

Children and Young People's Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy

2021_2023

Children on the Edge of Care,
Children in Care and Care Leavers

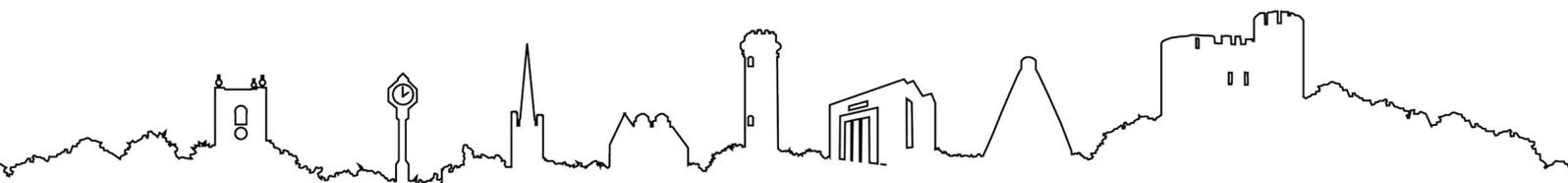
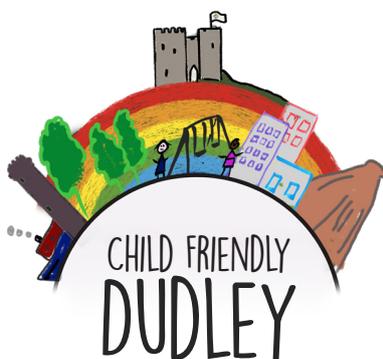


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Executive Summary

Dudley Council has the highest ambitions for our children and young people and in July 2021 made a formal commitment through our Cabinet to be a Child Friendly borough.

Following a period of sustained and safe reductions in children looked after by Dudley Council, since 2019 the number has remained relatively static. Our rate remains above that of our regional and statistical neighbours and the pandemic impacted further on this as court processes resulting in children safely exiting care were delayed.

Wherever possible it is our duty, and wish, to enable families to care for their own children, supporting them to access appropriate universal and targeted services, as required. We will be launching our refreshed Early Help Strategy towards the end of 2021, signalling our clear intent to working in partnership to support children and families at an early stage to prevent difficulties escalating. Strengthening our approach to supporting children, young people and families on the edge of care is also a priority within our ongoing improvement programme.

Where it is not possible for children to live safely within their own families we are committed to not only ensuring that 'sufficient' accommodation is available, but that children who are looked after are cared for in appropriate and high-quality placements that they can call home. To achieve this, commissioning that is informed by and conducted with care experienced children and young people is crucial. In accordance with our Participation Strategy this is currently achieved through a range of methods including our Young Commissioners programme and Care Experienced Apprentices.

Over the last three years we have experienced some noticeable changes in the profile of children and young people entering care, specifically a reduction in children aged 1 to 4 and a significant increase in 16 and 17 year olds. The number of children aged under 1 entering care remains high. We have also seen a corresponding shift in placement profiles with the biggest growth area being semi-independent accommodation.

We understand the challenges associated with non-regulated provision and have actively engaged with national consultation activity to address this. We continue to ensure the quality of provision through a 'high challenge high support' approach that aligns with our Restorative Practice framework. Our commitment to quality extends across all placement types with 91% of regulated external placements in 2020/21 rated as Good or Outstanding.

The majority of children and young people continue to be cared for in fostering placements where we have observed and shift in the profile of provision, notably a reduction in local authority foster carers and connected carers, resulting in an increase in first placements within external fostering provision. We will continue to work collaboratively and constructively with care providers in the independent fostering sector at the same time as continuing to grow our in-house fostering service to ensure we have a range of placement options that facilitate effective matching. We continue to make progress in this area with placements stability rates improving and high.

As a small borough, in-borough sufficiency can present a challenge. The location profile of placements has remained relatively stable with c. 55% in borough and 80% of out of borough placements within a 20-mile radius. We recognise there is more that we can do to improve

in-borough placements, particularly in terms of residential care where the number of independent children's homes in borough has increased in recent years.

Budgets continue to present a challenge with pressures growing as a result national sufficiency challenges, recruitment difficulties in the social care sector and general inflationary trends. It therefore remains crucial to explore commissioning approaches that deliver best value, and this is inherent within the Commissioning Plan that accompanies this strategy. Improving the quality and depth of data available to support commissioning plans remains a priority and Dudley Council is pleased to have been a key contributor the development of Data to Insight's placement demand modelling tool that has recently been launched following investment from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and support from ADCS, DfE, Ofsted.



1. Introduction

Dudley Council has the highest ambitions for our children and young people and in July 2021 made a formal commitment through our Cabinet to be a Child Friendly borough. We believe that every child has the right to feel safe to play, grow and learn and to live in a place where they have access to public services and where their voice is heard and matters.

Our vision is to give children the best start in life; to support families to be independent, responsible and successful; and to ensure we provide the highest levels of public protection for our most vulnerable children. We continue to develop and strengthen the services we deliver to children, young people and families. We have made significant strides to understand ourselves better and what work needs to be done to deliver on our ambitions, ensuring children are always first and at the heart of everything we do.

Wherever possible it is our duty, and wish, to enable families to care for their own children, supporting them to access appropriate universal and targeted services, as required. Working collaboratively with partners through Dudley's Early Help Strategy, we are committed to ensuring that these universal and targeted services are effective in meeting the needs of children, young people and families at an early stage and before difficulties escalate.

Between 2016 and 2019 significant progress was made in establishing an effective Early Help and Edge of Care offer through an integrated locality approach, introducing a Restorative Practice framework that has connection and relationships at its heart - working 'with' not 'doing to'. Success was evident through the gradual and safe reduction in the number of children looked after. An ongoing focus on effective permanence planning also supported this reduction as children exited care appropriately and successfully through Adoption, Special Guardianship and reunification.

Since 2019 the number of children looked after in Dudley has remained static. Our rate of children looked after remains above that of our regional and statistical neighbours. The needs of children and families are not static and we must continually review and adapt the services we provide to meet these needs. Poverty remains a critical factor that underpins many of the challenges families face which may bring them into contact with social care services and is not something that can be resolved through local approaches alone. New approaches are required to successfully tackle complex and rapidly evolving issues such as exploitation. The global pandemic has also created unprecedented challenges for children and families and for the individuals and organisations that work to support them.

The 2021 refresh of Dudley's Early Help Strategy is timely and aligned with ongoing activity to strengthen approaches to working with children and young people on the edge of care. We are also developing our services in line with nationally agreed expectations from the Judiciary to ensure that significant intervention, for example through the Public Law Outline, is utilised only where absolutely necessary to safeguard the most vulnerable. We are committed to contributing and responding to the Independent Care Review, considering carefully the implications in respect to sufficiency planning and strategic commissioning approaches.

Regrettably, even with appropriate thresholds and a highly effective Early Help and Edge of Care offer, there will still be some occasions where it is not possible for children to live safely within their own families and where it is necessary for the Council to assume a corporate parenting responsibility towards these children.

Section 22G of the Children Act 1989 sets out the local authority’s statutory duties to provide sufficient accommodation for children looked after and to plan more generally for them. We are clear that we have a duty to be ambitious for our children and young people. This means not only ensuring ‘sufficient’ accommodation, but that children who are looked after are cared for in appropriate, high quality placements that support them to thrive and – most importantly – that children are able to call home.

Where it is in the best interests of the child, these placements should be located within the borough enabling children to maintain positive relationships, continuity of education provision and a connection to the communities of which they are a part.

This Strategy contains information and analysis of benefit to providers of services to children, young people and families living in Dudley Borough or those for whom Dudley Council has a statutory responsibility. It identifies demand for care and support services for children on the edge of care, in care and care leavers and will inform discussions and planning between the local authority and its partners as to how this demand can be met and safely reduced to achieve the best possible outcomes for children and young people.

2. Demand for Placements

2.1 Population of Looked After Children

As at 31 March 2021 there were 621 children in the care of Dudley Council, a reduction of just two from the previous year. This followed a much more significant reduction of 36 between 31 March 2019 to 31 March 2020. The relatively static population of looked after children in this year is set against the context of the Covid19 pandemic.

It is difficult to accurately predict what may have happened to the looked after population had the pandemic not occurred. Undoubtedly the pandemic will have contributed to the number of children exiting care as individuals and organisations had to develop and implement new ways of working in unprecedented circumstances. There were many delays as a result of this, from which the wider Children’s Social Care system is still recovering, for example the impact on timeliness and conclusion of care proceedings and ability to recruit/match/place with adoptive parents.

Figure 1 and figure 2 illustrate the three-year trend in the number of looked after children in Dudley and how this compares with national regional and statistical neighbour figures. Comparable data is not yet available for 2021.

Figure 1

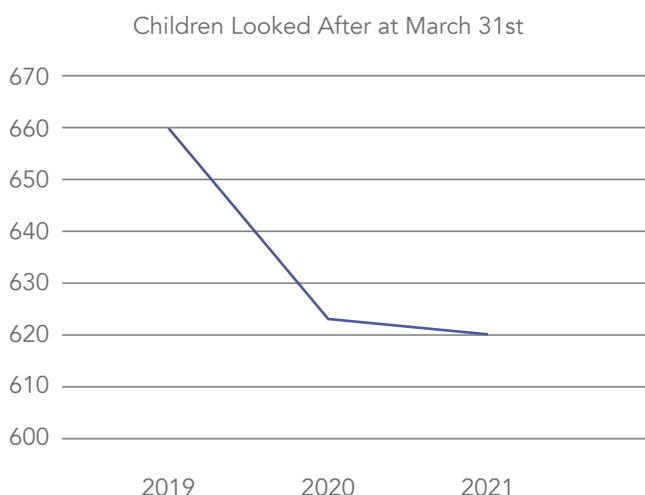
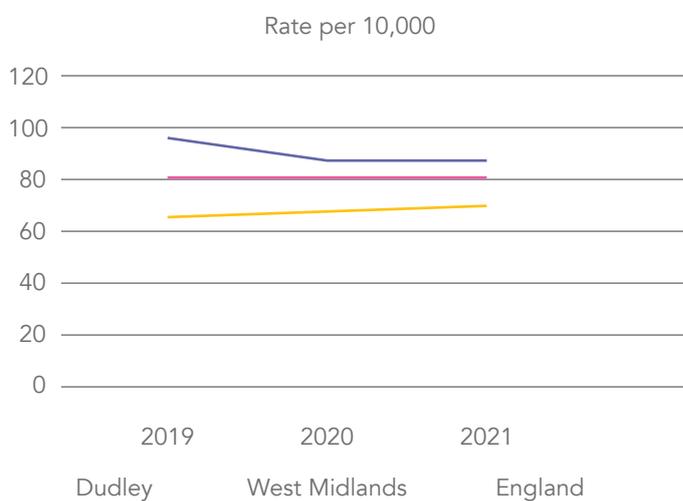


Figure 2



Within Dudley the gender profile of looked after children has remained consistent with 53% being male and 47% female. This is broadly in line with general population profile for children and young people in the borough where the split is 51% male and 49% female. There is a very slight overrepresentation of males which is a consistent national trend.

When considering the ethnicity profile of looked after children in the borough it is important to also consider the demographic profile of the wider borough and any changes that may have taken place over time. General population ethnicity data is only available as an estimate from 2019, however cross-referencing this data with our looked after children profile highlights (Figure 3 and Figure 4) a significant over representation of children with mixed ethnicity and an increasing proportion of black children who are also slightly over represented when compared to the general population. Once again this is a trend that can also be observed at a national level.

Figure 3: Ethnicity profile of Children Looked After (CLA)

Ethnicity	CLA			General 0 - 19 population
	2019	2020	2021	2019
Asian	3.3%	2.7%	2.4%	10.7%
Black	1.8%	2.6%	4.2%	2.4%
Mixed	16.1%	16.1%	16.7%	6.9%
White	77.5%	77.7%	75.4%	76.2%
Other ethnic groups	1.2%	1.0%	1.3%	3.7%

Reviewing admissions data demonstrates that since 2018/19 Dudley has experienced a gradual decrease in the % of new admissions who are of White ethnicity and a corresponding increase of those that are Black or Black British and Mixed ethnicity. The data shows fluctuations in terms of both gender and age but for 2020/21 in particular highlights a greater proportion of Black or Black British and Mixed ethnicity young people aged 16/17 coming into care and also a significant increase in females of Black or Black British ethnicity. The predominant reason for admissions was abuse and neglect however family dysfunction, absent parenting and socially unacceptable behaviour are factors identified as part of the increase. Further analysis of this cohort will be undertaken to support the ongoing developments in respect of Edge of Care provision.

Figure 4: Ethnicity profile of new admissions

Ethnicity of admissions	2018/19 (%)	2019/20 (%)	2020/21 (%)
White	78	72	66
Mixed	9	18	15
Asian or Asian British	5	3	3
Black or Black British	4	7	12
Other ethnic groups	4	1	4



Figure 5: Admissions of Black or British Ethnicity

Age	2018/19 (%)	2019/20 (%)	2020/21 (%)
Under 1	29	0	14
1 to 4	14	38	7
5 to 9	14	25	7
10 to 15	29	25	29
16 to 17	14	13	43

Figure 6: Gender of Black or Black British Black Admissions

Gender	2018/19 (%)	2019/20 (%)	2020/21 (%)
Male	57	88	36
Female	43	13	64

Figure 7: Admissions of Mixed Ethnicity

Age	2018/19 (%)	2019/20 (%)	2020/21 (%)
Under 1	31	27	24
1 to 4	6	27	18
5 to 9	13	32	6
10 to 15	44	9	35
16 to 17	6	5	18

Figure 8: Gender of Children Admitted of Mixed Ethnicity

Gender	2018/19 (%)	2019/20 (%)	2020/21 (%)
Male	63	59	65
Female	38	41	35

The number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children has remained low and stable, comprising approximately 0.01% of Dudley’s child population. Dudley is part of the UASC National Transfer Scheme.

The age profile of looked after children in Dudley has remained relatively stable although a small reduction in children aged 5 to 9 can be noted along with a sustained increase in 16 and 17 year olds.

Figure 9

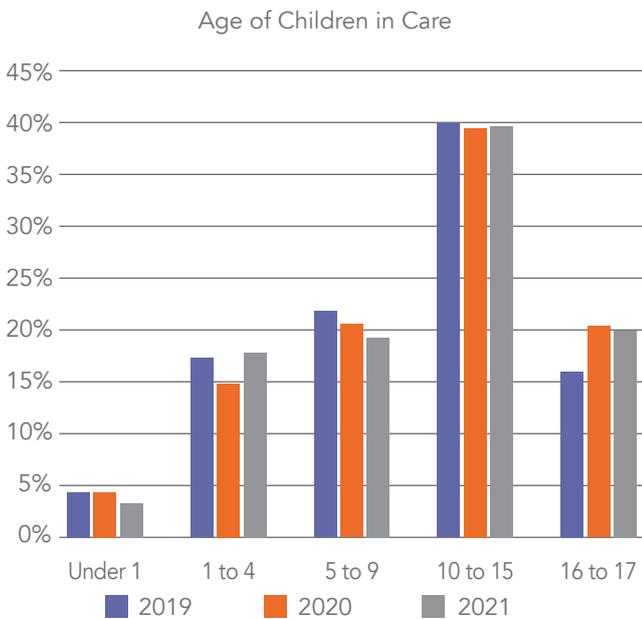
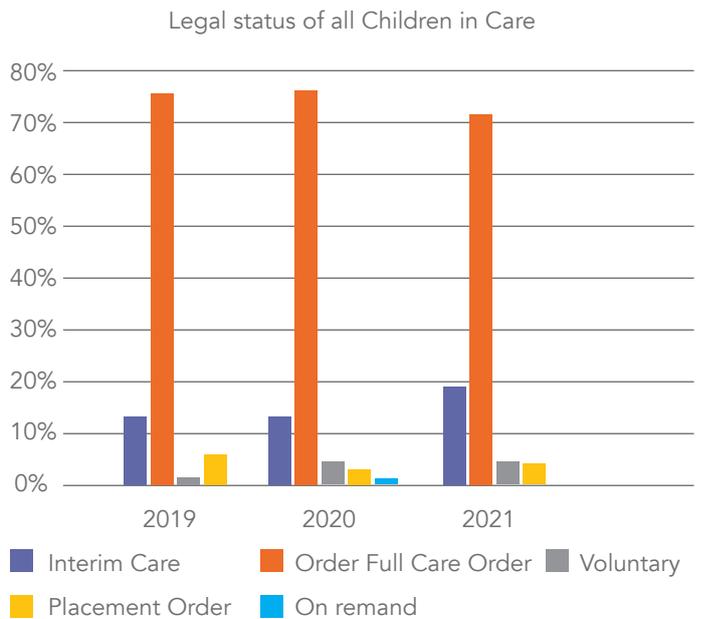


Figure 10



As illustrated in Figure 10 the legal status of looked after children as at 31 March has remained relatively consistent with a very slight increase in those S20 and for 2020/21 an increase in those subject to Interim Care Orders, mirrored by a reduction in Full Care Orders. This is perhaps not unexpected given the impact of the pandemic on the family courts.

During 2020/21 the number of admissions and discharges was almost identical. This contrasts with 2019/20 where discharges significantly exceeded admissions, the contributory factors to which are set out in Figure 15.

Figure 11

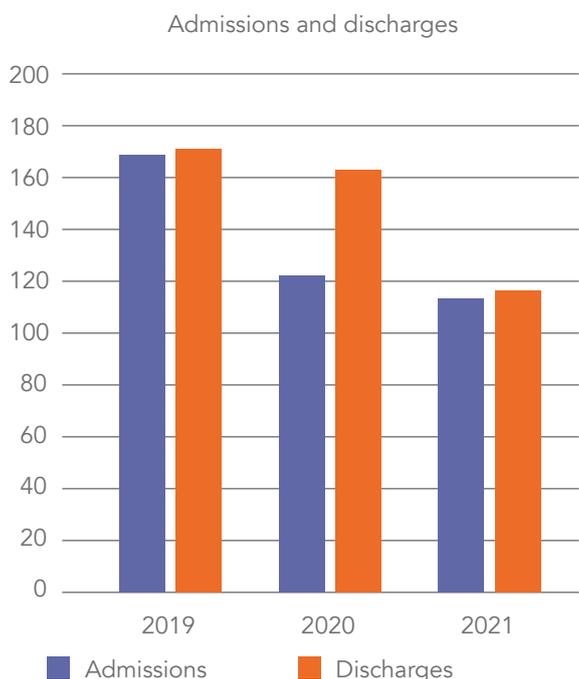
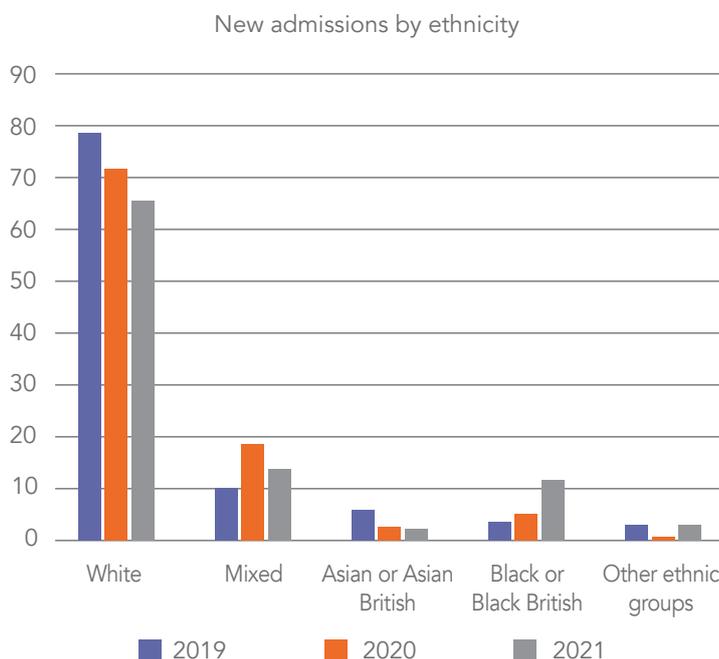


Figure 12



As demonstrated by figures 13 and 14 below, for new admissions to care there has been some level of variation across all age groups in the last three years but a particularly notable and sustained decrease in 1-4 year olds and a very significant increase in 16 and 17 year olds. The increase in 16/17 year olds can be attributed to several factors including the impact of various forms of exploitation and a more robust application of the 16/17 joint protocol with Housing.

Very young children under the age of 1 continue to make up a significant proportion of new entrants and it is notable that children under the age of 1 and young people aged 16 and 17 comprised almost half of all new admissions in 2020/21.

The Council and its partners are committed to providing an effective Early Help and Edge of Care offer that supports children, young people and families across the spectrum of age and needs. However, given the significant numbers of new admissions within the 0-1 and 16/17 age range there will be an increased focus on meeting the needs of these children and young people to ensure that appropriate services are available to prevent entry to care wherever possible and safe to do so, at the same time as addressing issues of supply in terms of appropriate placement provision.

Recognising that it will take a period of time to redesign and reconfigure services to reduce new entrants in these cohorts, in the interim period we will continue to plan effectively for them. This includes effective approaches around early permanence, including foster to adopt alongside appropriate provision and transitional support for teenagers and those who are leaving and have left care.

Figure 13

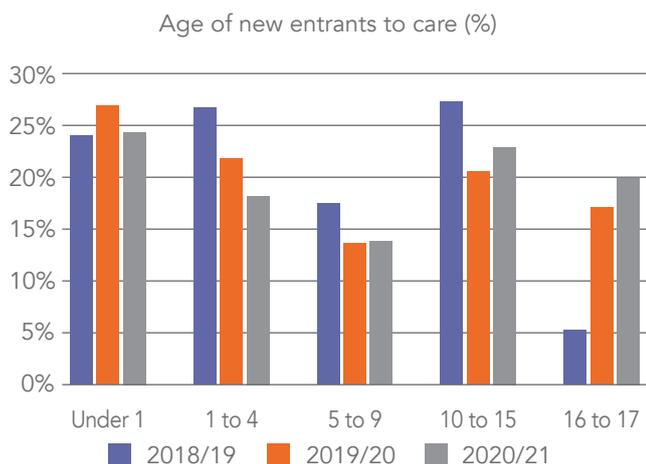
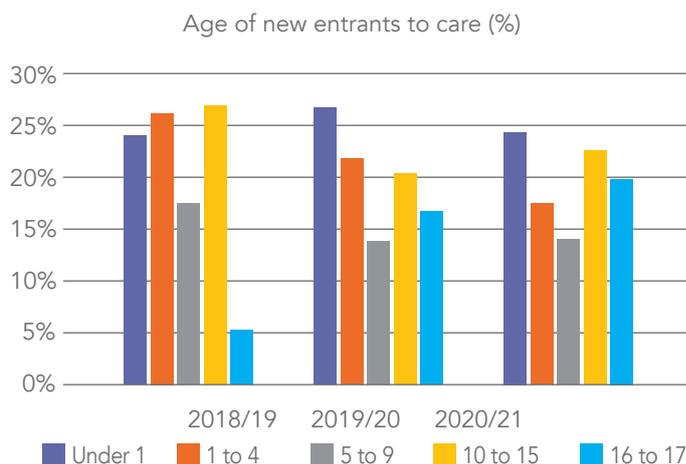
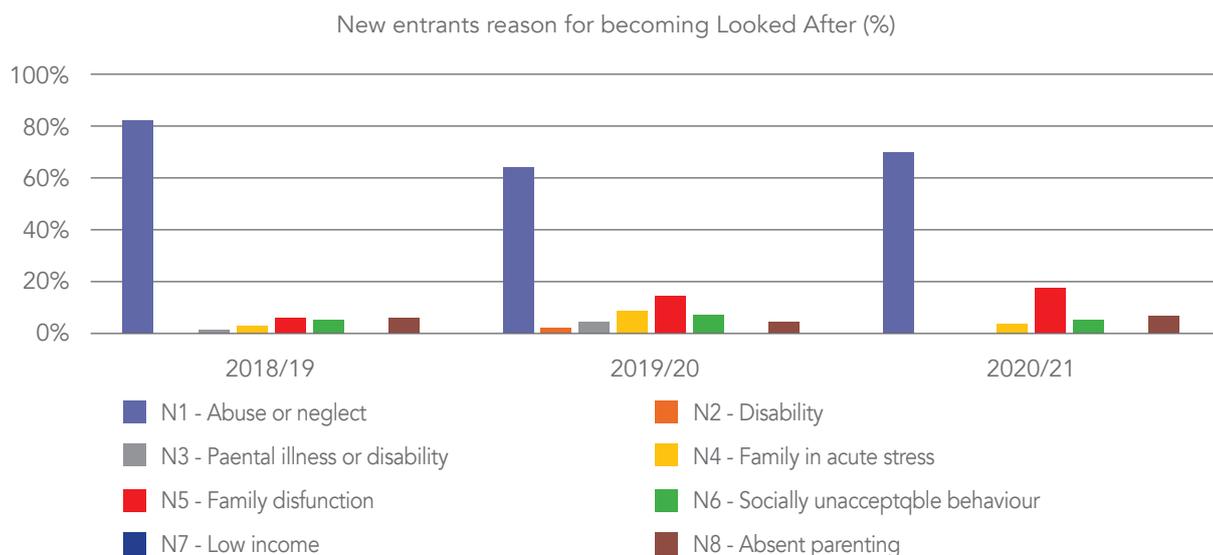


Figure 14



When considering the reasons why children became looked after abuse and neglect continues to be the predominant factor. However, the data also shows family dysfunction as a growing factor with a correlation between this and the increase in older teenagers entering care.

Figure 15



Examining the data on children and young people ceasing to be looked after demonstrates a relatively consistent profile in terms of age with the exception of 2020/21 where the vast majority were age 16-18 when exiting care. As referenced above this is likely to be largely attributable to the impact of the pandemic in delaying the progression of care and permanency plans for younger children.

In terms of figure 17 this does not show all of the reasons why a child ceased to be looked after but highlights the areas where there have been notable shifts, specifically a reduction in the number of children exiting care through adoption and SGO. Both of these areas are a key focus of the Council’s new Permanence Strategy and a range of measures are being implemented to ensure that adoption and SGO is progressed in a timely manner for all children where this is deemed to be in their best interest. The Achieving Early Permanence Panel and associated processes are central to this.

Figure 16

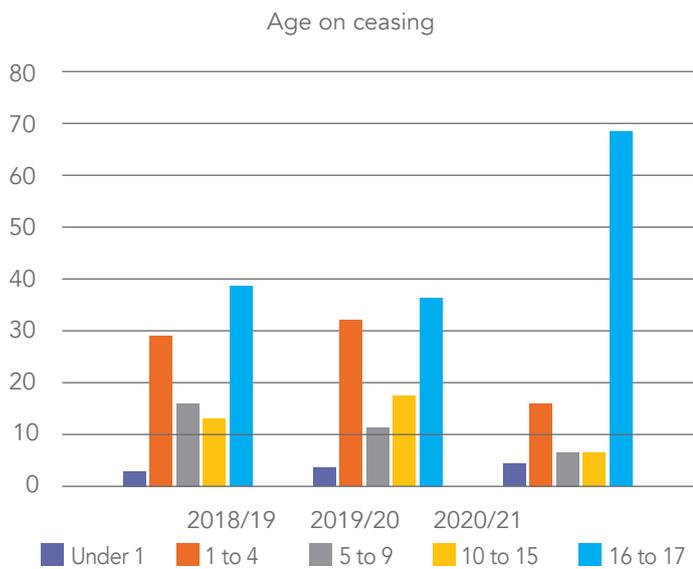


Figure 17

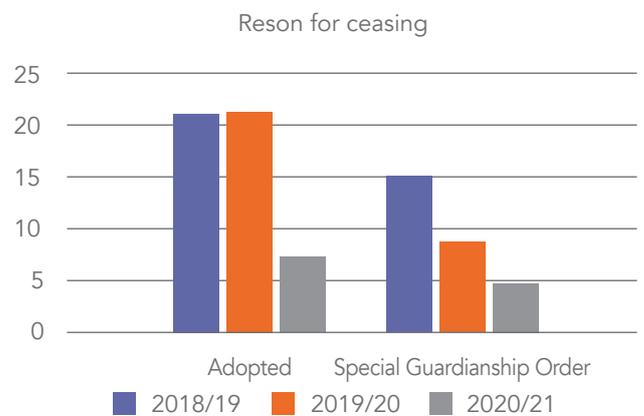
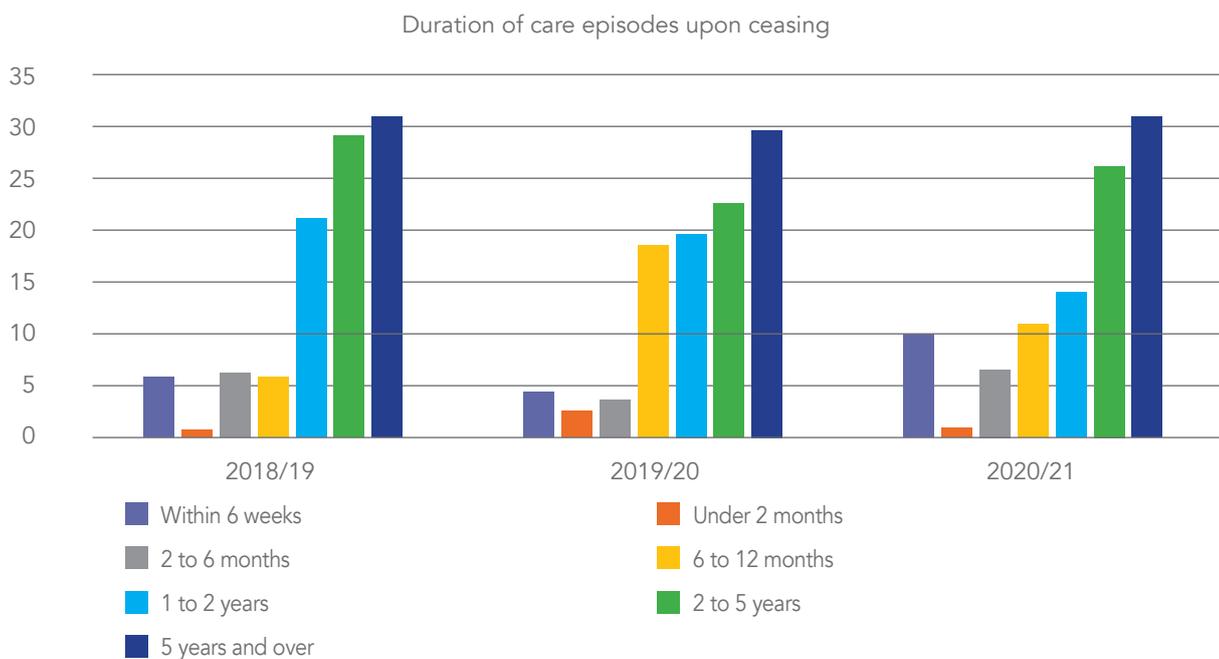


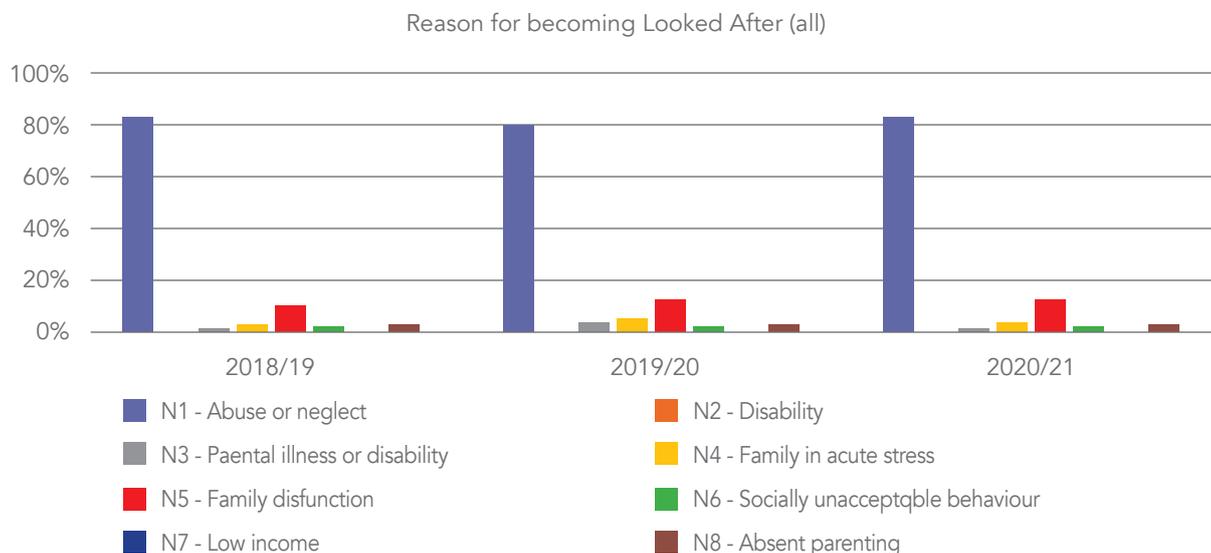
Figure 18



2.2 Needs of Looked After Children

Within the total population of looked after children there has been no real change over the last three years in terms of the reason for becoming looked after.

Figure 19



The proportion of children in care with a disability has decreased from 8.2% in 2019 to 6.6% in 2021. The prevalence rate for disability amongst the wider children and young people population in Dudley is 4.6% so whilst children with disabilities are still over-represented in the children in care population, the gap is narrowing, with Disability recorded as the primary reason for a child becoming looked after in less than 1% of admissions in each of the last three years.

Conversely, the proportion of children in care with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) continues to an increase, rising from 14% in 2019 to 20.8% in 2021. National research has shown that looked after children almost four times as likely to have SEN than all children and nine times more likely to have an EHCP.

Rather than being perceived as negative, the increasing rate of looked after children with an EHCP in Dudley could be viewed positively in some respects as it is likely to be partly attributable to improvements in local SEND provision that have delivered more timely assessments and issuing of plans. Similarly improvements in placement stability may also be a positive contributing factor as frequent/multiple placement moves - particularly if across different local authorities – can present a significant challenge in terms of successful completion of any assessment process.

Following Dudley's 2019 SEND inspection a significant programme of improvement activity is underway. This includes the creation of a dedicated SEND commissioning function which is adopting a needs-based approach to strategic planning and commissioning of SEND provision. A SEND Sufficiency Strategy will be completed during Autumn 2021 and will align with this strategy where appropriate.

As improvements are made in commissioning appropriate education provision in the local area it will be important to ensure sufficient accommodation in the local area so that looked after children with an EHCP realise the benefits of SEND improvement and can have their health, education and social care needs met locally. Similarly, this improved education offer should help to ensure that looked after children do not need to be placed out of borough to have their education needs met.

Figure 20

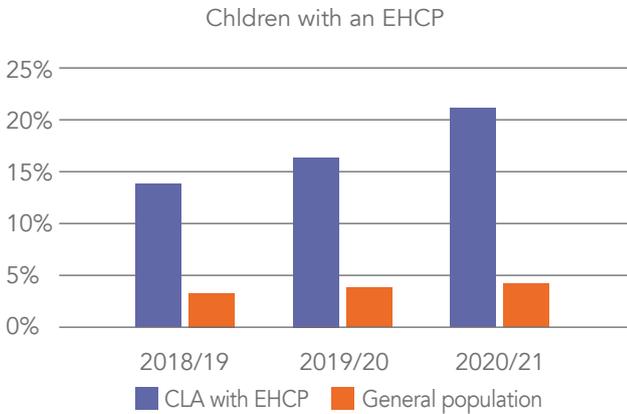


Figure 21



As highlighted by figure 21 completion and return of SDQs continues to present a challenge and this remains an area of focus for improvement. Changes have been introduced during 2021 which should result in a reduction in the number of non-completions in future years. From the returns available it is positive that there has been a slight increase in the number of normal scores with a very slight reduction in cause for concern and borderline.

However, the scores for a significant number of children still fall within this category and it remains a priority to ensure that wherever children are placed, their needs are identified and those that are caring for them have the relevant training, knowledge, skills and support to respond appropriately. Services such as Dudley Lighthouse Links (DLL), our emotional health and wellbeing service for children in care will play a central role in this.

In addition to DLL and other emotional health and wellbeing provision there is also an expectation where children are being cared for in external placements that involve therapeutic approaches, that providers evidence robust assessments, formulations and therapeutic responses including intended outcomes and evidence of progress against them.

2.3 Care Leavers

Figures 22 and 23 below highlight an issue both in terms of the accommodation and employment/education/training (EET) status of care leavers. Although progress has been made around EET for those aged 16/17, it is clear that this trend reverses post-18 and that there is also a reduction in the proportion of those that are living within suitable accommodation.

Figure 22

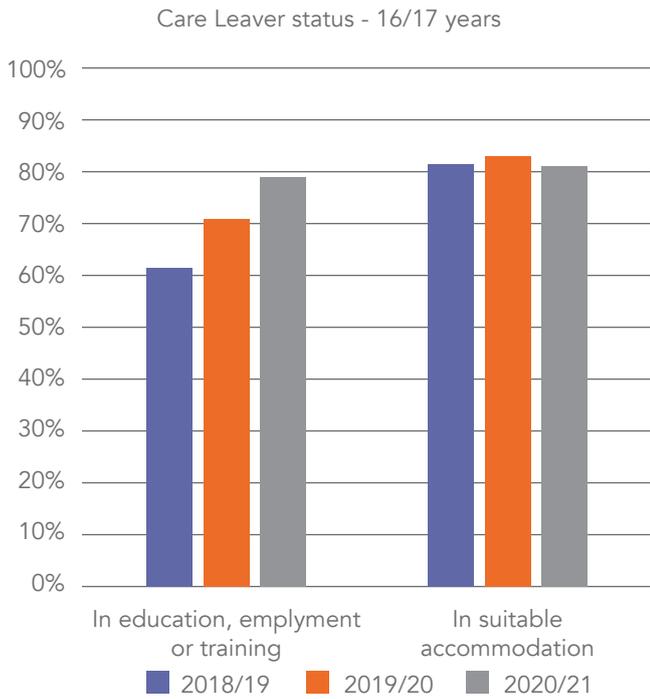
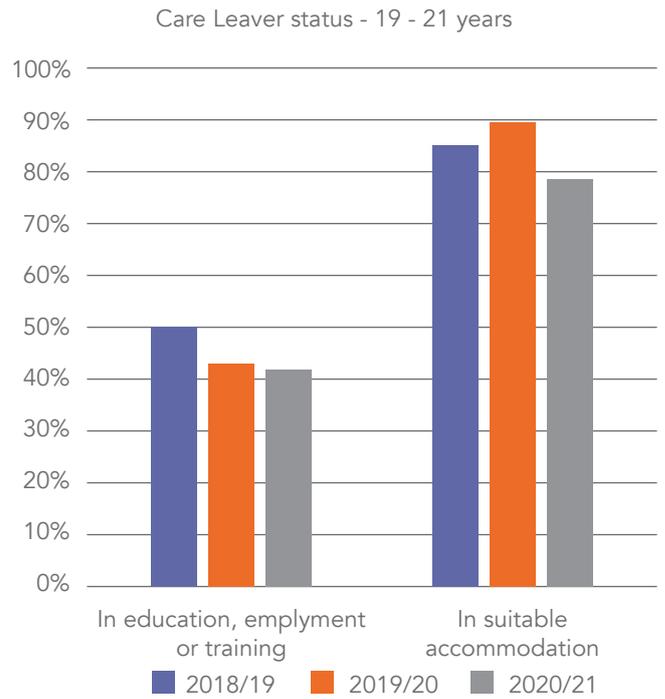


Figure 23



EET figures remain low in contrast to our regional and statistical neighbours and are also below the England average. Performance is better when looking at % of care leavers in higher education where Dudley has one of the highest rates in comparison to statistical neighbours and is in line with national average. The overall percentage of care leavers in suitable accommodation is lower than statistical neighbours but higher than both the West Midlands and national average.

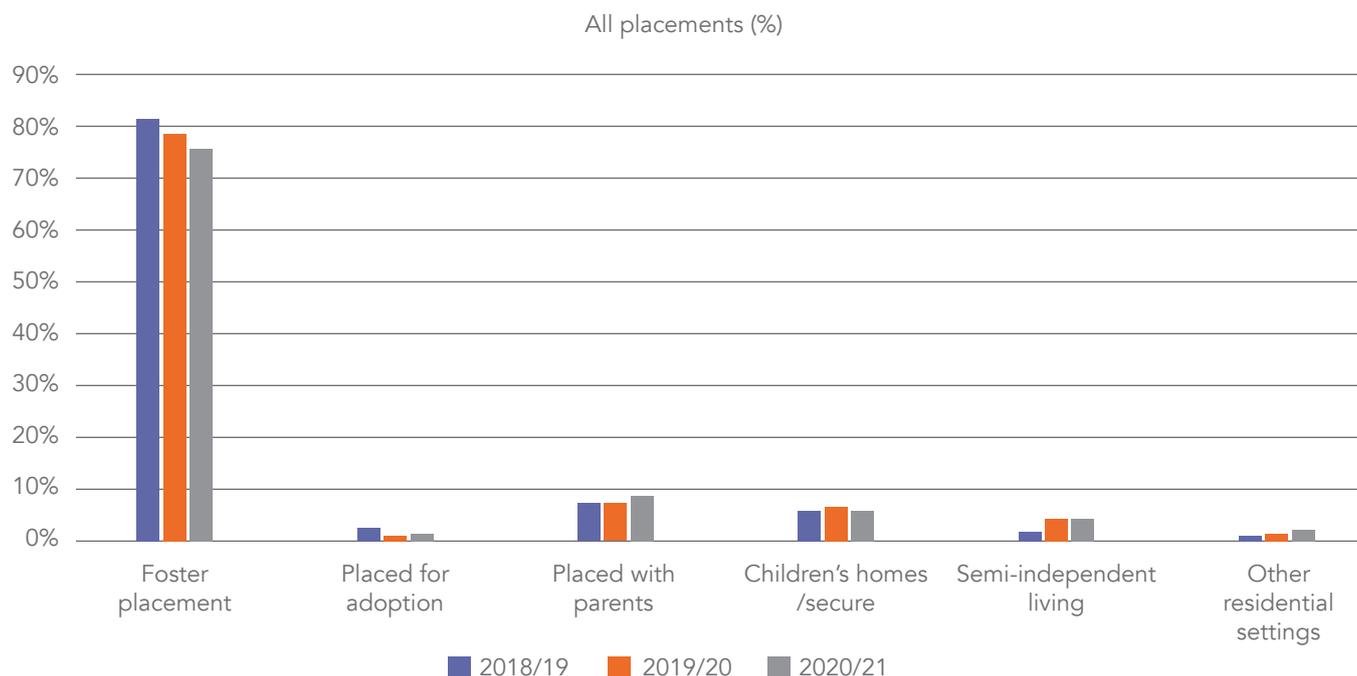
There are a range of routes through which we will continue to work to increase the numbers in both EET and suitable accommodation. A key objective of our Fostering Recruitment Strategy is to increase the number of Staying Put arrangements. A new contract for transitional support services for 16-25 year olds will also go live in early 2022 and be a key mechanism for delivering improvements to both accommodation and EET, working alongside existing service provision such as Housing and Dudley Connexions service. The development of Child Friendly Dudley will also have a key focus on further developing relationships with training providers and employers to secure increased and diverse opportunities for care leavers through defined pathways.



3. Supply of placements

3.1 Provision of placements

Figure 24



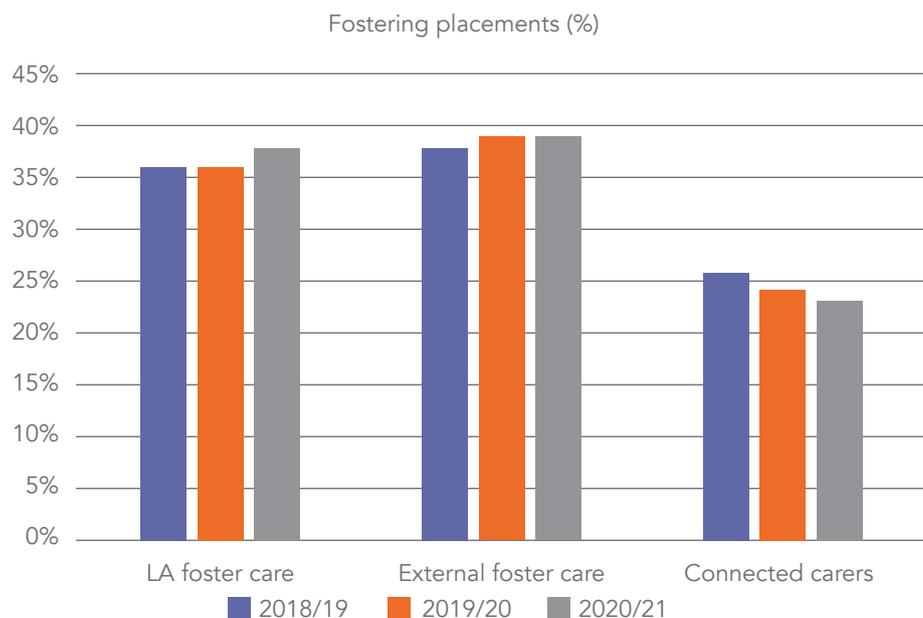
Foster care continues to account for the clear majority of placement provision, despite a slight overall reduction in the last three years. Following a reduction from levels seen in 2016, the proportion of children placed with parents is once again increasing, influenced by a range of factors including the approach of the Family Courts and delays experienced as a result of the pandemic impacting on activity to progress discharge of care orders.

The proportion of fostering placements continues to be evenly balanced between local authority and IFA carers although slightly more IFA placements are evident. Dudley Council remains committed to increasing our cohort of internal foster carers and in 2021 have refreshed our Fostering Recruitment Strategy. The strategy is focused on recruiting a diverse range of carers that are representative of both Dudley and our profile of children looked after. We are seeking not only long-term carers but also short term and task focused including mother and baby placements.

The Fostering Recruitment Strategy is focused around five key objectives which include developing a consistent and effective wrap around support model for carers and the creation specialist placements that support successful step down from residential care.

In addition to utilising the West Midlands Fostering Framework to secure external fostering placements, Dudley Council is also part of the Big Fostering Partnership, a collaboration between several West Midlands local authorities, Big Issue Invest and National Fostering Group whose aim is to secure successful long-term fostering placements for children and young people stepping down from residential care. BFP enables us to connect to a wide network of independent foster carers and will be complementary to any internal approach that is developed, enabling us to explore a range of options to ensure we secure the best possible match for children and young people.

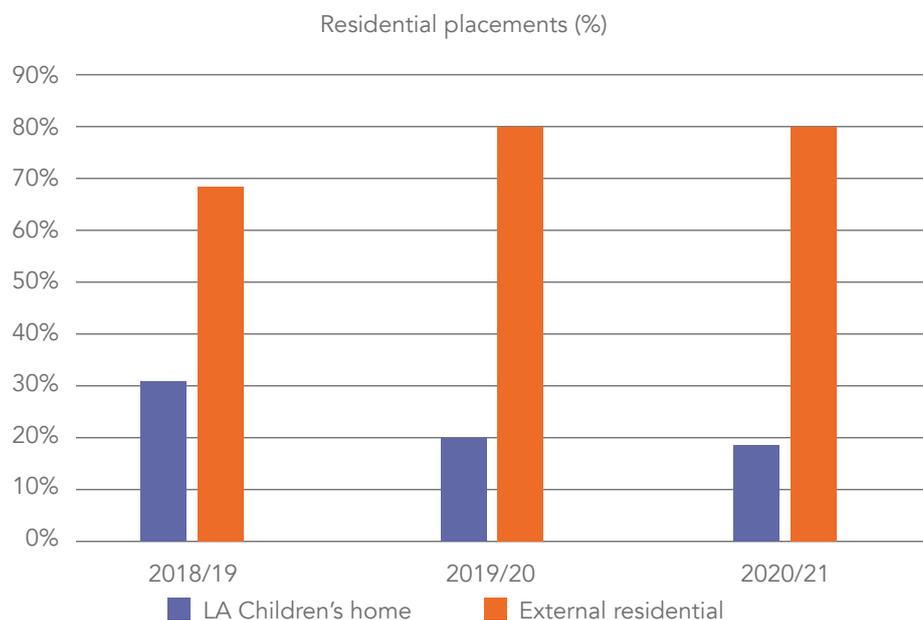
Figure 25



It is noticeable that the number of children placed with connected carers has experienced a slight reduction year on year. This could be attributed to a range of factors and potentially reflects work in previous years around permanency together with the changing profile of new entrants to care and specifically the increase in 16/17 year olds who may be less likely to access a connected carer placement.

Dudley Council continues to invest in our Family Group Conferencing service and strengthen its role within cases in the Public Law Outline and those entering proceedings. As this embeds there may be an increase in connected carer placements as families are supported to identify alternative caring arrangements where children are unable to remain with parents. Alongside this we will continue to review and develop the support provided to connected carers to ensure that they feel confident in meeting the needs of children in their care and that options for permanency through SGO or an alternative arrangement are progressed where appropriate.

Figure 26



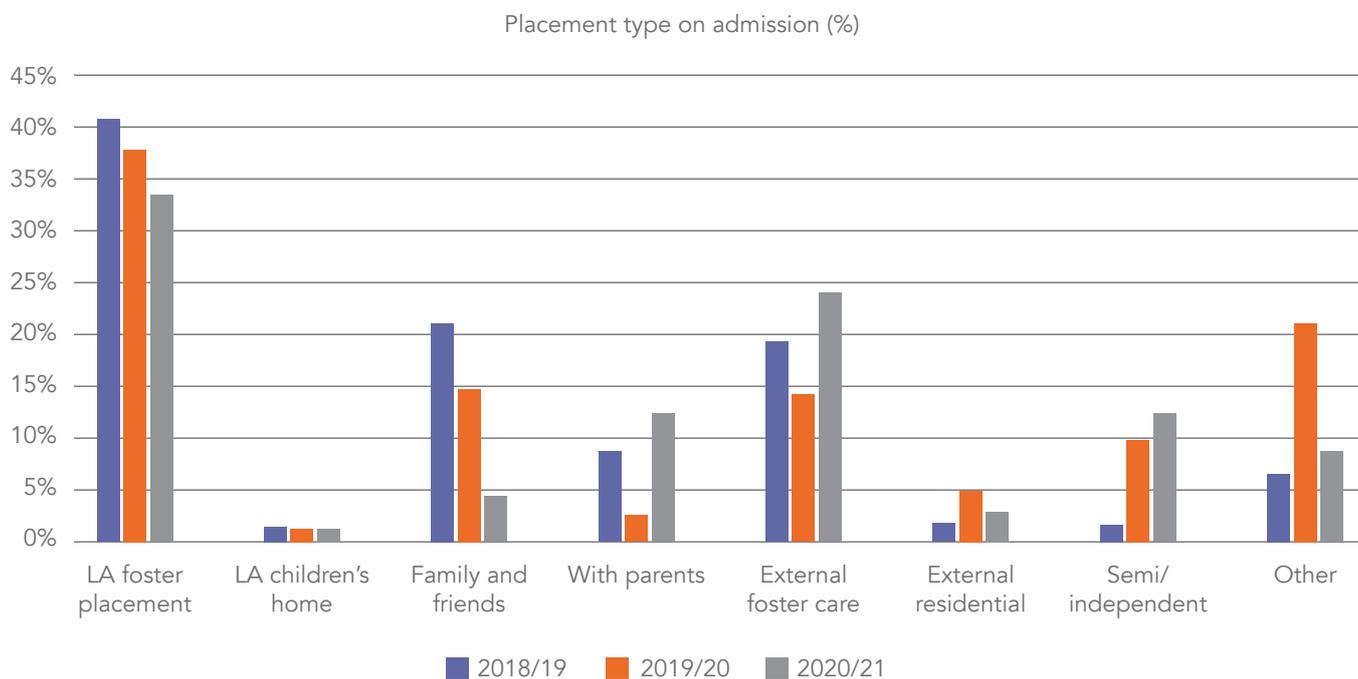
Since 2016 Dudley Council has gradually reduced internal care home provision for a variety of reasons. As the number of children and young people placed in residential care during this time has remained relatively stable this has resulted in a slight increase in the requirement for external residential placements (31 placements at 31/3/21 compared to 26 on 31/3/19). Over time as we seek to strengthen both our internal fostering provision and edge of care responses we would expect to see a reduction in the overall demand for residential care.

Despite this, we are clear that residential care has an important role to play in sufficiency planning and for certain children/young people in specific circumstances will be the best placement option. Where this is the case we are committed to ensuring that children and young people are cared for in high quality provision that can meet their specific needs.

We have a high success rate in securing placements through the West Midlands Residential Flexible Contracting Arrangement but are still reliant on small number of spot purchase placements to meet our sufficiency needs.

Figure 27 demonstrates more recent trends in terms of supply of placements for new entrants to care and highlights the increasing difficulties the Council has experienced in placing within local authority foster care and with connected carers. As a consequence of this we have observed an increase in new entrants to care being placed in external fostering placements. The significant increase in first placements in semi-independent provision is also notable and is related to trends previously discussed in terms of a rise in the number of 16/17 year olds entering care.

Figure 27



When placement type on admission is considered by age, the noticeable trends over the last three years include:

Children under 1

- An increase in children placed in local authority foster care
- A significant decrease in children placed with connected carers from 15% in 2018/19 to 4% in 2020/21

Children aged 1 to 4

- A reduction in those placed in local authority foster care from 56% in 2019/20 to 28% in 2020/21
- A reduction in those placed with connected carers from 24% to 10%
- An increase in children placed with parents from 13% to 33%
- A reduction in children placed in external foster care from 24% in 2018/19 to 10% in 2020/21

Children aged 5 to 9

- Reduction in local authority foster care from 48% to 38%
- Significant reduction in children placed with connected carers from 24% to 6%
- Increase in children placed with parents from 14% to 19%
- Significant increase in children placed in external foster care from 14% to 31%

Children and Young People aged 10 to 15

- A decrease in local authority foster care from 33% to 19%
- A significant decrease in placements with connected carers from 26% to 4%
- A significant increase in external foster care from 26% to 50%

Young People aged 16 to 17

- A significant decrease in those placed in local authority foster care from 33% to 4%
- A significant decrease in use of external residential care from 22% to 4%
- A significant increase in independent/semi-independent living from 22% to 60%

Although data in respect of placement stability is showing an improved performance for 2020/21 we acknowledge that the pandemic and multiple lockdowns is likely to have had some impact on this. Whilst recognising that lockdowns will have placed unprecedented pressure on placements where lower levels of stability may have been predicted, our children and young people and those that care for them demonstrated incredible levels of resilience.

Figure 28

Placement Stability Measures	31/03/2019	31/03/2020	31/03/2021
Children looked after for at least 12 months	76.8%	83.0%	84.2%
Children looked after with three or more placements during the year	8.3%	9.9%	6.1%
Children looked after continuously for at least 2.5 years aged under 16 who were living in the same placement for at least 2 years	67.1%	62.6%	72.8%

It is important that we learn lessons from this in order to maintain and improve on 2021 placement stability rates. A diverse range of factors will contribute to this including effective matching, placement planning and support services, underpinned by a sufficient supply of placements that align with the needs and care plans of our looked after children.

We are committed to only placing children and young people in high quality provision. Despite the national issues around the supply of residential placements, Figure 29 below demonstrates a high level of success in placing children and young people in Good or Outstanding provision.

Where there are concerns regarding the quality of a provision, for example where a setting is downgraded to Requires Improvement whilst a child is in placement, we work with providers in accordance with our restorative practice model of high support and high challenge to ensure shortfalls are addressed quickly and clear evidence of improvement is provided. The safety and welfare of the child is always paramount and children will not remain in placements where there are significant concerns regarding the providers ability to safeguard and meet need effectively.

Figure 29

Quality of placement based on Ofsted inspections	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement to be good	Inadequate
Overall experience and progress of children and young people				
Independent fostering agencies	9	28	0	1
Children's homes	3	23	1	0
How well children and young people are helped and protected				
Independent fostering agencies	8	25	4	1
Children's homes	2	24	1	0
Effectiveness of leaders and managers				
Independent fostering agencies	7	25	5	1
Children's homes	5	19	3	0

In recent years an increasing amount of resource has been directed to quality assuring supported accommodation and responding to concerns that have presented in relation to in-borough provision regardless of whether we have commissioned placements with these providers. Dudley has responded to all of the recent DfE consultations regarding unregulated provision and as we await details of any future regulatory arrangements, continue to strengthen our existing quality assurance approaches. This includes the development of a Kite Mark for supported accommodation that is being co-produced with a national charity and young people from Dudley who are experts by experience.

3.2 Location of Placements

As a small borough with a (historically very) high rate of children in care, securing a high proportion of in-borough placements has always been challenging and the proportion of in vs out of borough placements has remained relatively static in recent years. Positively, whilst maintaining approximately 55% of placements in borough, the number of placements within a 20 mile radius has also increased and accounts for almost 80% of out of borough placements.

Figure 30

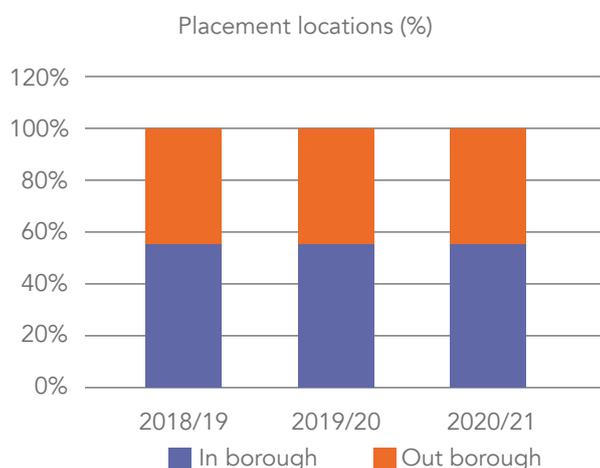
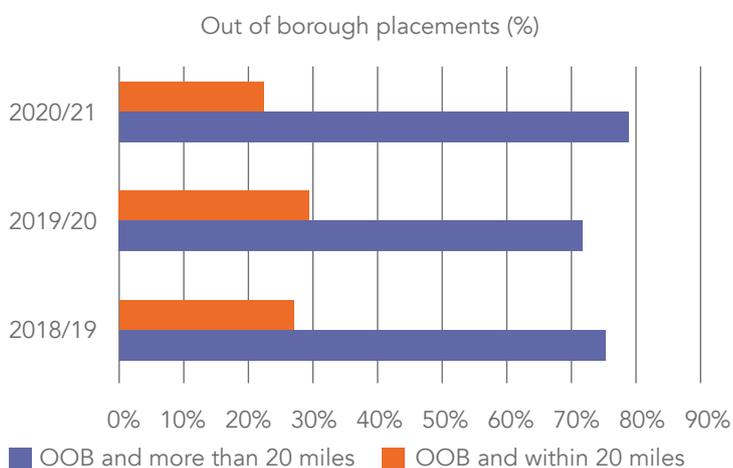


Figure 31



Although there are no Independent Fostering Agencies with a registered office in Dudley, a significant number of IFA carers reside in the borough. The number of registered independent children’s homes in Dudley has also gradually increased during the last five years. We currently have 56 Ofsted registered beds in borough although only 12 of these are with providers who are part of the West Midlands Flexible Contracting Arrangement (FCA) which remains our primary mechanism for commissioning external placements in a legally compliant manner with increased safeguards in respect of quality and cost.

Although we have and do place with children’s homes within the borough, we know that there is scope to improve our relationships and commissioning arrangements in respect of local provision. This will be a key priority for the period covered by this strategy and support further improvements to data shown in Figure 30 (location).

With the growth of semi-independent/supported accommodation we are aware of an increasing number of providers who have established themselves in the borough. With this provision being unregulated and not subject to the same planning requirements, we do not always know when a new provision has opened.

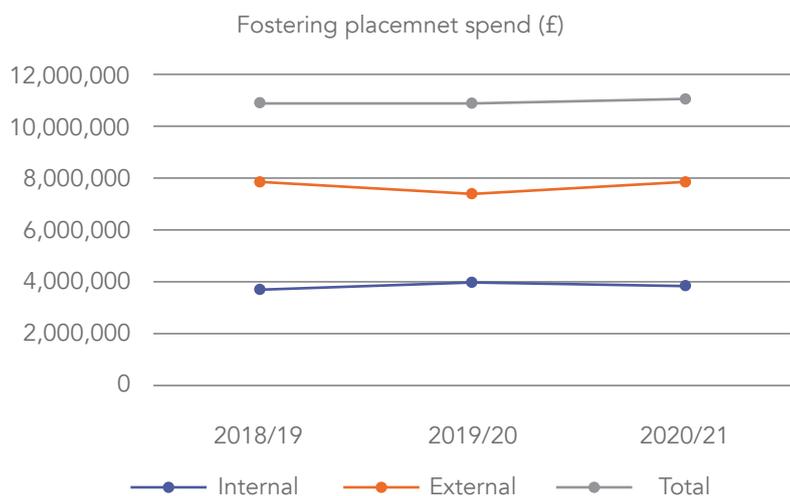
We encourage providers of all types who are considering establishing a provision in Dudley to make contact with the Council’s Integrated Commissioning Hub. This enables support to be provided through data and intelligence and via strong partnership working relationships with Police, Community Safety and Planning departments, to advise on potential locations and types of provision that may be required. This early contact also enables us to share the quality standards which we expect from providers and offer support to enable compliance.

The West Midlands Supported Accommodation Framework continues to be our primary mechanism for securing placements and a refreshed framework will be in place from 2022. The new framework will operate in a similar manner to the current in terms of being split into different categories of support reflecting the varying levels of needs and independence of young people that are placed.

The framework will operate alongside a new contract for transitional support for 16-25 year olds in Dudley borough that will be in place from February 2022. This contract will build on a successful partnership (“Alliance”) model that has been developed in the borough in recent years. A key area of focus for the new contract will be expanding the range of accommodation options to ensure effective transitional support for young people with a high level of need.

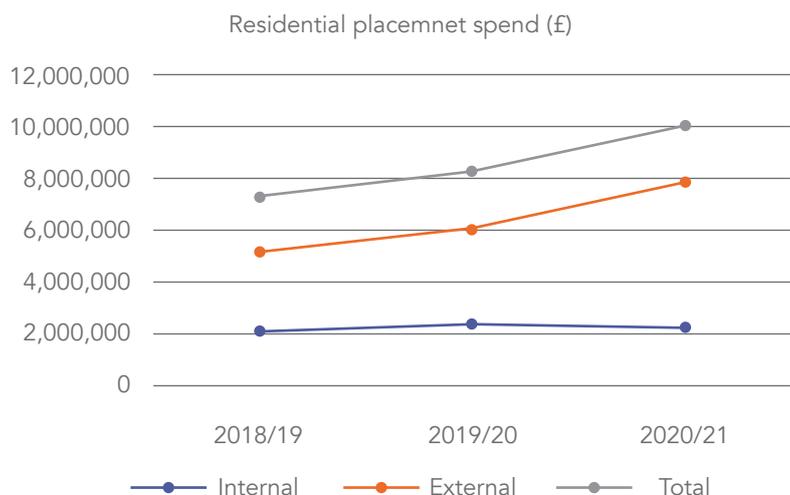
3.3 Cost of placements

Figure 32



Annual spend on fostering placements has remained relatively static despite the overall number of placements reducing by 30 from 31/3/2019 to 31/3/21. This is primarily due to inflationary pressures and the impact of moving to new framework arrangements. Over time and through the successful implementation of the Fostering Recruitment Strategy we hope to reduce our reliance on external foster care through an increased range of internal placement options that are reflective of need to ensure effective matching.

Figure 33



In contrast to a consistent level of spend in fostering, over the last three years there has been a significant increase in spend on residential care, despite having the same number of overall placements on 31/3/19 and 31/3/21. The most notable increase is in the 12 months from 31/3/2020 to 31/3/21.

A number of factors are contributing to this increased spend including: a reduction in internal provision and increase in external provision; introduction of new framework arrangements and associated price uplifts; and ongoing national issues around supply resulting in a small number of very high cost placements, including solo placements and those with high staffing ratios.

It is notable that through a recently analysis of FCA usage, approximately two thirds of our external residential placements are made via this route and the average weekly fee paid is below the average for the region. The 33% spot placements therefore have a significant role to play in the escalating costs.

From experience we know that there is not always a direct correlation between the cost of the placement and the quality in terms of outcomes for children. Whilst our overall ambition is to reduce the number of external residential placements over time we remain committed to ensuring that any placement we commission delivers excellent value for money in terms of the outcomes that are evident for children and young people.

We await with interest the findings of the Competition and Markets Authority review into social care provision and the outcomes of the wider Independent Care Review.

Figure 34

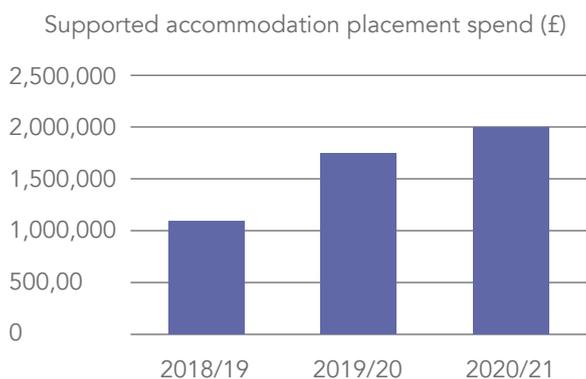
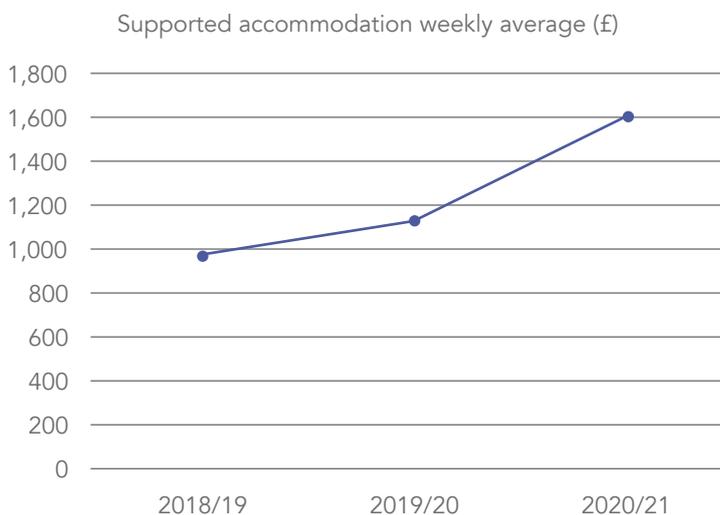


Figure 35



Supported accommodation is also an area of provision where the Council spend has increased by almost £1m in the last 3 years. As referenced above this increase is largely driven by an increase in 16/17 year olds who are looked after with 16 placements at 31/3/19 compared to 29 at 31/3/21

The majority of supported accommodation placements are for young people who require lower levels of support as they approach independence (between 14 and 20 hours per week). However, we have observed a small but significant increase in the number of young people approaching 18 where placements in residential care have been unsuccessful and there is still a high level of need which must be managed through and post transition, particularly for those young people who do not meet the threshold for adult services.

This increased level of need has been reflected in increased placement costs primarily due to the higher levels of staffing and support required. Once again, the new transitional support contract will include a key focus on developing a partnership model of accommodation and support services that are effective in meeting the needs of this group of young people, utilising principles of emerging models in respect of Transitional Safeguarding.

Figure 36

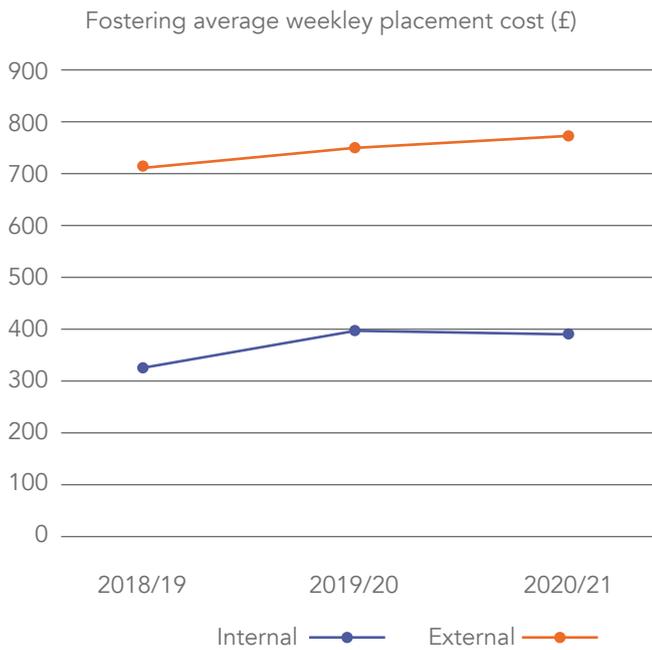
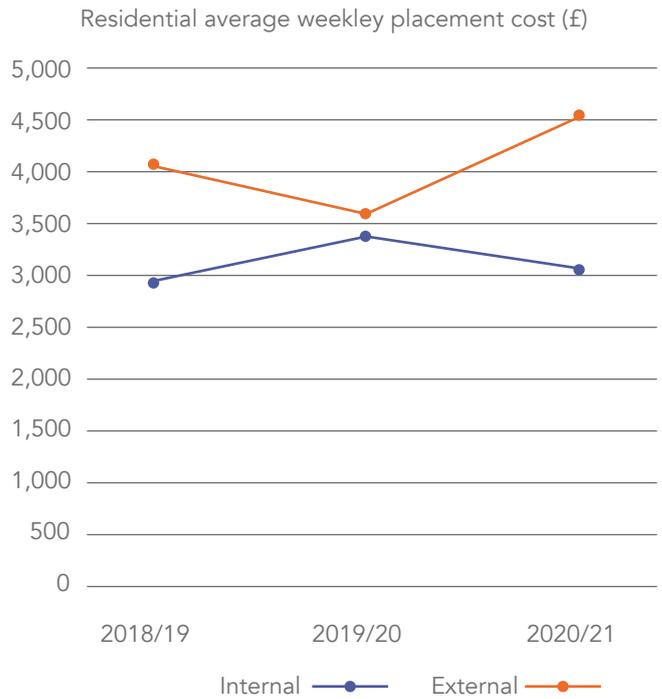


Figure 37



In summary, it is recognised that all Local Authority budgets are under major pressure. The Council continues to seek to manage budgetary pressures at the same time as improving outcomes for children by continuing an approach that:

- Matches placements to needs to get the best outcomes for children and young people, including keeping them as local as possible to their families and networks.
- Reduces the numbers of children coming into care by intervening earlier.
- Increases the numbers of children placed permanently in families.
- Considers reunification to family or connected carers throughout the child’s journey in social care.
- Supports children and young people and their families or carers to prevent unnecessary placements in children’s homes, residential special schools or residential family centres, whilst acknowledging that sometimes a residential placement is the best option.
- Encourages providers to develop service delivery models that deliver value for money.
- Ensures the best possible range of placements available to the Council.



3.4 Challenges in Providing Placements and Related Services

The national challenges around placement sufficiency are well documented in terms of:

- Recruiting and retaining skilled foster carers that can offer a breadth of provision from caring for new born babies through to older teenagers, including providing continuity through transition as part of Staying Put arrangements.
- In a sector where demand consistently outstrips supply, securing high quality residential care placements in appropriate locations and at an acceptable cost; and
- Managing a market of independent supported accommodation providers where there are low barriers to entry and no regulatory framework governing provision.

Dudley experiences all these challenges and is progressing a range of activities to mitigate the impact, as outlined in Section 4 of this strategy.

At a local level we still experience difficulties in specifically quantifying through data, the areas of sufficiency that provider the greatest challenge. For example, we know through our day-to-day experience that key challenges include:

- Emergency and crisis accommodation
- Placements for children and young people with significant mental health needs who are either stepping down from Tier 4 provision or do not meet the threshold.
- Placements for young people who are victims of or at risk from various forms of exploitation.
- Placements and support services for young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour.
- Placements for sibling groups.

We do not currently have access to robust data that accurately quantifies this need which would then enable us to take forward very specific targeted commissioning approaches. Activity is in progress to resolve these challenges.

In November 2020 Dudley Council Children's Services launched its new case management system. As a significant change programme, activity to embed the new system and establish full functionality is ongoing. However, in respect of sufficiency planning the new system offers significant opportunities to enhance the availability and quality of data required to plan and commission effectively against need.

Work is underway to build the reports required to more accurately capture and profile the needs of children beyond the high-level categorisation that has been used to develop this strategy. This will be supported by the development of a new West Midlands Placement Portal in 2022 that will have improved functionality in respect of capturing and profiling trends relating to demand for external placements.

Any subsequent refresh of this strategy will therefore contain more specific data however we will not wait until a refresh to act on this data but instead seek to utilise it in our planning and conversations with providers as soon as it is available.

4. Views of children and young people

Dudley Council Children's Services Directorate seeks the views of children and young people in a range of ways and is committed to securing meaningful engagement and undertaking co-production of services. Full detail of the approach is set out within our Participation Strategy however we have highlighted below a range of views provided by children and young people which relate to the experience of different types of care placements. These views will be taken into account and of paramount importance when planning and commissioning future provision.

How can we recruit the best foster carers?

- See how they cope in situations (the kids test)
- Proper background checks
- Meet them - we could interview them
- Nice house - get young people to visit or give guidance (what to have e.g. wi-fi / what to avoid)
- Experience of looking after children/young people
- Check their body language
- Make sure they can:
 - Deal with situations correctly
 - Offer a friendly environment
 - Listen to us
 - Are caring
 - Loyal
 - Show respect
 - Reliable
 - Trust us
 - Spend time with us

What makes a good foster carer?

- They back you up
- Fun!
- Listen to you
- Understanding
- Caring & compassionate /check you are okay
- When you are upset they support you
- Speak up for you
- Stable
- Food (healthy)
- Give positive encouragement
- Loving and respectful
- Not rude or abusive
- Loyal



What makes it difficult to be in foster care?

- Being away from family
- Bullying
- Feeling angry over what has happened
- Don't like the rules
- School/education lets you down
- Social workers - let you down
- Stigma around being in care
- Moving around a lot
- Some people don't understand different culture/religion
- Friendships are hard - difficult to keep / feel secretive as don't always tell people I'm in care . . . and don't.
- People who think they know all about being in care . . . and don't.
- People who don't understand disabilities

What are the best ways to make living with your foster carer a good experience?

- Be flexible to our needs e.g. if they have asthma think about allergies etc
- Treat us as individuals
- Treat us the same as their own children
- Take us on holidays - don't use respite over Christmas or to go on holiday without us
- Trust (both ways)
- Have our own room - let us decorate it how we want
- Have fun!
- Allow friends around / allow sleepovers (at home and at friends)
- Give us pocket money (not everyone gets what they should)
- No fake clothes
- Nice food
- Offer new opportunities and support us to do them
- Fair but firm (be reasonable)
- Work with us - co-operate
- Clean, tidy house (with a little mess)

What kind of support do foster carers need to do a good job?

Training:

- Emotional support and how to give it
- Communication including sign language and body language
- Religious/cultural awareness
- Relationships
- First aid
- Abandonment issues
- Health issues including mental health
- Support around food
- How to read emotions
- Understanding school/education system
- Psychology

More teams in emergencies to support when needed

Passes that we can use to go on lots of days out

A normal lifestyle like a kid at home not in care

A garden like a park with lots of swings and slides

I would like to have less restrictions



Residential care

A house pet like a dog or a cat

More takeaways

More pocket money

Exercise equipment

Lots of toys to play with

Help with practical skills and getting me ready for move on

Staff that are supportive and not in it for the money

A caravan somewhere that we could go to during holidays and weekends



Providing emotional support

Being honest with the match when existing people that may live in the accommodation

Staff do what they say within the time shared

Feeling safe and secure

Accommodation in a safe place

Support to access and remain in education, employment and/or training



Supported accommodation

What is important to you?

Staff that are a good communicator and supportive

Ask me what I want and help me plan for the future

"It's nice to have the help but if you have too much help it can make it harder to go independent cos they did all the stuff for you without any questions or any answers. They can kind of take over"

Somewhere that is clean with private space

Life skills training

5. Commissioning plan

Our response to the trends and areas of need highlighted with this strategy is outlined in the commissioning plan below:

Activity	Brief description	Timescales	Children's Services Lead	Commissioning Lead
Sufficiency Strategy	Complete and publish updated sufficiency strategy to reflect current position and guide sufficiency planning and commissioning activity for the next two years	August 2021	Andrea Stone	Laura Smith
Regional Framework Management	Operational management of regional residential, fostering and supported accommodation frameworks. New supported accommodation framework will go-live during 21/22.	Ongoing	Wendi Grizzle	Sian Hickman
Sub-Regional Residential Block Contract	Further scoping activity to confirm business case (or lack of) for participating in a sub-regional residential block contract	October 2021	Wendi Grizzle	Michael Robinson
DMBC Fostering Recruitment Strategy	Implementation of DMBC Fostering Recruitment Strategy with the aim of recruiting 20 carers a year for the next three years covering a range of different fostering tasks	Ongoing	Menna Davies	Laura Smith
Big Fostering Project	Continue to embed the Big Fostering Project as one of a series of options to support planned and successful step-down from residential care in accordance with the child/ young person's care plan	Ongoing	Wendi Grizzle	Michael Robinson/Shain Akhtar
16-25 Transitional Support Service	Tender for provision of accommodation-based and floating support for 16-25 year olds building on successful Alliance model with Housing & voluntary and community sector partners.	Contract Start Date Feb 2022	Wendi Grizzle	Michael Robinson/Shain Akhtar
Emergency Accommodation	Development of internal emergency accommodation provision. Scoping exercise with Black Country local authorities to identify potential opportunities for joint commissioning approaches to emergency/crisis accommodation.	January - March 2022 December 2021	Wendi Grizzle	Laura Smith/ Michael Robinson
Edge of Care	Review and reconfiguration of existing edge of care offer with an initial focus on adolescents moving on to a broader offer over time	Phased implementation of new model commencing October 2021	Andrea Stone	Laura Smith
Dudley Lighthouse Links	Providing commissioning support to implement the findings of the independent strategic review in respect of any service re-design and governance arrangements including management of joint commissioning with Dudley Integrated Health and Care NHS Trust. Current contract ends December 21	New contract in place January 22	Wendi Grizzle	Laura Smith/ Shain Akhtar

Activity	Brief description	Timescales	Children's Services Lead	Commissioning Lead
Lifelong Links	Bid to secure external funding to establish/ pilot/embed the Lifelong Links model as developed by Family Rights Group to create a range of benefits for children in care, including improved placement stability.	Bid submission 2022	Ver Foreshaw/ Emma Jones	Laura Smith/ Shain Akhtar
Short Breaks	To establish a new commissioning model for Short Breaks services in Dudley to replace historical contracts.	September 2022	Emma Matthews	Laura Smith/ Shain Akhtar
Regional Adoption Agency	Ongoing partnership work with the RAA to ensure a sufficient number of well-matched adoptive placements for all children that require them. DMBC to continue to act in the role of lead commissioner on behalf of all members.	Ongoing	Andrea Stone	Michael Robinson
Provider Engagement Programme	Develop and deliver an ongoing programme of engagement with providers - including a particular focus on in-borough residential care to maximise local placement sufficiency	Commence Autumn 2021 then ongoing	Wendi Grizzle	Laura Smith/ Michael Robinson
Risk Based Quality Assurance	Ongoing development of risk-based quality assurance approach to external placements including improved process/joint working between Children's Services and key partners e.g. Police.	Ongoing	Wendi Grizzle	Laura Smith/ Michael Robinson/ Joanne Basterfield



