

**2024**

**Report of the Auditor General  
to the Nova Scotia  
House of Assembly**



**Health, Safety and Well-Being of  
Children Placed in Temporary  
Emergency Arrangements and  
Child and Youth Care Homes**



**Performance Audit**  
**Independence • Integrity • Impact**

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May 7, 2024

Danielle Barkhouse, Lisa Lachance and Nolan Young  
Deputy Speakers  
House of Assembly  
Province of Nova Scotia

Dear Deputy Speakers:

I have the honour to submit herewith my Report to the House of Assembly under Section 18(2) of the *Auditor General Act*, to be laid before the House in accordance with Section 18(4) of the *Auditor General Act*.

Respectfully,



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# Health, Safety and Well-Being of Children Placed in Temporary Emergency Arrangements and Child and Youth Care Homes

## Department of Community Services

### Key Messages

- Weak oversight of children in temporary emergency arrangements and child and youth care homes is increasing the risk that vulnerable children will not be properly cared for.
- Social workers are not meeting with children at the required frequency impacting their ability to properly plan for the child's care.
- Missing and outdated plans of care may result in the needs of children not being addressed.
- No assessment or analysis by the Department of over 1,900 critical incidents or serious occurrences that could impact the health and safety of children.
- Weak agreements do not allow the Department to hold service providers accountable for the quality of care provided to children.

### Why We Did This Audit

- Children in the care of the Minister are a vulnerable population.
- Temporary emergency arrangements and child and youth care homes only to be used after other options exhausted or the needs of the child cannot be met elsewhere.
- 271 children placed in child and youth care homes between April 2021 and March 2023 at a cost of \$40 million per year.
- 227 children placed in temporary emergency arrangements between April 2021 and September 2023.
- The annual cost of temporary emergency arrangements increased \$23.3 million over five years to \$28 million per year.

### Weaknesses in Oversight of Temporary Emergency Arrangements Putting Vulnerable Children at Increased Risk

- Number of children in temporary emergency arrangements has increased from 36 in 2017-18 to 138 in 2022-23, while the annual cost has risen from \$4.6 million to \$27.9 million over the same period.
- Temporary emergency arrangements are not licensed or inspected by the Department.
- Average length of stay in a temporary emergency arrangement is over eight months when these are intended to be only used for up to four days.
- Implementation of recommendations from a 2022 internal review assessing the Department's compliance with temporary emergency arrangement policies not tracked.
- Social workers not having enough contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements.
- During the audit period, temporary emergency arrangement service provider agreements were missing key terms and conditions that could impact the quality of care children receive.
- Management indicated the increase in temporary emergency arrangements caused by several factors including fewer foster families, increased needs of children in care, and child and youth care homes not accepting placements.

### Placement Decisions Not Supported

- No explanation why children are placed in specific child and youth care homes.
- Placement information collection tools outlining the needs of a child outdated and missing information.
- Department policy does not require documentation to explain placement decisions.

### **Policies for Plans of Care Are Not Followed**

- Plans of care for children in child and youth care homes not completed or completed late.
- Quarterly and annual reviews of plans of care not completed or completed late.

### **Social Workers Are Not Always Meeting with Children In Child and Youth Care Homes At The Required Frequency**

- Social workers are not always meeting with children within seven days of placement in a child and youth care home or having contact with children every 30 days as required by Department policy.
- Social worker contact with children not always occurring at the child and youth care home.

### **Health and Safety Risks to Children in Child and Youth Care Homes Not Analyzed**

- The Department relies on child and youth care homes to track incidents that could impact the health and safety of children in care.
- Over 1,900 critical incidents or serious occurrences that could impact the health and safety of children in child and youth care homes reported to the Department, but no analysis completed to determine causes, trends, or patterns.
- The Department does not know how many allegations of child abuse or neglect were reported by children living in child and youth care homes.

### **Improved Quality Assurance Process for Child and Youth Care Homes and Temporary Emergency Arrangements Needed**

- Department's quality assurance work limited to when files are closed or transferred, so active files may not be reviewed for compliance with Department policies.
- Current quality assurance work does not examine the placement decision for a child, or the frequency of social worker contact with a child in care.
- Improved quality assurance processes needed for the Department to identify situations where Department policies are not met and take corrective action faster.

### **Significant Inconsistencies in Funding for Child and Youth Care Homes**

- The Department has not completed a review of how child and youth care homes are funded.
- No explanation for the differences in funding models for third-party child and youth care homes.
- Funding per bed for third-party child and youth care homes was 16 to 27 per cent higher than funding for government homes between 2020-21 and 2022-23.
- Significant differences in funding per bed for third-party child and youth care homes ranged between \$164,000 and \$335,000 in 2022-23 with no explanation for the difference.

### **Weaknesses in Agreements with Child and Youth Care Home Service Providers**

- Service provider agreements with third-party child and youth care homes service providers do not outline performance standards for the care of children.
- In 2022-23 \$20 million in funding provided to third-party run child and youth care homes but agreements do not include terms to hold service providers accountable.

### **Child and Youth Care Homes Licensed and Inspected But Improvements Needed**

- Child and youth care homes are inspected twice per year as required by policy.
- Inspections identifying violations such as incomplete training, missing vulnerable sector checks, and missed fire inspections.
- Improved policy guidance needed for determining timelines for the correction of violations.
- Inspection process does not verify if staff background checks are renewed at a regular frequency.

## Reference Guide – Key Findings and Observations

Paragraph	Key Findings and Observations
<i>Weaknesses in Oversight of Temporary Emergency Arrangements Putting Vulnerable Children at Increased Risk</i>	
20	Significant increase in the number and cost of temporary emergency arrangements
21	Children remaining in temporary emergency arrangements for over eight months on average
24	Implementation of recommendations from a 2022 internal review of temporary emergency arrangements not tracked
27	Department policies do not reflect current social worker contact standards for children in temporary emergency arrangements
29	Significant gaps in social worker contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements
31	Unannounced site visits to temporary emergency arrangements not occurring
32	Weekly virtual contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements and service providers not occurring
38	The Department does not know how the current temporary emergency arrangement service providers were selected
39	The Department did not have detailed agreements with temporary emergency arrangement service providers
41	Improved agreements for temporary emergency arrangements signed after Auditor General's audit work completed
<i>Placement Decisions Not Supported</i>	
43	No explanation of how child and youth care homes are selected for children
45	Placement information collection tools completed, but contain outdated and missing information
52	Placement information collection tool only highlights a child's negative behaviours and challenges
<i>Policies for Plans of Care Are Not Followed</i>	
53	The Department has policies to develop plans to meet the needs of children in care
55	Plans of care not completed or not updated on time
58	Plans of care not reviewed and updated as required
<i>Social Workers Are Not Always Meeting with Children in Child and Youth Care Homes At The Required Frequency</i>	
64	Social workers not always meeting with children within seven days of being placed in a child and youth care home
66	Social workers are not always having contact with children every 30 days as required
70	Social workers meeting with children in person but not always at the child and youth care home
<i>Health and Safety Risks to Children in Child and Youth Care Homes Not Analyzed</i>	
73	Critical incident and serious occurrence reports not always found in a child's Department file
74	No analysis of over 1,900 incidents in a two-year period that could potentially impact the health and safety of children
78	The Department does not know how many allegations of child abuse or neglect were made by children living in child and youth care homes
<i>Improved Quality Assurance Process for Child and Youth Care Homes and Temporary Emergency Arrangements Needed</i>	
83	An improved quality assurance process could allow the Department to identify and address issues sooner

(Continued)

Paragraph	Key Findings and Observations
<i>Significant Inconsistencies in Funding for Child and Youth Care Homes</i>	
86	Funding model for third-party run child and youth care homes varies by service provider
92	Significant variations in the funding per bed for child and youth care homes
<i>Weaknesses in Agreements with Child and Youth Care Home Service Providers</i>	
96	Agreements do not include terms and conditions to hold service providers accountable
<i>Child and Youth Care Homes Licensed and Inspected But Improvements Needed</i>	
103	Process in place for the licensing of new child and youth care homes
105	Regular inspections of child and youth care homes identify violations
107	Violations addressed but improved guidance needed for timelines to correct violations
113	Updated background checks not required for child and youth care home staff

## Recommendations and Responses

Recommendation	Department Response	
<p><b>Recommendation 1.1</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services assess the implementation status of the recommendations from the 2022 internal review of temporary emergency arrangements and take appropriate actions to address any outstanding recommendations.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 26</b></p>	<p>DCS has completed and implemented 22 of 24 recommendations from the 2022 Internal Review. The remaining 2 recommendations will be implemented by December 2024. The recommendations are now in practice within the department and/or included within the signed Service Level Agreements for the Temporary Emergency Arrangements.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"> Department Agrees</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> December 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.2</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services update the Department's policy for social worker contact requirements with children in temporary emergency arrangements to reflect the current contact requirements.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 37</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation.</p> <p>(a) The current contact requirements with children in temporary emergency arrangements were communicated via a policy directive and will be incorporated in the current provincial policy manual by September 2024.</p> <p>(b) The Child and Family Wellbeing policy and procedures manuals are currently being revised and the policy will be publicly available by December 2024. The contact requirements with children in temporary emergency arrangements will be incorporated into the internal procedures manual.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"> Department Agrees</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> a) September 2024 for insertion to existing policy  b) December 2024 for inclusion in new policy</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.3</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services regularly monitor social workers' contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements, and with the service provider caring for the children. If Department contact standards are not being met, appropriate action should be taken to achieve compliance.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 37</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation. The current policy will be updated to reflect contact and documentation requirements. There are times when extenuating circumstances result in contact or documentation standards not being met. In these cases, the supervisor will meet with the social worker to determine the reason, and if appropriate, a supervisor note to file will be made. If determined that there are no extenuating circumstances, the supervisor will work with the social worker and take appropriate action to achieve compliance.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"> Department Agrees</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> September 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.4</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services create and use a process to select temporary emergency arrangement service providers. The process must include standardized requirements that potential service providers must meet before permission is granted to provide temporary emergency arrangements.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 42</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation and was in the process of entering into Service Level Agreements with temporary emergency arrangement (TEA) service providers after the OAG testing period and prior to the completion of the OAG audit report and recommendations. All TEA service providers now have signed Service Level Agreements as of October 2023.</p> <p>DCS will create and use a process to select any additional TEA providers. The process will include standardized requirements for potential service providers to meet before being approved to provide TEA support.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"> Department Agrees</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> September 2025</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.5</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services regularly monitor the agreements with temporary emergency service providers to assess whether service providers are complying with all terms and conditions.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 42</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation. Monitoring will occur on an ongoing basis through regular contact by the social worker and a team of DCS Service Provider Support managers who work with service providers to ensure compliance with all terms and conditions of the service level agreements. If there are issues identified, this team works with the appropriate divisions of the department to take corrective action.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"> Department Agrees</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> Ongoing</p>

## Recommendations and Responses

Recommendation	Department Response	
<p><b>Recommendation 1.6</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services require staff to document the rationale behind the selection of a specific child and youth care home for a child.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 44</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation. A policy directive requiring documentation of the rationale for how a specific child and youth care program was selected for each child will be created and issued. Supervisors will monitor to ensure this policy is implemented and followed.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> March 2025</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.7</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services establish guidance outlining how frequently a placement information collection tool, used to outline the needs of children being placed in a child and youth care home, must be completed.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 52</b></p>	<p>The current placement information collection tool will be updated. Guidelines for use of the revised tool will be provided. These will specifically address the conditions under which the child's placement needs must be reviewed and when the PIC tool should be updated to reflect any changes. These guidelines will include timelines for completion and will be monitored by the supervisor.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> March 2025</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.8</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services revise the placement information collection tool used to outline the needs of children to introduce space in each section to describe the strengths of the child and any progress the child has made in addressing past challenges.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 52</b></p>	<p>The guidelines for the revised PIC tool will emphasize the importance of this practice, and supervisors will monitor to ensure the child's strengths, and progress made in addressing past challenges, are reflected.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> March 2025</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.9</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services complete a placement information collection tool outlining the needs of each child to be placed in a child and youth care home. All sections of the placement information collection tool should be completed.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 52</b></p>	<p>The placement information collection tool is currently being updated and will provide direction to document the needs of each child to be placed in a child and youth care program. Direction to complete all sections of the placement information tool will be required, and supervisors will monitor to ensure the tool is both completed and updated.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> March 2025</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.10</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services regularly assess whether plans of care are completed within the timelines outlined within Department policies and whether the required quarterly and annual reviews are completed on schedule. When policy requirements have not been met timely action must be taken to achieve compliance.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 61</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation and will regularly assess whether plans of care are completed and reviewed within the timelines outlined in policy. If not completed within the time frame allotted as per policy, a supervisor consultation note will be added outlining the rationale for non-completion and time frame to complete. This time frame will be monitored by the supervisor.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> December 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.11</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services monitor whether social workers meet with children in child and youth care homes as outlined in Department policy. When meetings do not occur as required, timely corrective action must be taken to contact the child, including in-person visits to their home.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 71</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation and will regularly monitor for documentation confirming social workers are meeting with children in child and youth caring programs as outlined in policy. When it is not possible to complete contact as per policy, a case notation from supervisor will be made to the file including a rationale for the action not being completed, and a time frame for completion as an exception. This time frame will be monitored by the supervisor.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> September 2024</p>

## Recommendations and Responses

Recommendation	Department Response
<p><b>Recommendation 1.12</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services record and track critical incidents and serious occurrences reported by child and youth care homes. This process must include the regular analysis of these events to identify trends, the assessment of risks to children, and a plan to resolve how these risks will be managed.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 77</b></p>	<p>DCS monitors and, as appropriate, investigates every critical incident and serious occurrence that is reported, including those reported by child and youth caring programs. These individual reviews will continue, and where appropriate, investigations to ensure the safety of the child will be carried out under the Act.</p> <p>By December 2024, DCS will develop a policy and process to record and track critical incidents and serious occurrences reported by child and youth caring programs. Quarterly reports will be prepared and analyzed to identify trends, assess risks to children and follow up as required. DCS will ensure that all service providers are submitting reports as appropriate.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">  Department Agrees   <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> December 2024         </p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.13</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services add a feature to their case management system that captures allegations of child abuse or neglect of children living in child and youth care homes.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 82</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation. DCS will investigate the possibility of incorporating a new case type to reflect that the allegation is related to a child living in a child and youth care home in the future case management system.</p> <p>The design of the Child and Family Wellbeing component of the future case management system (Collaborative Case Management or CCM) is expected to be underway in the Summer of 2024 and available for use by the Summer of 2025.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">  Department Agrees   <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> Summer 2025         </p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.14</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services regularly analyze allegations of child abuse or neglect of children in child and youth care homes to identify trends or patterns and to take action where required.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 82</b></p>	<p>DCS will investigate the possibility of centralizing referrals of allegations of child abuse or neglect pertaining to children in child and youth caring programs to a dedicated team which will enable more rapid identification of trends or patterns and allow for appropriate action to be taken if trends or patterns are identified.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">  Department Agrees   <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> September 2024         </p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.15</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services review and revise their quality assurance processes to regularly assess the files of children residing in child and youth care homes or temporary emergency arrangements for compliance with Department policies. This should include assessing whether:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the best available placement option was found for the child;</li> <li>- plans of care are developed and regularly reviewed; and</li> <li>- social workers are having the required contact with children.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 85</b></p>	<p>Child and Family Wellbeing practice requires that social workers and their supervisor meet at least monthly for supervision and to discuss files of children on their caseload. In addition, policy requires that a child's Plan of Care be reviewed at least every 90 days. Policy will be updated to require that at least every 90 days, each open file is reviewed by supervisors and social workers. This meeting will seek to assess whether the best available placement option was found for the child; that plans of care are developed and regularly reviewed per policy; and that social workers are having the required contact with children. Supervisors will be required to note the outcome of these reviews in the file.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">  Department Agrees   <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> March 2025         </p>

## Recommendations and Responses

Recommendation	Department Response	
<p><b>Recommendation 1.16</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services complete a comprehensive review of the funding models and establish a consistent approach to funding child and youth care homes.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 95</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation. We will conduct a comprehensive review of the current funding models for child and youth care programs with the goal of establishing an equitable funding model. This model will consider costs associated with operating and providing quality services for children and youth and will ensure consistency and transparency across the continuum of placement options.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> September 2025</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.17</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services implement comprehensive agreements with third-party service providers which include terms and conditions to provide high quality and consistent services to children living in child and youth care homes.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 101</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation. Service Level Agreements are currently being developed for all third-party service child and youth caring program providers and will include terms and conditions to provide high quality and consistent services to children living in child and youth care programs.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> September 2025</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.18</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services review and update child and youth care home inspection policies to reflect the current practices of the Department, including defining acceptable timelines for addressing the violations and outlining any factors inspectors must consider when setting timelines.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 112</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation. The policy on child and youth care home inspection will be updated to reflect current practices and will include definitions of acceptable timelines for addressing violations and factors to consider when setting timelines.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> June 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.19</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services review and approve extensions to the timelines for correcting violations identified through the inspection of child and youth care homes.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 112</b></p>	<p>The current practice for reviewing and approving extensions to the timelines for correcting violations identified through the inspection of child and youth caring programs requires a supervisor to provide approval for any extension. This policy will be reviewed and updated, particularly to ensure that any individual who is acting in a supervisory role on a temporary basis identifies this to be the case. Regular monitoring to ensure that any extension provided is approved by a supervisor, or an individual acting as a supervisor, will be carried out by the Director.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> June 2024</p>
<p><b>Recommendation 1.20</b> We recommend the Department of Community Services require all staff working in a child and youth care home to complete child abuse registry, criminal records, and vulnerable sector checks at regular intervals. Child and youth care home inspections should confirm the required checks are completed at the mandated frequency.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><b>See paragraph 114</b></p>	<p>DCS agrees with this recommendation. A review of the current frequency of child abuse registry, criminal records, and vulnerable sector checks will occur, and the inspection policy will be amended to include confirmation of these checks having been completed. The department will also undertake a cross-jurisdictional scan to identify leading practice.</p>	<p> Department Agrees</p> <p> <b>Target Date for Implementation:</b> September 2025</p>

## Questions Nova Scotians May Want To Ask

1. Does the Department of Community Services have plans to license temporary emergency arrangements?
2. How does the Department of Community Services plan to improve oversight of both child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements?
3. Does the Department of Community Services have a strategy to reduce the reliance on child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements?
4. How does the Department of Community Services plan to improve service provider accountability for the care of children in temporary emergency arrangements and child and youth care homes?

# 1 Health, Safety and Well-Being of Children Placed in Temporary Emergency Arrangements and Child and Youth Care Homes

## Background

- 1.1 The Department of Community Services (the Department) is responsible for the *Children and Family Services Act* (the Act), a provincial law which protects children from harm, promotes the integrity of the family, and requires consideration of the best interests of children in all proceedings and matters under the Act. The Act provides protection for children at risk of abuse or neglect by enabling the Department to intervene on their behalf.
 
- 1.2 When the Department has determined a child needs protective services and is at imminent risk of harm, a decision may be made to take the child into the care of the Minister of Community Services if there are no alternative, less intrusive, options available to keep the child safe. Once the child has been taken into care, the Department applies to the Nova Scotia Supreme Court (Family Division) for a court order granting protective services for the child and placing the child in the Minister's temporary care and custody. The court maintains oversight of the child protection court proceeding and grants orders respecting placement and services as it determines are in the child's best interests until the conclusion of the proceeding, in accordance with the Act.
- 1.3 Family reunification is the objective of all interventions when the court has placed a child in the Minister's temporary care and custody. Temporary care and custody orders are granted when the court determines a child cannot remain at home and placement with family, friends or community is not available or would not be in the child's best interest. Once the child is in temporary care, the Department works with the family and child to address circumstances that caused the child to be taken into the care of the Minister.
- 1.4 In addition to temporary care and custody orders, the court can also grant a permanent care and custody order for a child when it determines the circumstances and risks that led to a child coming into care have not been, or won't be, successfully resolved. The court makes that order when it finds that, within the legislated timeline provided by the Act, the child can't safely return home, and there are no other viable placements for the child. A permanent care and custody order effectively severs parental rights. The Minister becomes the permanent legal guardian of the child with all the rights, powers, and responsibilities of a parent for the child's care and custody.
- 1.5 When the court places a child in the Minister's care, the Minister must act as a wise and conscientious parent. Available placement options for a child in care include:
  - Kinship foster care – caregivers with whom the child has an established relationship including relatives, neighbours, or close friends of the family
  - Foster care – caregivers who open their homes to children who are unable to live with their birth families

- Child and youth care homes – licensed, community-based residences for children who cannot be placed in a foster care environment or with moderate to severe emotional or behavioural challenges that require a higher level of supervision and structure than is available in foster care. These homes often provide care for multiple children
  - Temporary emergency arrangements – two-on-one care for children that is intended to be used for a short period of time while the Department works to find foster care or a child and youth care home for the child.
- 1.6 This audit focused on child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements. We did not examine foster care, nor did the scope of this audit include the processes used by the Department to determine when a child must be removed from their parents or guardians and taken into the care of the Minister.
- 1.7 Responsibility for child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements is spread across three divisions within the Department of Community Services.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia and Department of Community Services

- 1.8 Department management has indicated that recruitment and retention of social workers has been challenging. Social workers within the Department face many challenges in the work they do. This work can be stressful and time consuming as they are responsible for children in the care of the Minister, many of which have high needs that require a lot of attention.

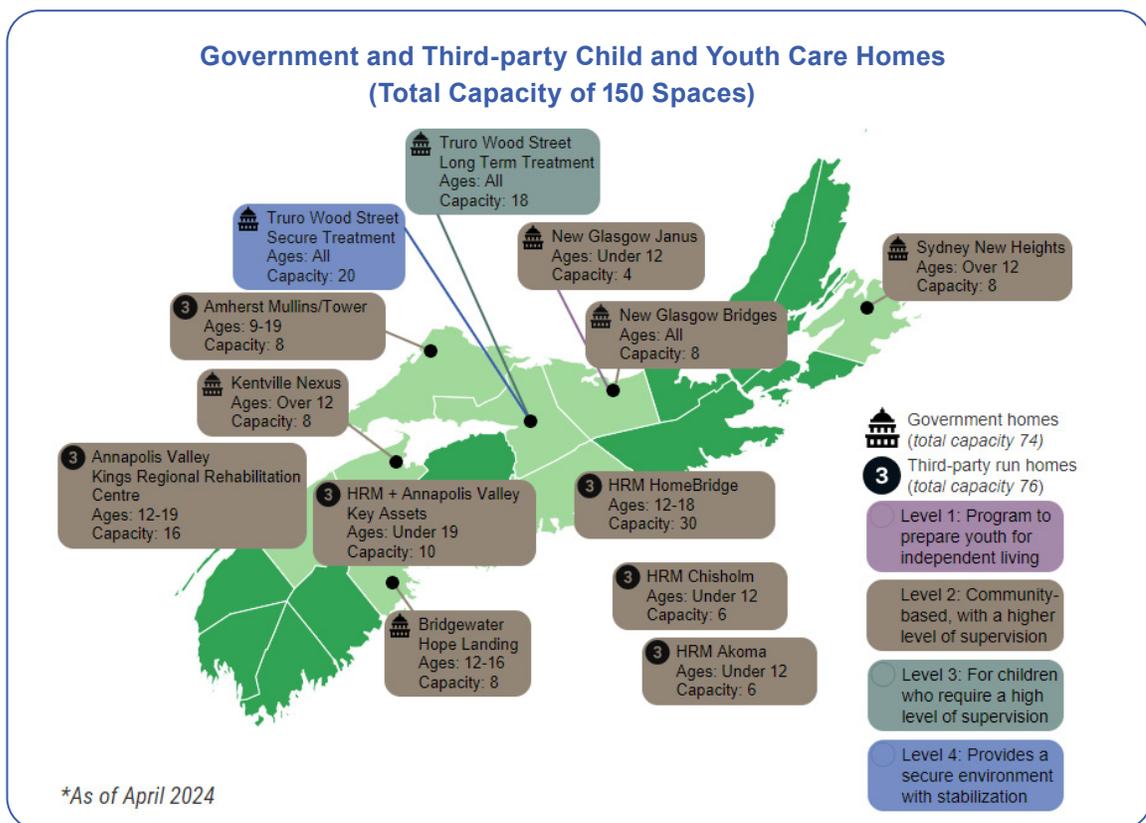
### Child and Youth Care Homes

- 1.9 There are 150 spaces in child and youth care homes across the province. Approximately half of these spaces are in government run homes with the remainder run by third-party service providers funded by the province. All child and youth care homes must be licensed by the Department of Community Services and are inspected at least twice per year.

1.10 There are four levels of child and youth care homes. Children are to be placed in a home with a level of care that best meets their needs.

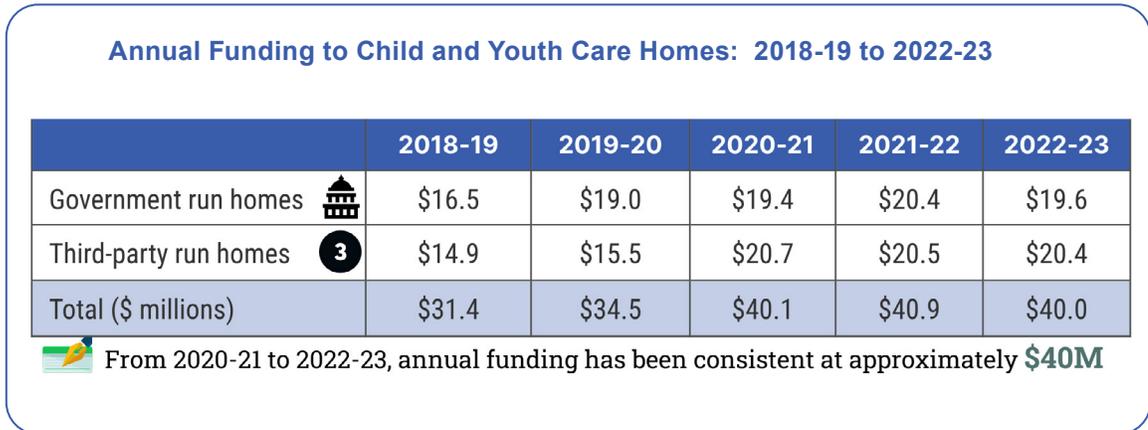
- Level 1 (Semi-independent) – focuses on preparing youth over the age of 16 for independent living.
- Level 2 (Community-based program) – serves children under 19 years old with moderate challenges who require a higher level of service and supervision than available in foster care.
- Level 3 (Long term treatment) – serves children under 19 years old with a wide range of complex behavioural and emotional challenges that are addressed through individualized treatment plans.
- Level 4 (Secure involuntary treatment) – serves children under 19 years of age who require stabilization in a secure environment to address behavioral, social, and emotional difficulties.

1.11 An overview of the child and youth care homes throughout the province is outlined below, with most of the homes classified as Level 2.



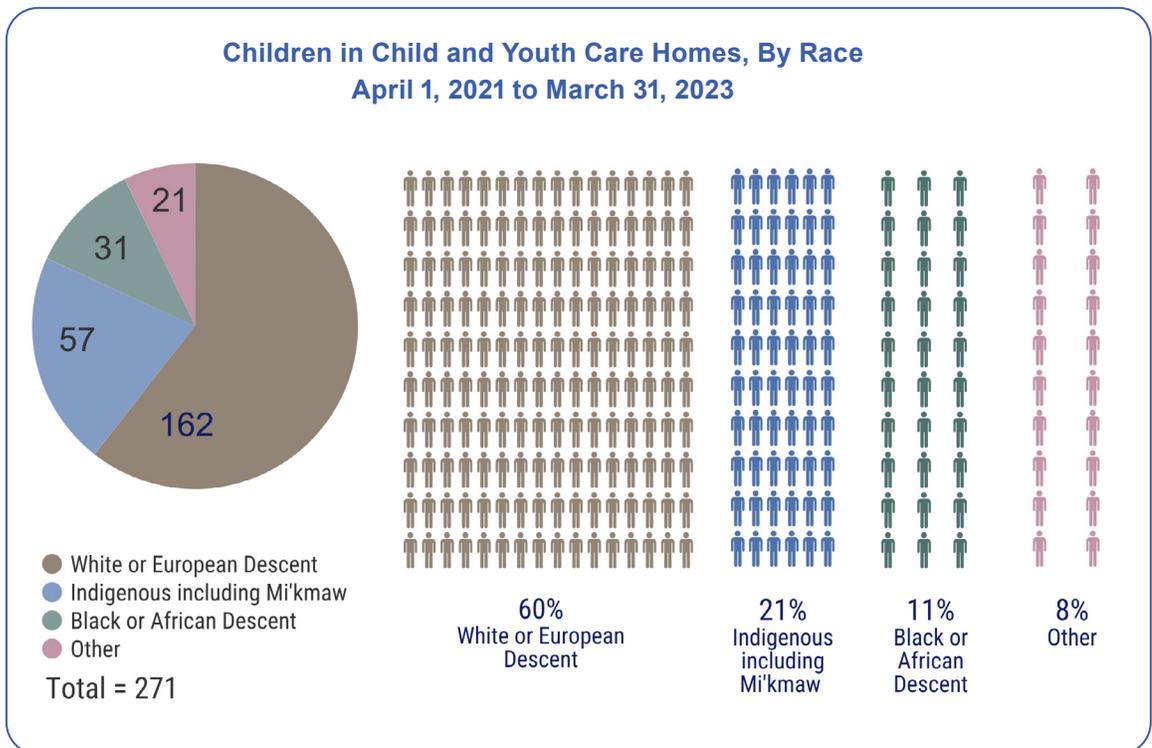
Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia and Department of Community Services; unaudited

1.12 Annual funding to child and youth care homes over the past five years is outlined below.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia and Department of Community Services; unaudited

1.13 During our two-year audit period (April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2023) 271 children were placed in child and youth care homes with many of these children moving between different homes during this period. The age of the children ranged between three and 18 years old with an average age of 14 years and an average length of stay of 240 days. A breakdown by race for the children in child and youth care homes during our audit period is outlined below.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia and Department of Community Services; unaudited

- 1.14 Child welfare services to the Mi'kmaw population on reserve are carried out as part of a Tripartite Agreement between the Department of Community Services, Indigenous Services Canada and Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services of Nova Scotia. The 21 per cent of Indigenous, including Mi'kmaw, children highlighted in the above chart include children living both on and off reserves in the province. Our audit did not include the work of Mi'kmaw Family and Children Services of Nova Scotia, but in our sample of files tested we did include Mi'kmaw children living off reserve.

### Temporary Emergency Arrangements

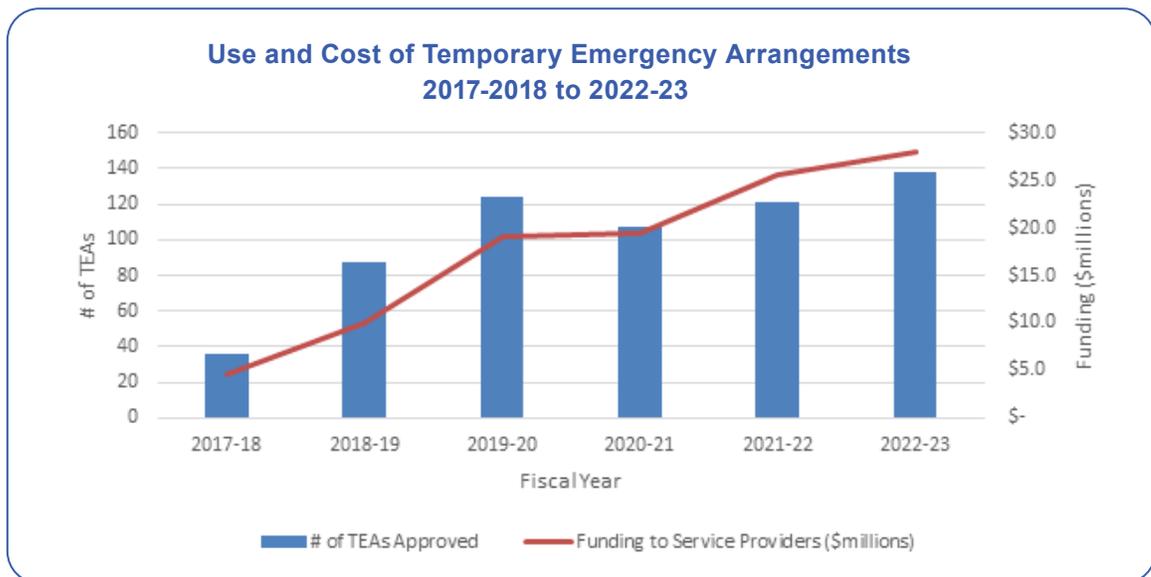
- 1.15 A temporary emergency arrangement is a home where a child in the care and custody of the Minister can reside for a brief period until an approved kinship foster home, foster home or child and youth care home becomes available, or the child returns to their parents or guardians. It is the responsibility of the Department to explore all other options before using a temporary emergency arrangement with the goal of minimizing the length of time the child spends in these unlicensed arrangements.
- 1.16 Three types of temporary emergency arrangements can be used by the Department:
- A family member or other person with a significant established relationship to the child. There were 33 children placed in this type of temporary emergency arrangement between April 1, 2021, and September 30, 2023.
  - A community-based program, not licensed by the Department of Community Services, such as a detox center, transition house, or emergency housing shelter. Management said these are no longer used by the Department.
  - A contracted service provider. There were 227 children placed in temporary emergency arrangements run by contracted service providers between April 1, 2021, and September 30, 2023.
- 1.17 This audit focused on temporary emergency arrangements provided by contracted service providers; we did not examine the use of family members or community-based programs.
- 1.18 Contracted service providers deliver temporary emergency arrangements, including caregivers, to look after one child 24 hours per day, seven days per week. These homes are not licensed by the Department, and as a result are not inspected like child and youth care homes. As of October 2023, there are four contracted service providers delivering temporary emergency arrangements for the Department.
- Arden Professional Client Care
  - Specialized Support Service of Nova Scotia
  - Alternative Programs for Youth and Families
  - Colchester Community Respite Services

## Weaknesses in Oversight of Temporary Emergency Arrangements Putting Vulnerable Children at Increased Risk

1.19 Temporary emergency arrangements provide a short-term solution where a child can live until a licensed placement, such as foster care or a child and youth care home, can be found. Department policy states a temporary emergency arrangement is not intended to last more than four days except in exceptional circumstances.

### ➔ Significant increase in the number and cost of temporary emergency arrangements

1.20 Temporary emergency arrangements are necessary in some situations, but our audit work shows the Province’s growing reliance on these interim measures. Their use is becoming more frequent, and children are not staying in these for short periods of time, at a significant cost to the Department. Over the five-year period of 2017-18 to 2022-23, the number of temporary emergency arrangements approved by the Department increased almost 300% from 36 in 2017-18 to 138 in 2022-23, while the cost rose over 500% from \$4.6 million to \$27.9 million over the same period.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia and Department of Community Services; unaudited

### ➔ Children remaining in temporary emergency arrangements for over eight months on average

1.21 Between April 1, 2021, and September 30, 2023, 227 children were placed in a temporary emergency arrangement with an average length of stay of 252 days, or over eight months. Arden Professional Client Care was used for approximately 83 per cent of the temporary emergency arrangements opened during this period. Department management indicated the number of temporary emergency arrangements is declining. According to management as of April 3, 2024, only 35 temporary emergency arrangements were in use, with six new arrangements opened in the first three months of 2024.

1.22 Management indicated a variety of reasons contributed to the increase in temporary emergency arrangements including:

- Fewer foster parents, resulting in more children in temporary emergency arrangements and child and youth care homes.
- More children with complex needs and behaviours that exceed the level of care provided in a foster home or a child and youth care home.
- Child and youth care homes not accepting placements or making unplanned discharges, creating the need for a temporary emergency arrangement until a placement can be found. This is discussed later in the chapter.
- More temporary emergency arrangements were needed to safely house children in response to COVID-19 outbreaks.

1.23 As the number of temporary emergency arrangements increase and children remain there for long periods, there is a risk they are no longer a temporary solution for the child until a licensed placement option can be found. Since temporary emergency arrangements are not licensed and regularly inspected by the Department, there could be additional risks to the health and safety of children in these arrangements.

#### **Implementation of recommendations from a 2022 internal review of temporary emergency arrangements not tracked**

1.24 In July 2022, the Department completed a review to assess compliance with Department policies and determine if any changes were needed to better oversee children living in temporary emergency arrangements. Findings from this review included:

- Department social workers did not have regular contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements
- Temporary emergency arrangements were not always staffed by two individuals
- Service providers allowed children to be away from the temporary emergency arrangement for extended periods of time
- Incidents potentially impacting the health and safety of children were not reported to the Department
- Weaknesses were found in service provider conflict of interest policies

1.25 The review resulted in 24 recommendations to improve the Department's role in meeting the needs of children living in temporary emergency arrangements and overseeing service providers. Examples of the recommendations included:

- New weekly progress reports from service providers to the child's social worker
- Regular unscheduled visits from the child's social worker to their temporary emergency arrangement

- Standardized reporting of incidents that impact the health and safety of children
- Improved conflict of interest policies for service providers

1.26 While the review was a positive step in identifying and managing the risks related to temporary emergency arrangements, the Department has not been tracking the status or implementation of the recommendations, nor evaluating whether the risks identified in the review have been addressed. Without regular monitoring, the issues identified almost two years ago will continue to go unaddressed.

### **Recommendation 1.1**

We recommend the Department of Community Services assess the implementation status of the recommendations from the 2022 internal review of temporary emergency arrangements and take appropriate actions to address any outstanding recommendations.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS has completed and implemented 22 of 24 recommendations from the 2022 Internal Review. The remaining 2 recommendations will be implemented by December 2024. The recommendations are now in practice within the department and/or included within the signed Service Level Agreements for the Temporary Emergency Arrangements. Target Date: December 2024.

## **Department policies do not reflect current social worker contact standards for children in temporary emergency arrangements**

1.27 Following the Department's 2022 review, revised standards for social worker contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements were communicated to staff in a September 2022 memo outlining:

- Initial contact with the child at the temporary emergency arrangement within seven days of the placement;
- Face-to-face contact with the child at the temporary emergency arrangement three times in every 30-day period, with at least one unannounced visit; and
- Weekly virtual contact with both the child and the staff from the service provider caring for the child.

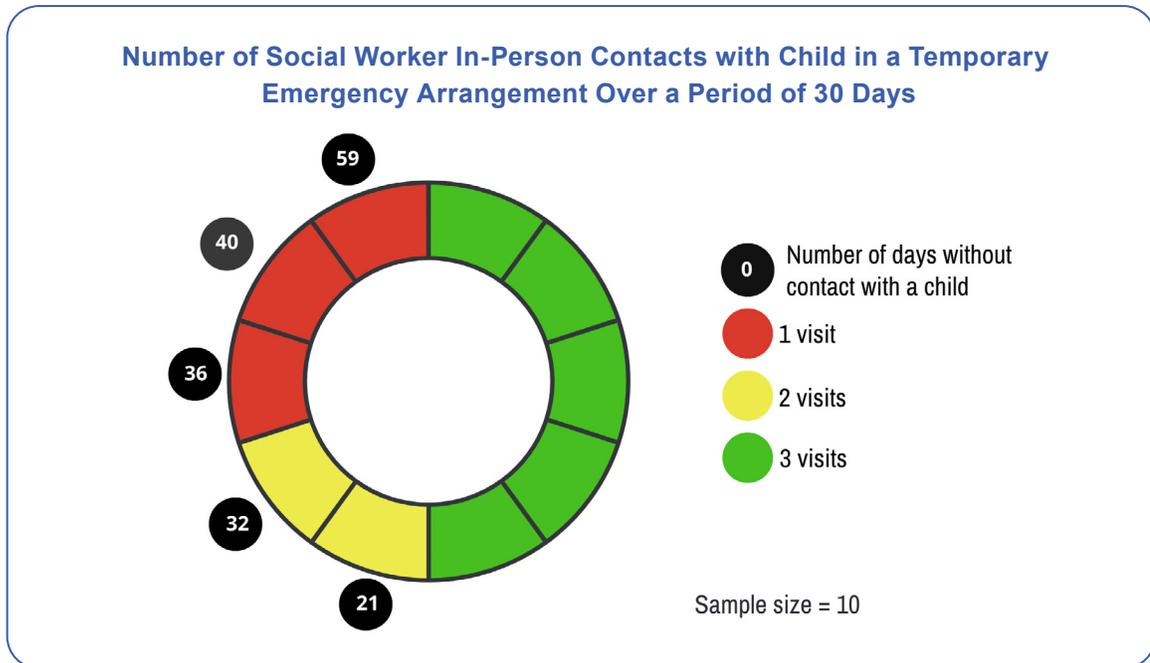
1.28 Despite the announcement to staff of the revised standards in September 2022, the Department policy manual has still not been updated to reflect these new requirements. This lapse creates a risk social workers who rely on the policy manual for guidance on contact requirements will not have the most up-to-date information, especially those new to the Department. Inconsistencies in direction to staff can create discrepancies in the frequency of social worker visits with children in temporary emergency arrangements.

## **Significant gaps in social worker contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements**

1.29 We were encouraged to see the direction for more frequent social worker contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements than for children in a child and youth care home as it would

mitigate some of the risk for children staying in these unlicensed arrangements for longer periods of time. However, we are concerned to find the contact requirements are not always being met.

- 1.30 We reviewed a sample of 10 children placed in temporary emergency arrangements after September 2022 and found in five of the 10 samples, the social worker did not have the required three in-person contacts with the child in the 30-day period reviewed. Even more concerning, there were periods of up to 59 days where the social worker did not have in-person contact with the child. An overview of these samples is provided below.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia

### Unannounced site visits to temporary emergency arrangements not occurring

- 1.31 The Department's 2022 review identified a need for social workers to conduct frequent unannounced visits to children living in temporary emergency arrangements. However, for eight of the 10 samples we reviewed, we could not determine if any of the social workers' visits to the child within the 30-day period examined were unannounced. Unscheduled visits provide an opportunity for social workers to see a child in the temporary emergency arrangement without providing the service provider an opportunity to prepare in advance. This is an important step in assessing the level of day-to-day care the child is receiving, and without it, social workers may not obtain an accurate picture.

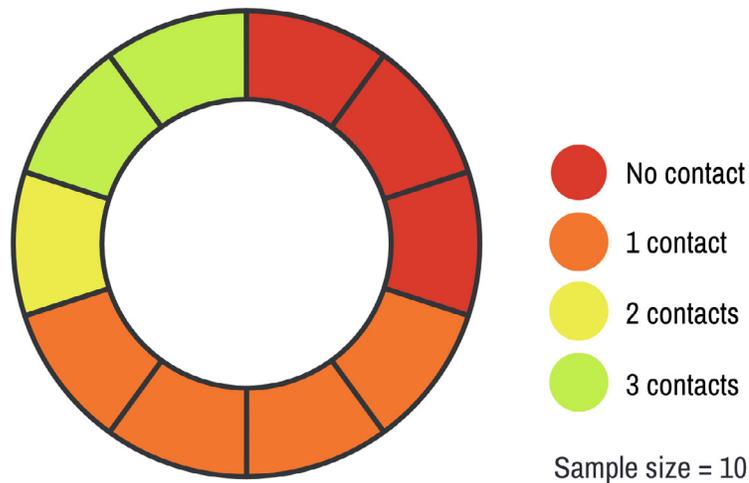
### Weekly virtual contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements and service providers not occurring

- 1.32 Social workers' in-person contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements should be supplemented with weekly virtual meetings with the child and service provider staff. However, like other contact standards, these virtual interactions are not happening as required.

1.33 For our sample of 10 children placed in a temporary emergency arrangement after September 2022, we found no instances where the social worker completed the required four weekly virtual contacts in the first four weeks following the placement. For all the samples, there was at least one week where there was no virtual contact with the child. For three of these samples, there was no virtual contact at all with the child in the four-week period examined.



**Number of Social Worker Weekly Virtual Contacts With Children in a Temporary Emergency Arrangement – First Four Weeks**



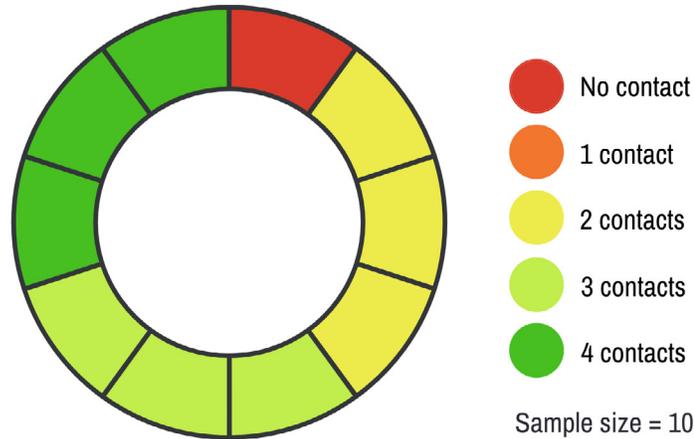
Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia

1.34 We overlaid the samples from the in-person and virtual contact testing and found shortfalls in five of the five samples. When the social worker did not meet the required three face-to-face contacts with the child, the required number of virtual contacts with the child were also not met.

1.35 We also found in seven of the 10 samples, the social worker did not have weekly contact with the service provider as required by policy. In one of these samples, the social worker had no contact at all with the service provider in the four weeks following the placement of the child in the temporary emergency arrangement.



### Number of Social Worker Weekly Virtual Contacts With Temporary Emergency Arrangement Service Provider – First Four Weeks



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia

- 1.36 Social workers need to have regular contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements, as well as the service providers caring for them, to thoroughly assess the well-being of the child and plan for their care. The gaps in contact with both the child and the service provider, combined with incomplete unannounced visits to temporary emergency arrangements, may make it difficult for social workers to be fully aware of the condition of the home and the child and the quality of care the child is receiving.
- 1.37 The issues we have identified around social worker contact are not limited to temporary emergency arrangements. As noted later in this report, we also found similar instances of social workers not meeting contact standards for children living in child and youth care homes.

#### Recommendation 1.2

We recommend the Department of Community Services update the Department's policy for social worker contact requirements with children in temporary emergency arrangements to reflect the current contact requirements.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation.

- (a) The current contact requirements with children in temporary emergency arrangements were communicated via a policy directive and will be incorporated in the current provincial policy manual by September 2024. Target Date: September 2024 for insertion to existing policy.
- (b) The Child and Family Wellbeing policy and procedures manuals are currently being revised and the policy will be publicly available by December 2024. The contact requirements with children in temporary emergency arrangements will be incorporated into the internal procedures manual. Target Date: December 2024 for inclusion in new policy.

### **Recommendation 1.3**

We recommend the Department of Community Services regularly monitor social workers' contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements, and with the service provider caring for the children. If Department contact standards are not being met, appropriate action should be taken to achieve compliance.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation. The current policy will be updated to reflect contact and documentation requirements. There are times when extenuating circumstances result in contact or documentation standards not being met. In these cases, the supervisor will meet with the social worker to determine the reason, and if appropriate, a supervisor note to file will be made. If determined that there are no extenuating circumstances, the supervisor will work with the social worker and take appropriate action to achieve compliance. Target Date: September 2024.

#### **The Department does not know how the current temporary emergency arrangement service providers were selected**

1.38 Children placed in temporary emergency arrangements often require a high level of care and support, yet the Department does not have a process for selecting service providers to deliver temporary emergency arrangements. Management indicated the four current service providers have been in place for many years and it was not aware of how these companies were selected. Without a detailed process to select service providers, there is a risk that the level of care they provide is inconsistent, which can have a direct impact on the health, safety, and overall well-being of children in temporary emergency arrangements.

#### **The Department did not have detailed agreements with temporary emergency arrangement service providers**

1.39 The Department paid temporary emergency arrangement service providers almost \$28 million in 2022-23 to care for highly vulnerable children. We expected to see detailed service agreements with each provider clearly outlining the Department's expectations for the care of children placed in temporary emergency arrangements as well as terms and conditions to allow the Department to oversee the care of the child.

1.40 The service agreements used by the Department when contracting temporary emergency arrangement service providers during our audit period (April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2023) are not specific to temporary emergency arrangements. It is a standard agreement the Department uses when contracting for general services needed for children in the care of the Minister, such as tutoring. This agreement does not include clear performance expectations, including qualifications for the staff responsible for caring for the child; reporting requirements; or terms governing the Department's right to audit or inspect the records of the service provider.

#### **Improved agreements for temporary emergency arrangements signed after Auditor General's audit work completed**

1.41 Following our audit work, the Department signed new service agreements with the four temporary emergency arrangement service providers. These agreements set standards for service providers, including detailed qualifications for staff caring for children in temporary emergency arrangements. Furthermore, service providers are required to regularly report to the Department on the status of children in their care and be subject to review or audit up to seven years after the date of the final payment from the Department.

- 1.42 The implementation of these new agreements represents a significant improvement in the Department's ability to oversee temporary emergency arrangements. However, it is now important for the Department to assess whether service providers are complying with the terms and conditions of the agreements.

#### **Recommendation 1.4**

We recommend the Department of Community Services create and use a process to select temporary emergency arrangement service providers. The process must include standardized requirements that potential service providers must meet before permission is granted to provide temporary emergency arrangements.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation and was in the process of entering into Service Level Agreements with temporary emergency arrangement (TEA) service providers after the OAG testing period and prior to the completion of the OAG audit report and recommendations. All TEA service providers now have signed Service Level Agreements as of October 2023.

DCS will create and use a process to select any additional TEA providers. The process will include standardized requirements for potential service providers to meet before being approved to provide TEA support. Target Date: September 2025.

#### **Recommendation 1.5**

We recommend the Department of Community Services regularly monitor the agreements with temporary emergency arrangement service providers to assess whether service providers are complying with all terms and conditions.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation. Monitoring will occur on an ongoing basis through regular contact by the social worker and a team of DCS Service Provider Support managers who work with service providers to ensure compliance with all terms and conditions of the service level agreements. If there are issues identified, this team works with the appropriate divisions of the department to take corrective action. Target Date: Ongoing.

## **Placement Decisions Not Supported**

### **No explanation of how child and youth care homes are selected for children**

- 1.43 Department policy states choosing the right placement is the most critical decision a social worker must make on behalf of a child. While the availability of space at child and youth care homes may limit the options available, each placement decision needs to be based on a thorough review of the child's needs. Based on the wording of this policy, we expected to see a clearly documented explanation of how the needs of the child and other factors were considered in making the placement decision. This could include assessing the likelihood of a child succeeding in group care, gauging the ability of the child to maintain family and community connections, and evaluating the services offered in the child and youth care home which could benefit the child.



- 1.44 From a sample of 20 children placed in child and youth care homes during our audit period, we found no explanation of why the specific child and youth care home was selected. There is no requirement in Department policies to document the rationale for selecting a specific child and youth care home. Department staff indicated discussions to determine the most suitable home for a child are often not documented in the child's file and the decision is based on vacancy rather than the specific needs of the child.

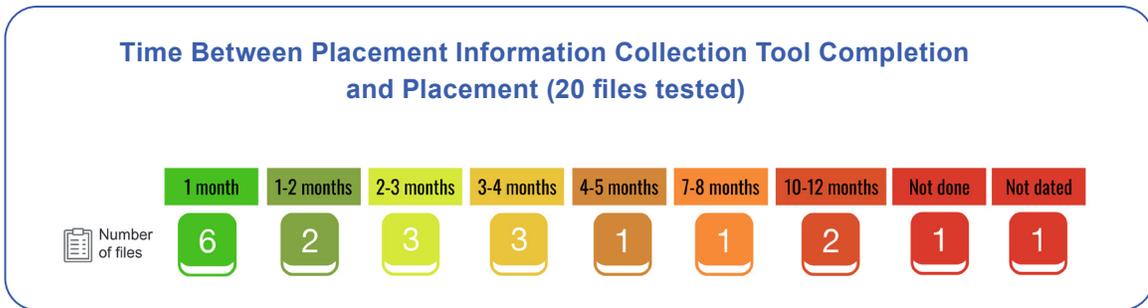
#### **Recommendation 1.6**

We recommend the Department of Community Services require staff to document the rationale behind the selection of a specific child and youth care home for a child.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation. A policy directive requiring documentation of the rationale for how a specific child and youth care program was selected for each child will be created and issued. Supervisors will monitor to ensure this policy is implemented and followed. Target Date: March 2025.

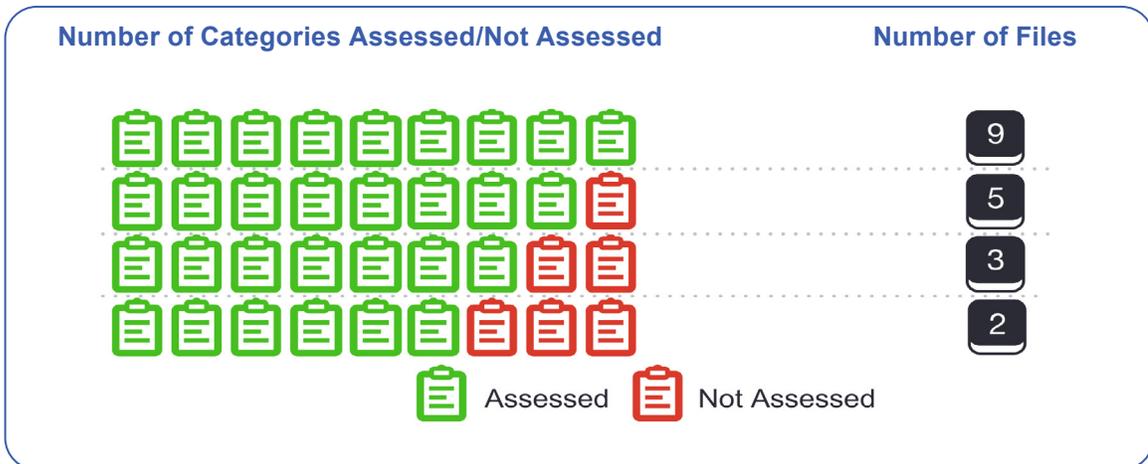
#### **Placement information collection tools completed, but contain outdated and missing information**

- 1.45 If a kinship or foster care home is unavailable or not suitable, the social worker must find a child and youth care home for the child. To assist with this, the child's social worker must complete a placement information collection (PIC) tool. The PIC tool is a form that provides an overall assessment of the needs of a child to be used in finding the best available child and youth care home with nine categories, including health, education, and behavioral considerations.
- 1.46 We reviewed 20 placements of children in child and youth care homes during our audit period (April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2023) and found a PIC tool was completed in 19 of 20 cases. However, we had concerns with the timeliness and comprehensiveness of the PIC tools.
- 1.47 Management told us a PIC tool must be completed each time a new placement is requested for a child. This could be when a child first enters care or when a change in placement occurs. For example, when a child moves from foster care to a child and youth care home or when a child moves to a different child and youth care home. However, this requirement is not clearly outlined in Department policy. The policy also does not state when a past PIC tool needs to be updated if it is taking a significant length of time to secure a child and youth care home for a child.
- 1.48 The 19 PIC tools we reviewed were completed between five days and almost one year in advance of the child's placement in a child and youth care home, with the average PIC tool over three months old.
- 1.49 An up-to-date PIC tool is necessary to find the best possible placement and inform caregivers of the level of care the child requires. Out-of-date PIC tools may not capture any changes to the child's needs, especially for children experiencing the stress of removal from their families or moving to a new placement. For seven of the 19 placements we selected for review, the PIC tool was between three months and almost one year old, increasing the possibility the current needs of the child were not accurately identified or considered in the selection of the child and youth care home.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia

1.50 We also found 10 of the 19 PIC tools we reviewed had at least one area of the tool not completed. Common incomplete categories include the health, emotional, behavioral, and social needs of the child.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia

1.51 A complete PIC tool is essential to find the best child and youth care home for a child. Incomplete information could result in the child not having their needs met, and further disruption for the child if they must be moved to another, more suitable, child and youth care home.

## Placement information collection tool only highlights a child’s negative behaviours and challenges

1.52 The social workers we interviewed expressed concerns the PIC tool does not provide a complete picture of a child. Specifically, it only highlights the negative behaviours and challenges presented by a child and does not capture the strengths of a child or improvements made. This can make it more difficult to find a placement for the child. For example, when service providers only see the negative and challenging behaviour presented by a child, they may be reluctant to provide a space in a child and youth care home, limiting the options where a child can be placed.

### Recommendation 1.7

We recommend the Department of Community Services establish guidance outlining how frequently a placement information collection tool, used to outline the needs of children being placed in a child and youth care home, must be completed.

**Department of Community Services Response:** The current placement information collection tool will be updated. Guidelines for use of the revised tool will be provided. These will specifically address the conditions under which the child's placement needs must be reviewed and when the PIC tool should be updated to reflect any changes. These guidelines will include timelines for completion and will be monitored by the supervisor. Target Date: March 2025.

#### **Recommendation 1.8**

We recommend the Department of Community Services revise the placement information collection tool used to outline the needs of children to introduce space in each section to describe the strengths of the child and any progress the child has made in addressing past challenges.

**Department of Community Services Response:** The guidelines for the revised PIC tool will emphasize the importance of this practice, and supervisors will monitor to ensure the child's strengths, and progress made in addressing past challenges, are reflected. Target Date: March 2025.

#### **Recommendation 1.9**

We recommend the Department of Community Services complete a placement information collection tool outlining the needs of each child to be placed in a child and youth care home. All sections of the placement information collection tool should be completed.

**Department of Community Services Response:** The placement information collection tool is currently being updated and will provide direction to document the needs of each child to be placed in a child and youth care program. Direction to complete all sections of the placement information tool will be required, and supervisors will monitor to ensure the tool is both completed and updated. Target Date: March 2025.

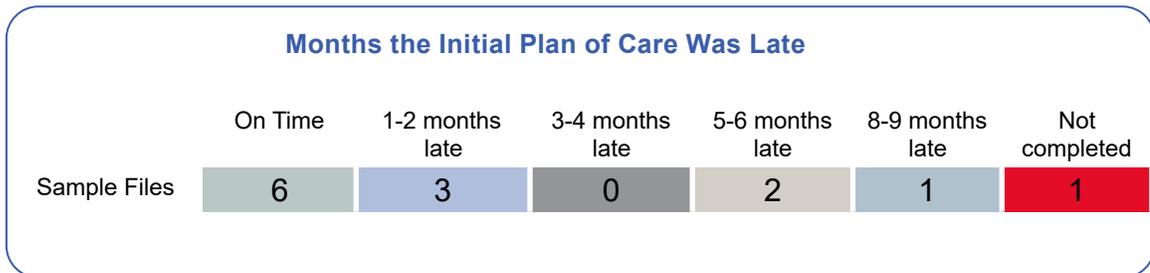
## **Policies for Plans of Care Are Not Followed**

### **The Department has policies to develop plans to meet the needs of children in care**

- 1.53 Within 90 days of the child coming into the care of the Minister, a child-specific plan of care must be developed that outlines how the needs of the child will be met; describes services or supports needed to assist the child; and lists objectives for the child. This plan must be developed through a case planning meeting between the child's social worker, other Department staff and stakeholders, as well as the child and the child's family where appropriate.
- 1.54 There is policy guidance outlining timelines for the completion and regular review of the plans of care, the content to be included, and a template to be used to document the plan. We found the plan of care template was consistent with the policy requirements and outlined what should be included in the child's plan to address the needs and objectives of the child across numerous categories including:
  - Physical health, development, and well-being
  - Mental health, development, and well-being
  - Learning, education, and development strengths and weaknesses
  - Social skills and challenges
  - Recreation interests and hobbies.

**Plans of care not completed or not updated on time**

- 1.55 We reviewed a sample of 20 children placed in child and youth care homes during our audit period (April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2023) and found three instances where a plan of care was not prepared for the child. For the plans of care that were completed, we found the required sections of the plan were generally completed and relevant parties such as Department and child and youth care home staff and family members were involved in the development of the plan of care.
- 1.56 While plans of care were completed for most of our samples, we found several examples where the plan of care was not completed in a timely manner. For 13 of our 20 samples, the child required an initial plan of care upon entering the care of the Minister. For seven of these samples, the plan of care was not completed within 90 days as required by Department policy.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia

- 1.57 Department policy requires planning for a child to begin as soon as the child enters the care of the Minister. When plans of care are not completed or are completed late, there is a risk the needs of the child will be neglected or not identified in a timely manner. Many children placed in child and youth care homes have a high level of needs, so timely planning to support these children becomes even more important. Without planning and support, the transition to care may be made more difficult and potentially impact the child’s ability to adjust to the child and youth care home. This could create further challenges for the child and the resulting behaviour could be disruptive to other children living in the home.

**Plans of care not reviewed and updated as required**

- 1.58 Department policy requires the child’s social worker to review the plan of care with their supervisor at least every three months to assess whether it continues to reflect the goals and objectives for the child. For two of the 17 samples where a plan of care was completed, we found no quarterly reviews of the plan. In another five samples, some of the quarterly reviews were not completed, or completed late. Some examples of these issues are outlined below:



- For one sample, there were only three reviews in the 12-month period after the plan of care was developed.
- For one sample there were only three quarterly reviews completed between November 2021 and August 2023. Over a period of 21 months we expected to see seven reviews of the plan of care.
- For one sample there was a period of almost six months between reviews.

- 1.59 Department policy also requires the plan of care to be reviewed annually at a case planning meeting. These meetings provide an opportunity for the child's social worker, caregivers, and others providing services to the child to review the plan of care and discuss any necessary revisions. For the 17 samples reviewed where a plan of care was completed, an annual review of the plan should have been conducted in eight of the cases. For the remaining samples, the annual review was not yet due at the time of our work, or the child was no longer in care.
- 1.60 For five of eight samples where an annual review was needed, the review was either not completed or completed late. For two of these samples, the annual review had not been completed and was between three months and almost a year overdue. For the other three samples, the annual review was completed but was between a week and approximately nine months late.
- 1.61 Management indicated there may be a variety of reasons for plans of care not being completed, completed late, or not reviewed quarterly, including workload demands, social worker recruitment, and retention challenges. Social workers interviewed also expressed similar concerns, indicating there is not always enough time to complete these tasks due to their workload. Despite these challenges, it is important for a child's plan of care to be completed and adjusted to reflect the strengths and needs of the child, as well as chart ongoing progress towards goals. The quarterly supervisor reviews and annual reviews of the plan of care are essential milestones in assessing whether the needs of the child are being met or if plan revisions are needed. When these reviews are not completed, or not completed at the correct frequency, there is a risk the child may not receive the level of care required while living in a child and youth care home.

#### **Recommendation 1.10**

We recommend the Department of Community Services regularly assess whether plans of care are completed within the timelines outlined within Department policies and whether the required quarterly and annual reviews are completed on schedule. When policy requirements have not been met timely action must be taken to achieve compliance.

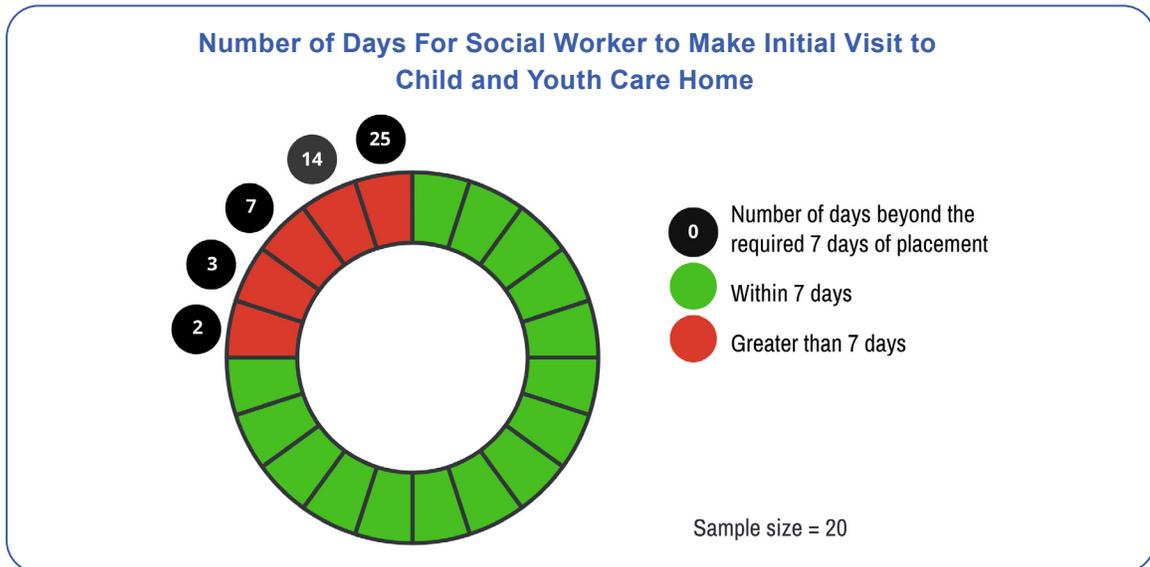
**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation and will regularly assess whether plans of care are completed and reviewed within the timelines outlined in policy. If not completed within the time frame allotted as per policy, a supervisor consultation note will be added outlining the rationale for non-completion and time frame to complete. This time frame will be monitored by the supervisor. Target Date: December 2024.

### **Social Workers Are Not Always Meeting with Children in Child and Youth Care Homes At The Required Frequency**

- 1.62 Previously, we discussed the importance of social workers having regular contact with children placed in temporary emergency arrangements. Department policy also highlights the importance of social workers having regular contact with children in child and youth care homes, to assess the safety and well-being of the child and to make informed decisions about the child's care.
- 1.63 Social workers are required to have face-to-face contact with a child within seven days of the child being placed in a child and youth care home. After this initial contact, social workers must contact the child, either by phone or in person, at least once every 30 days. In addition, social workers must have in-person contact with the child at least every 90 days with a portion of the contact being with the child at the child and youth care home.

**➡ Social workers not always meeting with children within seven days of being placed in a child and youth care home**

1.64 We reviewed 20 instances of children being placed in a child and youth care home during our audit period (April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2023) and found five instances where the social worker did not visit the child in the home within seven days of the placement.

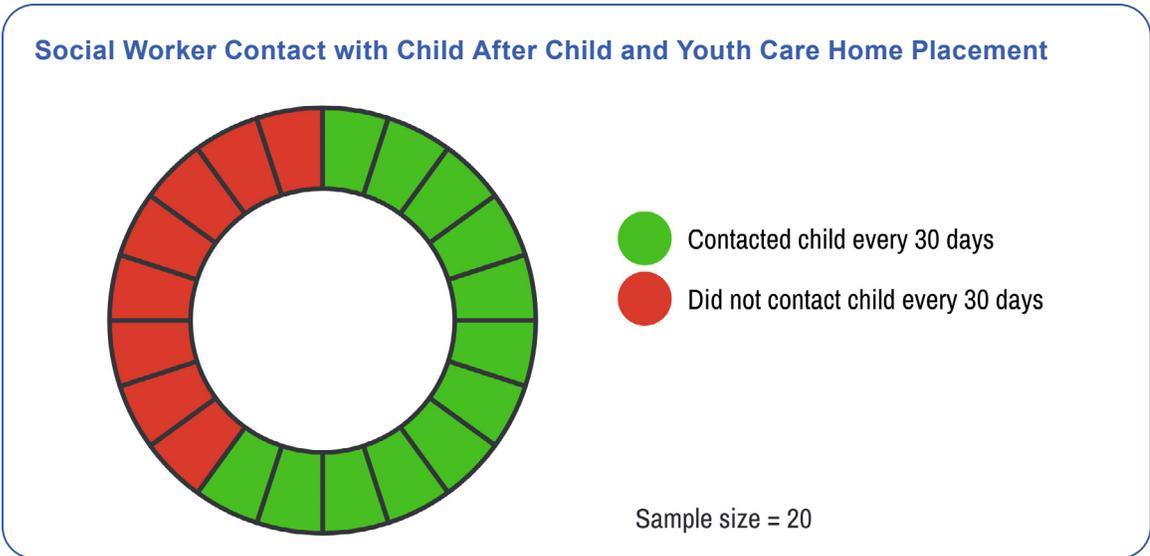


Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia

1.65 A child's removal from their family home and placement in a child and youth care home can be a very traumatic experience. Similarly, when a child must move from a foster care situation, or from one child and youth care home to another, it can be very disruptive to the child's routines and present additional challenges. A timely initial visit is essential to assess how the child is adjusting to the child and youth home and can help identify any additional support the child may need. When this initial contact is delayed, any issues the child experiences adjusting to their new home may not be addressed quickly and could impact the child's overall well-being.

**➡ Social workers are not always having contact with children every 30 days as required**

1.66 We reviewed the meeting dates of the next three social worker contacts with children following their initial visits to assess if the contacts were occurring at least every 30 days. We found in eight of 20 samples the social worker did not have contact with the child at least every 30 days as required by Department policy.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia

1.67 For one of the eight samples the social worker only contacted the child once between February and August 2023. For the remaining seven of the eight samples we examined the dates of the next three contacts between the social worker and the child following the initial visit and found at least one period of more than 30 days between contacts. We found gaps of between 34 and 98 days where the social worker did not have contact with the child.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia

1.68 These gaps in contact are very similar to what we reported earlier in the report around social worker contact with children in temporary emergency arrangements. Like the explanation provided for our findings around plans of care, management told us a variety of reasons may contribute to the issue including staff workload, recruitment, and retention challenges.

1.69 Regular and ongoing contact between social workers and children in care is necessary to assess the overall well-being of the child and to plan for the child’s care. In most of the samples noted above, there were periods of almost two months or longer when the social worker did not have contact with the child residing in a child and youth care home. These gaps in contact make it more difficult for social workers to:

- develop a relationship with a child;
- establish open lines of communication;
- assess the child's plan of care and progress towards goals; and
- determine if appropriate support is provided within the child and youth care home.

### **Social workers meeting with children in person but not always at the child and youth care home**

1.70 We found social workers are generally meeting the Department's policy requirement to have in-person contact with the child at least once every 90 days. In 19 of the 20 samples reviewed, the social worker met with the child in person at least once in a 90-day period. This face-to-face contact helps the social worker develop a relationship with the child and allows for an assessment of the child's mental and physical condition which may be more difficult to assess by phone.

1.71 Department policy requires at least part of the in-person contact with the child every 90 days to occur at the child and youth care home where the child is residing. We found this is not always happening. In four of the 20 samples, we found none of the in-person contact with the child was at the child and youth care home. Visiting and seeing the child where they live can provide valuable information to the social worker on the child's living environment. Without seeing the child's physical living space, the social worker may not get a complete and accurate picture of the factors impacting the health, safety, and well-being of the child.



#### **Recommendation 1.11**

We recommend the Department of Community Services monitor whether social workers meet with children in child and youth care homes as outlined in Department policy. When meetings do not occur as required, timely corrective action must be taken to contact the child, including in-person visits to their home.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation and will regularly monitor for documentation confirming social workers are meeting with children in child and youth caring programs as outlined in policy. When it is not possible to complete contact as per policy, a case notation from supervisor will be made to the file including a rationale for the action not being completed, and a time frame for completion as an exception. This time frame will be monitored by the supervisor. Target Date: September 2024.

## Health and Safety Risks to Children in Child and Youth Care Homes Not Analyzed

- 1.72 The Department of Community Services requires child and youth care homes to report incidents which impact the health and safety of a child residing at a home. These incidents are classified as either a critical incident or a serious occurrence.

### Definitions of Incidents

A **critical incident** occurs when:

- A child dies
- A child is seriously injured and requires medical attention beyond immediate treatment and release from a doctor, clinic, or hospital
- A child makes a suicide attempt, not including self-harm
- A child must be evacuated from the home for 24 hours following a fire or disaster
- A child has been, or is believed to have been, forcefully taken or removed from the home without consent

A **serious occurrence** occurs when:

- A child requires significant medical treatment, due to accident or illness
- A child is missing less than 24 hours and identified as at imminent risk
- A child has made an allegation of child abuse or neglect
- Any other circumstances that could affect the safety or well-being of a child

Source: Department of Community Services

### Critical incident and serious occurrence reports not always found in a child's Department file

- 1.73 Child and youth care homes are required to document critical incidents and serious occurrences on forms, including an outline of how the incident was addressed, and submit them to the Department. However, we reviewed a sample of 31 critical incidents and serious occurrences found in the files of child and youth care homes and found 12 of these were not included in the child's file with the Department, meaning these events may not have been communicated to the social worker. Health and safety risks within child and youth care homes may be unknown and go unaddressed when these events are not communicated to the Department.

### No analysis of over 1,900 incidents in a two-year period that could potentially impact the health and safety of children

- 1.74 Even when critical incidents and serious occurrences are reported, they are not tracked by the Department. Management told us they rely on each child and youth care home to record and track these events. The Department was unable to tell us how many of these were reported during our audit period and instead had to contact each child and youth care home provider to request this information. Despite no policy requirement for child and youth care homes to record critical incidents and serious occurrences (other than submitting forms to the Department), 12 of 13 providers were able to provide the information. However, the remaining provider is the largest third-party service provider in the province, and they indicated they do not track the number of critical incidents and serious occurrences in their homes.

1.75 Excluding the one service provider, child and youth care homes reported approximately 1,900 critical incidents and serious occurrences during our two-year audit period. Department policy requires management to perform a quarterly analysis to identify any trends in serious occurrences, but this is not completed. There is no requirement in the Department's policies to perform a quarterly trend analysis for critical incidents.



1.76 We find it concerning 1,900 events have been recorded over our two-year audit period that could potentially impact the health and safety of children living in child and youth care homes, and the Department has not completed any analysis to assess the seriousness of these events nor identified trends or patterns that need to be addressed. For example, one government-run home accounted for approximately 37 per cent of serious occurrences over our audit period. We would have expected to see a thorough analysis by the Department to determine why one home accounted for such a high percentage of serious occurrences – averaging almost one per day -- as well as to understand the nature and cause of these incidents.

1.77 We recognize there can be varying degrees of severity between critical incidents and serious occurrences and that some might not pose an immediate risk to the health and safety of a child. But without a regular analysis of these events, the Department is potentially unaware of health and safety risks to children in child and youth care homes and how these risks can be reduced. Furthermore, the detailed analysis of these events can also identify areas where Department policies could be revised or where additional training for staff may be needed.

#### **Recommendation 1.12**

We recommend the Department of Community Services record and track critical incidents and serious occurrences reported by child and youth care homes. This process must include the regular analysis of these events to identify trends, the assessment of risks to children, and a plan to resolve how these risks will be managed.

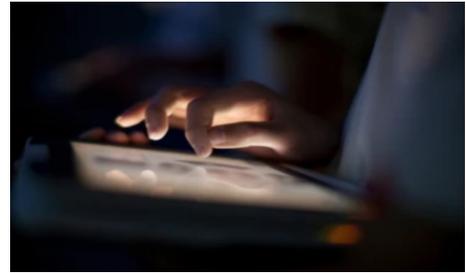
**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS monitors and, as appropriate, investigates every critical incident and serious occurrence that is reported, including those reported by child and youth caring programs. These individual reviews will continue, and where appropriate, investigations to ensure the safety of the child will be carried out under the Act.

By December 2024, DCS will develop a policy and process to record and track critical incidents and serious occurrences reported by child and youth caring programs. Quarterly reports will be prepared and analyzed to identify trends, assess risks to children and follow up as required. DCS will ensure that all service providers are submitting reports as appropriate. Target Date: December 2024.

#### **The Department does not know how many allegations of child abuse or neglect were made by children living in child and youth care homes**

1.78 The Department has detailed policies for responding to allegations of child abuse or neglect from children living in child and youth care homes. These policies outline requirements for staff to report, assess, and investigate allegations, including steps for supporting and protecting the child while the allegation is assessed, and the investigation completed. Our audit did not include the Department's investigation of these allegations.

1.79 Any allegations of abuse or neglect made by children in child and youth care homes represent a potentially serious health and safety risk to the child, as well as the other residents of the home. Due to this risk, we were surprised when the Department could not tell us how many allegations of abuse or neglect were made by children living in child and youth care homes during our audit period.



1.80 Management indicated that due to weaknesses in the Department's case management system, they cannot distinguish between allegations of child abuse or neglect related to children in child and youth care homes and allegations related to children outside of child and youth care homes. The case management system can identify allegations related to children in foster care, but a similar feature is not available for child and youth care homes.

1.81 Department policy requires a child's allegation of child abuse or neglect in a child and youth care home be reported to the Department as a serious occurrence. The policy states staff are to review these allegations to identify any trends or patterns that warrant further investigation by the Department. However, as previously noted, the Department is not recording or tracking serious occurrences and management indicated they do not monitor trends in the allegations from children in child and youth care homes.

1.82 The Department's lack of knowledge of the number of allegations of child abuse or neglect from children in child and youth care homes, as well as trends or patterns in the allegations, is concerning. Without this information, the Department cannot thoroughly assess the health and safety of these children. Children living in child and youth care homes have already experienced the stress of being removed from their family. Exposure to further abuse or neglect while in care can greatly impact their well-being. It is vital for the Department to closely monitor these allegations to determine if additional steps are needed to protect these children.

### Recommendation 1.13

We recommend the Department of Community Services add a feature to their case management system that captures allegations of child abuse or neglect of children living in child and youth care homes.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation. DCS will investigate the possibility of incorporating a new case type to reflect that the allegation is related to a child living in a child and youth care home in the future case management system.

The design of the Child and Family Wellbeing component of the future case management system (Collaborative Case Management or CCM) is expected to be underway in the Summer of 2024 and available for use by the Summer of 2025. Target Date: Summer 2025.

### Recommendation 1.14

We recommend the Department of Community Services regularly analyze allegations of child abuse or neglect of children in child and youth care homes to identify trends or patterns and to take action where required.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS will investigate the possibility of centralizing referrals of allegations of child abuse or neglect pertaining to children in child and youth caring programs to a dedicated team which will enable more rapid identification of trends or patterns and allow for appropriate action to be taken if trends or patterns are identified. Target Date: September 2024.

## Improved Quality Assurance Process for Child and Youth Care Homes and Temporary Emergency Arrangements Needed

### An improved quality assurance process could allow the Department to identify and address issues sooner

1.83 A quality assurance process involves regular review of the files of children in child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements to assess compliance with Department policies and expectations. For example, this could include assessing whether social workers are having contact with children in child and youth care homes every 30 days and if plans of care are completed within 90 days of a child entering care. The process provides an opportunity for management to proactively identify instances of non-compliance with Department policies and promptly take action to improve the oversight of children in care. This could involve reinforcing policy requirements with social workers, identifying areas where additional training is necessary, or revisiting policy requirements to assess whether they still meet the needs of children.

1.84 The Department's current quality assurance policy only requires a review of a child's file for compliance with the Department's policies when the child's file is closed or transferred. For example, if the file is transferred from one Department office to another. Unless either of these events occur, there is no quality assurance work to assess whether social workers are complying with Department policies. Furthermore, while the current process does examine when plans of care are completed and regularly reviewed, it does not assess whether the best possible placement was found or appraise the frequency of social worker contact with children.



1.85 Many of the issues we noted in the chapter could have been identified by the Department through a quality assurance process to regularly review the files of children in child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements. If non-compliance with Department policy is identified through a quality assurance process, it can be quickly addressed to improve the care of the child. For example, if management identifies a situation where a social worker has not had contact with a child in a child and youth care home for more than 30 days, contact with the child can be immediately arranged before the gap in contact widens.

### **Recommendation 1.15**

We recommend the Department of Community Services review and revise their quality assurance processes to regularly assess the files of children residing in child and youth care homes or temporary emergency arrangements for compliance with Department policies. This should include assessing whether:

- the best available placement option was found for the child;
- plans of care are developed and regularly reviewed; and
- social workers are having the required contact with children.

**Department of Community Services Response:** Child and Family Wellbeing practice requires that social workers and their supervisor meet at least monthly for supervision and to discuss files of children on their caseload. In addition, policy requires that a child's Plan of Care be reviewed at least every 90 days. Policy will be updated to require that at least every 90 days, each open file is reviewed by supervisors and social workers. This meeting will seek to assess whether the best available placement option was found for the child; that plans of care are developed and regularly reviewed per policy; and that social workers are having the required contact with children. Supervisors will be required to note the outcome of these reviews in the file. Target Date: March 2025.

## Significant Inconsistencies in Funding for Child and Youth Care Homes

### Funding model for third-party run child and youth care homes varies by service provider

1.86 The Department does not have a consistent model to fund third-party child and youth care homes. Service providers are funded using one of two models or a combination of the two.

### Description of Different Funding Models

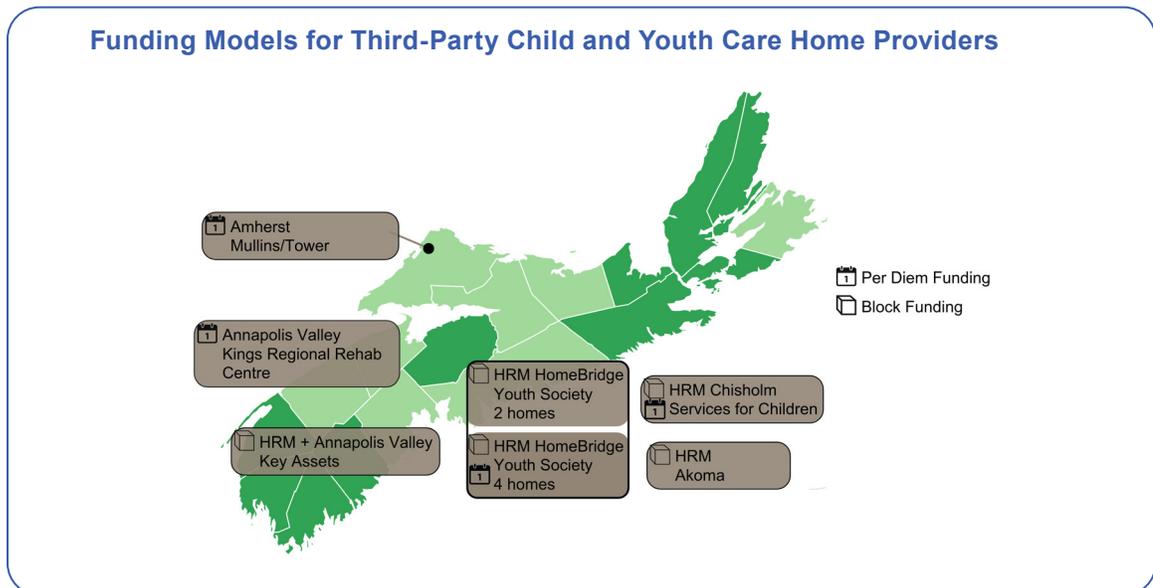
**Block Funding:** Service providers receive an annual funding amount in equal monthly instalments. Funding is not based on the occupancy of the home.

**Per Diem Funding:** The service provider is funded based on the occupancy of the home. Funding is calculated using a daily rate multiplied by the number of children in each home and is paid monthly.

**Block and Per Diem Funding:** The service provider receives 75 per cent of their annual funding in equal monthly instalments. The remaining 25 per cent is based on the occupancy of the home.

Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia and Department of Community Services

1.87 An overview of how each of the six third-party child and youth care home service providers are funded is outlined in the below table.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia and Department of Community Services

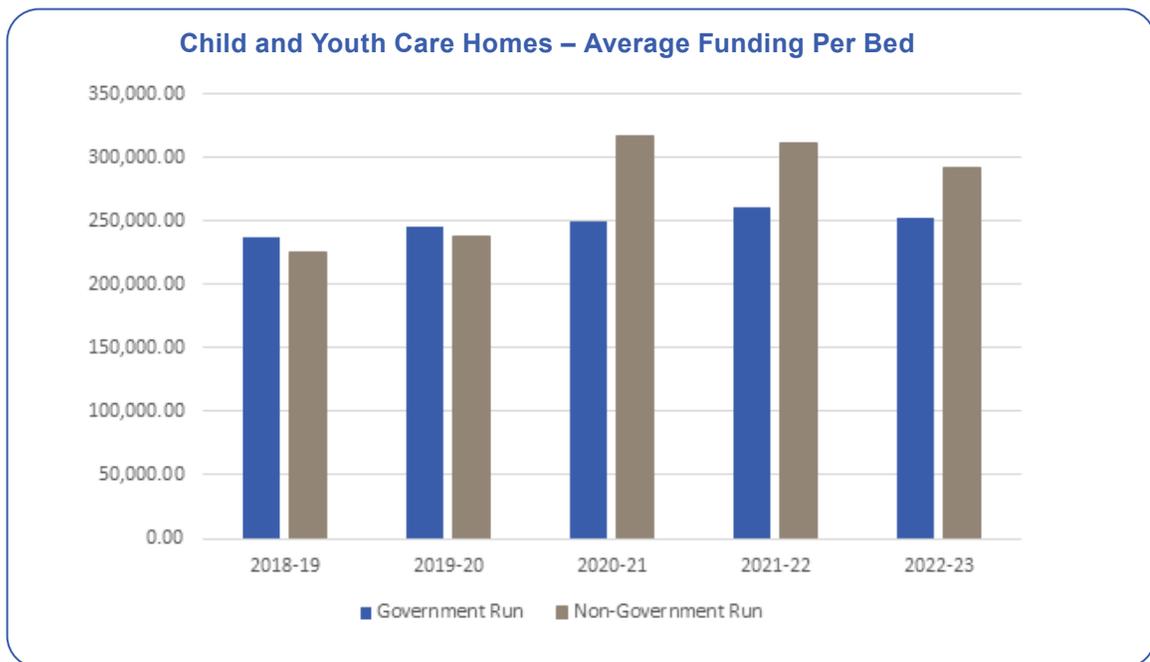
1.88 The Department has not completed a review of the funding for child and youth care homes and had no explanation why the funding model varies between service providers other than the individual historical relationships. The different approaches present challenges for the Department. When service providers receive block funding, there is no incentive to fill empty beds. As noted later

in the chapter, service providers may not accept a child even when space is available. Under a block funding model, a reduction in the number of children does not reduce the level of funding provided by the Department.

- 1.89 Under a per diem model, there is an incentive for service providers to fill space even if they are struggling to care for the children they already have. Alternatively, when occupancy is low and less funding is received, it may be challenging for per-diem service providers to provide services to the children in their care.
- 1.90 The different approaches to funding third-party service providers could result in significant differences in the level of funding provided to these homes. We found that the average annual funding per bed for block-funded homes is approximately \$403,000 compared to approximately \$199,000 for per-diem funded service providers. This variation in funding may lead to an inconsistent level of care across third-party run child and youth care homes.
- 1.91 Government run child and youth care homes are staffed by provincial government employees and are given an annual budget to manage the homes. The budget is developed using the same process for other provincial government departments and programs.

**Significant variations in the funding per bed for child and youth care homes**

- 1.92 While total cost for child and youth care homes is almost evenly split between government run and third-party homes, we found significant differences when comparing the funding per bed across the two categories. In 2018-19 and 2019-20, the funding per bed for government run and third-party run homes was comparable. However, in the three-year period from 2020-21 to 2022-23, the average funding per bed in a third-party run child and youth care home has ranged between 16 and 27 per cent higher than government run homes.



Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia; Department of Community Services

- 1.93 Furthermore, we also found significant differences in the funding per bed between the third-party service providers. Specifically, in 2022-23, the funding per bed for each service provider ranged from \$164,000 to \$335,000.

Service Provider	2022-23 Annual Funding	Number of Beds	Cost Per Bed
Akoma	\$2,012,446	6	\$335,408
Chisholm Services for Children	\$1,865,684	6	\$310,947
Homebridge Youth Society	\$8,906,077	40	\$222,652
Kings Regional Rehabilitation Society	\$3,640,895	19	\$191,626
Mullins House/Tower House	\$819,842	5	\$163,968

*Note: The service provider, Key Assets, was excluded from this analysis since they provide one-on-one care while the others provide care for multiple children.*

*Source: Office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia; Department of Community Services*

- 1.94 We did not expect to see such a wide variation in the cost per bed for third-party service providers. While we recognize there may be some variation in the services within child and youth care homes, each of these third-party service providers offer Level 2 child and youth care homes, and they should be providing similar care for children with similar needs. The Department was unable to provide an explanation for these differences.
- 1.95 When a child is placed in a child and youth care home, they should receive a certain level of care regardless of where they are placed. However, the funding differences we have identified could potentially lead to differences in the quality of care and services provided to children in child and youth care homes.

### **Recommendation 1.16**

We recommend the Department of Community Services complete a comprehensive review of the funding models and establish a consistent approach to funding child and youth care homes.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation. We will conduct a comprehensive review of the current funding models for child and youth care programs with the goal of establishing an equitable funding model. This model will consider costs associated with operating and providing quality services for children and youth and will ensure consistency and transparency across the continuum of placement options. Target Date: September 2025.

## **Weaknesses in Agreements With Child and Youth Care Home Service Providers**

### **Agreements do not include terms and conditions to hold service providers accountable**

- 1.96 Prior to 2019, the Department did not have agreements in place with third-party service providers of child and youth care homes. While agreements were signed with five of six service providers in 2019 and 2020, they did not contain the type of terms and conditions we would have expected to see for service providers caring for vulnerable children. We found the agreements did not include:

- end dates or requirements to update or renew;
- performance standards or staff qualifications for service providers;

- just cause termination to outline terms and conditions for the Department to terminate agreements or withhold funding based on poor service provider performance.
- 1.97 The Department has a template for child and youth care homes that outlines how the child's plan of care will be implemented while the child is living in the child and youth care home. However, we found service providers have developed their own forms and do not use the Department's template. This deviation from the established template can lead to potential inconsistencies in the care of a child. However, due to weaknesses in the agreements, the Department has no way to require service providers to abide by certain standards, such as the use of its template.
- 1.98 The Department also noted a need for improved agreements with third-party service providers for child and youth care homes. Department staff noted there is nothing in current agreements to hold service providers accountable to specific standards. Furthermore, staff said third-party run child and youth care homes can decline to accept a child into the home even when space is available. This can place significant pressure on the Department to find an alternative placement for the child, yet there are no standards or consequences in the contracts to hold service providers accountable in these situations. If alternative placements cannot be found, more children may have to be placed in temporary emergency arrangements.
- 1.99 For the remaining service provider, the Department did implement a more comprehensive agreement which includes many of the terms and conditions that we found were missing from the other agreements including:
- Service delivery standards
  - Staff competencies
  - Reporting requirements
  - Consequences for failure to comply with the agreement
- 1.100 However, it did not address concerns identified by Department staff related to the service provider's ability to deny a placement even when space is available.
- 1.101 The Department spent over \$20 million in 2022-23 on third-party run child and youth care homes to provide care to vulnerable children in the care of the Minister. Without strong agreements between the Department and its service providers, it is difficult for the Department to verify funding is used for its intended purpose and make sure children have proper and consistent care regardless of where they are placed. The absence of strong agreements with service providers creates a significant risk to the Department that could impact the health, safety and well-being of children living in child and youth care homes.

#### **Recommendation 1.17**

We recommend the Department of Community Services implement comprehensive agreements with third-party service providers which include terms and conditions to provide high quality and consistent services to children living in child and youth care homes.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation. Service Level Agreements are currently being developed for all third-party service child and youth caring program providers and will include terms and conditions to provide high quality and consistent services to children living in child and youth care programs. Target Date: September 2025.

## Child and Youth Care Homes Licensed and Inspected But Improvements Needed

1.102 The Licensing Services Unit of the Department of Community Services is responsible for licensing child and youth care homes and completing at least two inspections per year of each licensed home. Inspections assess compliance with requirements set out in the *Children and Family Services Act*, the Children and Family Services Regulations, and Departmental policies for child and youth care homes. Temporary emergency arrangements are not licensed or inspected by the Department.

### Process in place for the licensing of new child and youth care homes

1.103 The Department of Community Services follows a process to license new child and youth care homes. The process requires an applicant to submit documentation including municipal permits; plumbing, electrical, heating and fire inspections; proof of insurance; as well as an initial inspection by the Department. Only one new child and youth care home was licensed during our audit period (April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2023). We found all required documentation was provided by the applicant and the Department followed the required process to approve the home.

1.104 Licenses are valid for up to five years, with the renewal process requiring confirmation that the original details of the home have not changed, such as location, number of beds, and age of children served.

### Regular inspections of child and youth care homes identify violations

1.105 Child and youth care homes are regularly inspected by staff from the Licensing Services Unit to determine whether homes adhere to the requirements outlined in legislation and Department policy. We reviewed the inspections of 12 child and youth care homes during 2022 and found each home was inspected twice per year as required by Department policy. Under Department policy, one of the two annual inspections should be unannounced, with no prior scheduling for the inspection. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, all inspections were announced to limit the risk to inspectors, staff, and residents of child and youth care homes. Unannounced inspections resumed in March 2023.

1.106 The inspection process is functioning as designed and identifying violations at child and youth care homes. Violations were found by inspectors in 13 of the 24 inspections we reviewed. Examples of these included:

- staff training, such as non-violent crisis intervention, not completed
- staff vulnerable sector checks not completed
- documentation around the administration of medication to children not completed
- fire inspections not completed
- repairs and maintenance to the property not completed.

## Violations addressed but improved guidance needed for timelines to correct violations

1.107 Management told us child and youth care homes are initially given 30 days to correct any violations. Department management also told us some violations may need to be corrected faster.

1.108 Department policies require inspectors to distinguish between administrative violations and high priority violations which require immediate attention. However, the policy does not include timelines for the correction of either type of violation. Management said inspectors no longer distinguish between the types of violations. Instead, child and youth care homes are usually given 30 days to address all violations.



1.109 Department policies should reflect current practices and clearly outline factors to consider when determining appropriate timelines for correcting violations. This policy guidance is needed to set clear expectations for inspectors, promote consistency in the inspection process, and help identify situations where some violations need to be corrected sooner than others.

1.110 There are situations where, due to the nature of a violation, a child and youth care home may need additional time beyond the initial 30 days to correct a violation. For example, additional time may be needed to arrange for contractors to make repairs to the property or to schedule and complete staff training. For fire inspections, child and youth care homes rely on the Office of the Fire Marshal or municipal fire departments to complete their inspections.

1.111 For six of the 13 inspections with violations at the child and youth care homes, the violations were corrected within the initial 30-day period. For the seven remaining inspections, the home required additional time to address violations such as staff training; repairs to the home and surrounding property; and fire inspections. In each of these cases, we found the granting of additional time reasonable given the nature of the violation and found inspectors regularly monitored the homes while the violations were outstanding. At the time of our testing, all violations had been corrected.

1.112 When child and youth care homes are given additional time to correct violations beyond the initial 30-day period, an extension must be approved by an inspector's supervisor. However, there was no supervisor approval for three of the seven inspection reports we tested when the home was granted an extension. While we found the extensions were reasonable given the nature of the violations, supervisor approval is an important control in the inspection process. Not only does it help hold inspectors accountable for ensuring violations are addressed as soon as possible, but it also helps promote the consistent treatment of child and youth care homes by the Department.

### **Recommendation 1.18**

We recommend the Department of Community Services review and update child and youth care home inspection policies to reflect the current practices of the Department, including defining acceptable timelines for addressing the violations and outlining any factors inspectors must consider when setting timelines.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation. The policy on child and youth care home inspection will be updated to reflect current practices and will include definitions of acceptable timelines for addressing violations and factors to consider when setting timelines. Target Date: June 2024.

### Recommendation 1.19

We recommend the Department of Community Services review and approve extensions to the timelines for correcting violations identified through the inspection of child and youth care homes.

**Department of Community Services Response:** The current practice for reviewing and approving extensions to the timelines for correcting violations identified through the inspection of child and youth caring programs requires a supervisor to provide approval for any extension. This policy will be reviewed and updated, particularly to ensure that any individual who is acting in a supervisory role on a temporary basis identifies this to be the case. Regular monitoring to ensure that any extension provided is approved by a supervisor, or an individual acting as a supervisor, will be carried out by the Director. Target Date: June 2024.

### Updated background checks not required for child and youth care home staff

1.113 As part of the inspection process, inspectors determine whether child abuse registry, criminal record, and vulnerable sector checks were completed when child and youth care home staff members were initially hired. Management indicated homes may have their own policy requiring staff to regularly renew these checks, but this is not something required by the Department. This is different from temporary emergency arrangements where staff working with children require updated child abuse registry, criminal record, and vulnerable sector checks every six months.

1.114 Without requiring regularly renewed background checks, there is a risk the Department or the home may not be aware if staff at child and youth care homes have committed criminal offences or abused children after they were hired. This could potentially place already vulnerable children living at a child and youth care home at a higher risk of abuse.

### Recommendation 1.20

We recommend the Department of Community Services require all staff working in a child and youth care home to complete child abuse registry, criminal records, and vulnerable sector checks at regular intervals. Child and youth care home inspections should confirm the required checks are completed at the mandated frequency.

**Department of Community Services Response:** DCS agrees with this recommendation. A review of the current frequency of child abuse registry, criminal records, and vulnerable sector checks will occur, and the inspection policy will be amended to include confirmation of these checks having been completed. The department will also undertake a cross-jurisdictional scan to identify leading practice. Target Date: September 2025.

## Reasonable Assurance Engagement Description and Conclusions

In Spring 2024, we completed an independent assurance report of child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements at the Department of Community Services. The purpose of this performance audit was to determine if the Department of Community Services was adequately ensuring the health, safety, and well-being of children placed in child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements.

It is our role to independently express a conclusion about whether the child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements comply in all significant respects with the applicable criteria. Management at the Department of Community Services have acknowledged their responsibility for the child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements.

This audit was performed to a reasonable level of assurance in accordance with the Canadian Standard on Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001—Direct Engagements set out by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada; and sections 18 and 21 of the *Auditor General Act*.

We apply the Canadian Standard on Quality Control 1 and, accordingly, maintain a comprehensive system of quality control, including documented policies and procedures regarding compliance with ethical requirements, professional standards, and applicable legal and regulatory requirements.

In conducting the audit work, we have complied with the independence and other ethical requirements of the Code of Professional Conduct of Chartered Professional Accountants of Nova Scotia as well as those outlined in Nova Scotia's Code of Conduct for public servants.

The objectives and criteria used in the audit are below:

**Objective(s):**

To determine if the Department of Community Services is effectively overseeing child and youth care homes to promote the health, safety, and well-being of children in care.

**Criteria:**

1. The Department of Community Services should have an appropriate process to determine funding levels for child and youth care homes.
2. The Department of Community Services should follow an appropriate process for the approval and licensing of child and youth care homes.
3. The Department of Community Services should have signed and appropriate service agreements with all third-party service providers operating child and youth care homes.
4. The Department of Community Services should complete appropriate inspections of child and youth care homes with deficiencies addressed in a timely manner.
5. The Department of Community Services should follow an appropriate process for the placement of children in child and youth care homes to meet the needs of children in care.
6. The Department of Community Services should follow an appropriate process to develop, implement, and manage plans to meet the needs of children in child and youth care homes.
7. The Department of Community Services should follow an appropriate process for receiving, responding to, and addressing complaints and concerns regarding child and youth care homes.

**Objective(s):**

To determine if the Department of Community Services is adequately overseeing temporary emergency arrangements.

**Criteria:**

1. The Department of Community Services should determine any risks related to temporary emergency arrangements, including an approach to the identified risks.
2. The Department of Community Services should follow an appropriate process for the selection of temporary emergency arrangement service providers including signed service agreements with each provider that clearly outline expectations.
3. The Department of Community Services should appropriately monitor children in temporary emergency arrangements.

Generally accepted criteria consistent with the objectives of the audit did not exist. Audit criteria were developed specifically for this engagement. Criteria were accepted as appropriate by senior management at the Department of Community Services.

Our audit approach consisted of interviews with management and staff of the Department of Community Services, reviewing policy, examining processes for child and youth care homes and temporary emergency arrangements and detailed file review. We examined relevant processes, plans, reports, and other supporting documentation. Our audit period covered April 1, 2021 – March 31, 2023. We examined documentation outside of that period as necessary.

We believe the evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide the basis for our conclusions. Our report is dated May 1, 2024 in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Based on the reasonable assurance procedures performed and evidence obtained we have formed the following conclusions:

- The Department of Community Services is not adequately overseeing child and youth care homes which increases the risks to the health, safety, and well-being of children living in these homes.
- The Department of Community Services is not adequately assessing and managing risks related to temporary emergency arrangements, potentially putting already vulnerable children at greater risk of not receiving proper care.

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