks are completed, but there is further work underway to aggregate data on children’s physical, emotional, or mental health outcomes to provide a clearer picture on compliance with health checks so that the service can focus on any identified areas of improvement.
- (3) Within B&NES, children and foster carers generally benefit from strong fostering support, trauma-informed training, and most young people progress into their chosen post-16 destinations. There are no permanent school exclusions for children in care, and suspensions are low. Community organisations play an important role in supporting UASC to integrate locally providing services such as collaboration with national charities like the Refugee Council and Asylum Aid, while local volunteer groups such as Bath Welcomes Refugees provide additional assistance with English lessons, housing, and social activities. Areas of focus for the senior management team relate to placement stability, the completion of timely and high quality, return-home interviews after missing episodes, culturally appropriate placements for UASC, and high levels of complex needs that put pressure on specialist education and therapeutic provision.

3.14 The table below sets out some further detail on the number of children we care for and the type of care arrangement they are in.

3.15 It is important to note that in B&NES there are currently no children placed in unregistered residential children's homes; this has been a priority area of work over the past year to achieve this.

	<b>Number of children (as of 26<sup>th</sup> February 2026)</b>
Total Children in Care	228
Children in Foster Care placements	87
Children in Kinship Foster care	48
Children in residential care (including residential schools)	49
Children placed with parents	7
Young people in 16+ provisions	28
Unregulated kinship care arrangements (overseen by the Assistant Director on a weekly basis). <i>See additional paper for details on the BANES Unregulated placement policy.</i>	3
Remanded in secure accommodation	1
Parent-child residential placements	2 babies
Placed with adopters	3

3.16 For those children in **residential care**;

- 4 children are living less than 5 miles from their parents' home address,
- 15 children are living within 20 miles of their parents' home address,
- 5 children are living 20-50 miles from their parents' home address.
- 22 children do not have the distance in miles recorded, however their homes are located in the following areas –

Oxfordshire (2 children)	Liverpool (2 children)	Devon (1 child)
Herefordshire (1 child)	Swindon (2 children)	Gloucestershire (3 children)
Manchester (2 children)	Northampton (2 children)	Cardiff (2 children)
Swansea (1 child),	Cheshire (1 child),	Peterborough (1 child),
Wiltshire (1 child)	Staffordshire (1 child)	

3.17 There are three children currently in residential care as a result of there being no suitable, available foster placements. The Alternative Care team continue to actively search for a suitable foster carer for these children and remains a key priority for the team.

3.18 For those children in **foster placements**;

- 49 children are living within 10 miles of their parent's home address;
- 15 children are living 10-20 miles from their parents' home address;
- 7 children are living over 20 miles from their parents' home address;
- for 16 children the number of miles is not recorded.

3.19 For those children in **kinship foster placements**:

- 35 children are living within 5 miles of the parents' home address;
- 7 children are living 5-10 miles from their parents' home address;
- 6 children are living more than 20 miles from their parents' home address.

3.20 Through the Sufficiency Programme, there is a focus on increasing the availability of local placements so that, where appropriate, more children can return to live within the local area. However, for some children it would not be in their best interests to move, as they have achieved stability in their current placement and have established education arrangements and professional networks that should not be disrupted.

3.21 There is a strong focus on supporting children in care to return to live with their families when it is safe and appropriate to do so. This process, known as reunification, involves carefully assessing whether a child can move back home and ensuring the right support is in place for both the child and their family. B&NES has an established Reunification Framework, based on National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) guidance. The in-house Systemic Family Therapist provides direct therapeutic support to families undergoing assessment. In the last quarter, six children have successfully returned home. To further strengthen this work, a Reunification Panel was introduced in October 2025 to bring together key professionals to

identify when reunification should be considered, and to plan the assessment, timescales and support required.

3.22 In parallel to the work underway to support our children in care, the Council continues to drive high quality support for families to enable children who are considered to be on the edge of care to remain living with their families. This includes:

- Social Workers and Family Support Practitioners offering interventions informed by the Practice Framework for Children's Services: Systemic practice, trauma informed, and using attachment theory.

3.23 Families Together – a systemic intervention using intensive visiting to support our children considered most at risk of entering care, typically our adolescent cohorts. These children are overseen by the Assistant Director through the Care and Resource/Families Together Panel.

- Fostering Families – an innovative support package using Adult Attachment Assessments to match parents with a fostering families carer. The carer offers 15-30 hours of support to the parent and child in the family home or in the community, led by the needs of the family. This often replicates a typical kinship support arrangement for families who are particularly isolated or do not have their own family networks to rely upon for support. The intervention has been shortlisted for two categories in the National MJ Awards 2026.

#### **GOVERNMENT REFORMS, FOSTERING HUBS & REGIONAL CARE COOPERATIVES:**

3.24 The Government has set out a national ambition to create 10,000 additional foster homes over the next decade. This is intended to reduce reliance on residential care, improve outcomes for children, and stabilise local authority budgets. The plan forms part of a wider programme of reform to modernise fostering services. As part of this, the government are advocating for a regional delivery model which will provide a shift towards regional delivery of fostering recruitment and assessment. Fostering hubs will play a central role in this model, reducing duplication across councils and ensuring that recruitment efforts are targeted where they are most needed. This regional approach is intended to create a more consistent and efficient system.

3.25 The new end-to-end fostering hubs are intended to operate as fully fledged regional fostering services, taking responsibility for every stage of the fostering journey, from recruitment and assessment through to approval, training, and ongoing support. This replaces the current model, where existing hubs mainly coordinate early recruitment activity and act as a single point of entry but then hand applicants back to local authorities for full assessment and support. By consolidating these functions into one regional service, the new hubs aim to create a more consistent, streamlined system that can plan and deploy resources across a wider area rather than being constrained by local authority boundaries. Please see the minimum requirements for the end-to-end fostering hub below.

- a) Targeted recruitment which focuses on driving up numbers and builds on recruitment good practice from best performing hubs;

- b) A single front door - one destination for all enquiries across a hub to remove any duplication and ensure the process is easy to navigate for prospective carers;
- c) A “journey guide” from enquiry to approval - responsive, dedicated support for prospective carers from first enquiry to decision;
- d) An established support network for carers - prioritising developing this and maximising the use of the foster carers and child’s existing network in doing so;
- e) Regional assessment function - managed by the hub, utilising embedded social workers to make quick progress and decisions;
- f) Enhanced regional data - many hubs already have regular pipeline data meetings with their partner Local Authorities (Las) to track progress and identify delays, leading to faster

3.26 The table below sets out the timescales associated with the development of end-to-end fostering hubs

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Deadline</b>
Region to submit interim version for hubs costed plan to show which LA’s will be moving forward end to end	31st March
Department for Education (DfE) to work with hubs to refine costed plan and ensure it meets all elements of design specifications	April
Deadline for hubs to have received relevant political clearance of final coted plan to return to DfE	Beginning of June
Implementation	July
Go Live	September

3.27 Regionalisation is part of a longer-term shift toward creating Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs), with the new end-to-end fostering hubs acting as an interim step. While current hubs focus mainly on early recruitment, RCCs will ultimately plan, commission, and deliver a full range of children’s care services, including fostering, residential, and secure care, on behalf of all local authorities in a region. Their purpose is to reduce competition between councils, stabilise the care market, and secure better value for money. As RCCs become established, the new end-to-end fostering hubs are expected to be absorbed into this regional structure so that fostering recruitment, assessment, and placement functions sit alongside wider commissioning responsibilities. The Government expects local authorities to participate fully in this transition and align their services with the emerging regional model.

3.28 The South West regional group is proceeding with an application for grant funding to pilot a Regional Care Co-Operative. South Gloucestershire are leading on the application.

## **4 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS**

- 4.1 Local Authorities (LAs) in England have a legal duty under **Section 22G of the Children Act 1989** (inserted by the 2008 Act) to take steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for children in care within their local area. This duty requires strategic planning to ensure a mix of accommodation meets the needs of children, including those with complex needs or on the edge of care.

## **5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)**

- 5.1 Any areas of developing work through the Sufficiency Programme that may have resource implications, will be set out in a robust business case and taken through the relevant governance routes for approval.

## **6 RISK MANAGEMENT**

- 6.1 A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision-making risk management guidance.

## **7 EQUALITIES**

- 7.1 The Sufficiency Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) demonstrates that the programme supports the council's statutory duty to secure appropriate local accommodation for children in care by improving the availability, stability and quality of placements across fostering, residential care, short breaks and 16+ provision.
- 7.2 It draws on a comprehensive needs assessment highlighting the diverse needs of children in care—including disabled children, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and care-experienced young people—and shows that the programme is designed to enhance equity by increasing local placement options, supporting cultural and faith matching, improving short breaks access, and strengthening accommodation pathways for older teenagers and young adults.
- 7.3 While some transitional risks are identified, particularly for disabled children, UASC, and young people at key transition points, these are addressed through targeted mitigation such as phased implementation, targeted foster carer recruitment, strengthened partnership with housing, and improved training for carers and providers.
- 7.4 Overall, the EQIA concludes that the sufficiency programme has a positive equalities impact, reducing disadvantage and improving outcomes for children and young people who are among the most vulnerable in the community

## **8 CLIMATE CHANGE**

- 8.1 Through our work to secure homes for children in care that are within the BANES area, or closer to the BANES area, there will be significant positive climate impact. The impact will be felt through reduced travel by professionals visiting children, children accessing education close to their home, and through the reduction in travel for the child when they spend time with their family.

## 9 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

9.1 None

## 10 CONSULTATION

10.1 The matters in this paper have been presented to and agreed by the Transformation Project Board and Sufficiency Programme Board.

10.2 The S151 Officer and Monitoring Officer have reviewed and agreed the contents of the report.

<b>Contact person</b>	Phoebe Holland and Paula Sumner 01225 396907
<b>Background papers</b>	Sufficiency Statement: <a href="https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=80779">https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=80779</a>  BANES Unregulated placement Policy: <a href="https://trixcms.trixonline.co.uk/api/assets/bathnes/d2055e96-fca4-4da2-9f97-4e329ea1e70f/banes-policy-for-unlawful-unregistered-and-unregulated-placements-11.2025.pdf">https://trixcms.trixonline.co.uk/api/assets/bathnes/d2055e96-fca4-4da2-9f97-4e329ea1e70f/banes-policy-for-unlawful-unregistered-and-unregulated-placements-11.2025.pdf</a>
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