



# **CHILDREN IN OUR CARE**

## **Sufficiency Strategy 2024 - 2026**



**BIRMINGHAM  
CHILDREN'S TRUST**



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## **Children in our Care Sufficiency Strategy 2024 - 2026**

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## Introduction

The Trust works in partnership with families, putting the welfare of children at the heart of our business by listening to their wishes and feelings and acting in their very best interests. For those children who cannot live with their birth parents or extended family, we are committed to being the best corporate parents we can be, being very aware of our duties under the Children Act to offer sufficient variety of suitable accommodation when our children in care need it.

In the spirit of our practice model Connections Count, we intend to further strengthen relationships with our private sector provider partners, to maximise capacity, variety, quality and value in the provision we commission.

This Strategy sets out how Birmingham Children's Trust (the Trust) will meet its sufficiency duty as laid out in Section 22G of the Children Act 1989. The purpose of the strategy is to:

- Set out what we know about the profile of our children in care and forecast future demand
- Detail our current offer
- Identify the emerging challenges
- Set out the strategic intentions for 2024 - 2026

Our sufficiency strategy is underpinned by the following key principles:-

- We deliver good quality, supportive care settings that meets the needs of children in Birmingham.
- We continue to build our local sufficiency so children and young people can maintain local links and relationships and access to education, health and social care services.
- Children are best placed living with their family and friends
- Where children cannot live with friends or family we want them to live with foster carers that are supported by the Trust
- We work in partnership with residential providers to achieve good outcomes for the children they care for.
- We always aim to achieve value for money.

## Progress and Impact of 2021 – 2023 Sufficiency Strategy

The sufficiency strategy 2021/2023 set out a clear set of commissioning intentions which focused on increasing the number of children in family-based care, delivering earlier intervention and prevention through early help and developing provision both in partnership with the market but also, internally. Considerable progress has been made in delivering against these intentions, the highlights of which are as follows -

- We have delivered and embedded a city-wide Early Help offer, which was judged to be Good by Ofsted in April 2023.
- Bridgelands residential home was delivered, is now well established and rated as Good.
- Our Regional Adoption Agency was delivered, is now well established and rated as Good with outstanding leadership and management.
- Through 23/24 we achieved a record 102 adoptions, more than any local authority in the country.
- We have significantly reduced incidents of unregulated/ unregistered care episodes which now stands at just 0.2% of the care population.

- The number of Kinship carers within the Trust has increased by 38% since September 2023. This means an additional 93 children are being supported with their family network than this time last year.
- Birmingham Fostering has recently bucked the national trend by increasing the number of new foster carers approved with 53 mainstream foster approvals expected in 2023/24
- We have increased the number of children living with Trust foster carers from 45%-55%.
- Capital investment has been secured to modernise the Trust's existing residential estate
- We completed over 28 market engagement meetings with Birmingham Providers with 30% of placements generated as a result.
- We have worked with 30+ supported accommodation providers to facilitate their registration process and build sufficiency.

Our priorities for 2024 - 2026 therefore reflect a balance between the ambition to continually innovate and develop our offer with the need to consolidate and embed what we have achieved already.

## **Our Current Offer**

### **Internal fostering (including Out of Hours)**

Birmingham Children's Trust Internal Fostering Service is registered as an Independent Foster Agency (IFA) since the transfer of Children's Services from the local authority on 1st April 2018. The service was rated Good in August 2021.

The Trust continues to provide a range of care experiences both short term, long term and in an emergency. We are committed to ensuring children have family-based care whether that be with extended family members under a Kinship arrangement or with mainstream foster carers.

We have in place a robust Fostering Recruitment and Retention Strategy to ensure we meet the priority areas for recruitment.

In March 2024, Fosterlink carried out a diagnostic review of the Trust's fostering recruitment processes. The Fosterlink Service project has been commissioned by the Department of Education in response to the 'Independent Review of Children's Social Care' (2022) and Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) markets study, 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' (2022), responding to the national shortage of suitable foster carers.

Key report findings:

- Birmingham Fostering has recently bucked the national trend by increasing the number of new foster carers approved with:
  - 17 new mainstream foster approvals in 2022/23
  - 53 mainstream foster approvals expected in 2023/24 (12 have panel dates before the end of March).
- Birmingham has a full-time qualified marketing and social media manager with a comprehensive website, recruitment, and marketing plan, making good use of google analytics and specialist web companies to keep Foster Birmingham near the top of search engines.

- The outward facing website has been completed to very a high standard and the approved foster carers portal, which will support recording, training and detailed information, is about to go live.
- Mainstream foster carers express a high degree of satisfaction with the service. They believe that Birmingham offers a competitive financial package and better support than competitors.
- Foster carers are deeply embedded in shaping the service with a paid Ambassador scheme and the Birmingham Foster Carer Association (BFCA) also delivering a wide range of support services

Birmingham fostering department have been asked to present to other local authorities by Foster Link due to their exemplary performance in mainstream fostering marketing, recruitment and retention.

**Current capacity as of September 2024 is as below:**

<b>Foster Care Type</b>	<b>No of Foster carers</b>	<b>Approved Places</b>
<b>Mainstream</b>	325	595
<b>EDT</b>	6	16
<b>Connected Person</b>	226	344
<b>Reg 24</b>	27	38
<b>Step Up</b>	9	13
<b>Foster to Adopt</b>	7	7
<b>Total</b>	600	1013

### **Internal Residential Children's Homes**

Birmingham Children's Trust has five internal children's homes; one providing specialist residential, two short breaks provision and one providing both residential and short breaks for disabled children. Further to this the Trust provides one children's home offering care to children who have emotional and behavioural difficulties and may have a diagnosis of ADHD or an ASC and an Education Health and Care Plan.

The short break homes support children and young people that have short breaks plans. A percentage of these children are aged 12 – 17 years and likely to require continuing care as they transition into adult services.

See the summary below for the service and capacity offered in this area:

Home	Beds	Age	Description	Rating
Camborne	12	5-18	A specialist home providing care for children with a range of learning disabilities or additional health and behavioural conditions. The home delivers support and interventions to develop skills and establish daily routines for possible re-integration into the family home, foster care or to live in the community. All children have an Education, Health and Care Plan.	Inadequate
Warwick House	7	5-18 years	A specialist home providing short breaks / respite provision for young people with a range of disabilities, autism, emotional needs, challenging behaviours, additional health conditions and communication needs. Short Breaks are provided under section 17 and 20 of the Children's Act. All children have an Education, Health and Care Plan.	Good
Edgewood	10	5-18 years	This home provides specialist long term care for children with a range of learning and physical disabilities as well as health needs. Short Breaks are provided under section 17 and 20 of the Children's Act. All children have an Education, Health and Care Plan.	Good
Charles House	7	5-17 years	A specialist home providing short breaks / respite provision for young people with a range of disabilities, autism, emotional needs, challenging behaviours, additional health conditions and communication needs. Short Breaks are provided under section 17 and 20 of the Children's Act. All children have an Education, Health and Care Plan.	Outstanding
Bridgelands	3	8 – 18 years	This home provides care medium to long term care for up to three children of either gender between 8 and 18 years of age who have emotional and behavioural difficulties and may have a diagnosis of ADHD or an ASC and an Education Health and Care Plan.	Good



## Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs).

The Trust recognises the need for a mixed market approach to foster care and relies on independent provision to ensure sufficiency of supply of good quality care and outcomes for children and young people, while achieving value for money. The usage of IFA placements fluctuates between 45% and 55% of the Trust's overall need, as below.

	Apr-24	May-24	Jun-24
	07/05/2024	29/05/2024	02/07/2024
Total Foster Care	1514	1511	1512
Agency Foster Care	681	668	681
BCT Foster Care	833	843	831

Birmingham is part of the West Midlands Regional Fostering Framework used by 14 local authorities / Trusts in the West Midlands. The framework uses a tiered approach to placements and aims to reduce the use of spot purchased placements ensuring these are only used where the specific needs of the children are so complex that they require a bespoke service rather than simply due to a lack of local provider responsiveness.

The current framework includes arrangements for 'step down placements' to transition children out of residential care or to avoid entry to residential care for those children that can be fostered with enhanced packages of care and support

There are 55 IFA's (excluding local Trusts) in the West Midlands. Of those 42 IFA's - 32 are on the West Midlands framework and 10 are considered spot purchase. Framework IFAS have a total capacity of 4433 registered placements and the 10 spot purchase IFAS have a total capacity of 613 placements. Overall, this means access to total capacity of 5046 foster placements and via the framework, we have access to around 87.5% of those placements.

## Supported Accommodation -

Supported Accommodation is used for children in care aged 16-17 years who are ready for semi-independent living and to prepare them for leaving care. The Trust is part of a regional framework, giving access to providers who have a range of properties across the West Midlands, and some nationally.

There are 232 settings in the Birmingham area offering a total of 765 beds, and 909 settings in the West Midlands area offering a total number of 2265 beds.

Sufficiency of Supported Accommodation is in good supply and there is a steady flow of new entrants to the market. Market engagement continues regularly in order to shape the market to provide the breadth of support type and intensity that we need, to be able to move children within the same provision from higher support needs to lower as they build their independent living skills.

Since the Supported Accommodation Regulations commenced in Autumn 2023, the Trust has increased its scrutiny of this type of provision and is working with providers to improve quality and assure ourselves of safety and compliance. Capacity is available to respond supportively to providers where concerns are raised. There is an ongoing visiting schedule commenced and regular engagement with providers to support their registration and first visits and inspections.

## Short Breaks

Since 2011, local authorities have had a duty to provide Short Breaks. These are family based support services for disabled children and their families to help them manage pressures and prevent crisis. This contributes to sufficiency of accommodation for looked after children overall by aiming to keep children at home with their families where possible and avoid admission to care.

Short breaks include overnight residential stays in our internal Disabled Children's Homes, weekend clubs, holiday schemes, family based or contract care (fostering short breaks) and short breaks offered within the home, leisure and play services and home-based services such as sitting and befriending. The Trust's Short Breaks Statement can be found at: [Interim Short Breaks Statement 2023-2024 \(April 2024\) | Birmingham Children's Trust \(birminghamchildrenstrust.co.uk\)](https://www.birminghamchildrenstrust.co.uk/interim-short-breaks-statement-2023-2024-april-2024)

Intensive Family Support is a city-wide specialist service for disabled children and their families referred by Disabled Children's Social Care where a range of emotional, social and behavioural difficulties, compounded by the stress of caring for one or more disabled children is impacting on positive family functioning

The Trust currently commissions annual capacity for around 3000 children and young people to take advantage of short breaks across the city.

## Independent Residential Children's Homes

Placements for residential children's homes are primarily made through the Regional Residential Flexible Contracting Arrangement (FCA).

The FCA Framework is a pseudo-Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) which was established in December 2018. The contract runs until December 2024 and is currently being recommissioned. It is the main mechanism for commissioning residential care placements across the West Midlands region and is used by 14 Local authorities/ Trusts.

The key principles of the FCA are

- Local provision for local children – maintaining links with families, where safe to do so, and supporting re-unification or transition to planned long term placements
- Supporting local authorities to reclaim capacity within their area
- Partnership working – developing relationships with local partners, providers and support services
- Placement matching and stability by improved targeting of referrals
- Flexible provision with the ability to respond to specialist need – emergency, short term, long term, permanent, sibling, solo, short breaks
- Encouraging innovation and creative solutions to managing children with complex needs
- Market development and regular engagement with providers to ensure they are aware of needs and gaps in provision
- Framework is continually open and providers can join at any time
- Annual review of fees
- Enables mini-tenders and block commissioning by local authorities / Trusts when required

The FCA aims to secure sufficient accommodation against four categories with staff who have expertise to manage the needs of children who are victim of abuse and/or neglect, child sexual



exploitation, mental health needs, eating disorders, self-harm, alcohol/substance misuse, criminal behaviour and criminal exploitation, violent/aggressive behaviours, sexualised behaviours, fire setting, Disabilities/ Special Educational Needs.

- **Category One** – Provision of Placements in Residential Children's Homes for Children with Emotional and/or Behavioural Difficulties (EBD)
- **Category Two** – Provision of Placements in Residential Children's Homes for Children with who have a Learning Disability and/or Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC) with Challenging Behaviour
- **Category Three** – Provision of Placements in Residential Children's Homes for Children with Complex Health Needs and/or Physical Disabilities
- **Category Four** – Provision of Placements in Residential Children's Homes for Children with Specialist Mental Health Conditions

The majority of beds are available within Category 1, Emotional and/or Behavioural Difficulties and the fewest beds are available in Category 3, Complex Health Needs and/or Physical Disabilities.

There are currently 120 providers on the Regional Framework for Residential Care (FCA Framework) providing access to 517 homes and a total of 2191 beds.

Within Birmingham there are 82 residential homes providing access to 281 beds. Since 2021, 27 new homes have opened in Birmingham, with 7 in the 12 months June 2023 to June 2024.

Ongoing market engagement is active with all new providers who make contact to seek advice on planning and registration, with a view to building relationships and utilising their capacity once provision is opened. Responsive QA visits from various intelligence sources also enable us to provide support and remedial advice to address concerns and ensure quality care is offered and our children are safe.

### **Supported Lodgings**

St Basils, our partner agency supporting homeless young people and care leavers in the city, has a small pool of approved and regulated Supported Lodgings host providers for 16+ young people. The supported lodgings hosts, together with the independent living skills coach work with the young person to support their journey towards independence. This accommodation option has recently been spotlighted across Trust staff, and initial discussions commenced about BCT recruitment of its own resource of this type.

### **Crisis and Emergency Options**

From time to time the need arises to make short term or tailor-made arrangements for children who are homeless, have a disruption in their existing care arrangements or where their complex needs mean we cannot source foster care or residential to meet their needs. Void residential stock is sourced and trusted peripatetic staff teams are commissioned to support these children whilst arrangements are made for their ongoing care. This group of children are subject to close monitoring from Trust Leadership Team, given our ambition to ensure all children are in regulated arrangements at all times.

## What we know about our Children in Care

### Local Population

According to the 2021 census (ONS [Birmingham population change, Census 2021 – ONS](#)) the Birmingham population increased by 6.7%, from around 1,073,000 in 2011 to 1,144,900 in 2021. At 6.7%, Birmingham's population increase is slightly higher than the increase for the West Midlands (6.2%).

In the same timeframe, there has been an increase of 4.1% in children aged under 15 years, with the most rapid growth amongst those aged 10-14. This is lower than Eng average of 5%, but Birmingham has the highest percentage (22%) composition of children under 15 in its population compared to the other UK core cities (source [Mid-2022 estimate - Birmingham City Council](#)).

### Demographics

Of the 2283 children in care as at 31 March 2024, 1294 (57% of overall children in care population) were boys and 989 (43% of overall children in care population) girls. In every age bracket, besides the 5–9-year-olds, there are more boys in our care than girls.

The predominant age of our current children in care population is 10 – 14 years old. This correlates with the ONS population data for Birmingham, which shows the most rapid population growth for children in this age group. This presents sufficiency challenges in respect to ensuring we have sufficient variety and skilled foster carers who are able to care for adolescent children.

Age Group (combined boys and girls)	Numbers of children	% of overall children in care population of 2283 as at 31 March 2024
<b>Under 1</b>	96	4
<b>1- 4</b>	388	17
<b>5 - 9</b>	429	19
<b>10 – 15</b>	795	35
<b>16 - 17</b>	575	25

(Figure 4.4 Looked after children by age, BCT data as at 31 March 2024)

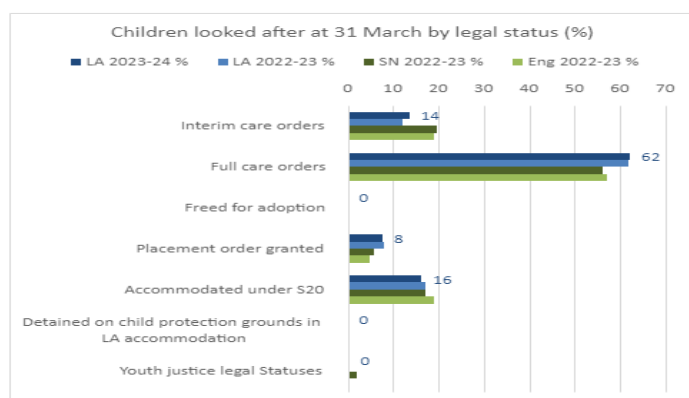
As at March 2024, the breakdown of the Trus's children in care population by ethnic origin was predominantly composed of children from White British background (figure 4.5).

Ethnicity group	Number of children	% of total children in care population at March 2024
<b>White British</b>	1077	47%
<b>Mixed</b>	507	22%
<b>Asian / Asian British</b>	279	12%
<b>Black / Black British</b>	280	13%
<b>Other ethnic groups</b>	140	6%
<b>Total</b>	2283	100

(Figure 4.5 Children in care ethnicity analysis of children in care end 2023 -2024 – Source 903 BCT LA Data)

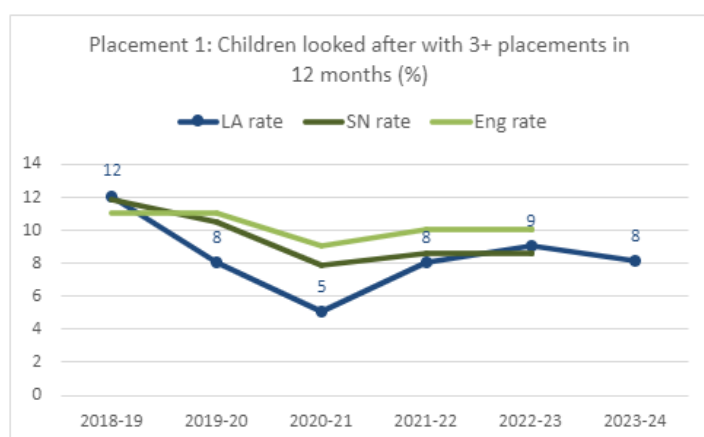
As corporate parents we would always ensure foster carers and other care providers can meet the cultural needs of our children. It is of note that as of June 2024, 59% of our internal foster carer population is White British, and so recruitment campaigns are attempting to diversify this to ensure we reflect the diversity within our wider city and looked after children population.

The majority of our looked after children cohort as at end of 2023-2024 were subject to full care orders (figure 4.5). This therefore suggests a need for more long-term accommodation options for this group, impacting on sufficiency planning.

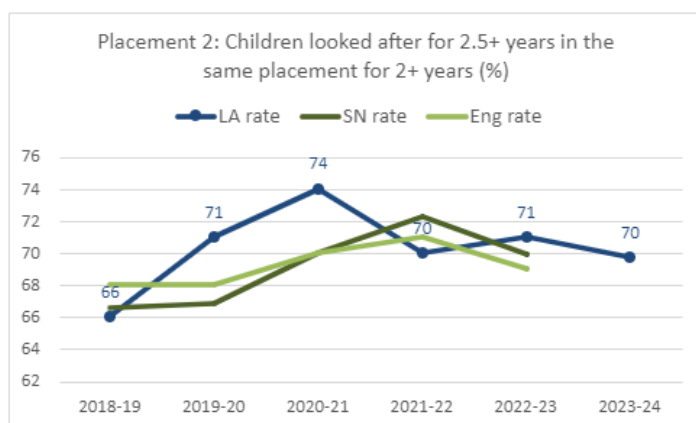


(Figure 4.6 Legal Status of Looked After Children – Source 903 BCT LA Data)

Placement stability correlates positively not only with positive outcomes for children in our care (health, education etc.) but also with sufficiency as children are moving around less within our system which reduced internal demand. Positively, the Trust appears to fare favourably compared to the England average and Statistical Neighbours in respect of children having multiple moves each year (figure 4.6), and on par with statistical neighbours and England average for general placement stability (figure 4.7) The intended practice focus on care planning and developmental work for operational staff can only strengthen this position.

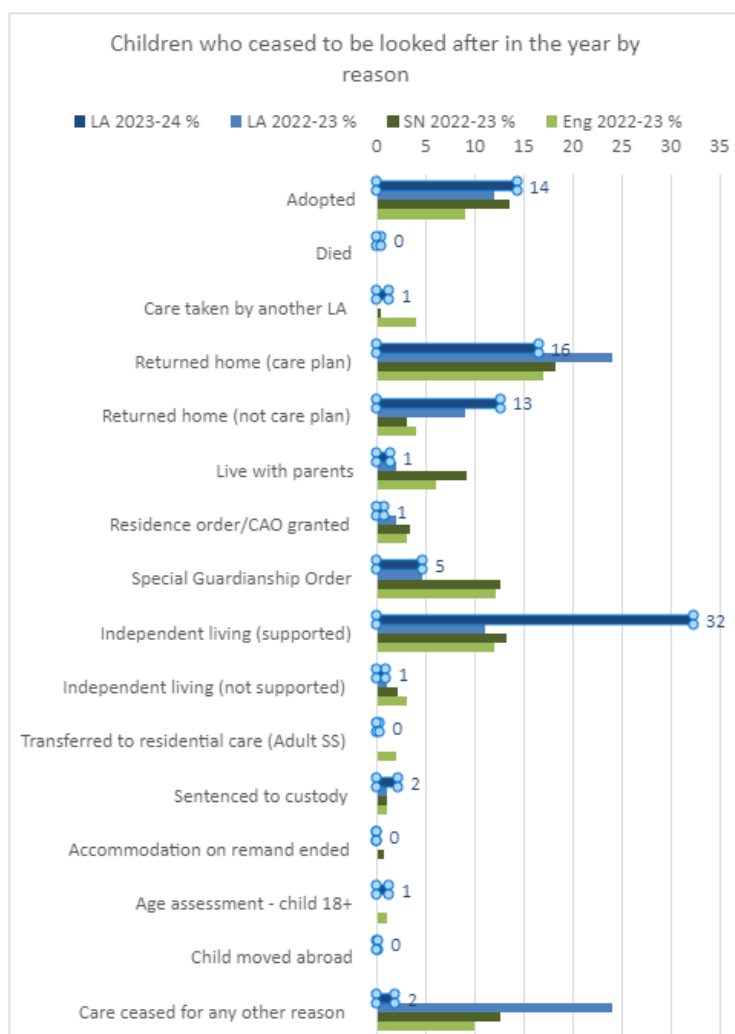


(Figure 4.7 Looked after children with more than 3 placements in 12 months as at end 2023 - 2024 – Source 903 BCT LA Data)

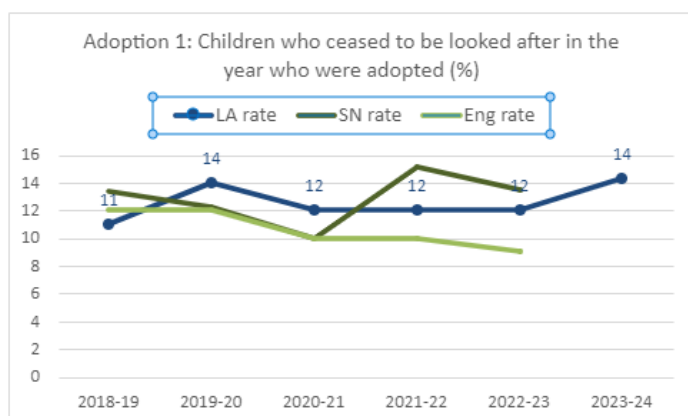


(Figure 4.8 Looked after children over 2.5 years in care in same placement for more than 2 years – Source 903 BCT LA Data)

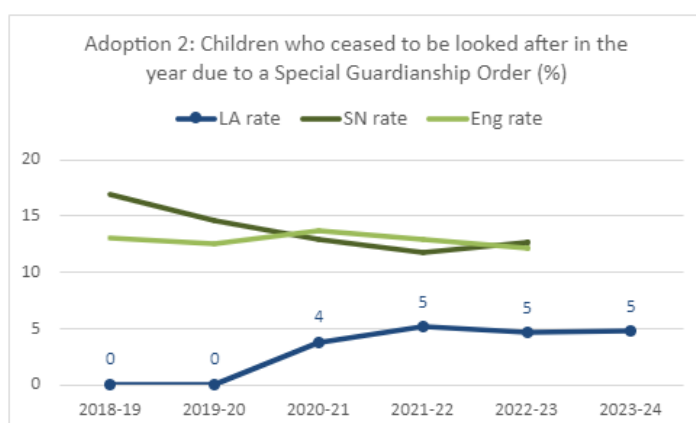
The below information (see figures 4.9, 4.10, 4.11) highlights that the majority of children leave care in Birmingham due to adoption, returning home, or moving to independent living. Generally, patterns appear in keeping to England averages and statistical neighbours. Notably care exits to Special Guardianship Birmingham rates are below both Statistical Neighbour and England average rates. This can be attributed to local custom and practice within Birmingham's judiciary but focus is required in this area to improve these rates.



(Figure 4.9 Reasons for children ceasing to be looked after in 2023 - 2024 – Source 903 BCT LA Data)

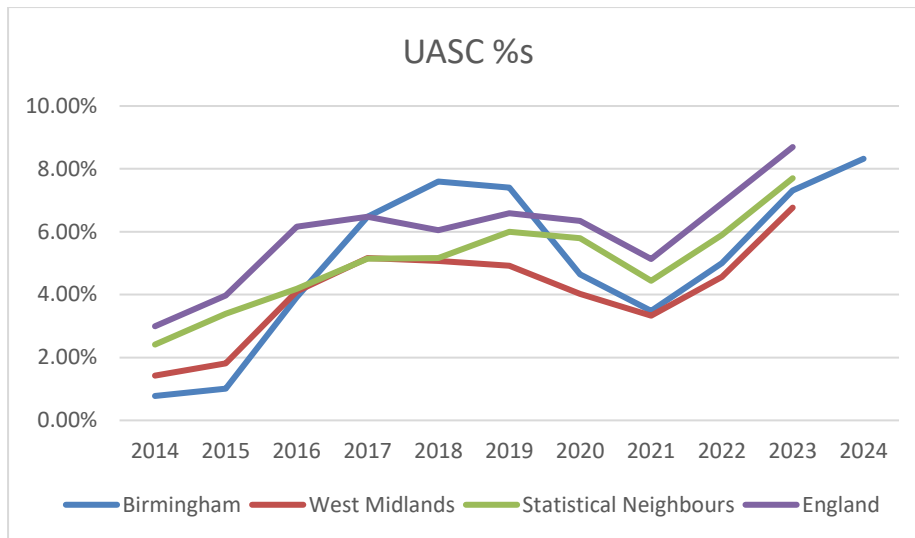


(Figure 4.10 Children adopted in 2023 - 2024 – Source 903 BCT LA Data)



(Figure 4.11 Children exiting care to Special Guardianship 2023 - 2024 – Source 903 BCT LA Data)

Birmingham is a super diverse city and offers children and young people from diverse communities including those who have experienced persecution a sense of belonging and safety. Given the opportunities, facilities and cultural connections, it is unsurprising that Birmingham's Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children population appears to be increasing in line with England average, and at a faster rate than statistical neighbours as below (figure 4.12). This cohort often arrive and present at an older age and account for the growing ageing care population. Generally, there is no difficulty in securing appropriate foster carer provision for this cohort if they are under 16 at admission. For the 16-17 year olds typically supported accommodation is sourced where they can live alongside peers with similar and shared experiences, develop networks and the skills to independent living. Given the pattern indicative of continued increase, BCT is already engaging with supported accommodation providers who have proven track record in supporting this group of young people and can offer growth in best value supported accommodation to meet demand.



(Figure 4.12 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children Population as at year end 2024 – Source 903 BCT LA Data)

## Financial Information

Over the past 4 years expenditure on placements for looked after children has consistently increased and exceeded budget (Figure 5.1 below). This overspend is attributable to the increased use of independent residential, foster care and high-cost supported accommodation for children requiring more intensive or longer term support, as is evident in expenditure analysis 2023-2024 (Figure 5.2). Despite this increase, we continue to maintain this inflation at a lower rate than all comparators. This can be attributed to the measures we have taken to collaborate with the provider market, persistent commissioning activity and the continues progress of delivering internal fostering and residential sufficiency.

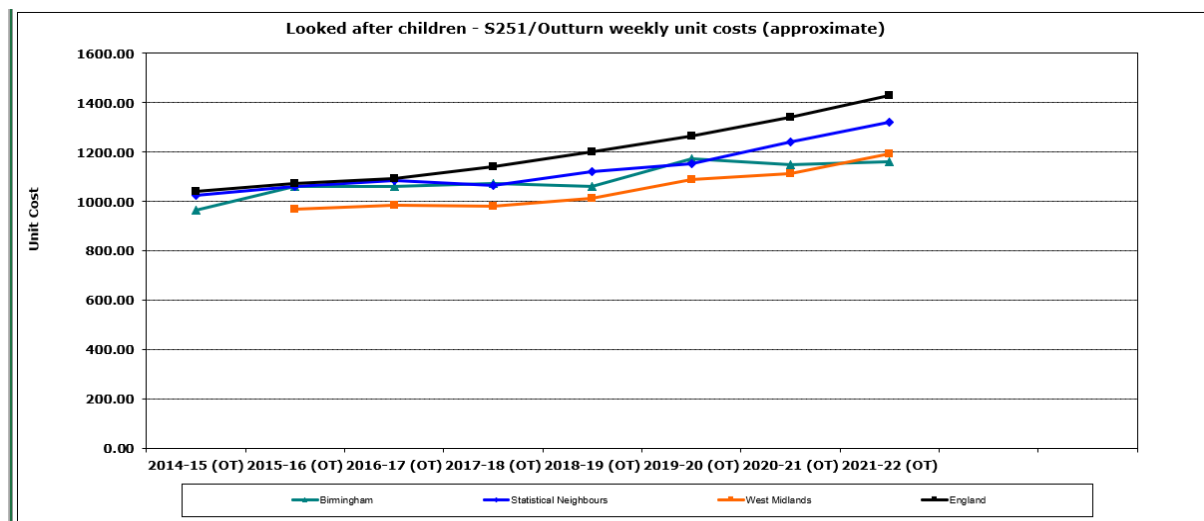


Figure 5.1 Placement outturn 2022-2023

Analysis by provision type as above highlights the majority of BCT spend on external provision for children is on residential care, despite this group of children only making up around 10% of the looked after children cohort remaining steady for the majority of 2023-24.

The national picture of the rising cost of care is well documented [[Children's social care market study final report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/903000/Childrens_social_care_market_study_final_report_-_GOV.UK_(www.gov.uk).pdf)], and the picture in Birmingham follows this



pattern, as demonstrated in figure 5.3 below. There has been substantial increase in recent years of unit costs. This, combined with rising numbers of children in care, creates pressures in being able to deliver sufficiency and variety within a limited budget envelope

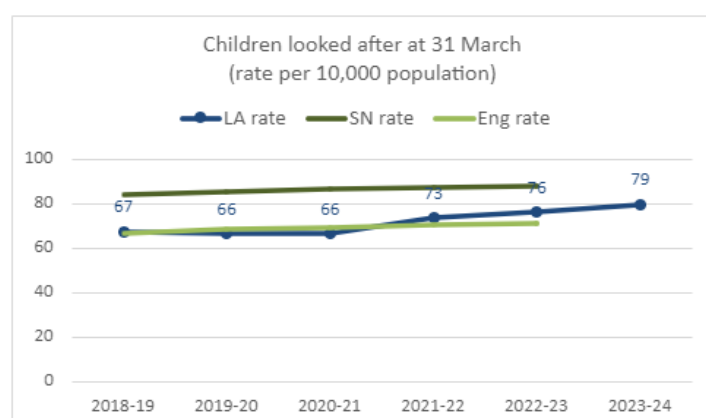
Provision Type	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
<b>Residential</b>	£4,211	£4,836	£5,488
<b>External Fostering</b>	£757	£803	£845
<b>Supported Accommodation</b>	£1,567	£2,141	£1,586
<b>Secure welfare</b>	£9,949	£8,647	£19,816
<b>Average cost of Top 10 highest cost BCT placements</b>	£11,002	£14,154	£16,661

Figure 5.3 – Unit cost (weekly) by accommodation type, illustrated in £ / week costs

While there are national drivers that are beyond the scope of our influence, we do recognise that good commissioning activity can mitigate this inflation. We have already demonstrated this in comparison to other authority's placement expenditure across the country and our strategy needs to build on this progress. We therefore need to deliver both internal fostering and residential sufficiency alongside continued innovation with the provider market to deliver local solutions that achieve high quality provision at best value.

## Rates of Looked After Children

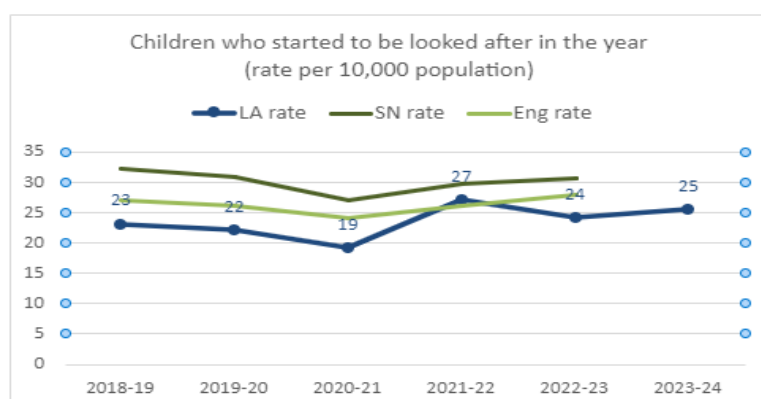
Current Birmingham Children in Care rates as of April 2024 are 79 children per 10k children population. This is an increase to previous periods and remains above England average rates, but below rates of other West Midlands Authorities and Statistical Neighbours (Figure 4.1).



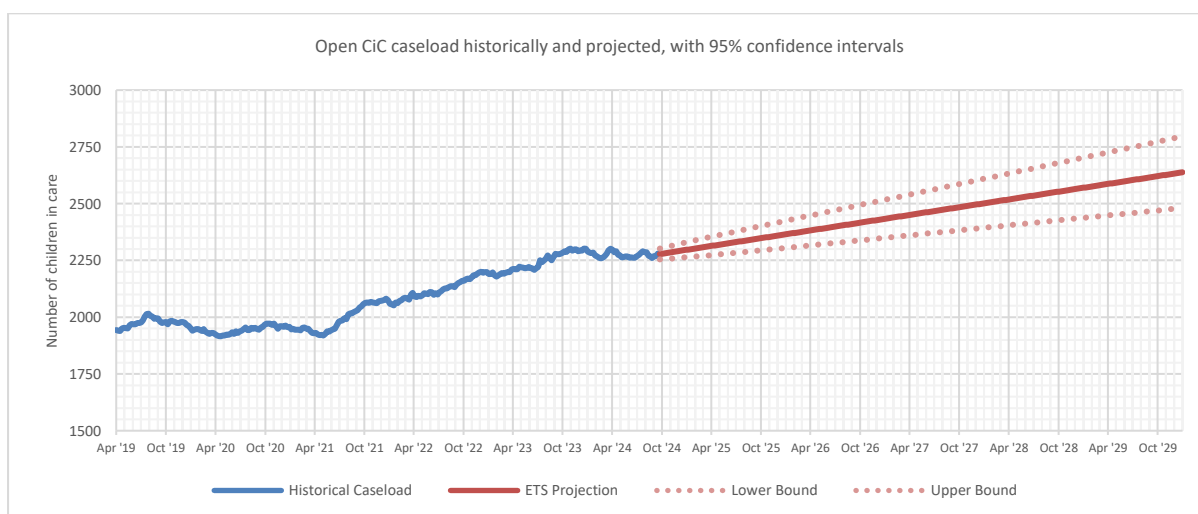
(Figure 4.1 – CIC rate per 10,000 5 year trend – 2023/24 903 BCT LA Data)

When we look closer at the rate of children per 100,000 who start to be looked after in Birmingham, the trajectory also appears upwards, which will naturally place pressure on sufficiency as the vacancies available will be utilised more quickly if there are more children

requiring care. In 2023 – 2024 there were 735 children starting to be looked after in Birmingham, and 658 ceasing to be looked after, which is a net increase of 77. This, however, is under the Statistical Neighbour and England Average (figure 4.2).



There are numerous factors including external forces which will influence Birmingham's future children in care population. To build clarity and to support the development of a high-quality and robust plan, the Trust has undergone a rigorous set of analysis to look at historical data and use this to build a forecast for the children in care caseload over the coming years. Based on historical growth, we are anticipating a 2-5% year-on-year linear growth in the Children in Care caseload (Figure. 4.3). By April 29 we can anticipate a looked after population of circa 2518 (Figure 4.4).



(Figure 4.3 – Looked After child population - Source 903 BCT LA Data)

Date	Lower bound	Forecast (mid-case)	Upper bound
April 25	2273	2314	2354
April 26	2316	2382	2447
April 27	2360	2450	2539
April 28	2404	2518	2631
April 29	2448	2586	2724

(Figure 4.4 – Looked After child population projections – Source Newton Europe August 24)

## Unregulated care

Over the last three years sufficiency has become an increasing challenge both locally and nationally. Reasons for this include: -

- A post-pandemic increase in demand, as witnessed nationally.
- Reforms to unregulated care driving greater demand for registered children's homes.
- High number of beds suspended/ restricted.
- Sufficiency challenges in relation to tier 4 provision.
- Availability of secure settings.
- 90%+ increase in the number of UASCs in the last 12 months.
- A 15% increase in the number of children from other local authorities placed in Birmingham.

With the onset of these more acute challenges the incidents of children being placed in unregistered settings has historically been high. At the time of the last inspection they averaged 15+. Through skilful market management and by strengthening relationships with providers we have reduced and sustained limited use of these arrangements (Figure 4.13) and remain proactive in minimising both use and duration. A fortnightly Directors' assurance meeting continues to scrutinize the individual circumstances of each child to ensure focus and motivation in supporting children to move to legal arrangements.

For those young people in unregistered settings we have a comprehensive quality assurance arrangement in place to ensure provision is safe and meeting children's needs.

To achieve our ambition of reducing unregulated use to zero we will need to develop specialised and more secure care for the most vulnerable, that is, provision that delivers beyond the scope of mainstream residential.

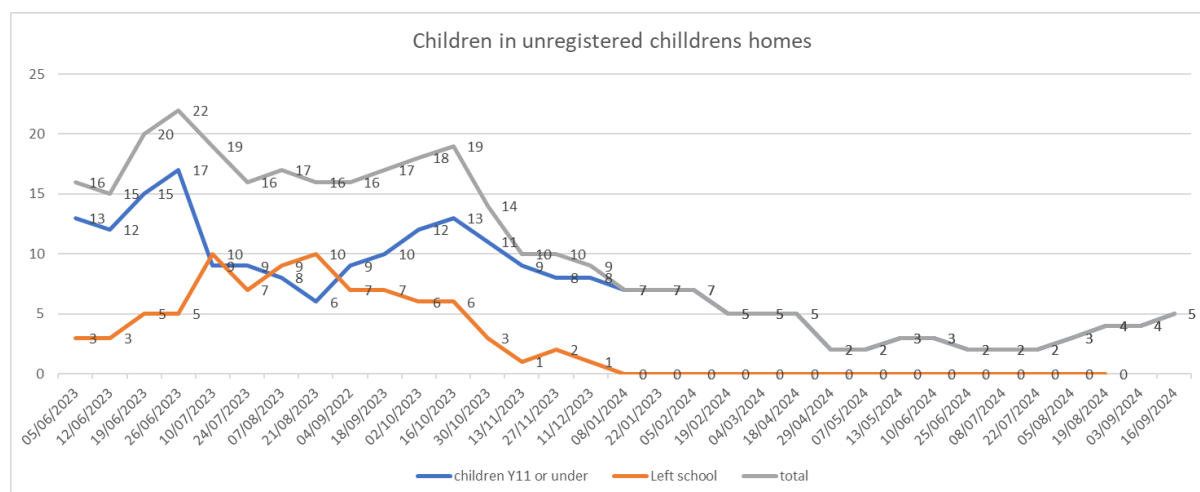


Figure 4.12 3 Children living in unregulated settings – locally produced data BCT Sept 2024

### Key Messages

- The number of children in care continues to rise and our sufficiency requirements are forecasted on the basis of this continued increase.
- We need to better diversify the ethnicities of foster carers to better represent the cultural diversity across the city and our population of children in care.

- The stability of children in our care compares favourably to national comparators and we will continue working to maintain and improve this.
- Children leaving care on Special Guardianship orders are low and we will need to work with the courts to improve local performance.
- We have had over 90% increase in unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children and while we continue to achieve good outcomes, services will need to be equipped with the capacity to maintain this performance.
- We have sustained our limited use of unregulated care and will continue to maintain our oversight and QA to sustain the improving trend.
- The cost of care continues to increase and we will need to continue growing our internal supply of fostering and residential provision alongside more innovative approaches to market collaboration.

## Strategic Intentions

We have a comprehensive understanding of our children in care and can summarise the key challenges as follows: -

- With the increasing care population and the greater proportion of these children of a fostering age, increasing our internal fostering capacity remains a priority.
- While children living in unregulated settings has significantly reduced, we aim for zero. We recognise that the challenges associated with insufficient secure provision and the need to develop jointly commissioned care solutions for complex children will all need to be overcome to achieve this.
- Developing relationships with residential providers and building greater levels of confidence will increase our access to the best and most cost-effective provision. Our challenge will be to ensure that our planning and preparation of placements are lean, efficient and in support of the providers requirements.
- Local custom and practice of the judiciary service continues to favour care orders before SGO's and we will need to influence less risk averse practices in order to drive SGO discharges.
- To address the challenge of rising care numbers we will need to collaborate as a partnership to achieve a systems shift towards earlier intervention and prevention.
- The cost of care is rising and we will need to develop more innovative ways to engage and influence the market to mitigate national inflationary drivers.

In light of these challenges, our focus for the 24/26 strategy is as follows:-

**Improve the commissioning framework arrangements to ensure effective response to sufficiency challenges and strive for high quality care for our children.**

The Trust recognises that there is a necessity to work with local, regional and national providers to secure the right accommodation type for all of our children, as demand outstrips our own supply. A good range and supply of accommodation and homes for children is needed, with the costs for these managed transparently. A primary route to achieve is through the West Midlands Regional Framework (WMRF), utilised for external fostering, residential and

supported accommodation, led by the West Midland Regional Commissioning Hub. Framework pricing and collective regional approach ensures the consistency and transparency we require in a challenging market. Internal Funding Review panels also consider all commissioned arrangements including scrutiny on those with additional packages.

The Trust will aim to provide placements to children and young people in Birmingham and its local area (within 20 miles) to ensure they are not isolated from their friends and family and have access to services and networks to improve their outcomes.

In the last year, the Trust has embedded its Practice Model of 'Connections Count'. Relationships are at the heart of this model. There is a desire to improve communication, visibility and relationships with local providers to maximise chances of placing local children within local placements. Through better relationships with providers and improved communication, the Trust aims to reduce its reliance on spot purchased provision, achieve an increase in local offers and best value.

There is a refreshed focus on service quality of commissioned provisions, with re-alignment of placement commissioning functions creating additional capacity for focus on quality. The ethos is that placement quality is everyone's business, and social work teams are actively encouraged to share feedback and concerns around provision quality. This feeds into an evolving schedule of quality assurance engagement and visits with providers.

#### **Key Actions**

- To work in close partnership with local providers to influence re-shape the market and increase the availability of all placement types for Birmingham children at the point of need.
- Proactive follow up, support and engagement with providers regarding planning applications for residential provision to ensure best chance of utilising occupancy when available.
- To develop and embed robust Quality Assurance Framework for externally commissioned provision to include pro-active site visits to providers to assess quality of offer and troubleshoot concerns. The desired impact is to drive up quality for our children and young people and build relationships with providers.
- To engage with the local and regional IFA market to improve relationships and throughput plan for children requiring moves. To aspire to local events including matching days. In turn this to result in reduction of number of residential placements.

**End to end review of the placements process to ensure we have the right skills, capacity and processes to more efficiently and effectively secure better provision and build greater levels of confidence with providers.**

As part of Trust 2025, the Trust is currently undergoing an extensive diagnostic of the commissioning and placements process to inform a design and implementation of new ways of working that ensure we are achieving the right, high-quality placements for our children.

This end to end review will include:

- Working with colleagues from the social working and placement teams to map the tools, processes, data, and systems involved from the initial placement of a child entering care, to the point of placement.
- Design of a commissioning and placements dashboard, answering key performance questions for the placements team
- Creation of clear benchmarking intelligence that can be used during provider negotiations. This will include benchmarks from previous placements with different levels of care need, alongside bottom-up benchmarks that will illustrate how much a placement 'should-cost'
- Live intelligence on our providers, so we can better understand pressure points and areas of leverage, whilst also improving utilisation and relationships with key providers.
- Set up of governance and improvement cycles along the placement process to drive a culture of data-informed decision making where innovation and change are encouraged.
- Build up an understanding of our market, future demand predictions, provider landscape to ensure we have the right availability of placements and are strategically managing the market.

### **Key Actions**

- Undertake end to end review and carry out required changes to build the required capacity, expertise and renewed processes.

## **Delivering more effective early intervention and prevention to support children and families**

We are proud of the progress made in the delivery of early help across the city and the demonstrable impact this has had. Our ambition now is to build on this offer to develop, in partnership with community health and mental health provider collaborative, a locally based integrated model of care that will make best use of our collective resources to support children and families earlier and more effectively. The "Trust 2025" programme will define the Trust's future operating model to continue improving outcomes and experiences for children, young people and families.

Trust 2025 responds to the national reforms to Children's Social Care services placing Birmingham amongst those LAs leading the sector through aspects of this reform. The work is also at the leading edge of developing locally placed based partnerships to integrate services for vulnerable children as a means to providing the most effective and efficient support to them.

The programme is currently in the detailed, design and testing phase, where new ways of working are being developed & tested with the input of multi-disciplinary teams, partners, children, young people and families.

### **Key Actions**

- Redesigning the ways of working across Early Help and Child in Need caseloads to support CYP&F to have timely, targeted & supported interventions that reduce escalations and enables a seamless experience. Including how to best utilise practitioners with an alternative qualification to social work leading the work with children/families on a CIN plan.



- Redesigning how children under a Child Protection Plan are supported, including how to create a multi-disciplinary safeguarding hub to get the right specialist support to work with children/families on a child protection plan and redesign associated processes to be more streamlined and family orientated way.
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- Explore how the partnership creates a shared digital single view of the child to provide quality & consistency of decision making & planning
- Redesigning how children in care are supported such that more children successfully exit care to an alternative setting and that those that remain in care have stable placements that match/meet their needs

### **Strengthening needs-led care planning**

The Trust seeks to be a learning organisation and to work from a relationship-based perspective. It is recognised across the system that there are opportunities for learning, development and strengthening care planning. This would potentially in turn increase the numbers of children being able to return home, access family-based settings (foster care and other family-based permanence if not returning to family), ensure children are living in settings aligned to their needs, and have effective transition plans for when they leave care. Overall, this would contribute to placement stability and positive outcomes for those individual children, thus improving the sufficiency picture more generally.

#### **Key actions:**

- Care and Pathway planning learning and training to be planned and rolled out across the social work system;
- Continued use of the BERRI approach and psychology support to assess whether a child's needs could be met in fostering and what support to provide within the professional network to address any barriers to fostering;
- Continued focus on the cohort of children aged 12 and under who are living in residential care to seek to maximise efforts to achieve family based care;
- Further embedding of Coming into Care panels and Funding panels as a conduit for signposting and monitoring progression of care plans to avoid drift and delay and maximise opportunity for family based care options (return home or otherwise).

### **4.1 Strengthening and Increasing our in-house Fostering Service.**

It is the ambition of the Trust as Corporate Parents, that where children need to remain in our care, we maximise the number who can live locally with our in-house Foster Birmingham foster carers. The composition, background, experience and skillset of this valuable group needs to be diverse to match the diverse population and ensure we have a variety of foster carers from a variety of backgrounds to meet the differing needs of our children in care. The

Trust believes family-based care should be an option where feasible for all of our looked after children. We intend to focus recruitment on activity on gaps in foster carers able to care for children existing residential care, who are on remand or have more complex needs.

**Key actions**

- To achieve overall year end net gain of 10 fostering households;
- To increase overall occupancy by 40 children in placement (10 per quarter);
- To achieve a minimum of 6 children stepping down from residential care into In-house fostering per year;
- To achieve 10 IFA carers transferring from IFA's per year;
- To recruit 3 new Parent and Child foster placements;
- To develop a culture across the Trust and council – 'Fostering Recruitment is everyone business'.
- To develop and strength are partnership within the communities, with partners, business and councillors to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

**Improved joint commissioning and collaboration with partners to deliver better provision for children with complex needs.**

It is recognised that there are a small number of young people that present with high levels of risk within the context of trauma and poor mental health. This cohort rarely assess as meeting the threshold for inpatient care but challenge the social care system in meeting their needs and keeping them safe. These young people arise infrequently but when they do they expose our system deficits and come at great cost.

The Trust is leading strategic scoping and planning across the partnership to strengthen well-being and mental health provision for children in care and is committed to collaboratively developing a model that works to support this group and prevent or prepare better for the crisis – averting the need for admission to Tier 4 beds or residential care.

The established Birmingham Complex Care Panel considers all children who have significant health or health needs which may require specialist accommodation provision such as residential school or alternative combined education, health and care provision commissioned outside of the Trust's accommodation placement service. There is scope for processes to be streamlined and improved to reduce delays for children requiring such provision, and who may whilst waiting be living in alternative unsuitable provision.

Where specialist health, education, secure or other regulated settings are not suitable or have been explored for children with particularly complex or challenging situations and are not available or cannot meet specific need, in rare circumstances the Trust may need to commission bespoke arrangements including care teams or crisis provision. The Trust is continually assessing options via the private market to compile such packages when needed.

Within this context there continues to be a national shortage of secure care, which services to exacerbate tensions locally in sourcing more secure and specialised services for our most complex and vulnerable young people.

#### **Key Actions**

- Delivery of the Birmingham Secure Facility.
- Develop proposals for the development of public/ private partnership model to secure exclusive provision for complex children and young people.
- Accelerate our joint commissioning activity future improvement to deliver care and support solutions for children with mental health and complex needs.
- Joint review of Birmingham's Complex Care Panel to establish more effective means of securing tripartite funded packages of care.
- Explore feasibility of using internal accommodation stock for crisis provision when required and build relationships with care staff team providers to call upon when infrequently required.

#### **Ensure that children can achieve permanence through adoption and special guardianship where appropriate.**

Adoption and Special Guardianship are two key routes for children to achieve permanence when they cannot remain with or return to their birth parents. Timely adoption is also a key factor influencing sufficiency within fostering, as children most often live with their foster carers prior to moving to their adoptive families.

Adopt Birmingham was set up as a Regional Adoption Agency in 2022 in conjunction with Family Society as the Voluntary Adoption Agency Partner. Children placed for adoption have steadily improved year on year.

Special Guardianship is an alternative route to permanence for children in the looked after system. The Trust seeks to maximise the exits from care via this route, which also fosters a sense of family-based care away from birth parents often with extended family and creates conditions for positive outcomes for the child. Our rates of exit from care via this route in Birmingham are currently below England averages.

#### **Key actions**

- To ensure the Regional Adoption Agency is able to meet the needs of children in need of adoption in Birmingham and to continue / maintain the increase in adoption rates year on year.
- To maximise opportunities for exit from care via Special Guardianship through improved case management, care planning and Special Guardian support.

#### **Supporting our young people to independence, and as care leavers through a quality offer that meets need and prepares them effectively.**

If desired improvements are made in care planning for children, naturally this will equate to smoother transitions to independence for our 16-17 year olds as they approach independence. Pathway needs assessments will be timely, pathway plans will be clearer and therefore this group of young people should be able to live in settings where when their independence levels increase, the support they receive gradually decreases. This would avoid the 'cliff-edge' sudden decline of support some care leavers have previously reported they experienced. As already mentioned, the focus and drive in the coming period will be to strengthen relationships with local and regional providers. St Basils, our local voluntary sector partner and host of the Youth Accommodation Hub, offers Supported Lodgings Hosts which are at present under-utilised for young people aged 16-17. The supported accommodation market currently in Birmingham is saturated with Category 5 (intensive support) offer provision, which is positive as young people may move from residential care initially, but not as aligned to their needs when they begin to develop increased independence skills.

There is a need to further develop effective partnerships with Birmingham City Council, as well as other housing providers to ensure cost effective, safe and good quality housing for care leavers. It is acknowledged that where young people at 18 may not be ready to move into their own independent accommodation, there is not always a readily available supply and clear pathway to access supported accommodation options to develop their skills for successful transition into adult life that can be funded through their own benefits. There is also a need to consider options for those who are already settled outside of Birmingham.

#### **Key actions**

- All procurement of semi-independent placements for under 18 year olds will take place through the Children's Placement Team.
- Exploration and review of current and future pathway for sourcing and provision of supported accommodation for care leavers 18+.
- Review of effectiveness of current joint protocol with BCC Housing and improvement action plan created and embedded.
- Promote knowledge of and use of Supported Lodgings host providers amongst social work teams to ensure this option is considered for young people transitioning towards independence.

#### **Governance**

The Strategy will be overseen through the Trust Leadership Team and held ultimately accountable to the Trust Board.

The Corporate Parenting Board includes representatives from Children, Care and Care Leavers Council and from key system services and partner agencies. It will provide the authority to hold the wider partnership to account.

This document should be read alongside the Trust Improvement Plan 2024/2025 and Trust Strategic Business Plan, which set out the wider system context and plans, and how this workstream fits in.