



County children home challenges

The challenges facing Surrey County Council's bid for more children's homes include high property prices, competition for places and no priority for the authority for homes in the area. Officers outlined plans to nearly double the number of spaces available for Surrey children in the county at a meeting of the children, families, lifelong learning & culture select committee on Tuesday (October 4).

The meeting heard of the authority's aim to house 80 per cent of its looked after children within the county, a number that in July 2022 was just under 40 per cent. An officers' report showed that in July, 45 of the 118 children in children's homes placements were living in Surrey, but this did not include those in residential schools, parental assessment units and in "unregulated" placements.

If these groups were included, then the number was 49 of 147 children in Surrey at that time. Plans to increase the number of children staying in the county would mean increasing the number of beds available by an additional 45 just in children's homes, or 69 to include all residential provision types.

Currently there are 28 beds in nine children's homes that are run by Surrey County Council, following the closure of one in February within 24 hours of an Ofsted inspection which said residents were at risk "of significant harm".

There are also 26 beds available in six children's homes run by external providers, but not included in total figures are 12 registered beds in two specialist services solely for young people with sexually harmful behaviours.

Councillor Jonathan Essex (Green, Redhill East) asked if there was an option to bring more of the residential services in house at the council, highlighting costs in the report which showed the weekly cost of a placement in a council-run children's home ranging on average from £3,177 to £4,294. This was in comparison to an average weekly cost in July on the open market of £5,232 per week.

The meeting heard that running children's homes "wasn't easy" and that having other providers could mean more support for the authority. Meeting documents show that the council's intention would be to run the new homes in the first instance, but consideration would be given to working with "trusted and high-quality" external providers. Documents also showed that Surrey faced challenges with its location near to London, which contributed to "increased competition" for beds in children's homes and some of the highest property prices in the country outside of London.

High costs of living made it hard for new providers to set up in the county which in turn meant "upward pressure to the cost of placements in Surrey". The county council also does not have priority access to local homes in the area, and other local authorities can refer children to homes in the county in placements which may last for several years. There is also a need to increase the number of places available because of the number of children in "unlawful" placements in Surrey.

Unregulated placements are not subject to Ofsted inspections but the county council is responsible for quality assuring all unregulated provision where looked after children will be placed. As of September 12 2022, there were five Surrey children looked after by the county council and aged under 16 in "unlawful" placements, so called after a change to legislation in September 2021.

Tina Benjamin, the county council's director - corporate parenting, said: "Unregulated, unlawful placements are not something we ever want to use and we try to do everything we can to avoid them. Unfortunately the national lack of placements sometimes means that we have to." She said as well as looking for other placements for the children, the authority would work with providers to try to get their Ofsted registration.

Plans to re-purpose £18 million of capital funding to bring about the additional capacity will be brought to the council's November cabinet meeting.