

Bedford Borough Council Placement Sufficiency Strategy

2024-2028

Our four-year sufficiency strategy to build and strengthen our support and offer to our children in care and care experienced young people.

Bedford Borough Council

Placement Sufficiency Strategy

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CONTENTS

Foreword	5
Introduction.....	7
Our context.....	9
Our corporate parenting principles.....	10
Our regional partnerships.....	11
Legislative framework.....	12
National context.....	13
National standards for independent and semi-independent provision for children in care and care leavers aged 16 and 17.....	13
Social Care National Framework.....	14
The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care	14
Stable Homes Built on Love	14
Children’s Homes Capital Fund	15
National Social Care Market Review.....	16
Resourcing challenges	17
Providers.....	17
CAMHS.....	17
Workforce.....	17
Rises in cost and complexity OF needs	18
What we know about our children and young people in our care and our care leavers.....	19
Summary	19
Demographics.....	19

Presenting Needs	19
Placement Type, Location, and Stability	20
Care leavers.....	21
Current Service provision	21
Services delivered by Bedford borough council	21
In-house fostering.....	21
Provision for children with disabilities	22
Provision for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC)	22
Youth Offending Service.....	23
Children who are missing or at risk of exploitation	23
Supported lodgings.....	23
16+ Supporting futures	23
Services commissioned from external providers.....	23
Adoption	23
independent Fostering.....	24
Residential	24
Supported accommodation	25
Cost of provision	25
Forecasting.....	27
Projected unmitigated demand	27
Forecasted unmitigated spend	28
Placements	28
Allowances.....	29
What we are being told	30

Children and young people	30
Partnership with health	31
Providers.....	31
Residential Care Providers' Insights	31
Semi-Independent Living Providers' Insights	31
Independent Fostering Agencies' (IFA) Insights.....	32
Our strategic priorities.....	32
Appendix 1: Needs analysis – children and young people in care.....	41
Projected numbers	41
Demographic profile.....	42
Presenting needs.....	42
Placement type, location and stability.....	45
Appendix 2: Needs analysis – Care leavers	51
Appendix 3: What we have been told	53
What some of our children and young people are telling us	53
Parentership with health	55
What some of our providers are telling us.....	56



FOREWORD

I am delighted to introduce Bedford Borough Council's Placement Sufficiency Strategy. This strategy sets out how Bedford Borough meets our duty to ensure there are sufficient resources to meet the needs of children, young people and families where: children are at risk of becoming children in our care;

- children in our care; and
- children are leaving care.

This strategy ensures that Bedford Borough Council is in a position to effectively fulfil our role as corporate parents. It highlights what we already know about the numbers and needs of children at risk of becoming children in care and children who are already in our care and what we are doing to address the challenges we face. We recognise that further work needs to be done to broaden our understanding around the needs of our children in care.

We will ensure that we work alongside children, young people and families in designing and developing the right support, in the right place at the right time. The strategy provides direction on the arrangements we will put in place to provide the right quality and range of services to achieve the following commitments:

- We will strive to safely reduce the rising number of children and young people in our care;
- We will increase the number of children and young people supported to live safely with their families;
- We will reduce our reliance on services away from Bedford Borough where these are not in the best interest of the child and young person;
- We will increase the numbers of kinship carers;
- We will increase the number of Bedford Borough Council Foster Carers;
- We will work positively with Independent Fostering Agencies;
- We will increase the range of local residential services to meet children with more complex needs; and
- We will improve the way we commission services.

Most importantly, the strategy provides the basis for our children, young people and families to achieve better outcomes, and live better lives as a result.

**Councillor Jane Walker - Portfolio Holder for Valuing Families;
Children's Services**



INTRODUCTION

A 'Sufficiency Duty' is placed on Local Authorities under the Children's Act 1989 (Section 22G). This Sufficiency Duty requires local authorities to ensure that there are sufficient placements within their geographical area to meet the needs of children and young people in care, and to take steps to develop provision to meet the needs of all children and young people in care locally as far as is possible.

WHAT DOES GOOD LOOK LIKE?

- All children are placed in appropriate placements with access to the support services they require in their local authority area, except where this is not consistent with their welfare;
- The full range of universal, targeted and specialist services work together to meet children's needs in an integrated way in the local area, including children who are already in care, as well as those at risk of care or custody;
- Where it is not reasonably practicable for a child to be placed within his/her local authority area, there are mechanisms in place to widen the range of provision in neighbouring areas, the sub-region or region which is still within an accessible distance (i.e. based on transport links and community boundaries), while still being able to provide the full range of services required to meet identified needs;
- All children with adoption recommendations are placed with an adoptive family within 12 months of that recommendation;
- Partners, including housing, work together to secure a range of provision to meet the needs of those who become children in care at the age of 16 and 17, and support the continuity of accommodation beyond the age of 18;
- Services are available in adequate quantity to respond to children, including predicted demand for a range of needs, and emergencies;
- In addition to meeting relevant national minimum standards, services are of high enough quality to secure the specific outcomes identified in the care plans of children in care;
- Services are situated across the local authority area to reflect geographical distribution of need;
- All placement providers (including private, voluntary and public sector providers) are linked into the wider network of services and work with these services to offer appropriate support to deliver identified outcomes for Bedford Borough children;
- Universal services know when a child is in care and have good links with the range of targeted and specialist services which support him/her, including placement providers;
- There are mechanisms in place to ensure that professionals involved in placement decisions have sufficient knowledge and information about the supply and quality of placements and availability of all specialist, targeted and universal support services within the local authority area; and
- The local authority and its partners collaborate to plan the market for services for Bedford children and commission in regional or sub-regional arrangements.

This strategy sets out the Council's vision and approach to meeting its responsibilities to provide secure, safe and appropriate accommodation to children in need, children in care and care leavers

over the next four years, is informed by current and anticipated sufficiency requirements, market changes, gaps and opportunities, drawing on a wide range of available national, regional and local data, and identifies the key challenges that we face in achieving sufficiency and our approach to overcoming them.

The Council wants to do what is right for all our children in care, which includes being able to provide somewhere safe, caring and suitable for their needs if they are not able to remain at home. This might only be for a few days, or it might be for the duration of their childhood, depending on circumstances. The council places a priority on prevention and early intervention and strives to offer a range of services tailored to each family's needs and strengths, that will give children the best possible outcomes.

Every child deserves to grow and thrive in an environment that nurtures their potential and safeguards their wellbeing. For children who find themselves in our care, this principle is of paramount importance. The journey of children in care is a unique one, often marked by challenges and uncertainties. As stewards of their welfare, it is our duty to ensure that they are provided with the support, resources, and opportunities necessary to thrive.

This strategy marks the beginning of our collective commitment to improving the sufficiency of provision and support for our children and young people. Grounded in the belief that every child deserves the chance to reach their full potential, this strategy outlines our vision, objectives, and strategic priorities to enhance the sufficiency of provision and quality of care provided to children in our care and care leavers.

Our approach is founded on the understanding that each child is unique, with their own set of strengths, needs, and aspirations. By adopting a child-centred approach, we aim to empower children to actively participate in decisions concerning their lives, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their rights respected.

At the heart of our strategy lies a commitment to collaboration and partnership. We recognise that the responsibility for the wellbeing of children in care extends beyond the confines of any single agency or organisation. Therefore, we will work closely with partner organisations, foster families, educators, healthcare professionals, and other stakeholders to create a supportive ecosystem that fosters the holistic development of children in care and care leavers.

The strategy will allow us to achieve four broad aims:

- increasing our understanding of children's needs;
- developing alternatives to children becoming or remaining in our care, through earlier intervention and at 'the edge of care';
- improving placement and care planning, to minimise the number of disrupted placements and unplanned moves; and
- developing the local authority residential care and fostering agency offers, to provide more placements within the borough.

The strategy links with many others designed to promote children's health, safety and welfare. Its success will depend on the energy and vision on colleagues working across the local authority and in partner agencies. We will work hard to achieve placements for children that are more than sufficient.

As we embark on this journey to enhance the sufficiency of placements for children in our care, we are guided by our commitment to uphold the rights and dignity of every child. By working together, we can create a bright and promising future for all children in care and care leavers.

OUR CONTEXT

FINANCIAL

In developing our Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP), we have forecasted demand and expenditure for children's care services, predicting significant increases in both the demand for placements and allowances and in complexity of need. Total expenditure is projected to rise from £24.0m in 2023/24 to £35.9m in 2027/28 (44% increase), leading to a potential budget deficit of £10.5m by 2027/28 if no measures are taken to mitigate costs. This increase is driven by a growing number of children in care necessitating additional placements and higher costs.

We have identified that we need to undertake further work on better understanding the unit costs of in house and external fostering and residential placements, so that we can be sure of balancing both cost and outcomes for children in our future work. We know that fostering is the most cost-effective placement type for children and young people in care aged under 16, and particularly when the placement is local to Bedford Borough, the outcomes for children are likely to be better. We know that there is a wide range of costs in external residential placements from the cheapest to the most expensive, and there is not always a clear link between cost of the placement and positive outcomes for children. It is important therefore, that we focus on the

quality of placements and outcomes, as well as being able to drive value for money, measured against outcomes

TRANSFORMATION

In 2023, we embarked on an accelerated transformation programme focusing on children's social care placements to help ensure we can reduce our forecasted overspend and enable us to continue delivering services that meet the needs of our children in care and care leavers. This focused programme reflects our commitment to both financial sustainability and providing the highest standards of care for vulnerable children and young people.

Creating and publishing this sufficiency strategy is just one of the twelve areas of focus that we seek to deliver on over the next two years. The sufficiency strategy aims to ensure that there are enough suitable placements available to meet the diverse needs of children in care, ranging from foster homes to specialised residential settings. By carefully planning and managing resources, we can better support children in care and care leavers to achieve stability and positive outcomes.

COMMISSIONING

Most accommodation-based and support services for children in our care are secured through external provision; however, we are increasingly exploring in-sourcing options both to enable greater oversight of provision and better outcomes for children, and potentially as a more cost-effective solution.

In Bedford, commissioning is separated into Strategic (Commissioning and Procurement team within Finance directorate) and operational

(placements and statutory support services teams within Children's Services). Teams are experienced in matrix working to support individual services being commissioned from compliant contractual arrangements where possible and ensure join-up of practice and provider relationship management that incorporates key stakeholders.

Commissioners work closely with the Engagement and Development team to ensure that children and young people's voices are embedded within tender development and their views considered in contract management. Relevant commissioning representatives attend resource panels to ensure that external services sought according to good commissioning and procurement practice wherever possible.

OUR CORPORATE PARENTING PRINCIPLES

The local authority has a unique responsibility to the children in our care and our care leavers, and the role we play in their lives is one of the most important things we do.

Our strong ethos of corporate parenting means that across the Council there is a strong sense of responsibility towards children in care and care leavers and this is a priority within the work undertaken. We recognise that children who are, or have been, in care have the same needs as other children but also face unique challenges.

The corporate parenting responsibility must be shared by the Council as a whole and with partner agencies who work with children in care and care leavers.

Corporate parenting is more than just providing food and shelter. It is about doing the same for our children in care and care leavers as caring parents would do for their own children.



It is our responsibility to:

- To act in the best interests and promote physical and mental health and wellbeing, of those children and young people;
- To encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings;
- To consider the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people;

- To help those children and young people gain access to and make the best use of services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners;
- To promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people;
- For those children and young people to be safe, and experience stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and
- To prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

OUR REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

In today's complex social landscape, the care and support of children in our care are collaborative endeavours that extend beyond the boundaries of individual local authorities. Regional partnerships play a pivotal role in addressing the multifaceted needs of children in care, offering a platform for shared resources, expertise, and best practices.

The following services are jointly commissioned:

- Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs): Approved Provider List tendered jointly with Central Bedfordshire and Luton Councils. This is a long-standing historic arrangement which is currently being re-tendered. Hertfordshire County Council will enter the partnership this year for the first time;
- Residential Children's Homes: Bedford Borough Council is part of the Southwest Residential Consortium, which is led by South Gloucestershire Council and also includes Bath and North East

Somerset, Gloucestershire, North Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire Councils. This commenced in April 2020;

- Children's Advocacy, Independent Visitors and Return Home Interviews: collaborative contract with Luton and Hertfordshire Councils, let to NYAS – commenced April 2016;
- Medical Advisor to the Adoption & Fostering Panels: variation to ICB (Integrated Care Boards) Community Paediatrics contract joint with Central Bedfordshire Council. Commenced April 2023;
- Children's Community Health Services: joint service between Bedford Borough Council, Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB. Commenced April 2018; and
- Young Carers: collaborative contract with Central Bedfordshire Council and BLMK ICB. Commenced October 2021.

In Bedford, we proudly work alongside our key partners in the following group and forums:

<i>Forum</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
Pan-Bedfordshire IFA Consortium Operational Leads Group	Oversight of IFA Approved Provider List, governance of partnership agreements, performance reporting, decision-making on provider uplift requests
Pan-Bedfordshire/BLMK Provider Forum	Engagement with provider markets, sharing trends, challenges, opportunities, planning based on feedback, occasional external speakers/trainers

BLMK Commissioning Leads' Meeting	Discussion of commissioning opportunities, challenges, sharing contract liquidity data, exploring collaborative tendering
Eastern Region Commissioning Forum	Focused on care placement commissioning, discussing regional trends, provider market intelligence, budgetary pressures, good practices
Children's Cross-Regional Arrangements Group (CCRAG)	Monitoring provider performance, conducting negotiations with providers on behalf of member LAs
Local Government Association – Children's Commissioning & Procurement Network	Information sharing on sector-wide trends, strategic supplier relationships, support with national contract templates
Southwest Residential Consortium	Oversight of Southwest Residential Pseudo-DPS, governance of partnership agreements, provider uplift requests

We have also established relationships with the local Police force and closely track any signs of exploitation or concerning missing episodes. Responses are co-ordinated via established multi-agency forums and action for individual children.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

¹ [Children Act 1989 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)

Key legislation for the provision for the accommodation and maintenance of a child in care is defined and outlined in Sections 22A to 22D of the Children Act 1989¹. The legislation provides a framework within which decisions about the most appropriate way to accommodate and maintain children must be considered:

- Section 22A of the Children Act 1989 imposes a duty on the responsible authority when a child is in their care to provide the child with accommodation;
- Section 22B of the Children Act 1989 sets out the duty of the responsible authority to maintain a 'looked after child' in other respects apart from providing accommodation;
- Section 22C of the Children Act 1989 sets out the ways in which a 'looked after child' is to be accommodated;
- Section 22D of the Children Act 1989 imposes a duty on the responsible authority to formally review the child's case prior to making alternative arrangements for accommodation; and
- Section 22G of the Children Act 1989 requires local authorities to take strategic action in respect of those children they look after and for whom it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation within their own local authority area.

This Sufficiency Strategy is set within the context of national policy and guidance with the following primary legislation applying:

- Children Acts 1989 and 2004;

- Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000;
- Care Standards Act 2000;
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child;
- Human Rights Act 1998;
- Adoption and Children Act 2002;
- Data Protection legislation;
- Children and Families Act 2014;
- Children and Social Work Act 2017;
- Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023;
- Children’s Social Care National Framework 2023.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Children's social care faces a number of significant challenges, notably rising demand, resource constraints, and increasing complexity of needs among children and families. The system is under pressure to deliver high-quality care and support amidst these challenges, with a strong emphasis on safeguarding, improving outcomes, and ensuring stability for children in care.

The number of children in need of social care support has been increasing, driven by factors such as poverty, family breakdown, and mental health issues. Local authorities face financial pressures, impacting their ability to deliver comprehensive social care services. The needs of children in care are becoming increasingly complex, requiring specialised interventions and tailored support. A growing number of children present with disabilities, mental health issues, and special educational needs. There is a high reliance on private and out-

of-area placements, which can impact the stability and continuity of care.

The following key factors will influence the way in which local authorities commission care placements / accommodation and support for the children in care over the next four years.

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR INDEPENDENT AND SEMI-INDEPENDENT PROVISION FOR CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS AGED 16 AND 17

Following a consultation in 2020, the Government introduced national standards for independent and semi-independent provision for looked-after children and care leavers aged 16 and 17. This provision has previously been unregulated (that is, not subject to registration with or inspection by Ofsted) and has been of variable quality. Unregistered provision, on the other hand, is provision that should have been registered with Ofsted but was not and is therefore illegal.

The intention of the Government is to raise the standard of this provision to ensure high quality accommodation and support for all young people living in such homes.

All providers of this accommodation were required to have had an initial registration accepted by Ofsted by the end of October 2023, with full inspections by Ofsted expected to begin in September 2024.

The response of the market to these regulatory changes has been mixed. Whilst it is likely that the majority of providers view the changes as necessary steps to ensure the safety and well-being of young people in care, there are concerns about the impact of regulations on the

capacity of registered providers to accommodate all young people in care, specifically those with complex needs or certain geographical areas where provision is limited. Additional resources are also required to implement changes effectively and expand registered provision.

SOCIAL CARE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The Social Care National Framework was published by the Government in 2023. This comprehensive policy document aims to reform the children's social care system. It establishes a set of standards and guidelines to improve the quality and consistency of care provided to vulnerable children.

The Children's Social Care National Framework 2023 will influence how local authorities commission placements by prioritising stability, quality, and collaboration. It emphasises placing children in stable and loving homes, promoting early intervention to prevent family breakdown, and improving the training and support for social workers and caregivers. Additionally, the framework encourages collaboration between different agencies to provide comprehensive support for children and families. These changes aim to ensure that placements are more consistent, effective, and focused on meeting the individual needs of each child in care.

THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

The review recommended a "fundamental shift" to improve family help and child protection, work to enable more children to remain with family networks, and action to "fix the broken care market", as well as ensuring children have a powerful voice in the decisions that affect them and improving outcomes for care experienced people. With

regard to placements for children in care, the review made a range of recommendations including:

- the development of new universal care standards for all types of care to guarantee care for every child in care, and provide the flexibility needed to ensure homes can meet the needs of children;
- moving the commissioning and running of children's homes, recruitment and training of foster carers into new Regional Care Cooperatives to bring a wider choice of homes for children closer to where they live;
- a 'new deal' for foster care, involving recruiting thousands more foster carers, making more foster homes feel like loving family environments for children and providing significantly more support for foster carers.

STABLE HOMES BUILT ON LOVE

Stable Homes Built on Love sets out the national strategy to reform children's social care, in response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. Key elements of this strategy focus on reforming the child protection system, enhancing support for families, and ensuring children in care have stable, loving environments.

It seeks to shift how local authorities commission placements by prioritising stability, early intervention, and local placements. It sets the ambitions for local authorities to focus on finding long-term, stable homes for children in care, such as through enhanced foster care and adoption services. This approach includes increased support and training for foster carers and adoptive parents, as well as investing in

early intervention services to address family issues before they necessitate care placements.

The strategy includes specific plans in relation to placements for children in care:

- A fostering recruitment and retention programme including regional recruitment hubs and roll out of the Mockingbird programme.
- Support for the children’s home sector including exploring professional registration of the workforce and a leadership programme.
- Introducing a financial oversight regime for the largest providers of children’s homes and fostering agencies.
- Setting up an expert group to review standards of care, regulations and guidance.

National policy also focuses on enabling local authorities to adopt more collaborative, multi-agency approaches, working with health, education, and community organisations to provide comprehensive support for children and families. Emphasis will be placed on arranging services which support children stay within their local communities, where this is the right thing to do, and commissioning specialised placements for those with specific needs. The strategy includes performance and outcome measures to ensure effective placements and may involve additional government funding and incentives to support these changes.



CHILDREN’S HOMES CAPITAL FUND

The Department for Education has invested £259 million in expanding capacity in children’s homes. This includes £12 million to expand secure children’s homes provision. Councils across the country have also been able to bid into the Children’s Homes Capital Fund for match funding to develop new provision or refurbish existing provision, with a particular focus on developing step-down provision or homes for children with more complex needs.

22 open children’s homes projects were funded in the first wave of funding, and another 48 projects in the second wave. These projects are anticipated to deliver around 350 additional beds by 2025. The secure children’s homes funding will deliver around 50 additional spaces. Building on this programme, in the Spring Budget 2024 the Government committed £45 million match funding to local authorities to build an additional 200 open children’s home placements and £120 million to fund the maintenance of the existing secure children’s home estate.

NATIONAL SOCIAL CARE MARKET REVIEW

In March 2022, the Competition and Markets Authority published the findings and recommendations of its market study into Children's Social Care in England, Scotland and Wales. The market study was commissioned to investigate widespread concerns with regards the shortage of appropriate placements and rising prices, it found three areas of concern:

- A lack of placements of the right kind, in the right places, means that children are not consistently getting access to care and accommodation that meets their needs;
- The largest private providers of placements are making materially higher profits, and charging materially higher prices, than expected;
- Some of the largest private providers are carrying very high levels of debt, creating risk that disorderly failure could disrupt placements and children's stability.

The study made several recommendations, which can be summarised into three key areas:

1. To improve commissioning by having some functions performed via collaborative bodies, providing additional national support and supporting local authority initiatives to provide more in-house foster care.
2. To remove barriers to providers creating and maintaining provision, by reviewing regulatory and planning requirements, and supporting the recruitment and retention of care staff and foster carers.

3. To create an effective regime of market oversight and contingency planning to reduce the risk of children experiencing negative effects from providers exiting the market in a disorderly way.

More recently, the DfE launched a new advisory group on children's social care 'Profiteering' in May 2024. The creation of the advisory group follows the growing concern in recent years with the involvement of the private sector in the market. The concerns, particularly in residential care, has led to rising costs and questions around the quality and availability of services. The responsibility of the group include:

1. Identifying Areas of Concern: The group will conduct a thorough assessment of the sector to identify areas where profiteering is most prevalent and the negative impact it may have on the provision of care.
2. Developing Recommendations: Based on its findings, the group will develop recommendations for policy changes and regulatory measures to address profiteering and improve transparency and accountability in the sector.
3. Engaging Stakeholders: The group will engage with a wide range of stakeholders, including care providers, local authorities, and advocacy groups, to gather diverse perspectives and ensure that proposed solutions are practical and effective.
4. Monitoring and Reporting: The group will monitor the implementation of its recommendations and report on progress to the DfE, providing ongoing insights and guidance for further reforms.

RESOURCING CHALLENGES

PROVIDERS

During COVID, supply challenges in fostering and children's homes were exacerbated. Against a backdrop of a reduction in foster carer recruitment overall there has also been a reported increase in foster carers leaving, resulting in a net reduction of foster carers nationally.

The market has also witnessed a reduction in the availability of experienced and trained carers thus reducing the availability of carers able to care for children with the most complex needs.

The market has also experienced a shortage in Children's Home Managers and Care Workers, particularly with the specialist skills required for placements of young people with more complex needs. This was compounded during the pandemic when some children's homes were reportedly not accepting newly placed children due to the risk of Covid entering the home.

These factors reduced the capacity of the market to meet the needs of local authorities for placements, which subsequently drove up prices. Many of the vacancies reported within internal and independent fostering agencies are deemed to be unsuitable to meet the complex needs or age requirements of the children requiring foster homes. This indicates that available foster carers are not being trained or developed quickly enough to meet the diverse placement needs of today's market.

CAMHS

Tier 4 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provision in England has been marked by significant challenges and changes over the past several years. The number of inpatient mental healthcare beds for teenagers fell by 20 per cent between 2017 and 2022, a reduction of 325 beds, despite increasing need for treatment. This means that councils are increasingly having to identify suitable accommodation and support for young people experiencing severe mental distress, with a significant increase in the number of applications for Deprivation of Liberty Orders for children in unregulated settings.

The distribution of Tier 4 CAMHS beds and provision has been uneven across different regions in England, leading to geographic disparities in access to care. This has resulted in some children and young people being placed far from their homes, causing additional stress for both the patients and their families.

WORKFORCE

Like all authorities, we seek to recruit more permanent staff and we are reviewing our offer considering the highly competitive market. We benefit from an Eastern Region scheme promoting Social Work and employment opportunities in one of the country's highest performing regions for children's social care.

Bedford benefits from a high number of permanent Team Leaders across the service. Most children in our care are allocated to the Permanency and 16+ Supporting Futures services which are fully staffed with permanent Team Leaders. We also benefit from a Social

Work Academy where experienced permanent managers support Newly Qualified Social Workers in permanent roles.

RISES IN COST AND COMPLEXITY OF NEEDS

The social and economic impact of the pandemic and its recovery impacted both demand for services and providers' response.

Children and young people were less affected than other age groups by Covid itself, but have been disproportionately impacted by the social, educational and economic impacts of the pandemic.

Studies have confirmed that many of the known risk factors for poorer outcomes for children and young people have been increased by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, including, for example, financial hardship and academic pressures.

In addition, the wider changes within the economy as the country recovered from the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, such as increasing inflation, higher utility costs, National Insurance and tax increases, has resulted in higher service costs, and subsequent provider cost increases seen by local authorities.

In a report² by the Local Government Association (LGA) a survey which polled councils across England found that high-cost placements have risen by 1,250% between 2018/19 and 2022/23.

The LGA attributed the surge in high-cost placements to a combination of factors, including a lack of choice in placements and an increasing

² [High-cost children's social care placements survey | Local Government Association](#)

number of children requiring help with complex needs, such as mental health issues or challenging behaviours.

The LGA is calling for urgent government action to address the issue, including:

- Rolling out planned Department for Education (DfE) programs on the recruitment and retention of foster carers to all councils.
- Expanding children's homes through capital investment, recruitment, and professional development of children's homes workers, and working with the voluntary and community sector.
- Working with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and NHS England on both inpatient mental health facilities and joint delivery of placements for children with complex mental health needs.



WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT OUR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUR CARE AND OUR CARE LEAVERS

SUMMARY

We undertook a review of our children in care population over the last three years to understand their characteristics, needs and identify changing or emerging trends to inform this strategy. Our key findings are summarised below and in more detail in Appendices 1 and 2.

As part of our strengthening of commissioning in the future we shall we undertaking further work to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the demographics of our children in care and care leavers.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographic makeup of children in care in Bedford Borough reveals notable diversity. Sixty percent of these children are White, which is lower than the national average of 76%. The proportion of Asian or Asian British children has remained stable at 6%. However, the percentage of children from Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups (19%) and Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British children (7%) has decreased over time. The gender distribution of children in care is 57% male and 46% female, which aligns with both regional and national trends.

PRESENTING NEEDS

The primary reason for children entering care is abuse or neglect, accounting for over 75% of cases. This is significantly higher than the regional and national averages of 65%. This category saw a notable increase of 7% in 2021 and has not reverted to previous levels.

Additionally, 'absent parenting' represents 12% of referrals in 2023, higher than the national average of 5-9% over the past five years. This category often includes Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC), and Bedford consistently has a higher proportion of UASC (11%) compared to the national average of 9%.

SEN

There has been a slight increase in the number of children in care with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The number of children with an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) fluctuated from 62 in 2022 to 68 in 2023, and then decreased to 59 in 2024. Similarly, the number of children receiving SEN Support has decreased slightly over the past three years. Projections indicate a slight increase in SEND cases over the next four years. The most prevalent primary need among children in care is Social, Emotional, and Mental Health needs, which often exceed other categories by a significant margin.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The percentage of children having annual health assessments has increased from 96% in 2019 to 96.5% in 2024. The rate of children with up-to-date immunisations has also reduced from 92% to 91.5% over the same period. Dental check-ups have shown variability, with a significant drop to 66% in 2021 but an improvement to 91% by 2024. Bedford performs better than regional and national averages in completing health assessments, although this trend is declining. All developmental assessments for children aged 0-4 years have been consistently completed over the past five years.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) scores indicate a possible worsening trend. The percentage of children with 'normal' SDQ scores has decreased from 47% in 2019 to 44% in 2023, while those with scores indicating a cause for concern' have risen from 40% to 44% over the same period. This suggests an increasing number of children in care are experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties. This likely attributed to the reasoning for children entering our care, such as trauma from abuse or a struggle to acclimatise to new settings caused by living in neglectful conditions. As discussed previously, the pandemic, cost of living crisis and national resource issues have caused a high level of placement stability issues, and children's struggles and presentation can be impacted by placement distance from community and family of belonging.

PLACEMENT TYPE, LOCATION, AND STABILITY

The analysis reveals significant shifts in placement type, location, and stability within our children's social care system. While the focus on stable, well-matched placements is evident, challenges persist, particularly regarding the decreasing use of our own provision and the increasing dependence on private provision.

The decline in foster care placements coupled with the rise in the use of secure units, children's homes, and semi-independent accommodation suggests a changing landscape in the types of care provided. This shift may reflect increased complexities in the needs of children entering the care system, highlighting the importance of responsive and flexible service provision.

LOCATION OF PLACEMENTS

The data highlights the challenge of finding suitable placements within our local authority boundary, resulting in a large proportion of children being placed outside the area. This trend raises concerns about the impact on children's connections to their communities, schools, and support networks. It also suggests a strain on local resources and the need for collaborative efforts with neighbouring authorities to address placement shortages and enhance regional capacity.

STABILITY OF PLACEMENTS

The analysis reveals concerning trends regarding the stability of placements, with children in our care experiencing more placement moves compared to regional and national averages. This instability can have profoundly negative impacts on children's emotional well-being, educational attainment, and overall development. The decreasing number of children in our care continuously for extended periods further underscores the challenge of achieving placement stability within the current system.

REASONS FOR PLACEMENT MOVES AND MISSING INCIDENTS

The data highlights changes in the status of placements as the primary reason for placement endings, suggesting systemic issues contributing to instability within placements. Additionally, the prevalence of missing incidents among children in care raises significant safeguarding concerns and underscores the need for robust support systems and preventative measures to ensure children's safety and well-being.

CARE LEAVERS

In Bedford, the number of care leavers has been stable over the past three years, with 151 aged 17-21 and 152 aged 22-25 in 2022-23. Bedford maintains contact with almost all care leavers, outperforming regional and national averages. The 16+ Supporting Futures Team supports 97% of care leavers aged 17-21, and services are optional but available up to age 25.

Bedford's care leavers are doing better than their peers in education, employment, or training (EET), with 65% in EET compared to 63.5% regionally and 52% nationally. The proportion of care leavers in suitable accommodation has improved, with 91% of those aged 17-18 and 88% of those aged 19-21 in suitable housing in 2022-23, exceeding national averages. In 2024, 89% of care leavers are in suitable accommodation. In 2022-23, 33% of 19-year-old care leavers lived with former foster carers in "staying put" arrangements, slightly above the national average of 32%.



CURRENT SERVICE PROVISION

SERVICES DELIVERED BY BEDFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

IN-HOUSE FOSTERING

Bedfordshire Borough Council is committed to improving the quality and availability of foster care so that all children and young people in our care have the opportunity to remain living within their local community and to benefit from the support and stability that they need to thrive and reach their full potential.

The service has 78 approved fostering households of which 25 households are “connected persons” (family and friends). Foster carers are approved at different tiers reflecting the level of experience

and skills in caring for children and young people with complex needs. The service has 31 fostering households approved at Tier 1, 38 at Tier 2 and 2 at Tier 3.

The service has recently joined the Eastern Regional hub that will provide a one-stop enhanced service for enquiries and initial visits to potential foster carers.

Initiatives to improve recruitment include utilising social media and producing podcasts alongside traditional recruitment and engagement activities. Exemptions from Council tax are in the process of being agreed and a scheme is being developed to provide counselling for foster carers to support recruitment and retention.

The service is joining the Mockingbird model pilot where a “hub” fostering household provides support for 6-10 other fostering households. We will begin with one initial ‘hub’ and review progress and outcomes to decide whether we will increase this offer. The Mockingbird model is evidenced to;

- Improve placement stability
- Improve foster carer recruitment and retention
- Provide a solution to respite requirements

PROVISION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

The Bedford Local Offer for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) outlines support and services available for children with disabilities and their families, including short breaks provision for children and families. A small number of young people

who have more than 75 nights of short break care per year will become children in care.

Bedford has two short-breaks residential units. Sunflower House provides short breaks for up to 5 children aged 7-18 with physical, sensory or learning disabilities. Foxgloves provides short breaks for up to 6 children aged 7-18 with a diagnosis of autism or learning disabilities.



PROVISION FOR UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN (UASC)

In April 2024 we were caring for 30 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. These children and young people are more likely to be placed in supported accommodation and more likely to be placed out of borough than the wider children in care population.

Table I: Provision for UASC



YOUTH OFFENDING SERVICE

Bedfordshire Youth Offending Service is a multi-disciplinary team that works to prevent and reduce offending behaviour amongst children and young people aged 10-17. The service works with children and young people in the community and those in custody.

The team works from three locations, two in the north of the borough and one in the south. Children and young people are, on occasions, remanded into the care of the Authority and become a child in our care. When a child is remanded, they are afforded the same support as any child in our care.

CHILDREN WHO ARE MISSING OR AT RISK OF EXPLOITATION

Our Adolescent Resource Team work with children and young people who have been missing or are at risk of exploitation. During 2022-23 there were 46 (13%) of our children in care who had a missing episode during the year and 24 (7%) who were away from their placement

without authorisation. This is higher than the national averages of 11% and 2% respectively.

SUPPORTED LODGINGS

Impakt Housing and Support provide a supported lodgings scheme in Bedford. The scheme offers young people aged 16-25 with supported accommodation with a host who provides support to live independently.

16+ SUPPORTING FUTURES

The 16+ Supporting Futures Team in Bedford provides aftercare services for children in care and care-experienced young people. They maintain contact, provide assistance in securing stable and good quality homes and support with education, employment and training.

SERVICES COMMISSIONED FROM EXTERNAL PROVIDERS

ADOPTION

Adoption services are provided by the regional adoption service, Adopt East. During the year 2023-24, 15 children were adopted from Bedford.

Where it is assessed to be in the child's best interests, the service will try to place a child in a foster to adopt placement where they are fostered by prospective adopters with the benefit that they can develop a secure attachment with their prospective lifelong family and avoid the need for a placement move. This provision also reduces demand for foster carers.

INDEPENDENT FOSTERING

We are a signatory to the Pan-Bedfordshire Independent Fostering Agency framework which commenced on 19 May 2021. The framework has five lots; standard, enhanced, step across from residential, Youth Justice and parent and child with a total of 25 providers on this framework.

The Framework allows a group of local authorities to work together to have a greater influence on the market with the aim of providing good quality placements that are cost-effective and provide value for money. BBC procure approximately 60% of IFA placements through the Framework with the remainder being spot purchased.



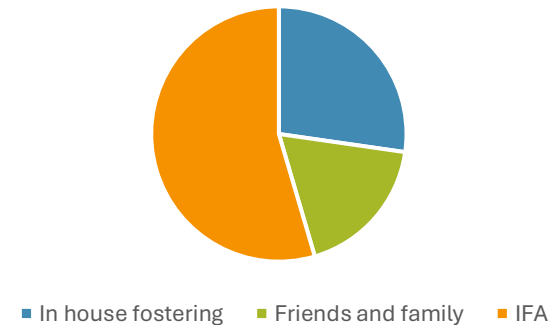
The Authority has an ambition to increase the percentage of placements procured through the Framework.

As of April 2024, Bedford had a total of 187 children living with foster carers. This consisted of 51 children (27%) with mainstream in-house

foster carers, 34 children (18%) with friends and family (connected persons) foster carers and 102 children (55%) with IFA foster carers.

We have an ambition to increase the percentage of children living with mainstream and connected persons foster carers and decrease the percentage living with IFA foster carers.

Table 2: Fostering provision



RESIDENTIAL

We are a signatory to a South-West consortium together with six other local authorities for the provision of children's residential home placements. The Framework commenced on the 1 April 2020 and consists of six lots; planned and same day residential care, crisis care, residential care with DfE regulated, residential parenting assessments and children with disabilities. In total there are 63 providers on this framework. We procure approximately 35% of residential placements using the Framework with the remainder being spot purchased.

We have an ambition to increase the percentage of placements procured through the Framework and are exploring the potential to establish and manage their own residential provision.

SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION

Supported accommodation describes a range of accommodation provision for young people aged 16-25 including small, shared houses of multiple occupancy, self-contained provision or multiple units of accommodation in a hostel setting. Support can range from outreach support for a few hours a week to 24 hours staffing on-site.

The Bedford Borough Framework for Semi-Independent Accommodation commenced on the 1 August 2020. The framework has three lots; 16+, 18+ and PACE for children who have been refused bail by the police and are instead transferred to local authority accommodation. These lots are all further split into in-Borough and out of area. In total there are 14 providers on this framework. We procure approximately 53% supported accommodation placements using the Framework.

We have an ambition to increase the percentage of placements procured through the Framework and are exploring the potential to establish and manage our own supported accommodation provision.

COST OF PROVISION

The financial position for children's social care budgets and councils is complex, with pressures stemming from increasing demand and complexity, limited resources, and competing priorities. Addressing these challenges requires strategic financial management,

collaborative approaches, and a focus on delivering sustainable, high-quality services that meet the needs of vulnerable children and families.

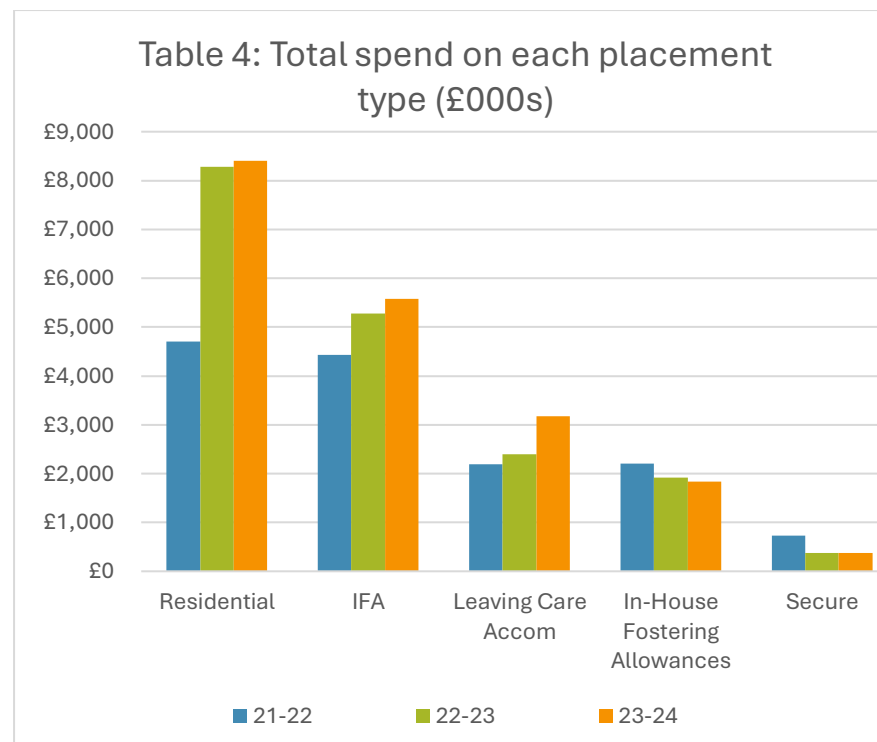
As shown in table 3, in Bedford, total expenditure on external provision has steadily increased over the last three years, with a notable jump of 41.8% from 2021/22 to 2022/23, followed by a smaller increase of 8.6%% from 2022/23 to 2023/24.

Independent foster care shows consistent growth, indicating sustained reliance on this option. In 2022/23 leaving care accommodation and residential care home placements doubled and has then increased in 2023/24 by the expected inflationary amount.

In-house fostering spend has reduced slightly between 2022/23 and 2023/24, which may reflect the reduction of in-house foster caring arrangements, however allowances have increased in line with national guidance and in 2024 increased by a further 4%. Secure accommodation costs have decreased notably.

Table 3: Spend by placement in £'000	21/22	22/23	23/24
Residential Care Home	£4,710	£8,282	£8,403
Unregistered Placements*	£0	£1,977	£2,613
Independent Foster Care	£4,436	£5,283	£5,584
Leaving Care Accommodation	£2,195	£2,398	£3,176
In House Fostering Allowances	£2,210	£1,919	£1,831
Secure Accommodation	£0,724	£0,377	£0,371
Total	£14,275	£20,235	£21,978
Year on year increase		41.8%	8.6%

* 2021-22 unregistered placements were not separately identified.



FORECASTING

While developing our Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) we analysed previous demand and looked at previous costings. We have also considered local knowledge and have produced the following demand forecasts for each category of care.

Table 5: Average demand rises	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28
IFA	6.14%	-4.13%	5.17%	4.92%	4.69%
Residential	0.00%	7.14%	10.00%	9.09%	8.33%
Unregistered	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Secure	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Semi-Independent	7.53%	4.26%	4.26%	4.00%	3.85%
In House Fostering	-3.16%	5.43%	5.15%	4.90%	4.67%

As shown in table 5 demand generally rises for most placement types, with particularly high increases for IFAs and residential placements in the early years.

PROJECTED UNMITIGATED DEMAND

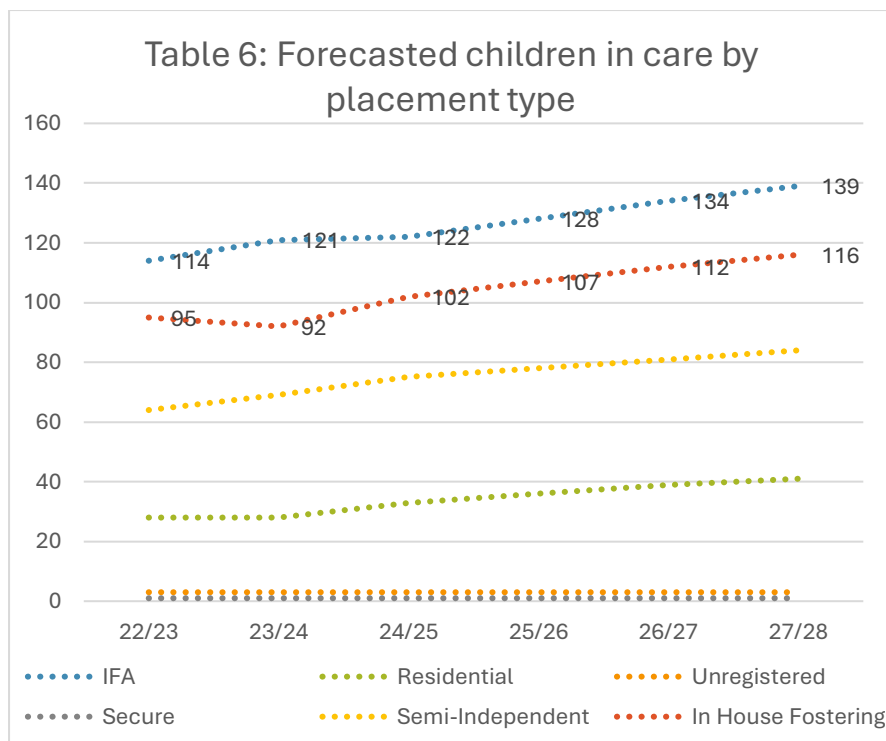
We are predicting a rise in demand and unit costs and as a result, the gap between expenditure and income widens over the six-year period.

As we can see in Table 6, the increase in children and young people in our care rises from 232 in 2019 to 265 in 2024, there is a substantial

increase in 2020-2022, likely attributed to the pandemic, and a substantial decrease between 2023 and 2024, most likely attributed to the national recovery from the pandemic. On average the numbers fluctuate between 1% and 3% each year, therefore the projection below takes into account the increase in forecasting, with consideration of children who currently leave our care for a number of reasons, without mitigations set out in this strategy. The overall estimate being that we may have to find 33 more additional placements in the next four years, if our mitigations are unsuccessful.

Table 6 illustrates forecasted trends in various types of placements for children and young people over a six-year period. Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements are predicted to show a consistent upward trajectory, indicating a growing reliance on external providers.

Residential placements have also seen a notable increase, suggesting a higher demand for care homes and residential facilities for children with complex needs or those unable to reside in family-based settings. Conversely, unregistered placements and secure accommodations are forecast to remain stagnant, indicating our ambition to phase out this type of accommodation. In-house fostering placements show some fluctuations but generally maintain stability.



FORECASTED UNMITIGATED SPEND

Table 8 shows we are predicting an upward trend in total expenditure on placements over the next four-year period, increasing from £22.3 m in 2022/23 to £35.9 m in 2027/28. We are currently projecting a budget deficit of £10.5m by the end of 2027/28.

Table 7: Overview of forecasted spend

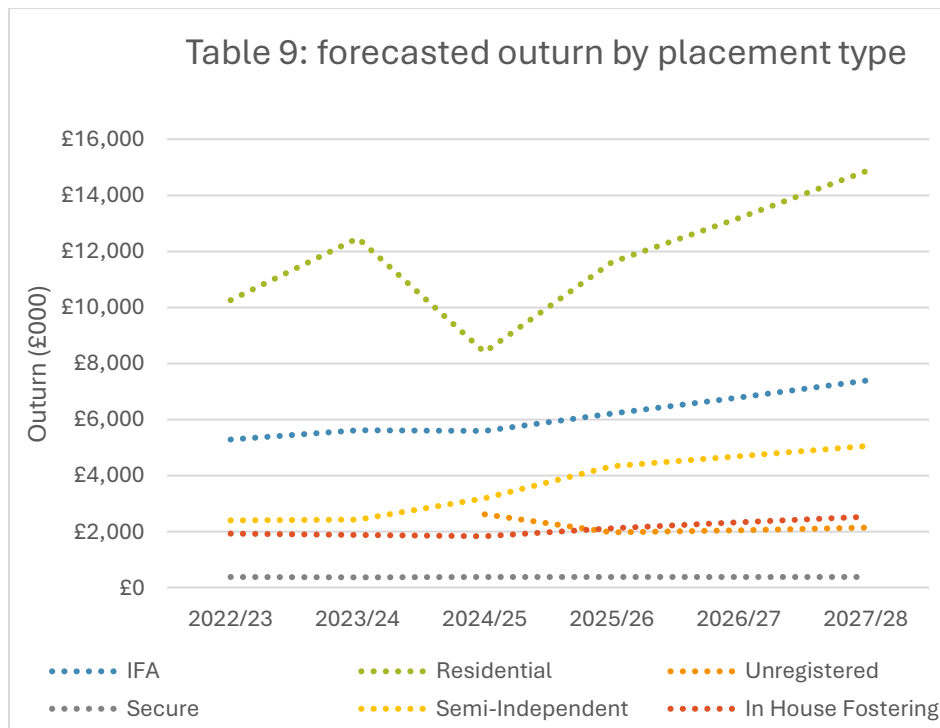
	22/23	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28
Placements	£20,235	£21,978	£24,111	£26,703	£29,461	£32,398
Allowances	£2,091	£2,073	£2,470	£2,774	£3,108	£3,491
Total Expenditure	£22,326	£24,051	£26,581	£29,478	£32,569	£35,889
Budget Variance			£1,181	£4,078	£7,267	£10,588

PLACEMENTS

Residential placements constitute the largest proportion of expenditure throughout the period, with a notable increase from £10.3 m in 2022/23 to £14.9 m in 2027/28.

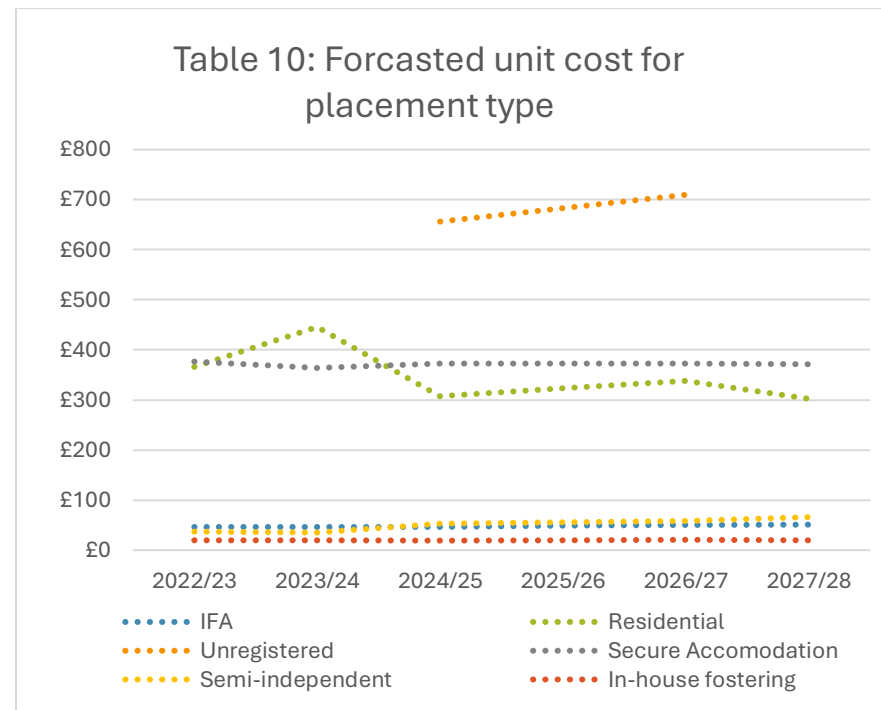
Table 8: Forecasted spend

	22/23	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28
IFA	£5,283	£5,584	£5,683	£6,216	£6,782	£7,384
Residential	£8,282	£8,403	£10,158	£11,621	£13,184	£14,855
Unregistered	£1,977	£2,613	£1,969	£2,047	£2,129	£2,214
Secure	£377	£371	£372	£372	£372	£372
Semi-Independent	£2,398	£3,176	£3,985	£4,321	£4,674	£5,048
In House Fostering	£1,919	£1,831	£1,944	£2,126	£2,320	£2,525
Total	£20,235	£21,978	£24,111	£26,703	£29,461	£32,398



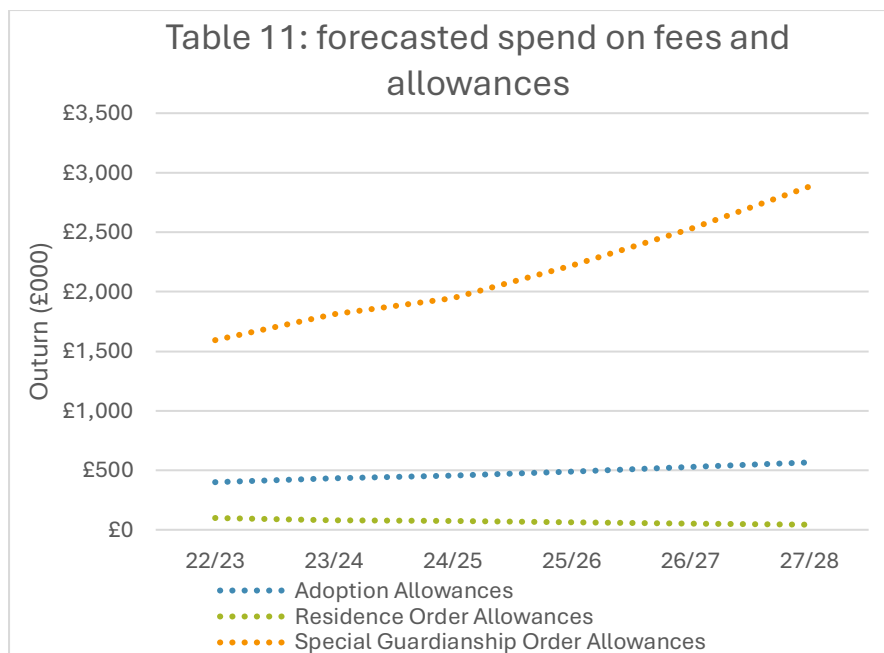
Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements also demonstrate steady growth, rising from £5.6 million in 2023/24 to £7.4m in 2027/28. Semi-Independent Living Accommodation expenses exhibit significant growth, increasing from £3.2m in 2023/24 to £5.0 million in 2027/28.

Based on our intelligence from the MTFP we are predicting that most types of placements will show an increasing trend in unit costs over the years, with the most significant increases in unregistered placements and semi-independent living accommodation. Costs for secure accommodation remain relatively stable although high.



ALLOWANCES

Adoption allowances show a consistent upward trend over the six-year period, increasing from £400k in 2022/23 to £566k in 2027/28. The percentage increase for this ranges from approximately 12.75% to 13.25% annually on average while Child Arrangement order allowances exhibit a declining trend from £99k in 2022/23 to £43k in 2027/28.



Special guardianship order allowances demonstrate consistent growth throughout the period and shows a similar annual percentage increase from approximately 8.3% to 8.7% on average as shown in table 12.

WHAT WE ARE BEING TOLD

We spoke to children in care, our partners, and providers about sufficiency for placements in Bedford. The full detail can be found in Appendix 3, we have summarised the feedback below.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children and young people define "home" as a place of safety, belonging, and comfort, where family and personal space are highly

valued. For many, home is a sanctuary where emotional wellbeing is prioritised, and familial bonds are nurtured. Supportive caregivers, personal belongings, and privacy are crucial for their sense of safety and comfort. However, external threats, lack of privacy, and conflicts within the household can significantly compromise their feeling of safety.

In foster care, children and young people seek respect, care, and compassion from their carers. They value foster carers who understand their individual needs and provide a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment.

In semi-independent living, safety, cleanliness, supportive staff, and opportunities for community engagement are paramount. Young people also emphasise the importance of being heard and receiving individualised support.

Transition from placements should be envisioned as a journey towards independence, equipped with practical life skills, emotional resilience, and a sense of belonging. Young people seek to leave their placements with the ability to make their own decisions, supported by comprehensive plans that help them realise their potential and thrive in their communities.



PARTNERSHIP WITH HEALTH

The relationship between Bedford Borough Council and the Bedfordshire, Luton, and Milton Keynes Integrated Care Board (BLMK ICB) in managing placements for looked-after children is guided by national policies and laws, including the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004, and the Health and Social Care Act of 2012. These regulations ensure that looked-after children receive timely and appropriate health services, including mental health care, regardless of their placement situation. They also mandate cooperation between local authorities and ICBs in health assessments and service provision.

The ICB is responsible for developing the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) to address the needs of looked-after and adopted children, identify service gaps, and guide strategic commissioning. The 2022 Joint Forward Plan (JFP) emphasizes improving placements for looked-after children through programs like ‘Enabling our Children and Young People to Thrive,’ which focuses on sustainable strategies for complex needs.

For 2023-25, the JFP includes actions to develop sustainable placements for children with complex needs. Long-term goals include creating a strategy for future needs and establishing sustainable local infrastructure for complex placements. Joint commissioning developments present opportunities for better support for children in care, care leavers, and foster carers, crucial for improving mental health services and residential care.

PROVIDERS

RESIDENTIAL CARE PROVIDERS' INSIGHTS

Local Authorities (LAs) are facing a significant shortage of residential placements in children's social care, compounded by providers' recruitment challenges, capacity constraints, and financial pressures. Children entering care often have complex needs due to early-life trauma, behavioural difficulties, and emotional and physical challenges. This situation is further complicated by instances of property abuse and verbal harassment, necessitating robust support systems for both children and frontline staff. Effective placement matching is difficult due to the scarcity of suitable placements and the diverse needs of children. Providers seek greater collaboration and assistance from LAs, particularly in planning applications and addressing societal stigmas surrounding care placements. Housing shortages and pricing disparities exacerbate these challenges. Addressing these issues requires coordinated efforts between LAs, providers, and other stakeholders to improve support systems, address staffing shortages, and challenge societal perceptions.

SEMI-INDEPENDENT LIVING PROVIDERS' INSIGHTS

Addressing the housing needs of young people in care is a significant challenge for LAs and service providers. Strengthening partnerships with housing agencies is crucial for securing stable living arrangements for young people transitioning out of care. Providers emphasise the need for simplified placement notification procedures to enhance operational efficiency and streamline transitions. Incentivising providers through recognition and reward mechanisms can promote

excellence in service delivery. The preference for 'In-Borough' placements highlights the importance of continuity of support and community connection, necessitating strategies to expand local placement options. Despite progress, challenges remain, particularly in securing affordable housing for young people aged 16 and over, due to rising property prices and rental difficulties. Collaborative efforts are needed to address these housing challenges and ensure safe, stable, and supportive living environments for young people transitioning to independence.

INDEPENDENT FOSTERING AGENCIES' (IFA) INSIGHTS

Providers face challenges in attracting and retaining carers, obtaining sole placements, and placing children near their schools due to geographical constraints. Despite these challenges, relationships between LAs and providers are strong, facilitating effective communication and issue escalation. The quality of social workers and the detailed nature of referrals from LAs are praised.

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

We have developed seven strategic priorities which are based on our needs analysis, demand and capacity analysis and our medium financial term plan. Our goal is to improve the experience of children and young people in our care and care leavers and reduce the forecasted overspend.

We have identified high-level success measures which will be reported to our corporate parenting board on a six-monthly basis along with an update on each strategic priority.



Strategic priority 1: We will support more children to stay with their birth parents or within their wider family networks.

This is important because:

Maintaining connections with birth parents and extended family members supports children and young people's emotional stability, cultural identity, and overall well-being, while reducing the trauma associated with being placed in care.

The number of children in care is set to increase until 2028. By implementing strategies to reduce the number of children coming into care we will reduce the forecasted pressure on the budget. Children

and young people have told us that they value being at home or with family members.

Kinship care, re-unification and edge of care

In Bedford Borough, we understand that kinship carers make a huge contribution to our placement sufficiency, keeping young people out of local authority care and providing stable permanent homes within their own family and community. We will continue to develop our approaches to kinship care and explore options to further support placement stability. We are committed to raising awareness of the challenges faced by kinship carers and making our policies and processes fairer and more comparable to how we treat adopters and foster carers.

For some children their stay in a care setting may be quite short and for others it can be much longer. Whenever there is a possibility of a child returning to their birth family it is important that we offer support, challenge and practical advice to parents and emotional support to children and young people about that possibility. We recognise that new approaches to how we work with a birth family whilst a child is in care need to be developed to create the best possibilities of reunification and that a clear offer of post reunification support needs to be developed alongside our refreshed kinship offer. We will continue to explore the opportunities to build on current work to support reunification with families where this is the best thing to do and will continue to work with partners on our edge of care service offer.

For these approaches to be successful, there is a need for a culture change across the wider partnership where risk is managed by keeping

young people close, with trauma informed and restorative approaches. This needs to be the relentless focus for the council, its partners and services it commissions.

Our developing models will be based on the following principles:

- A person-centred approach which will be guided by the voice of the child.
- A shared vision and plan for working with children and families.
- Equal recognition and respect of everyone's role.
- Retention of specialist roles, knowledge and skills.
- Information sharing between agencies.
- A Strengths-based approach putting relationships at the centre of our work with children and young people, together with their families and our partners.

This approach will build on what we know works successfully in other Local Authorities where professionals working together to keep more children safely at home has reduced the period of intervention by providing support to children and families at an earlier stage which is focused on their needs. This has reduced the number of children subject to Child Protection Plans and the number entering care within these Local Authorities.

How we will know that we are making an impact:

The number of children in care will decrease from our baseline position of 265 children in care. (March 2024).

Strategic priority 2: We will increase the provision of local, high quality foster care so that more children who cannot live with their birth family are provided with alternative family-based care.

This is important because:

Local foster care placements minimise disruptions in a child or young person's life. It supports children in care to stay in their familiar communities, attend the same schools, and maintain relationships with friends and supportive adults.

Local foster care is one of the most cost-effective placement types. It reduces transportation and administrative costs associated with managing placements far from the child's home community.

There are currently 50 in house foster placements, 32 family and friends' placements and 103 IFA. Only 37% of children in care are in a placement within the local authority boundary in 2024.

Our unmitigated forecasted demand predicts that we will need 46 additional fostering placements over the next four years (21 in-house and 25 IFA). Our unmitigated forecasted spend predicts that spend on IFA placements will increase by £2.1m whilst residential is set to rise by £4m.

Following the pandemic we have found that the recruitment and retention of foster carers has become more difficult, but we remain committed to growing our internal capacity, including that for specialist fostering provision. We will build on successes to date and grow our ability to attract and keep foster carers.

We will continue to reflect on the benefits that foster carers receive to make sure that they appropriately support their caring activity. We will continue to explore with our regional local authority partners the opportunities and benefits of increased collaboration.

We will look to make improvements to our traditional recruitment campaigns and digital marketing techniques to reach various groups of people and will reflect on and refine our methodology. We will consider what further improvements can be made to streamline our enquiry, recruitment and assessment processes, continually reflecting on the effectiveness of our approach and looking at best practice from elsewhere.

We will further review our training offer to our foster carers based on feedback to ensure we have a clear pathway of what training our foster carers need to complete during the first three years of their fostering careers. We will consider the opportunities that may be available by developing specialist / therapeutic fostering provision.

We will also give consideration to our relationship with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), including how we want to engage with the IFA market in the future, how we set out the needs for our children and how we achieve the best value for money from the market.

These actions will contribute to creating additional / surplus local fostering capacity over and above the 51 predicted and placing more children in fostering than residential (where appropriate), we will be able to dramatically reduce the unit cost. As of March 2024:

- 185 (69%) placements are categorised as with a foster carer.
- There are currently 50 (27%) in house fostering placements, 32 (17%) family and friends' placements and 103 (66%) IFA.
- 71 (38%) of 185 foster placements are placed within the local authority boundary.

How we will know that we are making an impact:

- The number and proportion of children in care in foster placements will increase.
- The number of children in care living with Bedford approved foster carers will increase.
- The number and proportion of children in care in residential placements will decrease.

Strategic priority 3: We will only place children and young people in residential care where their needs cannot be met within a family, and to increase local provision so that when we do so, we do not place them at distance.

This is important because:

There will always be a need to accommodate some children in residential homes in order to respond to their needs and manage risk safely and appropriately. Children who are received into care often have extremely complex behaviours including self-harm, targeted and indiscriminate violence, child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation and the ongoing damaging effect of parental mental health, domestic abuse, and substance abuse. A family dynamic care experience isn't always the right thing for every young person throughout their whole journey in our care, sometimes they will require a more intensive support offer. It is very much dependant on their past experience of family breakdown and or their foster care and or placement breakdown experiences. Once a young person is living in a residential setting their continuation there is influenced by the stability and outcomes they are experiencing in the residential setting, their progress and needs, and the level of independent living skills that will determine their need for continued residential care.

Many of the children who need residential care have experienced trauma or attachment issues stemming from circumstances in early life and need skilled care and support. Some of these children and young people will, with the right care be able to move to foster care settings whereas some will remain in children's homes until they reach adulthood.

We will work with our partners to explore opportunities to develop our internal residential estate so that we develop and retain within the council the skills and capacity to deliver these services in what can be

a volatile market and so that we can fill areas where the market is least able or willing to deliver.

In order to support our planning in terms of residential capacity we will focus on our use of data and information to more accurately forecast the ‘flow’ of placements, both in terms of numbers of places and type of provision needed. We will also work with partners, including the ICB to consider the placement sufficiency needs of children with profound and multiple health needs and disabilities, an area where there is limited provision within the market. We know that one of the key features to keeping children with disabilities at home with their birth families is by providing respite from caring in the form of short breaks, including overnight. We will continue to ensure we have the capacity and skills to care for these children to provide that break for carers where necessary. Whilst there is provision nationally for children with learning disabilities and autism, we would always wish for children to be close to their families, in their community of belonging, and to have continuity of education and healthcare. As such we need to continue to have local provision that can meet those requirements.

We know that for a small number of children emergency placements are needed at very short notice, for example for transfer overnight from police custody or due to emergency protection orders. This can place a pressure in our Emergency Duty Teams and more appropriate provision is needed for when this need occurs. We need to develop both foster carers and residential settings that have appropriate facilities for these circumstances and clear protocols for safe and effective care in what can be very difficult circumstances.

Only 37.4% of children in our care were in a placement within the local authority boundary in 2024. Children and young people have told us that they value having friends and other familiar community assets around them. Placing local also reduces transportation and administrative costs associated with managing placements far from the child’s home community.

By only placing children in care in residential placements when their needs cannot be met, rather than due to a lack of family-based care, will the overall spend on residential provision be reduced. It will then be possible to use these resources to support family-based care which has a far lower unit cost.

How we will know that we are making an impact:

- The number of children in care placed in children’s homes will decrease.
- The proportion of children living in children’s homes who live within Bedford will increase.

Strategic priority 4: We will work with BLMK ICB to increase and improve specialist provision for children and young people with significant mental health and /or complex needs.

This is important because:

Tier 4 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provision in England has been marked by significant challenges and changes over the past several years. Tier 4 CAMHS services are highly specialised typically inpatient care for children and adolescents with severe and complex mental health issues that cannot be managed at lower levels of care.

The distribution of Tier 4 CAMHS beds and provision has been uneven across different regions in England, leading to geographic disparities in access to care. This has resulted in some children and adolescents being placed far from their homes, causing additional stress for both the patients and their families.

There is currently no Tier 4 CAMHS provision available within the local authority boundary.

In the absence of sufficient placements, we are sometimes forced to utilise unregistered placements. Unregistered placements have the highest unit costs per placements and children and young people are often not placed within the local authority boundary.

How we will know that we are making an impact:

- We will have developed and implemented a plan to increase residential provision for children with complex needs working closely with NHS partners.

- We will have agreed joint funding arrangements with our health colleagues for relevant placements.
- Reduction in unregistered provision.

Strategic priority 5: We will secure permanence outside of care through adoption and special guardianship for all children for whom this is in their best interests.

This is important because:

Permanence should always be the plan for a child's upbringing, and it underpins all our interventions with children, their families and their carers. The route to permanence will be different for each individual child and Bedford Borough are committed to ensuring the range of options available are well considered and well supported to match an individual child's needs with their wishes being understood and taken into account. Adoption and Special Guardianship are two primary routes to permanency.

An alternative option for permanency is Special Guardianship which can offer a child the security, safety, and stability they need and deserve without absolute severance from the birth family, as is often the case with adoption. Special Guardianship can in many ways be interlinked given kinship carers for children often have an established relationship with a child.

We will give consideration to further development of our Special Guardianship offer and support. This is likely to include:

- Increasing awareness and improving preparation for becoming a Special Guardianship carer with the development of preparation training and guidance.
- Developing our work with pre-birth cases where adoption may be a parallel plan, to ensure we achieve increasing numbers of Early Permanence.
- Reviewing the offer of supervised family time support often a key challenge for prospective SGO carers.
- Ensuring access to advice and support is promoted for Special Guardianship carers, included as part of the Core Support Offer but with additional bespoke training for their specific position in any family network.
- Ensuring Special Guardianship families have access to therapeutic services in accordance with assessed needs.
- Reviewing the financial support offer.

How we will know that we are making an impact:

- We will increase the percentage of children who leave care via adoption and/or Special Guardianship Order (SGO)

Strategic priority 6: We will increase the quantity and range of high-quality care leaver accommodation and support to promote stability, safety, and emotional well-being.

This is important because:

We will consider how we can enhance our service offer to care leavers by ensuring improved planning and transition processes from residential settings into supported accommodation. We will look at further embedding strengths-based and trauma informed approaches to service delivery and developing multi-agency teams to provide a more responsive, flexible service to improve outcomes for care leavers.

We will ensure appropriate supported accommodation placements are available for children leaving our care. We will do this by:

- Fully understanding the impact that regulation of the sector and the introduction of National Standards will have on the supported accommodation market
- Giving consideration to our sufficiency of leaving care provision and where this makes sense, we will work closely with the private and registered provider market to increase provision and choice to meet forecasted increase in demand
- Participating in strategic planning with our Housing partners, with the objective of ensuring that young people can secure supported accommodation, general needs housing or private landlord accommodation at the right time
- Working closely with adult social care to ensure an appropriate range of accommodation options are available for young people in transition that secures continuity into adulthood wherever possible
- Giving consideration to commissioning tailored services for our care experienced young people locally

- Further developing and promoting our Supported Lodgings offer.

How we will know that we are making an impact:

- We will consistently have no care leavers in bed and breakfast accommodation or care leavers who are homeless.
- The cost of semi-independent placements will decrease.
- We will receive improved feedback from our care leavers regarding their accommodation suitability and quality of support received.
- We will have decreased number of care leavers living outside of the Borough.

Strategic priority 7: We will strengthen commissioning.

This is important because:

A strong and effective commissioning function is an essential component to ensure placement sufficiency, good and improving outcomes for children and young people and financial efficiency. We will look towards building a more co-ordinated and strategic commissioning plan for placement provision to help to ensure the right provision for children is available in the right places. This will need to be informed by a strategic needs assessment which should be shared with all partners including regional partners and providers.

We will review and explore smarter ways of commissioning to reduce costs, assure quality and support better matching through building better relationships with our market providers and establishing stronger commissioning practices. We will further embed and strengthen our approaches co-production and consultation with young people, families and staff to understand their needs.

We will develop a clear Market Position Statement to help local providers meet our children and young people’s needs. This will need to utilise the information contained within this placement sufficiency strategy alongside other relevant local Strategies and Action Plans so that existing and potential providers are aware of the demand and priorities within Bedford Borough. Our relationship with providers is crucial to the ongoing shaping and development of high-quality services. A major challenge for the council and our providers is to deliver an increased quality of service, improving outcomes for children and young people within budget. We wish to work with providers delivering locally to co-produce creative, collaborative solutions with us and will therefore seek to proactively engage with the provider market locally and will continue to build relationships with the clear purpose of shaping local solutions to meet local need. The quality of a child or young person’s placement is a significant factor in improving the outcomes and prospects for a child or young person who is in our care. We want to partner with a range of outstanding, innovative and flexible providers of homes for our children that are able and willing to be a vital member of the team around our most vulnerable children and young people with the aim of improving their outcomes.

We will improve systems to record and monitor information to better meet the current and future needs of our children and young people.

At every opportunity we will consider the relationship we want with the different markets in terms of frameworks, block contracts, and areas of specialism where we might work as a collaborative and with health partners to make provision. Our aspiration will be for children needing residential care to receive it within the Bedford Borough footprint, that the care they receive is outstanding and that costs are transparent with clear accountability for how money is spent. We know that in order to support some areas of the market we need to think about how the local authority can achieve the environment for SMEs and not-for-profit providers to flourish.

How we will know that we are making an impact:

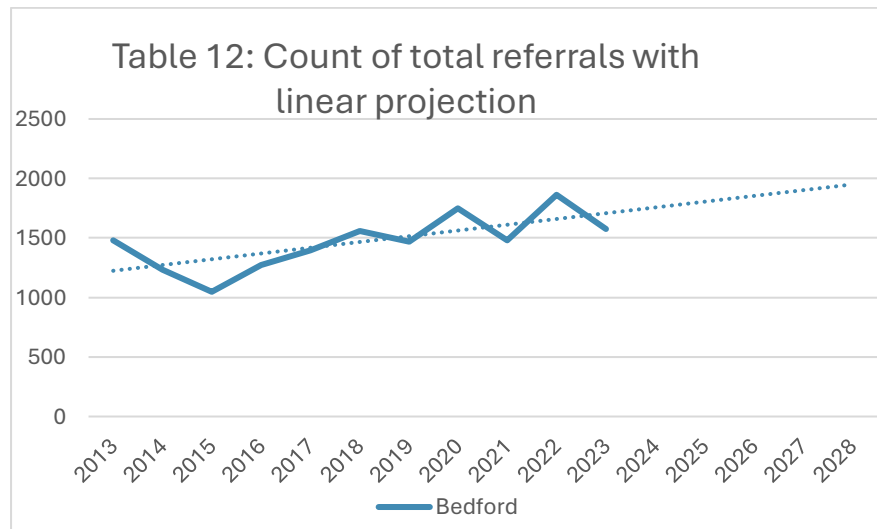
- Improved quality of provision.
- Improved matching of provision with need.
- Reduction in children placed out of borough.



APPENDIX 1: NEEDS ANALYSIS – CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE

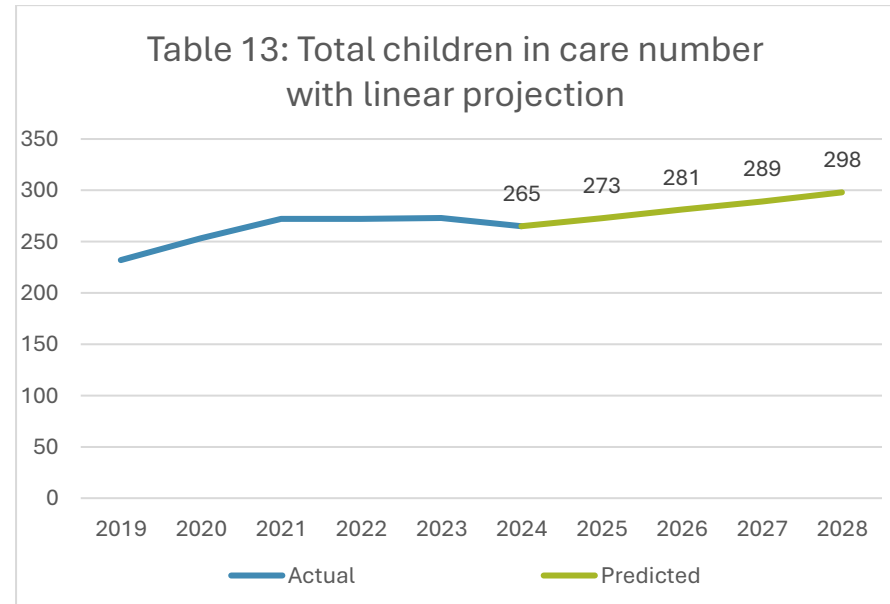
PROJECTED NUMBERS

In Bedford, the number of referrals we receive on an annual basis is rising and is projected to rise further as shown in table 12. The national rates of referrals are also increasing but at a slower rate, however the rate regionally is decreasing.

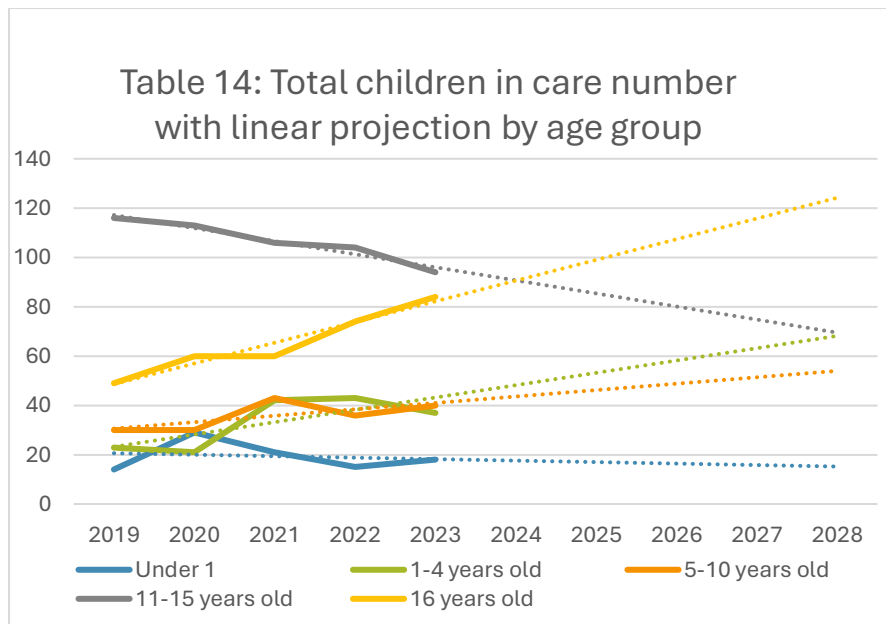


The number of children and young people in our care had been climbing very gradually but for the last three years had been stable and has started to show a slight decrease, falling from 272 to 265 at year end March 2024. Our prediction displayed in table 6 shows for the next five years the estimated increase will be 298 children in care by 2028. This

is based on a previous growth in each placement sector and is being used for our medium-term financial planning.



65% of the children and young people in our care are over the age of 10. Over the next five years the cohort of ages is set to change with the biggest shift between 11-15 years old and 16 years old and over. We can also see a steady increase in the 1-4- and 5-10-year-olds. The projected increase shown in table 13 will mean an increase in demand of provision for teenagers and young people over the next 3-5 years.



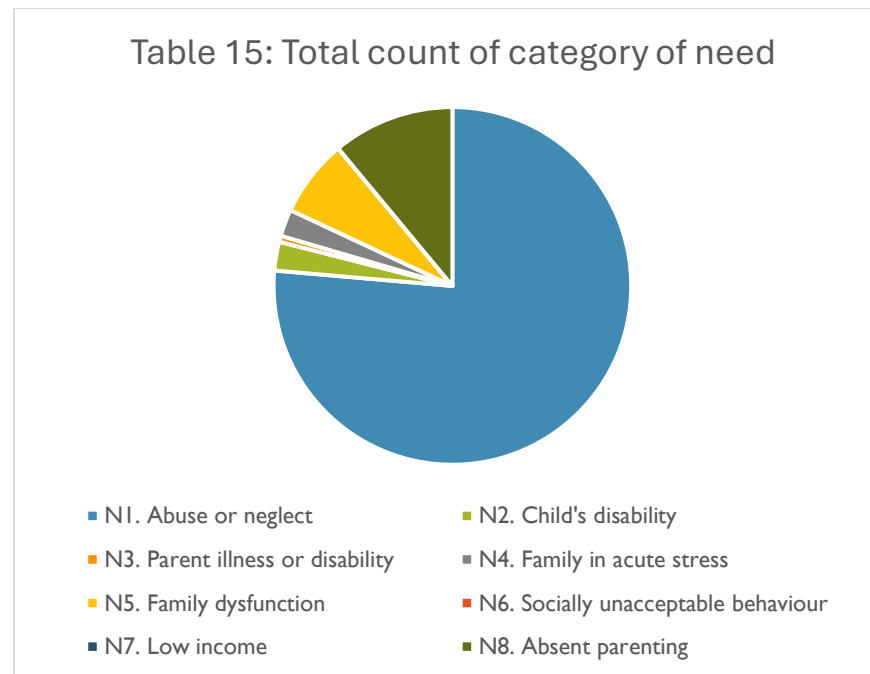
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

60% of our children in care are White compared to 76% nationally, the percentage of Asian or Asian British (6%) has remained stable, however the percentage of Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups (19%) and Black, African, Caribbean or Black British children (7%) has reduced over the time. Our proportion of male (57%) and female (46%) children in care is proportionate with regional and national comparators.

PRESENTING NEEDS

As shown in table 15 over the last five years ‘abuse or neglect’ accounts for over 75% of children and young people coming into care, which is

higher than the regional and national averages (65%). This category saw a rise in 2021 (7% increase from 2019) and it has not returned.



‘Absent parenting’ (12% in 2023) is also higher than national averages 5-9% over the last five years. This category is often used for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) and Bedford has also had a consistently higher proportion (11%) of UASC in comparison with the average of 9% across England.

SEND

We are seeing a slight incline in the number of children in care with SEN, table 16 displays the SEN status over the last three years.

Table 16: SEND Status		2022	2023	2024
Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)		62	68	59
No SEN or Unknown		101	120	102
SEN Support		50	49	44
Status excluded by age		54	30	48
Undergoing (or Pending) Assessment		5	6	7

We are currently in line with the region and England with all projected a slight increase over the next four years as seen in table 17.

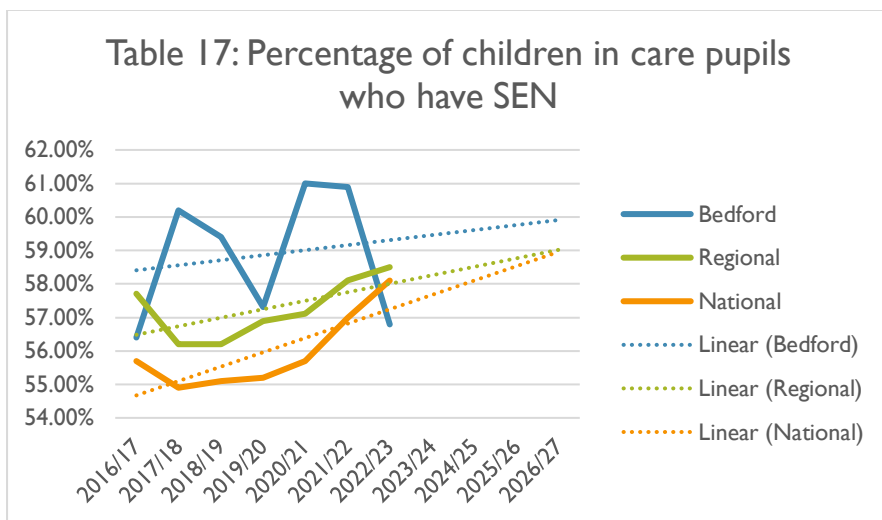
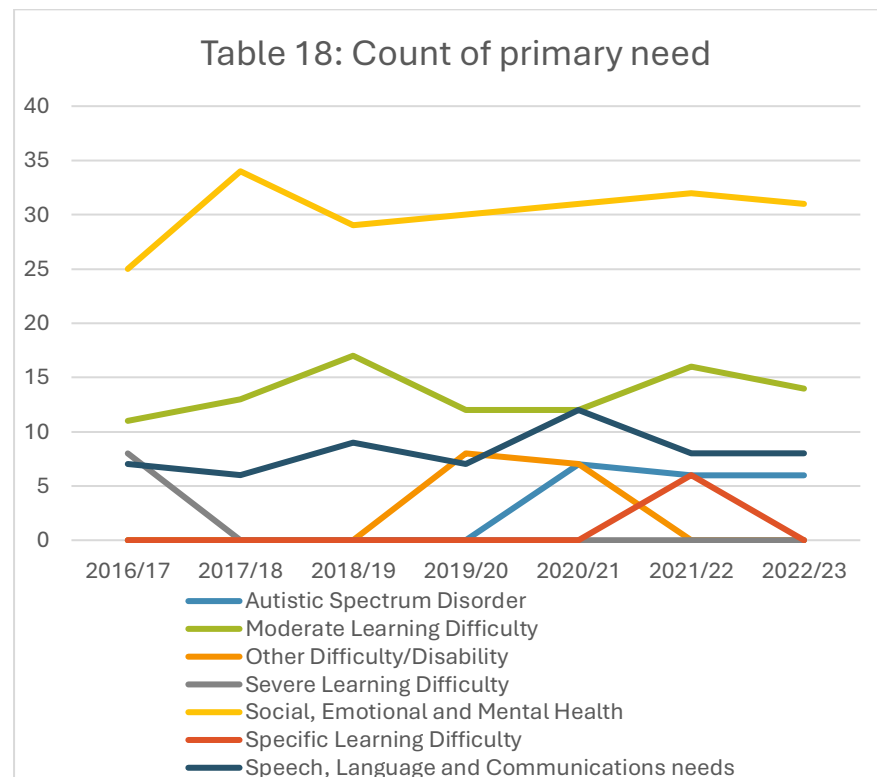


Table 18 displays the numbers of children in care and their primary category of need. We can see that Social, Emotional and Mental Health need is the most prevalent and in some years is more than double the next highest need. This evidences the importance of our Strategic

Priority 4, our need to work with health partners to ensure that children and young people receive the right care at the right time, including Tier 4 Bed provisions when necessary.

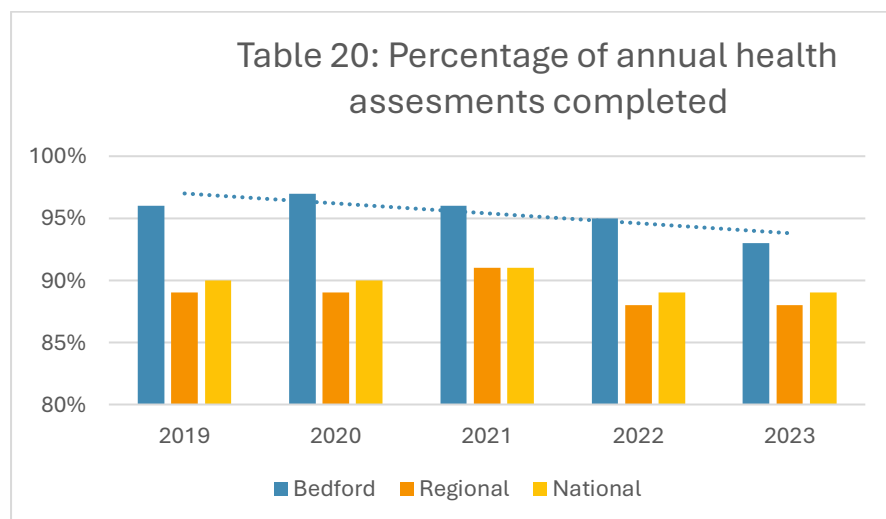


HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The physical, emotional, and mental well-being of children in care is of utmost importance. We can see in table 19 the rate of ensuring children in care have health assessments, up to date immunisation and attend the dentist is on a downward trajectory.

Table 19: Health assessments	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Had their annual health assessment (%)	96%	97%	96%	95%	93%
Had their immunisations up to date (%)	92%	96%	95%	94%	89%
Had their teeth checked by a dentist (%)	98%	96%	66%	84%	91%

Similarly, we can see in table 20 that Bedford performs better than our regional neighbours and the national rate of undertaking health assessments however this is on a downward trend.



All development assessments have been undertaken and are up to date for the last five years for children who are 0-4 years old. Apart from 2019 (which was 98%) all children in care had a SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) score each year. Generally, these scores are above the regional average but slightly lower than the national averages.

Table 21: Ages 5 to 16 years with SDQ score (%)	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
SDQ score is normal	47%	47%	56%	49%	44%
SDQ score is borderline	14%	15%	9%	9%	12%
SDQ score is cause for concern	40%	38%	35%	42%	44%

We are also able to see that the number of 'normal' SDQ scores is reducing along with 'borderline cause for concern', this therefore means that cause for concern' is rising.

MENTAL HEALTH

Tier 4 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provision in England has been marked by significant challenges and changes over the past few years. Tier 4 CAMHS services refer to highly specialised typically inpatient care for children and adolescents with severe and complex mental health issues that cannot be managed at lower levels of care.

Over the years, there has been a notable reduction in the number of Tier 4 CAMHS beds nationally. This reduction has been driven by various factors, including funding cuts, restructuring of mental health services, and a shift towards community-based care.

However, there has been a significant increase in the demand for mental health services among children and adolescents. This surge in demand has been attributed to rising rates of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and eating disorders, exacerbated by factors such as social media, academic pressure, and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The distribution of Tier 4 CAMHS provision has been uneven across different regions in England, leading to geographic disparities in access to care. This has resulted in some children and adolescents being placed far from their homes, causing additional stress for both the patients and their families.

In response to the crisis in Tier 4 CAMHS, the government and NHS have announced various initiatives aimed at improving mental health services for young people. These include increased funding, efforts to expand the number of inpatient beds, and initiatives to enhance community-based care to prevent the need for inpatient admissions.

PLACEMENT TYPE, LOCATION AND STABILITY

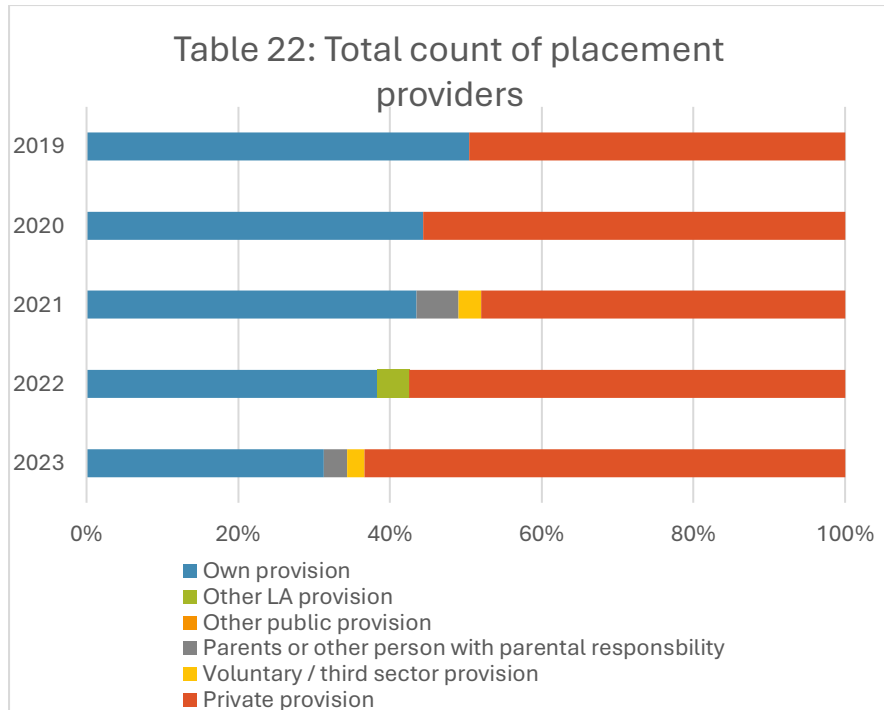
Placement location is crucial for ensuring stability and overall well-being. Staying in the same school helps to maintain educational continuity and social ties, while proximity to family and familiar surroundings can support emotional and psychological stability.

Additionally, a well-matched location enhances placement stability, reducing the likelihood of disruptive moves. All these factors contribute to a supportive and stable environment essential for our children and young people's development and success.

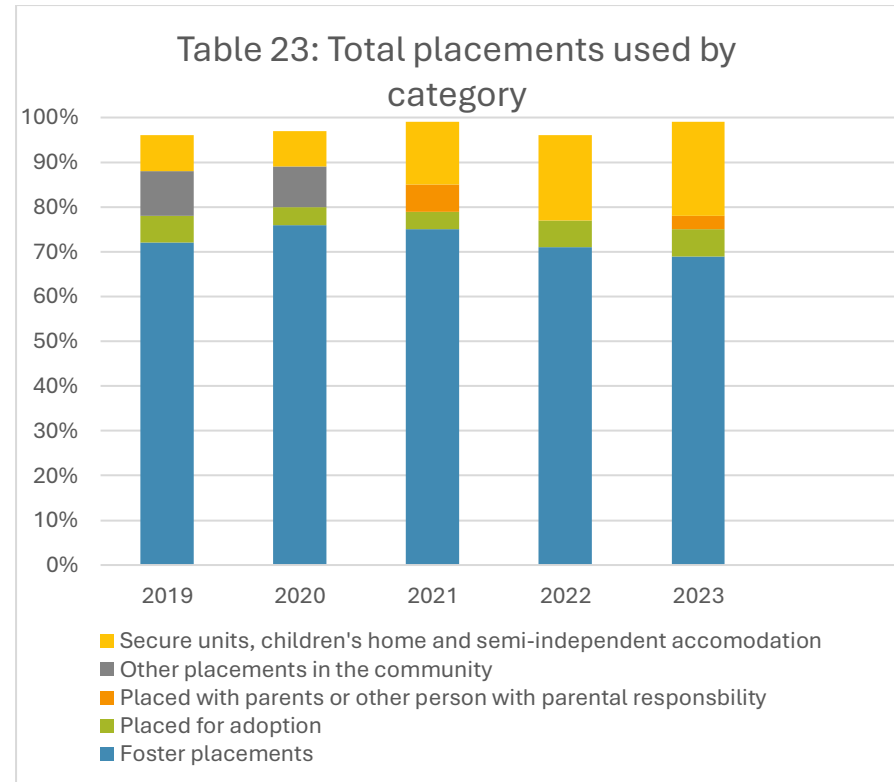
TYPE

In Bedford, we utilise a range of provision including our own and third party providers. Over the last three years we have seen a shift towards reliance upon 'private provision'. In 2019, nearly 50% of the provision we utilised was our 'own provision' whereas now this has dropped to around 30% (19% lower than national average) and private provision has grown to over 60% as shown in table 22. This is over 20% higher than the national average.





Over the last five years the percentage of children placed in a ‘foster placement’ has decreased as shown in table 23. Nationally, there is a higher proportion of children ‘placed with parents or other person with parental responsibility’ (8%) and lower proportion in ‘secure units, children’s home and semi-independent accommodation’ (13%). The largest proportional growth over the last five years are children placed in ‘secure units, children’s home and semi-independent accommodation’ which has more than doubled.



LOCATION

Over the last five years, we have seen a decrease in our ability to find suitable placements for our children in care within the local authority boundary. Nationally, we have seen the percentage of children being placed 20 miles or less from their home plummet from 73% to 60%, this is also being experienced in Bedford (60%) and more frequently in regional counterparts (55%).

Our regional counterparts and the national figures as seen in table 24 show more often than not that regional neighbours are able to place within their boundary where this is no longer the case in Bedford.

Table 24: Locality of placement		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Bedford	Inside the LA	53%	48%	50%	47%	42%
	Outside the LA	47%	52%	50%	53%	58%
Regional	Inside the LA	63%	63%	62%	63%	61%
	Outside the LA	37%	37%	38%	37%	39%

Simultaneously, Bedford and the region are seeing a net increase in the number of children in care being placed within the local authority boundary meaning that children in care from other local authorities are being placed in Bedford.

Using our most available data from the last three years, we analysed the distance children and young people are placed from their home by different categorisations to identify any trends. In table 25 we can see that it is after the age of 14 that children are more likely to be placed more than 150 miles from their home and even then, it is a rare occurrence. We can see that the majority are placed within 50 miles although this becomes less frequent the older the young person is.

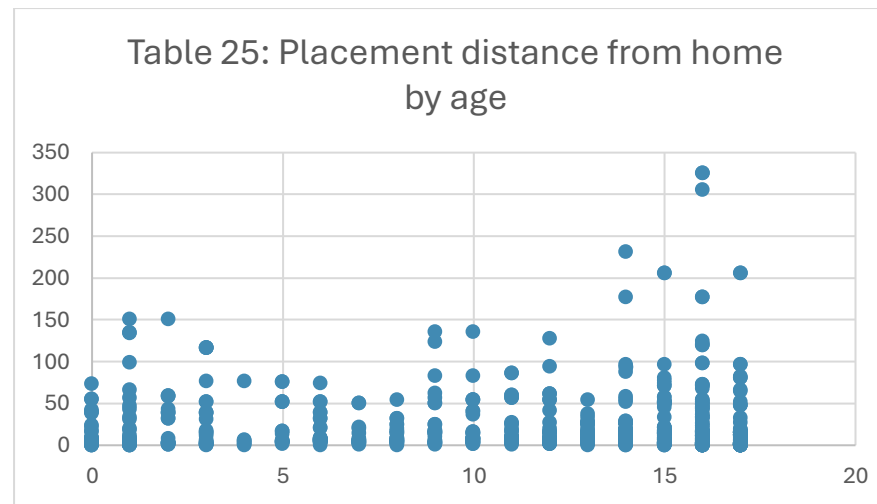
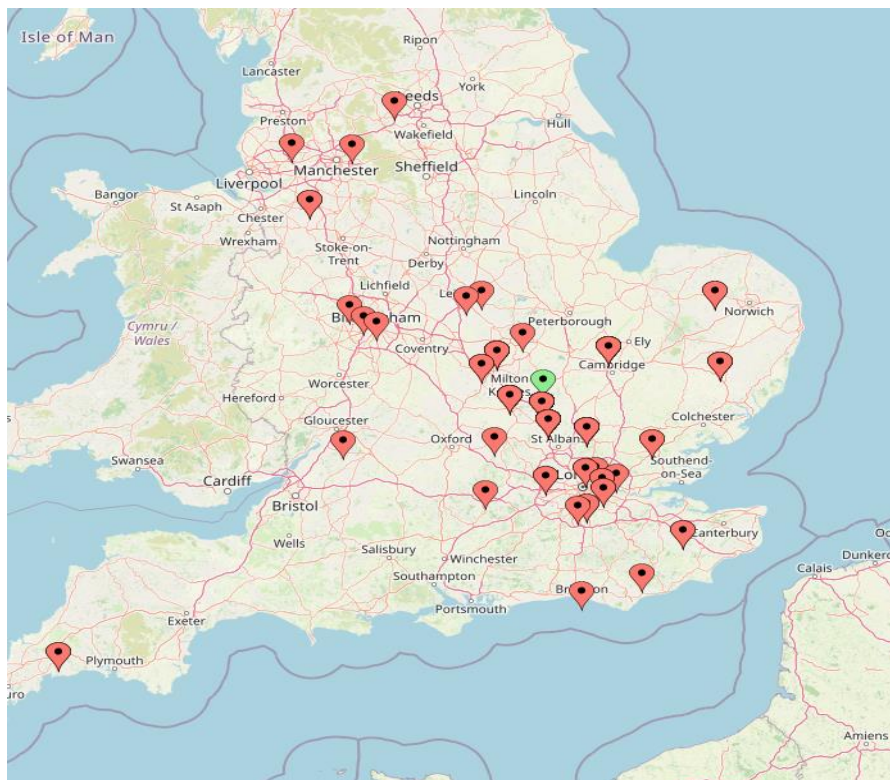


Table 26 shows that children and young people in our care who have SEN Support or an EHCP are more likely to be placed further from their home than those with no SEN.

Table 26: Distance from home in miles and SEN	No SEN	SEN Support	EHCP
2022	13 miles	20 miles	33 miles
2023	16 miles	37 miles	31 miles
2024	17 miles	33 miles	27 miles

In table 27 we plotted the location of all known placements made for the previous year (2023). It shows that some of our children in care are being placed as far as Leeds, Cornwall and Cambridgeshire.



We are also able to see variation in table 28 within the different types of placement types and the difference year on year is suggesting that our supply is not stable.

In addition, PR4 (Private provision) and PR5 (Voluntary provision) as seen in table 28 which is provision not directly delivered by the local authority, has further variation and the linear trend line suggest that we will be placing further year on year in most categories.

Table 28: Avg distance from home in miles	PRO	PR1	PR2	PR3	PR4	PR5
2022	1	17	13	34	24	11
2023	39	13	13	124	24	n/a
2024	10	14	45	n/a	28	38

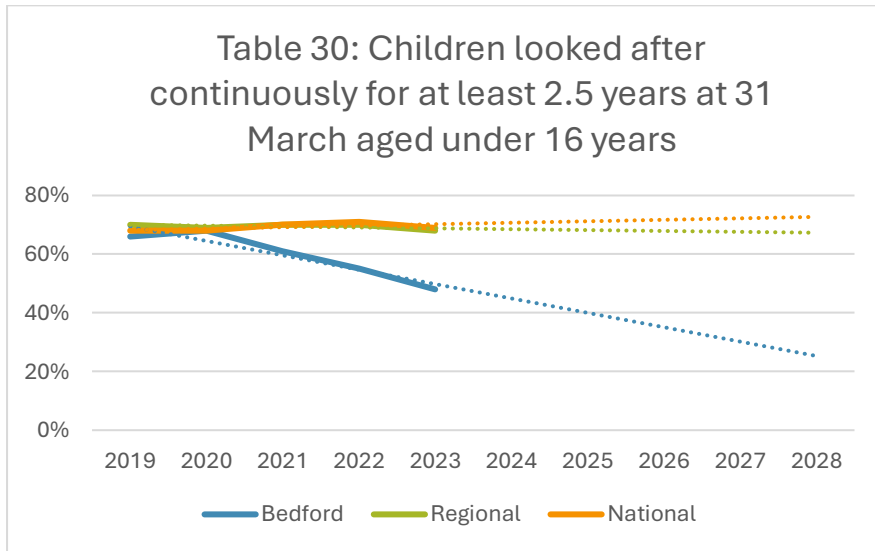
- PR0 - Parents or other person with parental responsibility
- PR1 – Own provision by the local authority
- PR2 – Other provision by local authority
- PR3 – Other public provision
- PR4 – Private provision
- PR5 – Voluntary provision

STABILITY

Using a range of published data and our own we also reviewed the stability of placements. We were able to identify that our children and young people experience more placements moves than those regionally and nationally. We can also see that this is increasing year on year.

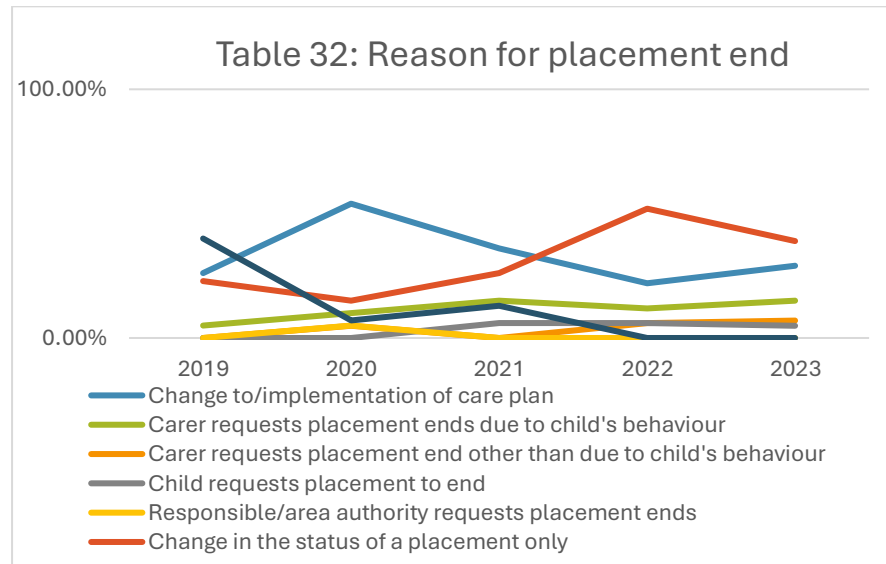
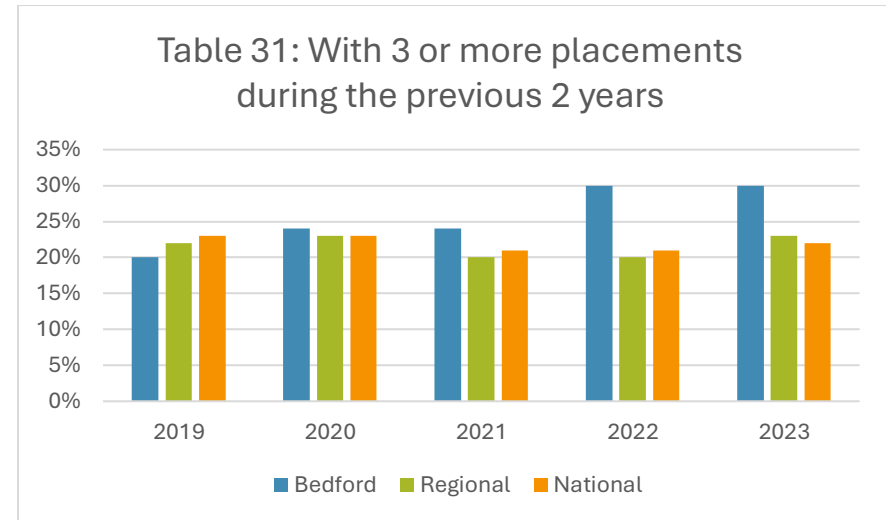
Table 29: 3 or more placement moves in the previous 2 years	Bedford	Regional	National
2019	20%	22%	23%
2020	24%	23%	23%
2021	24%	20%	21%
2022	30%	20%	21%
2023	30%	23%	22%

It is also clear from table 30 that the number of children in our care continuously in the same placement for at least 2.5 years is decreasing and it is considerably lower than regional and national counterparts.



It is also important to understand and track why placements have ended over the last five years to identify the cause of placement moves.

As seen in table 32 the number of placements coming to end due to the ‘change in a status of the placement only’ has at times more than doubled and is now the leading cause for placements to end. This category doesn’t necessarily mean that the child physically moved placements. It could be a change from short-term to long-term foster carer placement.



Throughout these years, Bedford's rates were generally higher than the national averages but comparable to the regional figures. The national percentage remained relatively stable around 10-11%, while the regional average was consistently around 12-13%.

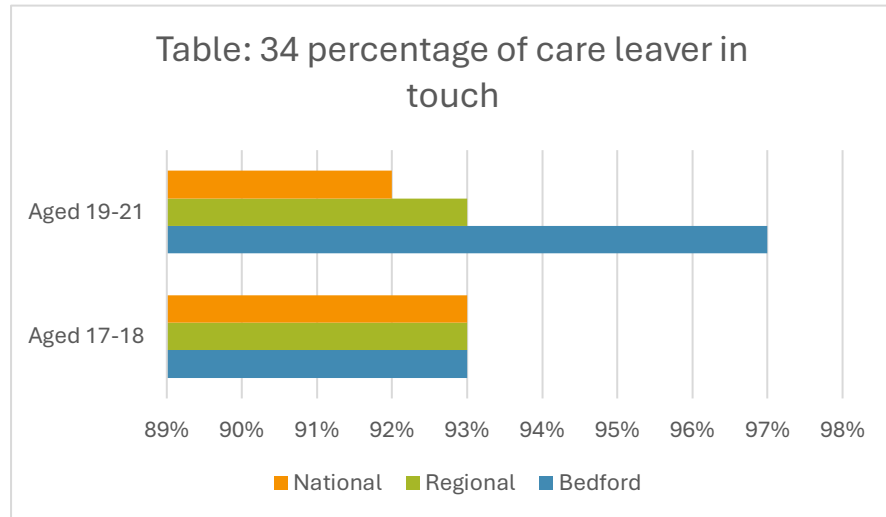
Table 33: Percentage of Bedford Regional National children who had a missing incident during the year			
2019	14%	13%	11%
2020	11%	13%	11%
2021	11%	12%	10%
2022	12%	13%	11%
2023	13%	12%	11%

Lastly, we looked at the percentage of children who had missing incidents during the year. In Bedford, the percentage fluctuated, starting at 14% in 2019, dropping to 11% in 2020 and 2021, and then rising slightly to 12% in 2022 and 13% in 2023.

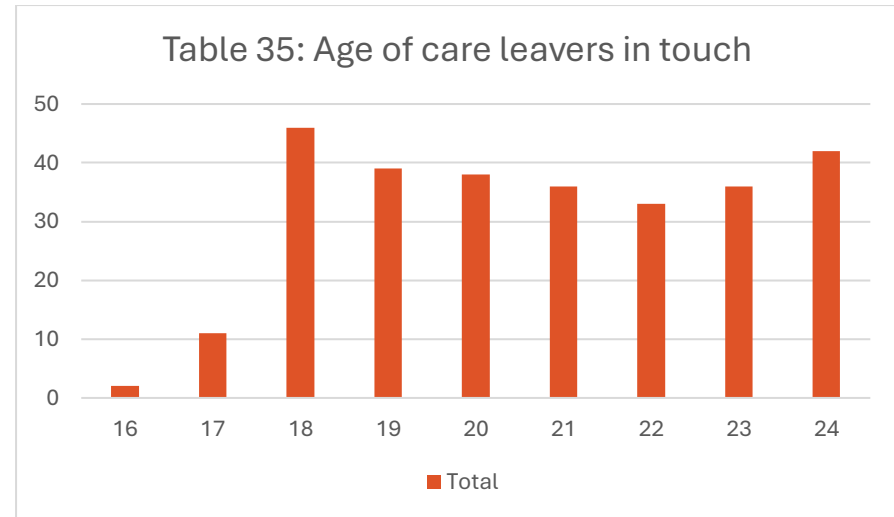


APPENDIX 2: NEEDS ANALYSIS – CARE LEAVERS

Our numbers of care leavers have remained relatively stable in the last 3 years with 151 care leavers aged 17-21 and 152 aged 22-25 in the year 2022-23. Performance data for 2022-23 as shown in table 34 outlines that we are maintaining contact with almost all our care leavers, exceeding performance of regional and national comparators.

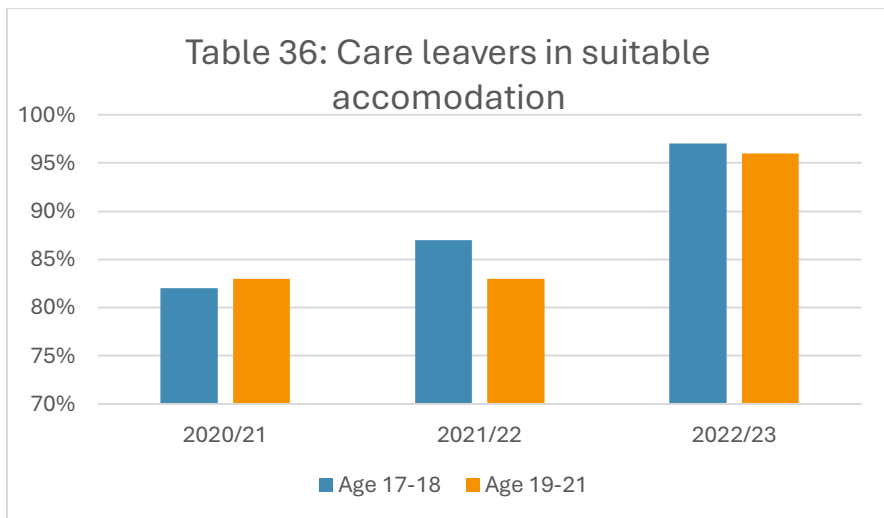


After Care Services for care experienced young people are delivered by the 16+ Supporting Futures Team. Overall, the service is ‘in touch’ with 97% of young people aged 17-21 who have left care. From the age of 21 years, an After Care service is optional for young people. The team supports young people up to the age of 25 as seen in table 35.



Young people require stable, good quality accommodation that is meeting their support needs to give them the best opportunity to engage in education, training or employment. In Bedford 65% of care leavers are in Education, Employment and Training (EET), the remainder are Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET). This is slightly better performance than the regional average of 63.5% in EET and a significant improvement from the national average of 52% in EET and shows that young people are more likely to be in education, training or employment than their peers regionally and nationally.

Table 36 shows the percentage of our young people who are living in suitable accommodation. The numbers of care leavers living in suitable accommodation has improved significantly in the last 3 years and Bedford has exceeded performance in comparison with the national average in 2022-23 of 91% for care leavers aged 17-18 and 88% for care leavers aged 19-21.



In 2024, services are supporting 89% of young people to be in suitable accommodation in early adulthood. Unsuitable accommodation would indicate a young person is in custody, receiving emergency housing or has not informed the local authority of their living arrangements. Street Homeless is addressed by services who will support with emergency accommodation.

Our care leavers live in a range of different types of accommodation, data from 2022-23 shows that 33% of our care leavers (7 young people) aged 19 were living with former foster carers in “staying put” arrangements. This was a little above the national average of 32%.



APPENDIX 3: WHAT WE HAVE BEEN TOLD

WHAT SOME OF OUR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE TELLING US

Understanding the lived experiences and perspectives of children and young people residing in supported accommodation is paramount at Bedford. Our established SHOUT group, facilitated by our Engagement Team provides the Council with valuable feedback on a regular basis. We have also recently joined the National Care Leavers Benchmarking Forum which provides key learning for services for care experienced young people.

The following insights were captured through our established SHOUT group and ad hoc groups used to support commissioning and procurement projects. They took place at various points throughout the last 12 months.

“HOME”

We undertook a discussion with children and young people in care about the notion of “home” and what it means. The sessions ran between April – May 2024 and participants articulated what their favourite things are about home and what makes them feel safe and supported.

Participants had a diverse interpretation of home, underlining its multifaceted nature. For many, home symbolised a sanctuary of safety and belonging, where familial bonds are nurtured, and emotional wellbeing is prioritised. Others described home as a place of comfort,

happiness, and relaxation, emphasising the significance of positive experiences.

Consistent with previous responses, family/carers and siblings emerged as a predominant theme, epitomising the essence of home for many participants.

Participants identified various factors that contribute to feelings of safety and security at home. These included the presence of supportive caregivers, personal belongings, and privacy. Additionally, access to technological devices, such as smartphones or gaming consoles, was highlighted as sources of comfort and connectivity.

Conversely, participants expressed concerns about factors that could compromise feelings of safety at home. These included external threats such as strangers or intruders, lack of privacy, and familial/carer conflicts. The absence of trusted individuals or support systems was also cited as a significant determinant in feeling unsafe.

When asked about their favourite aspects of home, participants reiterated the importance of family and personal space. Additionally, leisure activities, technological gadgets, and the freedom to engage in outdoor pursuits were identified as sources of enjoyment and fulfilment within the home environment.

The insights from the discussion emphasise the importance of tailoring support and intervention strategies to meet the unique needs and preferences of children and young people.

FOSTERING

The voices and experiences of children and young people are central to our approach here at Bedford Borough. We've engaged in various initiatives to understand the perspectives of those who have lived with both in-house and Independent Foster carers, recognising that their living environment is more than just a physical space—it's their home. What they seek above all is safety, a sense of being heard, and support. Respect, care, and compassion rank high on their list of priorities, as they strive to be the best versions of themselves. They appreciate foster carers who take the time to understand their individual needs, acknowledging that some may exude confidence while others may require additional support due to anxiety or other challenges.

A consistent theme in their feedback is their recognition of diversity among their peers. They understand that some may have positive family contact while others may not, and that each individual's care experience varies. What matters most to them is the provision of a safe, nurturing, and supportive home environment.

The feedback provided by these young people sheds light on their experiences upon arrival at a new foster placement. Feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and loneliness are common, particularly concerning their integration into their new surroundings and the unknowns of their future.

They articulate their perceptions of what constitutes a good foster placement, emphasising the importance of having their own space, supportive and communicative foster carers, fair rules, and patient, understanding caregivers with relevant training and experience.

Conversely, they outline what characterises a negative foster placement, including concerns about safety, unfair treatment, social isolation, and a lack of support for their wellbeing. Negative experiences may include feeling marginalised or unheard, or enduring negative attitudes towards their backgrounds and families.

Looking ahead, these children and young people aspire to leave their foster placements feeling more confident, independent, and emotionally resilient, with positive connections.

SEMI-INDEPENDENT

Safety, being heard, and receiving support are fundamental desires for young people. They acknowledge the diversity among their peers, understanding that while some exude confidence, others grapple with anxiety, underlining the importance of staff taking the time to understand them individually.

A recurring theme in their feedback is the importance of how they are supported to coexist within their living environment, emphasising the creation, understanding, and agreement of "house-rules." They advocate for collaboration between their 16+ Supporting Futures Team worker and staff in their placement to ensure suitable matches among residents.

Their feedback provides valuable insights into their initial feelings upon arriving at a new placement, encompassing a range of emotions from anxiety to excitement and weariness. Their ideal placement is characterised by safety, accessibility, cleanliness, friendly and accessible staff, and opportunities for community engagement.

Conversely, placements in unsafe areas with inadequate security, isolation, poor cleanliness, and a lack of support for personal growth make them feel bad. They emphasise the importance of staff being approachable, supportive, and proactive in addressing their needs, including mental health and wellbeing support, independence skills development, and assistance with cultural integration and immigration matters.

Their transition from the placement is envisioned as a journey towards independence, equipped with practical life skills, emotional resilience, and a sense of belonging within their community. They aspire to make their own decisions, supported by comprehensive plans to realise their potential and thrive.

In essence, the voices of these young people highlight the critical need for supportive, nurturing, and inclusive environments that prioritise their wellbeing, growth, and autonomy. Their experiences underline the importance of listening to and valuing their perspectives in shaping the provision of care and support services.

PARENTERSHIP WITH HEALTH

There is a key relationship between Bedford Borough Council and the Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes ICB in relation to placements for children in care. This is underpinned by national statutory and policy frameworks, the Statutory Guidance, 'Promoting the health and well-being of looked after children' 2015, the 1989 and 2004 Children Act and the Health and Social Care Act, 2012, specifically as it relates to:

- Looked-after children never being refused a service, including for mental health, on the grounds of their placement being short-term or unplanned.
- The duty to cooperate in relation to undertaking health assessments and ensuring support and services to looked-after children are provided without undue delay.
- Cooperating to commission health services for all children in their area.
- Ensuring that plans are in place to enable children leaving care to continue to obtain the healthcare they need.
- The legal duty on ICBs to work with local authorities to promote the integration of health and social care services.
- The need to reflect the high level of mental health needs amongst looked-after children in their strategic planning of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

The ICB also has a statutory duty to co-develop the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) which should consider the needs of looked-after children and adopted children, identify gaps in provision to meet the physical and mental health needs of looked-after children and inform strategic commissioning priorities.

The Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes 2022 Joint Forward Plan (JFP) sets out the NHS commitment to working across the Place system to improve placements for children in our care:

One of the nine High Impact Programmes in the Joint Forward Plan is 'Enabling our Children and Young People to Thrive'. This has four key aims, including developing a sustainable recovery-based strategy for complex needs and placements.

One of the 'problem' statements in the Enabling our Children and Young People to Thrive programme is 'BLMK has insufficient 'recovery & thrive' capability and capacity to meet the needs of our most complex children's placements within the patch'.

The Joint Forward Plan Operating Plan actions for 2023-25 include 'Working jointly with Councils at Place and wider to develop affordable and sustainable placements and/or capacity for children with the most complex needs'.

Outcomes for 2023-25 include 'Developing a market management strategy that plans and predicts what will be needed for children with the most complex needs over the next decade', and outcomes for 2031-40 include 'There is sustainable infrastructure for local provision of complex needs placements'.

There are a number of developments across the ICB footprint specifically relating to joint commissioning of children's services. There is an opportunity to explore working differently with the ICB in relation to joint funding, joint commissioning and providing better and more impactful support to children in care, care leavers and foster carers. This will be critical in order to progress the required improvements in relation to child and adolescent mental health, residential provision for children in care with the most complex needs, and therapeutic support.

WHAT SOME OF OUR PROVIDERS ARE TELLING US

RESIDENTIAL

Nationally, Local Authorities (LAs) across the board are grappling with a shared challenge: a significant shortage of available residential placements in children's social care. Providers, likewise, have told us they are confronting a crisis in recruitment, exacerbated by capacity constraints, financial pressures, and a lack of children's homes.

Children entering care often bring with them a complex set of needs stemming from early-life trauma, behavioural difficulties, and various emotional and physical challenges. Instances of property abuse and verbal harassment further compound these issues, necessitating robust support systems and interventions.

Frontline staff members require substantial psychological support to navigate the demanding environments they operate in. Effective matching of children and young people with suitable placements is crucial, yet often poses a significant challenge due to the diverse and complex needs of the children involved and placement scarcity.

Providers have told us they are seeking greater collaboration and assistance from LAs, particularly concerning planning applications and addressing societal stigmas surrounding children and young people in placements. Housing shortages and pricing disparities further strain the system, hindering efforts to meet the growing demand for residential placements and support services.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges demands a coordinated effort, involving collaboration between LAs, providers, and other

stakeholders. By working together to address staffing shortages, improve support systems, and challenge societal perceptions, we can create a more sustainable and inclusive care environment for children and young people in need.

SEMI-INDEPENDENT

Addressing the housing needs of young people in care remains a significant challenge for LAs and service providers alike. The relationship between LAs and the housing market is crucial in ensuring that suitable accommodation is accessible for young people. Strengthening partnerships and communication channels with housing agencies is imperative for navigating the complexities of the housing market and securing stable living arrangements for young people transitioning out of care.

One key area of concern highlighted in our discussions with Providers is the need for clarity regarding placement notifications. Simplifying procedures for receiving placement notifications would enhance operational efficiency for both LAs and providers. Streamlining communication channels and standardising protocols could facilitate smoother transitions for young people entering care and improve coordination between stakeholders involved in the placement process.

Incentivising providers through recognition and reward mechanisms, such as provider award events, offers a potential avenue for promoting excellence in service delivery. By acknowledging outstanding performance and innovative approaches to care provision, LAs can

foster a culture of continuous improvement within the provider market, ultimately benefiting the young people in their care.

The preference for ‘In-Borough’ placements, as opposed to ‘Out-of-Borough’ placements, reflects a growing awareness of the importance of continuity of support and community connection for young people in care. This trend further reinforces the need for LAs to explore strategies for expanding local placement options and strengthening community-based support networks.

Providers have told us that whilst progress has been made in certain areas, challenges persist, particularly in addressing the shortage of accommodation for young people aged 16 and over. Rising property prices and difficulties in securing affordable rentals pose significant obstacles for providers, impacting their ability to meet the housing needs of transitioning young people effectively.

Furthermore, the shared experiences of providers regarding housing insufficiency reinforces the need for collective action and partnership working. By collaboratively addressing housing challenges and exploring innovative solutions, stakeholders can work towards ensuring that all young people in care have access to safe, stable, and supportive living environments as they transition to independence.

IFA

Providers have told us they are experiencing challenges in attracting and retaining carers, along with difficulties in obtaining sole placements and placing children near their schools due to geographical constraints.

Relationships between LA's and providers are reported to be strong, facilitating easy communication and escalation of issues. Additionally, the calibre of social workers involved has been praised, along with the detailed nature of referrals received from all three LA's.