

Cabinet



Date of meeting:	10 February 2025
Title of Report:	Children's Services Update
Lead Member:	Councillor Jemima Laing (Deputy Leader, and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications)
Lead Strategic Director:	David Haley (Director for Childrens Services)
Author:	Vivien Lines, Children's Transformation Team
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Your Reference:	
Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

Purpose of Report

This report provides the sixth monthly update on and response to the Quarter 1 Financial Monitoring Cabinet Report presented in August 2024. The Quarter 1 Monitoring Report identified a budget variation of £4.692m forecast overspend related to placement costs of children in Plymouth's care. A first children's services update was provided to September Cabinet as recommended in the Quarter 1 monitoring report and this report provides a further update and response to that position.

Recommendations

For Cabinet to note the report.

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan

Keeping children, adults and communities in Plymouth safe.

Implications for the Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:

The report relates to MTFP commitments for the cost of care for children in our care.

Financial Risks

There are significant financial risks to the Council from pressures in this area as set out in the paper.

Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

None

Other Implications: e.g. Health and Safety, Risk Management, Child Poverty:

** When considering these proposals members have a responsibility to ensure they give due regard to the Council’s duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote good relations between people who share protected characteristics under the Equalities Act and those who do not.*

The paper addresses risks to the organisation.

Appendices

**Add rows as required to box below*

Ref.	Title of Appendix	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable)						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A	Briefing report							

Background papers:

**Add rows as required to box below*

Please list all unpublished, background papers relevant to the decision in the table below. Background papers are unpublished works, relied on to a material extent in preparing the report, which disclose facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the work is based.

Title of any background paper(s)	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable)						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Sign off:

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Originating Senior Leadership Team member: David Haley (Director for Children’s Services)

Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes

Date agreed: 03/02/2025

Cabinet Member approval: Councillor Jemima Laing (Deputy Leader, and Cabinet Member for Children’s Social Care, Culture and Communications

05/02/2025

I. Background and context

- I.1 The approved budget for placements for children in care in 2024/25 is £36.725m and at period 9 (December) the annual forecast spend is £42.575m, representing a forecast overspend of £5.850m. This has been a deteriorating position month on month this financial year as the number of children in care placed in residential settings has been increasing due to a shortage of foster placements for children. The table below shows where children in care are living compared to our projections when budget setting was completed and the costs of these placements. The pressure is both a cost and volume pressure.

Type of Placement	Estimated Numbers Sept 23	Existing Budget £m	Month 8 Forecast £m	Actual Numbers Month 9	Month 9 Forecast £m	Variance to Month 8 £m	Variance to Budget £m
External Residential	50	15.248	18.650	64	19.034	0.384	3.786
Unregistered	6	3.387	6.043	4	5.933	-0.110	2.546
External Fostering	158	9.251	8.880	154	8.88	0.000	-0.371
In-House Foster Care	126	2.855	2.855	150	2.855	0.000	0.000
In-House Connected Carers	42	0.952	0.952	49	0.952	0.000	0.000
External Supported Living	41	3.758	3.600	46	3.648	0.048	-0.110
Other Placement Settings - Children in Care	65	1.274	1.274	55	1.274	0.000	0.000
TOTAL CHILDREN IN CARE	488	36.725	42.255	522	42.575	0.321	5.850

- I.2 522 children were in the care of the Local Authority at the end of December, an overall downward trend in numbers over the previous six months (from 528 in November). Ten children came into care during December and 13 left care. Of the children coming into care, seven were planned as a result of ongoing assessment and concerns about the children and three were unplanned, arising from significant child protection incidents leading to the children needing safeguarding.
- I.3 The children's fostering and residential markets remain extremely challenging with a lack of fostering sufficiency driving some children into very high-cost residential placements. The evolving nature of children's needs and predicting the specific timing and requirements for their placement in our care remains a challenge. The expansion of our inhouse Foster for Plymouth service and the development of in-house residential provision for children are key developments as part of our Family Homes for Plymouth Children Transformation Plan to support more children to live in families close to Plymouth.
- I.4 There has been an increase in the number of children placed with connected carers and an increase in the number of children placed with our Foster for Plymouth carers this year. However, as a result of a national shortage of foster carers there has been an increase in the number of children placed in residential children's homes from 50 in September 2023 when budget setting was undertaken, to 64 at the end of December 2024. Whilst we have a successful block contract with

a local provider, providing homes in Plymouth for 16 children, 44 children in care are in children's homes at a distance from Plymouth. In addition, the average weekly cost of a child in a residential placement has risen to £7,523 per week from £6,906 per week in September 2023.

- 1.5 Because of the overall shortage of fostering and residential placements, a small number of children have required high-cost unregulated placements in settings not registered with Ofsted.
- 1.6 We continue to experience challenges finding fostering placements for children when they first come into care as well as for those children in residential settings who are identified as being ready to move onto a family setting and where family finding is actively progressing. As a result, children are placed in high-cost residential placements whilst we continue to search for foster families and because of a lack of supply of residential placements, some children are placed in unregistered arrangements as suitable residential placements cannot be identified.
- 1.7 At the end of December, as a result of focused management attention, the number of cared for young people in unregistered arrangements had reduced to two and both of these children are in provision that is registered with CQC. Unregistered Placements can cost on average £12,000-£16,000 per child a week, although in some cases have cost over £29k per child p/week. Our current forecast spend for unregistered placements is £5.933m a reduction of £110k from the previous month due to effective management action to identify regulated settings for some children.
- 1.8 During December, the number of children in residential settings increased to 64 (from 54 in July 2024) and a small group moved to higher cost placements during the month due to an increase in their needs, leading to an increase in the forecast position from £4.454m to £5.530 (a deterioration of £1.076m).

2. Learning from Quality Assurance

- 2.1 Quality assurance audits evidence that our social work practice is improving, assessments are more robust and social workers and team managers are making better and more confident decisions for children at risk of significant harm in a timelier way.
- 2.2 A recent review of children who recently experienced placement breakdown and moves into higher cost placements identified that foster carers were well supported and good efforts are being made to prevent placement disruptions for children, but some of our foster carers are finding the needs of some children too challenging. Our first Mockingbird Constellation is proving effective in providing a model of support for a group of foster carers. None of the children who had experienced a placement disruption in this review were placed in the Mockingbird constellation. Further information about the development of the Mockingbird model in Plymouth is set out below.
- 2.3 The focus continues to be on ensuring that families are provided with the right help when difficulties first emerge, to intervene in a timely and effective way when problems become more complex and to ensure the right placement, stable care and active care planning for children and young people when they do need to be in our care.

3. The Family Homes for Plymouth Children Transformation Programme

- 3.1 Our programme of work to reduce spend in this area and ensure children in care have a home that meets their needs and that wherever possible children grow up in families local to Plymouth is called 'Family Homes for Plymouth Children.' It has several elements:

Family Homes for Plymouth Children



3.2 Key planned outcomes of the programme include;

- Improve practice to keep more children at home and utilise family options when children do need alternative care, including further developing the use of family led decision making models to build family capacity so that children can remain cared for within their friends and family network.
- Grow the local independent sector market to increase local supply of both residential and foster care in line with our Sufficiency Strategy and reduce cost.
- Strengthen our brokerage function so that we maximise our capacity to identify the right placement at the right price for all children from when they first come into care.
- Use an evidence-based approach to identify children ready to move on from residential settings and to 'STEP' children from residential settings to foster placements in a timely, managed and well supported way.
- Recruit more foster carers for our in-house fostering service, 'Foster for Plymouth' and support more of our carers to be able to look after children with more complex needs or challenging behaviours.
- Support children who have been in care for some time to be reunified with their birth families when it is identified that there have been significant changes in the family.
- PCC becoming a direct provider of residential care for children and young people.
- Ensure we are get value for money from our placement spend, including maximising contributions from partners for eligible children with more complex needs.
- Improve support for kinship and Special Guardianship carers so that more children can leave care successfully through these routes.

Market development

3.3 To improve the range of high-quality residential placements and foster care closer to Plymouth we have:

- Strengthened how we work with fostering and residential providers in the region and elsewhere, in line with the objectives set out in our Sufficiency Strategy to support them to develop more provision in Plymouth.
- Improved our brokerage capacity so that we maximise available placements local to Plymouth for our looked after children.

3.4 Our Sufficiency Strategy has been updated for publication to the market setting out an updated needs analysis of the children we need care for and specific priorities where we would encourage the independent sector to develop more local provision. This currently includes provision for children with more complex emotional and behavioural needs and provision for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. A dedicated Commissioning Lead has identified tactical opportunities for local providers to develop more provision in line with local need and is working with specific providers to ensure more high-quality provision is in place.

3.5 The capacity in the children's Brokerage Team has been increased to improve our ability to utilise intelligence about providers to source the right placement for children from when they first come into care. The team have a programme of work in place to fully utilise existing frameworks of preferred providers as well as to identify specific provision in line with specific children's needs, such as our children who have plans to STEP them down from residential care.

Foster for Plymouth Growth

3.6 So that more of our children in care can live with our foster carers close to Plymouth, we have:

- Introduced an improved offer for our foster carers based on what our foster carers told us at the 2024 Foster Carer Summit. The improved offer covers both enhanced financial and practical support alongside practice improvement work for our workforce which foster carers will be part of delivering. This has included foster carers now being exempt from Council Tax.
- Ramped up our marketing and recruitment work to attract new carers, including being part of the South West Regional Hub and having an increased presence with community groups, faith groups, businesses and partners (currently including Dartmoor Zoo) and across Plymouth to widen the understanding of fostering and encourage applications to foster from diverse experiences and communities.
- Improved our support to carers to enable them to care for children with more complex needs, including those stepping out of residential, through introducing a 'Mockingbird' model of support, emergency foster care model and a model for the bespoke package of support for young people stepping out of residential.
- Held an annual Foster Carer Summit to uphold our commitment to review the support and retention offer regularly with our foster carers. The next one is being held in early February 2025.

3.7 Our Foster Carer Ambassadors fed back that the new Support and Retention Offer to Our Foster Carers 2024/2025 is a fair and comprehensive offer and shows exemplary intentions. They feel that this will ensure that support is implemented and enables them to hold the Local Authority and partners to account if this is not achieved. They have also shared that through this process, and in the implementation of the new financial offer as well as the support and retention offer, they have felt listened to, heard and respected.

3.8 Fostering South West represents a partnership of 15 Local Authority Fostering services across the south-west of England collaborating to actively recruit essential prospective foster carers. The Hub is funded by the DfE and brings together a collective in-depth experience and knowledge of their local communities, the needs of families, children and the young people in their care. The Fostering South West Hub went live on the 28th April 2024 after a period of collaborative design and implementation, with the formal launch event taking place on 5th November 2024. Through

collaboration, the aim of the Hub is to grow the number of fostering households through shared marketing and recruitment activity, taking advantage of a dominant market presence in the South West.

- 3.9 The implementation of the Hub in April 2024 coincided with Foster for Plymouth's launch of the improved Financial Offer, which was accompanied by a significant amount of marketing activity and attracted local press coverage. As such the uplift in fostering enquiries this financial year could be attributable to one or both of these activities.
- 3.10 As part of the DfE funding related to the Regional Fostering Hub, Plymouth City Council received funding to implement their first Mockingbird Constellation which went live in November 2024. Mockingbird is a programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK to deliver sustainable foster care through an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides. The model nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community. Each constellation is led by a hub home carer and liaison worker, the constellation offers vital peer support and guidance alongside social activities and sleepovers to strengthen relationships and permanence. Plans are in place to introduce three further Mockingbird constellations in 2025/26.
- 3.11 In order to attract prospective foster carers and encouraging those already fostering for Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) to transfer to the Local Authority we have increased our marketing activity and developed this in line with feedback from prospective foster carers and our fostering community about what engaged them and attracted them to apply. Targeted marketing is effective in this regard, and this is effectively used through social media channels.
- 3.12 Working with representatives from four local businesses, the Council is developing an even more ambitious marketing strategy and plan for 2025/2026. This will be an invest to save proposal as a wider reach will draw more applicants but require investment in marketing and staff resources. Within this we will establish a care experienced digital marketing apprenticeship within the Foster for Plymouth team, which will enhance the marketing activity and offer a unique opportunity to a care experienced young person.
- 3.13 The Foster for Plymouth social media launch took place in October 2024 and the film is being widely shared across social media channels. Plymouth Arts Cinema have kindly agreed to share a version of the film within their trailers and Dartmoor Zoo have agreed to include our campaigns on their screens within their café area.

STEPping children from residential care to family settings

- 3.14 So that we realise our commitment to children growing up in families, we are:
- Challenging practitioners to be more ambitious for children in care to grow up in a family utilising an evidence-based tool (which evaluates children's needs by understanding behaviour, emotional wellbeing, risk to self and others, relationships and indicators of psychiatric or neurodevelopmental conditions) to inform our assessments and identify children and young people who are ready to step out of residential care into family settings and to ensure that this happens a timely way.
 - Ensuring our care planning for children supports children to be cared for in a family home.
 - For our older young people who are in residential children's homes, this includes consideration of moving into supported accommodation to prepare for independence or focus on a transition to adult services.
 - Meeting weekly as a management team, alongside the weekly Children's Resource Panels, to review progress of identified STEPs children and young people, review any children or young people who have recently moved into residential and review the circumstances of those previously not deemed ready to step out so as to ensure that the searches for family-based care happens without delay.

- 3.18 As a result of challenges in the sufficiency of family homes over recent years, we have not been as ambitious for children in care to be in family homes as we should be. The STEPS approach is challenging this including using an evidence-based approach to assess children in residential care and identify those who may be suitable for family homes. The approach includes writing updated profiles and pen pictures which focus on the child's strengths, needs and the desired outcomes. These are used to engage with Foster for Plymouth and IFAs on our Peninsula framework and the wider IFA market nationally, where this is appropriate for the child's care plan, to identify Foster Carers committed to a planned transition for the child out of residential. Despite our ambition for children to be in family homes and active searching for foster carers for around 20 children in residential settings this year, limited placement sufficiency both in the independent and in house fostering sectors has significantly impacted our ability to progress plans and achieve the target dates and associated savings anticipated. Over the past two years there has been a reduction of approximately 2000 foster carers nationally, partly as a result of the impact of the pandemic on family's capacity to free up a bedroom for fostering.
- 3.19 At the current time, there has been a greater level of success in progression of STEPs plans into in house fostering than IFAs and for some of our older young people, greater benefits have been realised from progressing step forward to supported accommodation. One child in the STEPs programme was successfully placed with foster carers in December and four children and young people have an identified in house fostering match which is being progressed, one child is expected to move by the end of January 2025, two siblings are expected to move by the end of March 2025 and the other child has a longer term plan due to the need to undertake sibling assessments and transitions, however there is a clear plan in place.
- 3.20 In addition to the five children and young people above, there are fourteen children and young people currently placed in residential children's homes who are being actively worked through the STEPs programme or for whom step forward planning was already in place to move from those settings to family home so a more suitable provision. Searches are active for all of these children and young people, however there are no current expressions of interest or placement offers. A further thirteen children and young people have been identified by the teams as being suitable to step out of residential in the next six months, these children and young people have all been booked in to Children's Resource Panel by the end of January 2025 to formalise the plan and timeframes for actions to achieve this.
- 3.21 Creative ways are being pursued to support the children and young people who have been identified for STEPs to familiarise themselves and build trust in living with a fostering family as well as supporting Foster Carers to think differently about their capacity to offer a child a home from residential. This includes one of the young people being included in the Mockingbird Constellation and those where a local family is being explored being invited to Foster for Plymouth Social Committee events.

Reunifying children with their birth families and wider networks

- 3.22 Reunification is when a child returns home from a period of being in care and is the most common way for children to leave care in England. Children in care should always be supported to maintain connections with their family networks as these are often their lifelong links. Many children may experience a short episode of care and return to their families once it is assessed as safe for them to do so. However, reunification refers to when children have had a long-term care plan, but where there are changes in the child and/or family's circumstances which enables a safe return home to be considered. To ensure we identify opportunities for children to return to their birth families when they have been in our care for some time and this can be achieved safely, we are:
- Supporting children to maintain lifelong links with their birth families.
 - Making sure that we continuously review changes in children's circumstances that may make reunification possible.

- Refocusing our Targeted Help offer to provide intensive assessment and support to enable more children to return home from care to their birth families.
- 3.23 The Edge of Care Team has developed a model of practice which supports children to return home from care in a planned and supported way when it is safe for them to do so as part of our Family Homes for Plymouth Children programme. This model sets out a practice framework based on good practice toolkits, which addresses these challenges. The framework is a resource to support practice improvements for children returning home from care and to support practitioners and managers with professional judgement to complex decisions about whether a child should return home from care and what support will be needed to ensure that reunification is safe and successful. It provides a structure for analysing risks to the child based on robust evidence. It supports families and workers to understand what needs to change, to set goals, access support and services and review progress. It builds on and complements the existing work that practitioners are already doing with these children and their families, rather than replacing it.
- 3.24 Children in care who may be suitable for planned work to consider a reunification plan are currently being identified and dedicated resource to support the detailed assessment and careful planning and support to families that is needed to ensure reunification is done safely and successfully is being agreed.

PCC becoming a provider of residential care

- 3.25 To increase the quality and availability of residential care for children local to Plymouth, Plymouth City Council is becoming a provider of residential care across a number of types of provision including short breaks for disabled children, short term intervention to return young people back home or support them into independence and longer-term residential children's homes for children with complex needs.
- 3.26 Positives of developing local in-house residential children's homes includes;
- Ability to support children with local education and health services.
 - Improved potential to achieve step down to fostering and reunification to families when children are in Plymouth.
 - Reducing the average length of time children spend in residential.
 - Improved experiences from children experiencing fewer moves.
 - Improved family time for children to maintain links and relationships with their families where possible.
 - Better quality assurance, scrutiny and consistency of care when delivered in-house and close to Plymouth.
 - Potential savings from preventing a child moving into an unregulated arrangement which can cost us £12,000 a week.
 - Savings from social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers not having to visit children at a distance from Plymouth.
- 3.27 Capital has been agreed to purchase two houses in Plymouth and to develop them as the first homes for six children (three in each) between 8 and 16 years old. The children's homes are being developed to resemble family life as far as possible. An offer has been accepted on one house and work is progressing to ensure the location is suitable and with a view to the home being refurbished and registered with Ofsted prior to opening towards the end of the year. Viewings are currently taking place for the second property. A key risk will be recruiting the managers and staff team with the required skills and experience and work is starting early with HR-OD colleagues to plan and deliver an effective recruitment campaign.

- 3.28 Capital has also been allocated to undertake a feasibility study of the suitability of an existing PCC building, Colwill Lodge, as a residential short breaks provision for children with disabilities which will be designed to support families and prevent children from needing to come into high cost residential provision. The feasibility study is due to be completed by the end of February to support a detailed business case to be considered for the capital investment that will be needed to refurbish the building.
- 3.29 Finally, we are currently working with ICB colleagues to consider a joint bid to the DfE for an allocation from a current capital scheme to support residential developments for children with complex emotional and behavioural needs who are at risk of placements requiring a deprivation of liberty.
- 3.30 Opening children's homes is a complex process and as well as the recruitment of staff, the requirement to register with Ofsted is identified as a risk to timescales as delays in Ofsted's response are being experienced nationally.

Support to special guardianship and kinship carers

- 3.31 The objective of this strand of work is to support more children to be with kinship carers, family or friends who step in to care for a child when their parent isn't able to, rather than the child coming into care. In addition, we are developing practice to enable more children in care to leave care through a Special Guardianship route.
- 3.32 To prevent children from being in care unnecessarily, there is a need to improve the identification of and support to kinship carers and Special Guardianship carers, this includes ensuring financial support is equitable to foster carers so that kinship carers are well supported when a child would otherwise have come into care and carers do not lose out when their child leaves care through a Special Guardianship arrangement.
- 3.33 During 2024-25 a new Special Guardianship and Kinship Carer Support Team was implemented and has been identifying best practice in this area, as well as putting in place a stronger support offer to carers, including confirming contributions from key partners such as Health and the Virtual School. We have been identifying kinship carers across Plymouth who were previously unknown to us and developing peer support networks with two already in place within Family Hubs. In addition, a Special Guardianship Support Plan approach has been developed ready for implementation with all carers to set out the support plan for a child before the order is made.
- 3.34 A Special Guardianship Policy has been agreed and is being implemented ensuring Special Guardians are well supported to meet children's needs, and a policy setting out the financial support that will be provided is being finalised for implementation early in 2025-26.