



Children in Care Strategy for the Isles of Scilly 2023 - 2026

NB This document does not replace statutory guidance and should be read in conjunction with the SouthWest Child Protection Policies and Procedures associated with supporting children in care. This document aims to give local context on how we will support very low numbers of children to thrive if, and when, they come into local authority care for a short or permanent period of time.

1. Introduction

The Isles of Scilly has historically had very low numbers of children in care.

Every single child on the Isles of Scilly is valued and has the right to thrive and achieve.

Social care and partners make every effort to strengthen families and provide services at the earliest point of need to ensure that families can be together safely.

Where this is not possible the Council will do its best to ensure that feelings of separation and anxiety for the child are minimised as much as possible and that the child achieves the best possible outcomes.

The Council, due to the size of the community and its geographical location, is not a fostering and adoption agency in its own right and has an arrangement in place with Cornwall Council for fostering and as from April 2024 Adopt South West for Adoption, to carry out these services on its behalf. Cornwall Council's adoption and fostering team have received Good/Outstanding grades consistently over the last few years. The Council will quality assure all provision appointed, vetted and trained to look after children resident on the Isles of Scilly. The Council has also developed a bespoke marketing campaign with Cornwall Council to drive recruitment which has resulted in the recruitment of the first island based foster carer. We are aiming to rerun this campaign in the Summer of 2024.

Given low numbers it has not been possible to consult with care experienced young, however the promises we make to children in care are the ones that we would make to our own children and many of the tenets are embedded in our way of working with each and every child.

We also recognise that many of our children have a profound attachment not only to their families but also the islands and we will do everything possible to ensure that children can continue to maintain those connections.

2. Our promises to children in our care

Specifically, we pledge, in our written policies, procedures and practices and in our behaviours, to take clear steps to ensure that all the services we deliver will demonstrably:

1. promote more **love** in the care system including displays of appropriate positive physical affection;
2. ensure care experience people are regarded and treated as individuals worthy of **respect** and to promote that respect wherever we can;
3. ensure that **relationships** are seen as central to all our policies and procedures to support children in care and care experienced people;
4. take clear steps to improve **stability** and continuity in the lived experiences of people in care;
5. work with our partners and young people to raise awareness of need and improve support for the **mental health** and well-being of children in care and care experienced people in our local area;
6. recognise in our daily work that the impact of care experience does not end at 18 or 21 or even 25, and review our practice to **remove age restrictions** on support wherever we can;
7. protect, promote and where necessary rebuild **family and community connections** and help those young people for whom we are responsible to understand their personal history;
8. make sure that young people in our care are routinely engaged, consulted and **have a real say** in their own lives
9. ensure that young people in our care are properly and fully informed of their **rights** and offer advocacy to ensure they receive them; and
10. listen to the **voice** of children in care and care experience people of all ages and always consult them about changes to services and support.

3. Sufficiency

All local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that there are sufficient placements within their geographical area to meet the needs of children and young people in care. The Isles of Scilly has a population of 2,200 people located 28 miles from the mainland and there is currently two foster carer, different households plus another couple being assessed, within this geographic area. Due to the number of children living on the Isles of Scilly it has not been considered feasible to provide an in-house fostering service.

The Council of the Isles of Scilly has one generic children's team which provides services from early help; children with disabilities, children in need, child protection, children looked after and care leavers. The number of Isles of Scilly resident children who have become looked after is very low.

Since the implementation of the Children Act 1989 local authorities have been required to take steps that secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for children looked after within their local authority area (Section 22G Children Act 1989). This section of the 1989 Act was also inserted into Section 9 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008. This is now referred to as "the sufficiency duty".

The Statutory Guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for children looked after provides examples of best practice in securing sufficiency that include the following:

- That all children are placed in appropriate placements with access to the support services they require in their local authority area, except where this is not consistent with their welfare;

- That the full range of universal, targeted and specialist services work together to meet children's needs in an integrated way in the local area, including children who are already looked after, as well as those at risk of care or custody;
- Where it is not reasonable or practical for a child to be placed within her/his local authority area, there are mechanisms in place to widen the range of provision in neighbouring areas, or region which is still within an accessible distance, while still being able to provide the full range of services to meet identified needs;
- That partners, including housing, work together to secure a range of provision to meet the needs of those who become looked after at the age of 16 and 17 years, and support the continuity of accommodation beyond the age of 18 years;
- And in addition to meeting relevant national minimum standards, services are of high quality to secure the specific outcomes identified in the care plans of children looked after;

The Statutory Guidance states that "Local authorities must be able to show that at a strategic level they are taking steps to meet the sufficiency duty, so far as is "reasonably practical". It further explains what is meant by "reasonably practical" and it includes the following:

- that it is a general duty that applies to strategic arrangements, rather than to the provision of accommodation to a particular, individual child;
- it does not require local authorities to provide accommodation within their area for every child they look after;
- there may be a significant minority of children for whom it is not „reasonably practical“ to provide a certain type of accommodation within the area;
- in accordance with section 22C (5) of the 1989 Act, the overriding factor is that the placement must be the most appropriate placement available;
- the local authority must give preference to a placement with a friend, relative or other person connected with the child and who is a local authority foster parent [section 22C (7) (a)]

The term "looked after children" as defined in the 1989 Act refers to all children and young people being "looked after" by the local authority. These may be subject to Care Orders or Interim Care Orders; placed or authorised to be placed, with prospective adopters; voluntarily accommodated including unaccompanied asylum seeking children and LAC Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2014-2017, finally those subject to court orders with residence requirements i.e. a secure order or remanded to local authority accommodation.

The term "care leavers" as defined in The Children (Care Leavers) Act 2000 refers to eligible, relevant and former relevant children:

- Eligible children are those young people aged 16 and 17 who are still in care and have been "looked after" for (a total of) at least 13 weeks from the age of 14 and including their 16th birthday; Relevant children are those young people aged 16 and 17 who have already left care, and who were "looked after" for (a total of) at least 13 weeks from the age of 14, and have been „looked after“ at some time while they were 16 or 17;
- Former relevant children are those young people aged 18, 19 or 20 who have been eligible and/or relevant.

3. Local Context for Children Looked After

The Council of the Isles of Scilly is committed to ensuring that children and young people are able to remain safely within their own families wherever this is consistent with maintaining and promoting their wellbeing. This is supported through an early intervention, Signs of Safety model whereby all services involved with the family work together to strengthen families to prevent children coming into care.

We are also improving the range of support services available to children with disabilities and their families, again to ensure that this group of children and young people remain within their families wherever possible. This is achieved through supporting children and families in accessing targeted and early help services, in addition to “short breaks” offer.

We ensure that only those children and young people for whom care is essential come into care while enabling all others to be supported to remain within their extended families. Where children and young people need to come into care for their own safety and protection, we will seek to ensure that they remain placed as close as possible to their home, community and school, when this is in accordance with their best interests. For young children who are unable to safely return to their birth or extended families, we will seek permanency for them through adoption wherever possible. Adoption is associated with the best outcomes for children unable to remain within their own birth families, where this isn't possible the Council will seek to achieve permanency through a Special Guardianship Order.

4. Connected Persons

The Council is providing preventative services through Early Help to prevent children and young people coming into care, this has supported the Council in maintaining low numbers of children coming into care.

The Council of the Isles of Scilly places a high value on children being raised within loving families who can meet their overall developmental needs. The key principle underlying this document is that children should be enabled to live within their birth families unless this is not consistent with their welfare. Where it is detrimental for children to remain with their parents, first consideration will be given to placing them with a relative, friend or person who is connected to them from within their network. This principle applies whether a child is voluntarily accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 or is subject to a care order.

The Children Act 1989 Section 22 and 23 (6) states in relation to connected persons, ‘when a child is subject to care proceedings family & friends must be the first consideration in the list of placement options’, provided this arrangement is reasonably practical and is consistent with promoting and safeguarding their welfare.

This policy takes account of the evidence and research which indicates that children feel more attached, secure and have a better sense of who they are when they live with relatives and friends. The Council of the Isles of Scilly also recognise that when children are removed from their birth parents, feelings of separation and loss should be minimised. Hence, the preferred option, wherever possible, would be to place a child with someone with whom they have a pre-existing connection, rather than stranger foster carers. Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, allows for such immediate placements to be agreed by the Head of Service in advance of placement.

The decision to offer a permanent home to a child is not one that is taken lightly. It is essential that family and friends and connected person are made fully aware of the role they are taking on in relation to the child, the expectations the department has of them and what support they can expect from the department, so they can make an informed decision about offering permanence.

The guidance for social workers is:

- Give first consideration to family, friends or persons with a connection to a child, when a decision is taken to remove that child from his/her birth parents.
- Ensure a consistent standard of comprehensive assessments of family and friends and connected person carers that are completed within statutory recommended timescales;
- Ensure placement stability and secure permanence for children by identifying potential vulnerabilities and support needs of placements and offering a robust package of support.

To aid their judgement, the Council commissions an Independent Reviewing Officer, viability assessments, Family Group Conferencing, Legal Services and Connected Persons Assessments from Cornwall Council to assess the following options for a child or young person coming into care.

- Family and Friends foster care is a formal arrangement where the child is looked after by the Local Authority and placed with a relative, friend or connected person.
- 'Relative or friend' is defined as: a grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt (whether of the full blood or half blood or by marriage or civil partnership), step-parent or friend of the child.
- A 'connected person' is anyone who has a pre-existing connection to a child through their extended network. This may be someone who knows the child in a more professional capacity such as a childminder, a teacher or a youth worker, although these are not exclusive categories.

Family and friends and connected person foster care can therefore be defined as an arrangement where:

- Children are living with a relative, friend or connected person away from the parental home because they cannot live with their parents.
- The placement has in some way been assisted or initiated and/or is supported by Children's Services, often with a view to securing permanency via a Residence Order or a Special Guardianship Order.
- The child would otherwise be in stranger foster care.

These duties and responsibilities in respect of placement with family and friends, as outlined in the Children Act, 1989 include:

- Section 17, providing a range of support and/or financial services to children in need, including those who live with family or friends.
- Section 20, providing suitable accommodation to those deemed to require it because their parents or those with parental responsibility are unable or unwilling to do so.
- Section 22, determining the most appropriate placement for looked after children, and "giving preference to" a placement with a relative, friends or connected person, and who is also an approved Family & Friends foster carer.

These requirements are reinforced in the Public Law Outline, 2008 which requires authorities to demonstrate that they have considered family members and friends as potential carers at each stage of the decision-making process, before initiating care proceedings or making an application under Section 31 of the 1989 Act. It is therefore important that any discussions held with family, friends and connected persons are recorded effectively, as details will be required by the Court.

5. Emergencies and respite

Given low numbers of foster carers and the location of the islands, consideration has to be given to situations where either vetted foster care or friends and family care is not appropriate or available. Where the Local Authority is placing a child, registered childminders who are connected persons to a child, may be asked to support children in those situations taking into account the views of the child. The social care team monitor, review and support both the childminder and child in those situations. All childcare providers on the islands are either 'Good' or 'Outstanding' in their most recent Ofsted inspections and are able to provide care for up to 28 days as part of their registration. The list of childminders is held by Children's Services.

6. Support

All children looked after by the local authority will be supported by regular and intensive input by their social worker, Independent Reviewing Officer and strong multi-agency working.

They will be entitled to their own Personal Education Plan and specific focus will also be given to accommodating their health and social needs particularly bearing in mind the cost of accessing services in such a remote location. Support will be bespoke to the child concerned and ensure that they have access to the same opportunities as their peers.

Friends and family carers and childminders will be paid at the same rate as approved foster carers and conversations with social workers will be encouraged to ensure that additional costs are met in the interests of the child. Given low numbers there is considerable flexibility in considering requests for additional support.

All discretionary payments will be approved by the Senior Manager.

The Corporate Parenting Panel will oversee the welfare of our looked after children and ensure that their educational, social and health outcomes are positive. They will ensure the celebration of children's birthdays, achievements and other significant events where appropriate and invited.

Given the numbers of children in care those children and their birth families are likely to be high profile and signposting to services will take place both to prevent further instances of children coming into local authority care and to maximise opportunities for reunification.

7. Permanence Planning

To minimise drift and delay it is an overriding consideration that reunification may not be possible, that chances reduce after six months and that permanency is paramount. This is especially important on the Isles of Scilly in case the relocation of a child to the mainland may be in their best interests and the child will need additional support in this move.

8. Pathway Planning

All children are by law entitled to support at age 15 to plan a successful transition to adult life. On the Isles of Scilly most children aged 16 move to the mainland for training and/or education. A child in care will be given exactly the same services in terms of information, advice and guidance and statutory funding as well as additional support in visiting colleges, identifying accommodation and sourcing social opportunities which will be agreed in a Pathway Plan. Regular visits will be maintained by a local social worker. There are also island opportunities for supported internships and apprenticeships to which the young person will be signposted.

9. Leaving Care

Please see our separate strategy and policy on how we support our care leavers.

10. Extreme Conditions

There will be some circumstances specific to the Isles of Scilly, which may mean that is not possible to meet statutory requirements. Where a parent can ask a childminder, friend or relative to care for a child, and it is appropriate that this is without the intervention of the Local Authority, this will be done.

However should a parent not be able to exercise parental responsibility for example if flown off for a medical emergency, the Local Authority will act within legislative processes to ensure any child is safe and well cared for.

If they cannot be cared for by an Island Foster Carer, there are no other family or friends available, nor any connected person, the Local Authority will seek to place the child with the most appropriately approved, DBS checked adult until an appropriate legal placement can be found. In normal circumstances this would not be expected to be more than 72 hours.

However in extreme cases EG Covid 19 implications this may be for longer.

Suitable persons would include

- Registered child care providers, eg Childminders
- Houseparents of Mundesley Boarding Provision
- Social workers or suitably experienced and DBS checked staff providing care in a child's own home or other suitable accommodation.

All of these arrangements must be authorised by the Director of Children's Services with an appropriate risk assessment and reviewed on a weekly basis.