



Children in Care Sufficiency Strategy

2024-2026

SUMMARY

This strategy identifies our sufficiency needs and how we plan to address our sufficiency gaps for Children Looked After and Care Experienced Young People

OWNER

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1. Executive Summary

The purpose of our strategy is to set out our vision and approach to providing sufficient, safe, secure and appropriate homes to meet the diverse needs of the children in our care and care leavers over the next two years.

We want our children and young people to have access to homes which are of the highest quality; child and family centred; personalised and responsive to support our children to achieve the best possible outcomes. Our emphasis is on providing local homes in Reading or as close to Reading as possible so children and young people can remain in contact with family, friends and local services. Our key priorities are:

- To work with providers so there is a sufficient and diverse range of homes and support within Reading able to meet the varying needs of children and young people.
- To ensure as many children and young people as possible are placed in a family home.
- To provide a range of home options available to our care leavers via commissioning a variety of high quality provisions to enable our care leavers to progress confidently and successfully to independence.
- To develop a good fostering service which can meet the needs of children in care with foster carers in, or as close to possible as, Reading.
- To reduce our dependency on spot purchasing arrangements for residential homes and focus on local residential homes to meet the needs of our children, including those with complex trauma and challenging behaviours.

The delivery of our strategy is dependent on our ability to offer the right help at the right time, as early as possible, to enable children to remain with families, preventing needs from escalating and entering care. We are committed to working with partners to ensure that only the children and young people who need to come into care, do so.

2. Introduction

The Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) Sufficiency Strategy for 2024-2026 details how the company intends to meet sufficiency duty on behalf of Reading Borough Council. This strategy is a statutory requirement set out in Section 22G of the Children's Act 1989. This duty requires "local authorities to take steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the authority's area which meets the needs of children that the local authority are looking after, and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the local authority's area ('the Sufficiency Duty')".

Although the sufficiency duty lies with each local authority, that duty can be implemented most effectively through a partnership between the authority, company and partners. Each local authority has a duty, under section 10 of the Children Act ('the 2004 Act') to make arrangements to promote co-operation with its relevant partners with a view to improving the wellbeing of children in the authority's area.

Each of the statutory 'relevant partners' in section 10 is also required to co-operate with the local authority in making those arrangements. The duty on local authorities to secure sufficient homes should be undertaken within the context of these planning and co-operation duties which the 2004 Act places on the company, the council and all partners in order to improve the wellbeing of the child in the area.

Our Vision and principles

Our vision for all children and young people in Reading: ‘To unlock all the resources in the borough of Reading to help every child have a happy, healthy and successful life.’ Our work is informed by a series of guiding principles:

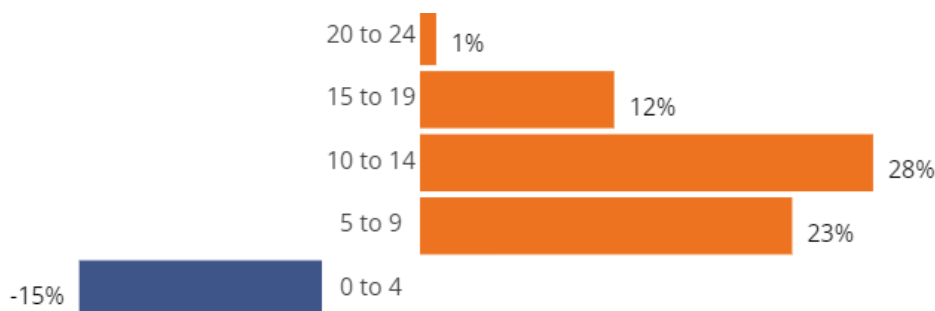
- Children and young people should be heard, and their opinion should be influential
- Children and young people should live in or close to their local communities unless this is not in their best interests
- Children and young people should have the opportunity to benefit from being part of some type of family
- Children and young people should get the support they need to thrive
- Children and young people be supported to grow and develop into independent adults

Our sufficiency strategy sets out how we will help this happen for every Reading child in our care and those leaving care. Throughout the life of this strategy the company will continue to work with our children in care, care leavers and key partners to deliver our priorities.

On 2 February 2023, the government published a new vision to transform children’s social care called ‘Stable Homes, Built on Love’: This strategy for reform set out proposals in response to recommendations from Josh MacAlister’s Independent Review (Care Review) of Children’s Social Care (2022), the Child Safeguarding Practice Panel’s National Review into Child Protection in England (2022) and the Competition & Markets Authority (CMA) Children’s Social Care Market Study (2022). One of the key aims of this vision is ‘Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care’. This is a vision shared by the company and is at the heart of this sufficiency strategy.

3. Overview

The population census of 2021 shows that we have 56,647 children and young people aged under 25 living in Reading. Reading has seen a 11.9% increase in population compared to the 2011 census. This growth is the sixth highest in the Southeast region. The changing population can be reflected in Figure 1. Whilst there has been a sharp increase in 5-9- and 10–14-year-olds, and a moderate increase in 15-19 year olds, the 20-24 year old population has remained largely static, while the number of 0-4 year olds has significantly decreased.



CLASSIFICATION: OFFICIAL

In terms of ethnicity, the general population of Reading has a higher number of individuals from ethnic minority groups with more than double the percentage of those recorded in the rest of the southeast at 35.1% and 17.5% respectively. This is highlighted in figure 2 below which shows data for Reading’s school-age population between September 2021 and September 2022. More than half of the children attending school are from minority ethnic heritage groups and approximately 150 languages are spoken by our school age population.

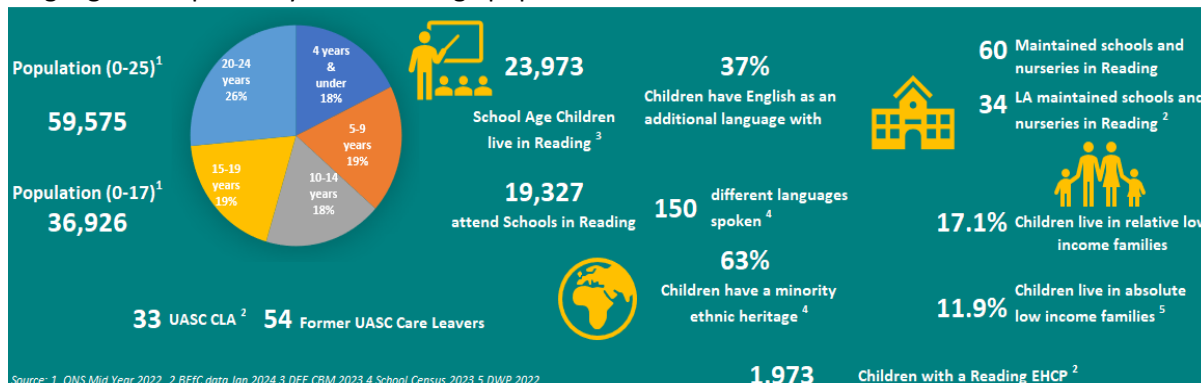


Figure 2: Demographic of Reading school age population

Suitability of placements

One of the guiding principles of the company is that children and young people should have the opportunity to benefit from being part of some type of family. Figure 3 shows the placement type of our children looked after (CLA) cohort over the last year. Across the course of the year, an average of 77% children looked after were living in a family environment.

	Q1 22/23	Q2 22/23	Q3 22/23	Q4 22/23
% of CLA cohort placed in family environment	78%	78%	77%	74%

Figure 3: % of CLA cohort placed in a family environment.

The BfFC Sufficiency Strategy of 2020-2023 had a target of 80% of CLA to be placed in a family environment thus this data would suggest at the start of the strategy for 2024-2026, the company is falling slightly short of this target. The company, however, has strived to ensure that as many children and young people as possible are placed in Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs), where appropriate. With the inclusion of SGO reporting (figure 4), had these young people instead been CLA, the number of children placed in a family environment would be significantly higher. As children in SGO placements may have otherwise been CLA, when taking this into consideration, we therefore have 87% of our children living in a family environment (77% when considering the CLA cohort only); above the previous sufficiency strategy target of 80%.

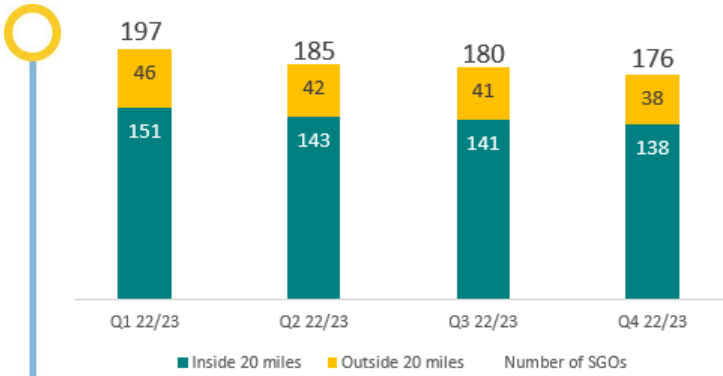


Figure 4: Number of children in an SGO

Another of the guiding principles is that children and young people should live in, or close to, their local communities, unless this is not in their best interests. Figure 4 demonstrates that when placed in an SGO, 78% of children and young people are living within 20 miles of their Reading address. This is a similar picture for those placed with friends and family where these placements have an increased percentage living closer to Reading. For residential care, this figure is 72% (figure 5). The total number of children and young people placed in foster care within 20 miles is 63%, however if this figure is broken down, the likelihood of living further away increases when a child is placed with an external Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) (figure 6).

Placement Type	Inside 20 miles	Outside of 20 miles
SGO	78%	22%
Friends and Family	77%	23%
Residential Care	72%	28%
Foster Care	63%	37%
Unregulated	97%	3%

Figure 5: % of children living within 20 miles.

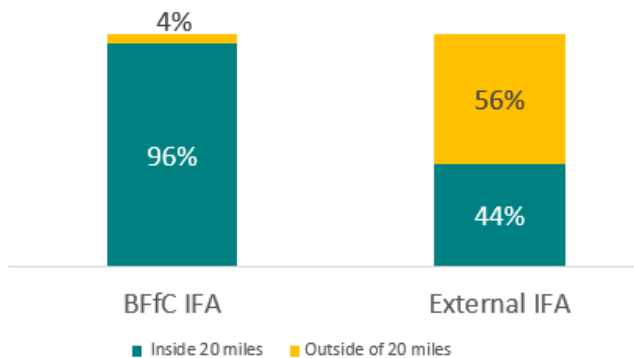


Figure 6: % children in foster care living within 20 miles when placed with BfFc IFA vs External IFA.

Effectiveness of past strategies

The previous sufficiency strategy ran from 2020-2023. The progress of the effectiveness of this strategy is shown below:

Sufficiency Action 2020-2023	RAG	Commentary
Fostering Provision		
Maximising opportunities for kinship care to reduce demand on in-house general and specialist foster care	Yellow	The use of Family Group Conferences to explore the extended family around a child has increased in 2023 and are now routinely done in the pre-proceedings and child protection process. Through this forum kinship options are always explored as part of the work we do. We explore extended family now routinely and kinship placements are made, but these are for short periods of time, before they transfer into Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Orders – which provide permanence outside of statutory processes.
Continue to implement a robust in-house foster carer recruitment, retention and training plan that is informed by an up-to-date needs' analysis	Yellow	Recruitment continues; however, our foster carer cohort is the lowest it has been since we have become an IFA. Having said that, we are expecting at least 3 further applications, and are awaiting approval of an IFA carer who is transferring to us. Redesign of the IFA is underway which has a focus on recruitment and retention. Training attendance has increased, and bespoke training has been commissioned where this was needed. We are also forming part of a regional recruitment partnership with other Local Authorities which aims to increase recruitment of foster carers across the southern region.
Establish a therapeutic support model for foster carers	Yellow	Some of our foster carers have completed parts of the trauma informed training but not all; we do not have a therapeutic support model, however as part of the regional recruitment partnership, we are in the process of setting up Mockingbird, which is a relationship-based support model.
Increase the number of company IFA carers which would include emergency foster carers and therapeutic foster carers	Red	This continues to be a need for the IFA. We do not have therapeutic foster carers as we do not offer specific therapeutic training in order for our foster carers to become therapeutically informed in their practice.
Increase utilisation of company IFA and framework IFA providers by working with the framework contracts team by minimising vacancies, 70%/30% split of in-house carers and external IFAs by 2023	Yellow	We recognise the benefits of being placed with an in-house carer, therefore our focus remains on the importance of being placed with our internal IFA. Where this is not possible, we will place with an external IFA locally, if possible. It remains our vision to have all children living in homes locally, whether that be with an in internal, or an external IFA carer. With 63% of those in foster care living locally, progress is being made towards achieving that 70% target.

Residential Provision		
To reduce spot purchasing arrangements with non-framework providers via contracted arrangements		This has reduced significantly. We now have 9 local beds purchased, and 9 beds on framework, which is the vast majority of all of our residential beds. On framework provision within 20 miles of Reading increased from 38 beds in 2020, to 91 beds in 2022, significantly increasing the opportunity to place on framework locally, subject to bed availability.
To develop options for an in-house or commissioned residential home as well as encourage new entrants to establish children’s homes to increase local sufficiency		BfFC has a task and finish group set up to explore options for in-house residential homes. Four properties have been identified by RBC as available and potential options for an in-house residential provision, and all of these options are being explored. Additionally, BfFC have encouraged three providers to establish new children’s homes in the local area, two of which are waiting their Ofsted registration, and two of which block contract beds have been purchased with.
Development of an in-house short-term emergency respite provision as an aide to reduce children entering care and for children in care placement breakdowns and support reunification		BfFC has a task and finish group set up to explore options for in-house residential homes. Four properties have been identified by RBC as available and potential options for an inhouse residential provision, and all of these options are being explored. If there is the option for BfFC to acquire two properties, one of these will be an assessment provision as an aide to reduce children entering care and for children in care placement breakdowns and support reunification. Additionally, two of the beds purchased as part of the residential tender for block contract beds in 2023, are crisis beds, also aimed at offering the same type of support.
To increase utilisation of residential framework and work with the framework contracts team to identify vacancies within a 20-mile radius of Reading		On framework provision within 20 miles of Reading increased from 38 beds in 2020, to 91 beds in 2022, significantly increasing the opportunity to place on framework locally, subject to bed availability. With a vacancy factor of 15, this increases our opportunity to place, subject to matching. In the last year, utilisation more than doubled from 4 placements to 9.
Participating in the recommissioning of regional agreements		BfFC recently committed to re-entering a new contract with the South Central framework to be able to continue to access residential provision to homes on this framework, increasing access to sufficiency of quality assured residential provision.
Semi-Independent Provision		
To increase in-house and external supported lodgings provision for care leavers		There is now 16+ semi-independent Dynamic Purchasing System in place which incorporates a lot for supported lodgings with 2 external providers who recruit and monitor local hosts to the Reading area. In-house supported lodgings remains an area of focus for recruitment and retention in the BfFC IFA.
To work with local providers regarding how unaccompanied asylum-seeking children can be better supported locally		There is a new 16+ semi-independent Dynamic Purchasing System in place which incorporates 2 lots for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. This has adequately met local

		<p>sufficiency needs, including new entrants to care through the National Transfer Scheme.</p>
<p>To work with the council’s housing department and young people to review and redesign existing provision in relation to crisis accommodation for 16/17-year-olds; supported group living or possibly trainer flats with on-site support</p>		<p>BFFC has jointly commissioned Foyer provision in Reading to provide supported accommodation with RBC Housing. The contract has been in place for several years. The contract is a block purchase of support from the 40-bed hostel. This includes 4 mother and baby accommodation units and 36 rooms within the hostel for 16–24-year-olds who are referred to the provision by RBC Housing and BFFC. The service is a valued, essential and a utilised accommodation option and pathway for CLA and Care Leavers aged 16 and 17 including Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) who often require a placement at short notice. The contract sum covers the cost of 24/7 staffing support based on 370 hours per week. Rent is charged separately via the young people’s entitlement to housing benefit, contribution from their salary if they are in employment or if they are in care, BFFC pay the rent element.</p> <p>BFFC also separately commission a ‘Crash Pad’. This is only for use by BFFC 16/17-year-old CLA and is a separate contract. This is one unit of accommodation. The unit is a separate annex within the hostel provision. The block contract cost paid by BFFC is for a retained bed to be utilised by 16/17 years olds for a maximum period of 14 days, as a short-term emergency or crisis option. The Crash Pad contract cost represents the rent element. Additional support is chargeable on a spot purchase basis.</p>
<p>Special Educational Needs Provision</p>		
<p>Conduct a full service and market review against the accommodation and support needs of children with special education needs and disabilities to identify accommodation and support service options required in Reading</p>		<p>Regarding accommodation, children and young people can access Pinecroft, BFFC shared care, from the age 8years +. Children accessing Pinecroft are grouped into groups of 4, with there being 3 groups of 4, which gives Pinecroft capacity of having 12 children. Each group of children attend for 3 nights and then spend 8 nights at home. All children attending Pinecroft are s20, and subject to looked after processes and have an allocated IRO.</p> <p>Currently there is not a BFFC full-time residential setting for children with special educational needs and young people who require to be accommodated full time in Reading. In 2023, however, BFFC tendered, and successfully commissioned, 9 beds across 4 lots, one of these being a Children with Disabilities lot, which caters for many this cohort.</p> <p>There is a short breaks statement with regards to services available:</p> <p>Level 1 – Community Short Breaks – Universal Offer</p> <p>Details of community short breaks are available via the Family Information Service and Local Offer.</p>

		<p>Level 2 – Community Short Breaks – Targeted Offer</p> <p>The Community Short Breaks either consist of the commissioned short break clubs that are being discussed within this proposal or the provision of direct payments, whereby children are open to the short break team and allocated a short break worker.</p> <p>Level 3 – Specialist Short Breaks Offer</p> <p>The specialist short break offer is provided at Cressingham. This can be in the form of an overnight short break or children accessing the service to attend the Independence Club or day service whereby children spend some time after school at Cressingham but are collected by 7pm and return home.</p>
<p>Work with Adult Social Care colleagues to improve transition arrangements and local provision for young people with special educational needs and disabilities.</p>		<p>BfFC meet quarterly with Adult Social Care colleagues and every three weeks with Preparing for Adulthood colleagues in order to ensure smoother transition arrangements for young people. Adult Social Care are in the process of creating a learning disability working team with members from education, Adult Social Care, Children’s Social Care and housing, so that we can undertake a full-service review to become more joined up in our working practice.</p>
<p>Develop strategic relationships with residential children’s homes and residential schools that could support children with complex needs in neighbouring authorities.</p>		<p>The Registered Managers of Pinecroft and Cressingham are members of a regional Registered Managers’ network, which is attended by Registered Managers within Berkshire.</p> <p>BfFC Responsible Individual is also building links with other Berkshire Responsible Individual’s and has devised a Responsible Individual template for BfFC using feedback of good practice from other homes.</p> <p>The Registered Managers, Responsible Individual and social work team have good links with the local residential schools for children open to the service.</p>
<p>Parent and Child Provision</p>		
<p>Explore options of developing local residential parent and child assessment service and/or recruiting company IFA foster carers who can support parent and child placements locally</p>		<p>Since the last Sufficiency Strategy, BfFC use of parent and child provision has significantly reduced; since the beginning of 2021 there have only been 8 residential parent and child assessment placements. Whilst there was engagement with a local provider looking to set up this provision type locally, this was not proceeded with as BfFC were unable to meet their demand and keep the beds filled.</p>
<p>Work with the South-Central Fostering Framework contract managers to increase local sufficiency of carers on the framework.</p>		<p>The 2023 South Central Fostering Framework now shows that there are 24 parent and child placements available on the framework within 20 miles of Reading. Whilst this is enough to meet our sufficiency needs, we are competing with other LAs within the consortium for these placements, and there is no guarantee that any of these 24 placements will have a vacancy at the time a placement is needed. Similarly, the number of parent and child assessment centres on the framework has</p>

increased from 3 to 11 between 2019 and 2023. Whilst these are not local placements, the increase does mean that more provision of this type is available to all LAs in the consortium.

Strengths and best practice

Residential Care

BfFC has made good progress in meeting its sufficiency target in terms of residential placements. The sufficiency strategy for 2020-2023 gave a target of 80% of these placements to be within 20 miles by the end of the period. For the majority of the 2022-2023 period, it remained above 80%, meaning this target was being surpassed. In March 2023, the figure stood at 67%. The recent increase can be attributed to the number of residential placements increasing; we have a relatively low number of children in residential homes meaning any increase in numbers has a big impact on percentage. In the last quarter of 2022-2023, this increased by two placements, both of which were outside 20 miles, which led to a 6% increase from the previous quarter.

In May 2021, BfFC entered a block contract arrangement with a local residential provider which significantly contributed to the sufficiency duty success. Following the success of this two-year pilot, BfFC tendered for a new framework, with contracts awarded to 4 providers across 8 beds. The beds are all in close proximity to Reading and are spread across 4 different lots to meet the differing needs of the CLA cohort. These lots include planned and same day residential care, crisis care, therapeutic residential care, and children with disabilities. These beds were awarded in June 2023, helping to improve local sufficiency of placements through commissioning children's residential beds locally on a block booking basis. This project also attracted new providers to Reading and includes the opening of a new children's homes; flexibility to adapt placements to meet individual children's needs and the ability to meet more complex needs locally. Contracts are for 2 years, with the option to extend for 2 years. Crisis beds will support a reduction in the use of Unregistered Placements, at a contracted price. The pilot bed block showed improved relationship building enabling the placing of children that may have otherwise been placed further afield and at a higher cost.

Quality of residential placements has been another success of BfFC with 100% of residential placements being judged to be 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted (a 12% increase on last year); 62% of placements were either on the framework or block contract ensuring closer contract management, quality assurance, and due diligence of placement.

Semi Independent Provision

Since the introduction of the new 16+ Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) in August 2021, with lots to meet the specific needs of this age group, which was not available on the last framework, unregulated semi-independent is the provision type that has seen the largest increase in the last year. This placement type now accounts for 16% of all homes, with 98% being within 20 miles. This has ensured that the sufficiency strategy success measure of a greater range of accommodation options being available to care leavers has been met.

Of particular note are the 2 lots which cater for the individual needs of our Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker cohort (UASC). From October 2023 all semi-independent providers will be required to register with Ofsted and so far, 100% of placements have indicated that they will be registering, leading to improved quality assurance of these homes. 98% of homes of this type are either framework or block contract ensuring closer contract management, quality assurance, and due diligence of

placement. The 2% accounts for one placement which is the same placement which is beyond 20 miles which required bespoke commissioning to meet specialist need.

On 9 September 2021, the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 came into force amending the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. The amended regulations make it unlawful for a Local Authority to place a looked after child in a home other than that which is expressly stated in Children Act 1989, s 22C(6)(a) to (c) ('CA 1989') or stated within the new regulation 27A. Prior to the change in law, some Local Authorities placed children in unregulated homes by using S22C(6)(d) a provision in the Act which allowed local authorities to place children in "other arrangements" if no other compliant home could be found. It is this loophole that has been closed, as some children under 16 were being placed in unsuitable homes and Local Authorities were relying on this section to regulate the placements.

The pressures seen in the IFA and Residential markets have also in turn contributed to additional pressures in the unregulated market. The reduction in IFA sufficiency has created a knock-on effect of referring children to residential homes, where a family setting would be more appropriate, and thus taking up residential beds. In turn we cannot find placements for our children who are better suited to residential homes. When referrals go out to residential homes, we are also increasingly receiving zero placement offers, where previously we may have had a choice. Once both the IFA and residential markets have been exhausted, occasionally the unregulated market remains the only available option.

Fostering

During 2023, BfFC retained a Reading carer for a 6-month pilot with an external IFA. The result of the pilot was that whilst there was an element of void factor due to matching criteria, the placement did lead to children being placed in a family environment in Reading when they may have otherwise ended up much further afield, or in a residential home. The result of this pilot is the commissioning of retained local carers with external carers will be progressed and extended into a contract across a number of foster carer homes, across number of IFA's, with carers in Reading.

Key challenges

Children's services across the country are experiencing a range of pressures which collectively are challenging them in both their ability to deliver high quality and safe services within budget. The areas which are most impacted include increasing demand (contacts, referrals), increasing numbers of CLA; increasing complexity of need of those looked after; soaring costs of finding homes for those children (only some of which is linked to complexity); a national shortage of appropriate homes which means many children having to move to higher cost residential homes when they are not the preferred plan; declining numbers of foster carers; increasing reliance on agency social workers and rising SEND demand. These pressures are all mirrored in Reading as set out below.

BfFC IFA

There is a national shortage of the right placements in the right place, resulting in children not consistently having their needs met (CMA 2022). In their study, Newton found that 54-67% of children were placed in residential homes where a family setting had been the first request; this is also our experience locally. The overall proportion of children living with foster families has dropped by 4% nationally, whilst there has been a 27% increase in the use of residential homes, contributing to poorer outcomes for children and increased spend. Since 2018 the number of fostering places has reduced by 5%, with a downward trend in applications falling from 10,250 to 8,280 and a high

volume of enquiries not translating into applications (Ofsted 2022). This is reflected in the number of Reading children placed in foster care, falling from 206 in 2017/18 to 176 in 2022/23.

Market challenges

The Competitions and Markets Authority review of the children's social care placements market, 2022 described the challenges facing LAs, concluding that there are significant problems in how the placements market is functioning in England. There are not enough placements of the right kind, in the right places, which means that children are not consistently getting access to the stable loving homes that meets their needs.

The largest private providers of homes are making materially higher profits and charging materially higher prices than would be expected from a functioning market. Some of the largest private providers are carrying very high levels of debt which creates a risk that disorderly failure of highly leveraged firms could disrupt placements. *"The UK has sleepwalked into a dysfunctional children's social care market. This has left local authorities hamstrung in their efforts to find suitable and affordable placements in children's homes or foster care."* (CMA, 2022).

The Children's Home Association's State of the Sector Survey 2023 highlighted the private sector's approach to formal procurement and tendering, with over a third not engaging with formal processes (twice as many as in 2021) and half of all providers selectively considering which tenders to bid for. 22% of all providers also reported choosing to leave a commissioned framework in the last year, all of whom experienced no negative consequences following the decision (up from 17% in 2022).

While BfC is a member of the South-Central Framework consortium, home availability on the framework has largely been at lower levels than can meet need; but improvements have been seen here. However, this does not meet the company's need to meet local sufficiency needs as the framework has placements nationwide; all local authorities in the consortium also state they are unable to find high numbers of homes on the framework for their children and young people with the most complex needs. This is something that the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), children's social care market study final report, March 2022, report also acknowledges, stating 'Needs were also shifting, with placements needed for a greater number of older children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, as well as those *with more complex needs. These shifts have also increased demand for residential care and specialist fostering placements.*'

The study also found problems in the way the placements market is operating. Children are not consistently gaining access to homes that appropriately meet their needs and are in the appropriate locations.

BfC intends to utilise the good relationships it has built with small local providers through its block contracts, as well as exploring opportunities to create its own residential homes in order to buck these market forces.

Future plans

Given the need to take a medium to longer term view of changes needed to improve sufficiency and reduce spend, BfFC plans to implement the following future plans:

Reducing demand at the front door

A review and reconfiguration of Early Help services through integrated early help teams with children's social care, moving to a model of Family Help, aligning early help/youth justice services with children's social care and attendance/early years services with education, to reduce duplication/gaps in services, and improve interfaces with key services and delineate pathways. It will also look to develop a local 0-19 Family Hub model with partners, reducing demand and escalation of need. This is part of the company's transformation programme for 2024/25.

A focus on partnerships and the Children's Single Point of Access (CSPoA)

A strong early help and prevention offer is critical to ensuring that children and families receive the right help at the right time, and to prevent escalation of need requiring statutory intervention. Early help and prevention 'are everyone's business' and good partnership work, framed under a poverty strategy is being developed to invigorate partnership commitment, that is realistic and deliverable. This includes the use of the Partnership Hub to offer alternatives and solutions to partners referring children into Children's Single Point of Access (CSPoA). Demand management work has already commenced through a review and refresh of internal processes in CSPoA, application of thresholds, a more robust step-down process and enhanced partnership working. Business as usual improvement work continues in this area to reduce the number of children open to the service.

Over time this will impact positively on caseloads, bringing them down to required levels and in the longer-term should also impact the number of children in care. A Multi-Agency Safeguarding (MASH) oversight board was set up in July 2023, convened by Berkshire West Safeguarding Children's Partnership (BWSCP).

The board will oversee the development of a partnership data set and hold all partners to account for referrals, and timeliness and quality of MASH information shares that impact on our ability to make timely proportionate decisions.

Developing a clearly defined and responsive edge of care and placement support offer

The aim of this plan would be preventing children entering care; stabilising the homes of those that are in care, preventing breakdown and escalation of care costs; stepping children down from residential to family based/foster care; returning children home. A Project Lead is in post to lead on this transformative work, in order to expedite the edge of care and placement support offer and initiate implementation at pace. This is part of the company's transformation programme for 2024/25.

Improved recruitment and retention of BfFC IFA carers

The IFA improvement plan includes restructuring the service to better support the recruitment and retention of foster carers. In partnership with 18 other LAs across the South East, BfFC successfully bid for 2 years of DfE funding to develop a Regional Recruitment Hub from July 2024 to improve the

recruitment and retention of local foster carers. Implementation of the bid will run alongside the IFA improvement plan to increase the proportion of children living with our own foster carers and is reflected in the net increase in carers referred to above. The bid also funds the development of a Mockingbird Hub, an evidence-based approach to supporting carers and preventing placement breakdowns.

The IFA improvement plan includes restructuring the service to better support the recruitment and retention of foster carers, with the aim of the recruitment of 20 (net) additional foster carers over three years, 6 in year one, 7 in year two, and 7 in year three. With an average of 1.25 homes provided per carer, this would provide homes for an additional 25 CLA. This, coupled with our 57 carers who currently offer homes to our children, would mean that at maximum utilisation, the BfFC IFA would be able to offer up to 96 homes to our CLA, dependent on matching and availability. The proposed action will increase in local foster carers who are committed to caring for local children and who feel valued and well supported. Whilst ambitious, the company has committed additional resource as part of the transformation programme for 2024/25 to make this more achievable.

In-house residential care for children

BfFC aims to improve local sufficiency of placements through the development of in-house residential homes for children. This plan also aims to combat the market forces which are leading to inflated residential costs. BfFC is working with RBC to identify property within its portfolio with the overall aim of developing two homes; one residential home and one assessment home for shorter term and crisis placements are being considered. The latter would also act as short-term respite homes in order to prevent placements and family breakdowns. The company has committed additional resource as part of the transformation programme for 2024/25 to make this achievable, with the aim of opening two homes during the duration of this strategy.

Support Framework

BfFC is working on commissioning a project to introduce a support framework. This project will commence in Spring 2024. Approved providers on the support framework could be used to offer support in the community to prevent family breakdown and children coming into care, or to offer enhanced care to existing placements to prevent breakdown, which often leads to new, more expensive placements being required. Spot purchasing support workers to off in home support including support workers, respite and domiciliary care, can often be expensive and vary widely in quality. Through using a framework of providers to deliver this support in the community, often to those considered 'edge of care', we can deliver a value for money, high quality service, in the community; this service will support families in order to allow young people to remain cared for at home.

Retained external IFA Placements

Earlier in 2023, BfFC retained a Reading carer for a 6 month pilot with an external IFA. The result of the pilot was that while there was an element of void factor due to matching criteria, the placement did lead to children being placed in a family environment in Reading when they may have otherwise moved further afield, or to a residential setting.

BfFC now intends to extend this project, proposing that the pilot is progressed into a contract across several beds, across number of IFA's, with carers in Reading. Increasing the availability of local carers will provide a step down from current residential placements; provide foster placements that may

not have otherwise been available and avoid children being placed in residential care, at much higher cost.

4. Demand for Placements

Population of looked after children

Since 2019, Reading has generally seen a gradual decline seen in the number of children in care. In 2022/2023 (figure 7) the number of children looked after is 252. This was the first increase seen since 2018/2019, when Reading’s Children Looked After (CLA) cohort was higher than both in England and compared to statistical neighbours, a trend that Reading has reversed in recent years.

Indicator	Cohort	Measure	Mar-19	Mar-20	Mar-21	Mar-22	Mar-23
Children Looked After	Outturn	No	273	280	270	234	252
	Reading	Per 10k pop	74	76	72	64	68
	England	Per 10k pop	65	67	67	70	71
	Stat Neighbours	Per 10k pop	62.6	63.5	65.3	69.6	67
UASC	Reading	No	9	10	19	23	34
	Reading	% of CLA	3%	4%	7%	10%	13%
	England	% of CLA	6%	6%	5%	7%	9%
	Stat Neighbours	% of CLA	11%	10%	9%	12%	13%

Figure 7: Number of children looked after

Most recent data shows that Reading has a smaller CLA cohort than both the average for England and statistical neighbours, as shown in figure 8, below.

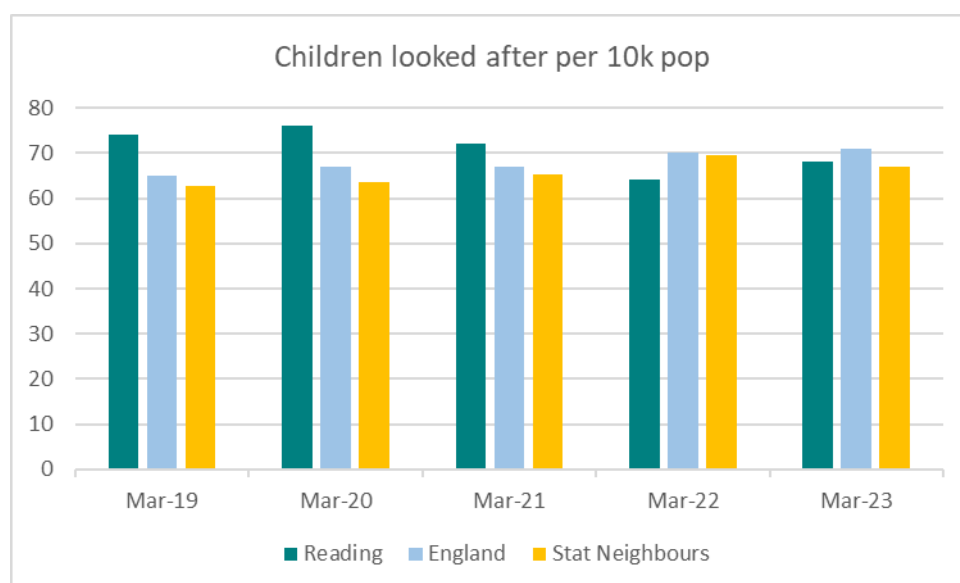


Figure 8: CLA per 10k pop

The recent increase in Reading’s CLA population can partly be attributed to the gradual increase in Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) over the same period whereby Reading’s percentage of UASC per the CLA population has increased over the last 5 years to above that of the average in England, as shown in figure 9.

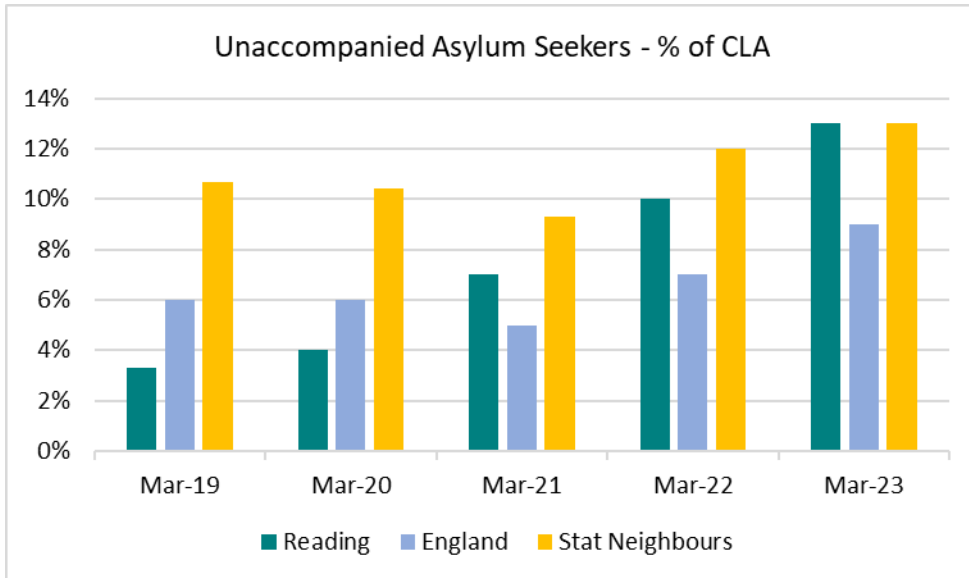


Figure 9: UASC % of CLA

The gender of Readings CLA population has significantly more males (figure 10) with the highest age group being 10–15-year-olds at 42% (figure 11); the majority of the cohort are White British at 52% (figure 12). The age of our children in care has remained largely static over the previous five years and each age group has seen an increase. Our children aged 1 - 4 have experienced the greatest percentage increase over the past five years however due to the smaller numbers in this age group, the largest increase of children numerically is within the 10 to 15-year-old age group who represent 42% of the CLA cohort.

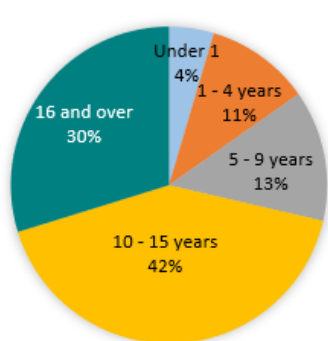


Figure 10: % breakdown of age of group of CLA

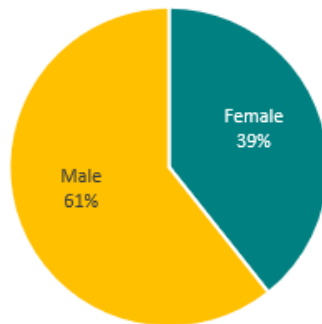


Figure 11: % breakdown of male/female of CLA

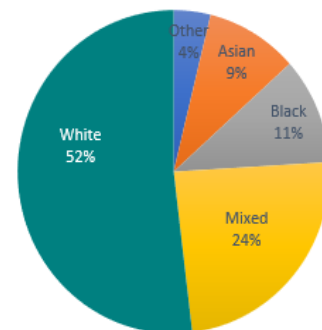


Figure 12: % breakdown of ethnicity of CLA

Needs of looked after children

The primary need of children when they become looked after during 2022/2023 was abuse or neglect at 36%, closely followed by absent parenting at 32%, as shown in figure 13 below. Higher absent parenting figures can again be attributed to an increase in UASC population in recent years. All of those that became CLA during 22/23 due to absent parenting were UASC demonstrating that UASC present a high proportion of those newly coming into our care. Family in acute stress was the third highest, where many local authorities have seen an impact from the cost of living crisis on families, including in Reading.

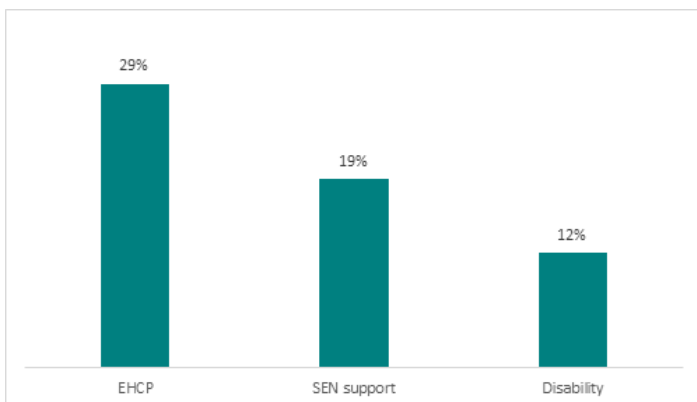
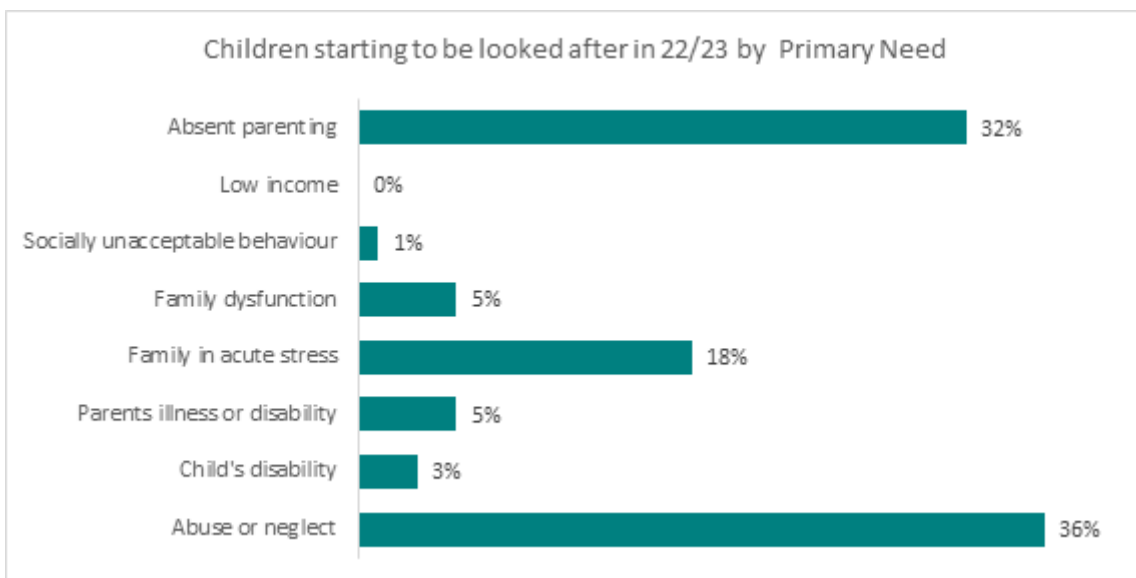


Figure 13: % Children starting to be CLA in 22/23 by Primary Need



Knowing this need helps BFfC be able to identify presenting challenges in providing homes for children across primary categories of need. Local sufficiency to meet certain need however also plays a part. For example, whilst BFfC’s second lowest primary need is child’s disability, locally there are very few homes available to meet this need meaning that whilst this need presents an overall low percentage of the CLA cohort, placing them can remain a challenge. Adding a disability lot to the residential block contract was aimed at tackling local sufficiency for this cohort.

Figure 14 below shows the share of BFfC CLA with Special Education Needs (SEN) and disabilities as well as those who qualified for an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan, again showing the difficulty in meeting need through placement. As figure 15 demonstrates, whilst only 3% of those

that came into care in 2023 had a disability as their primary need, 12% of the overall cohort have this primary need, demonstrating the sufficiency need in this area. Similarly, with nearly a third of the overall CLA cohort being in receipt of an EHCP, more complex and challenging needs is also a challenge in meeting the need of CLA.

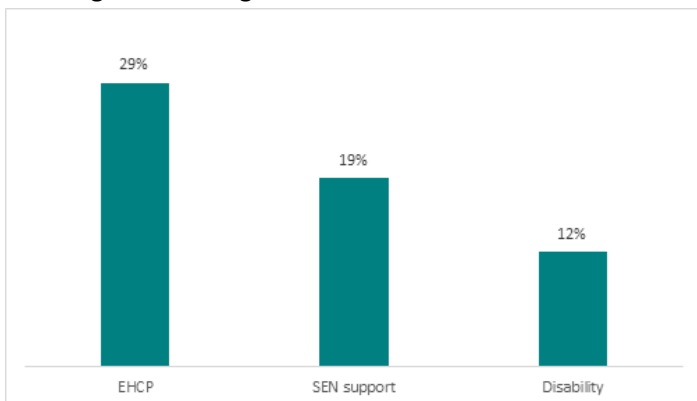


Figure 14: % of CLA with special needs and disabilities

Care experienced young people

Figure 15 below shows key statistics on BfFC care experienced young people. In 2023 there were 228 in this cohort up to the age of 25 years old. Those aged 16 and 17 are included in the 262 CLA cohort. 87% have a current pathway plan, 97% have recently had their case supervised, and 97% are in touch. Of these young people, 29% are not in employment, education or training (NEET) as shown in figure 16.

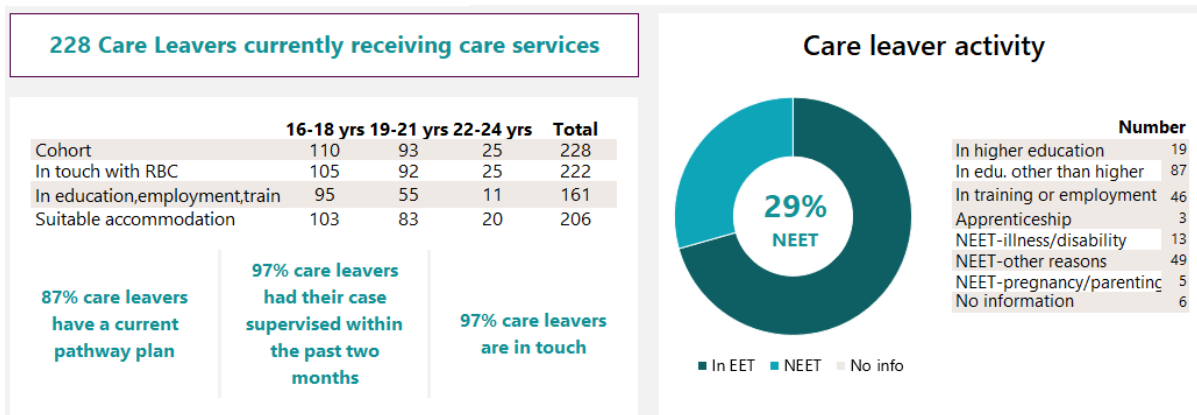


Figure 15: % of Care Experienced young people currently receiving care services **Figure 16: Care Experienced young people activity**

In terms of providing homes for these young people, the vast majority are considered to be placed in suitable accommodation, as shown in figure 17. The relative success of the BfFC 16+ DPS can be partly attributable to this and demonstrates the provision of support to our care experienced young people in order to achieve a successful transition to independent living. The biggest challenge faced by BfFC is older care experienced young people. Those aged 22 and over are less likely to be in touch or in suitable accommodation and are more likely to be NEET.

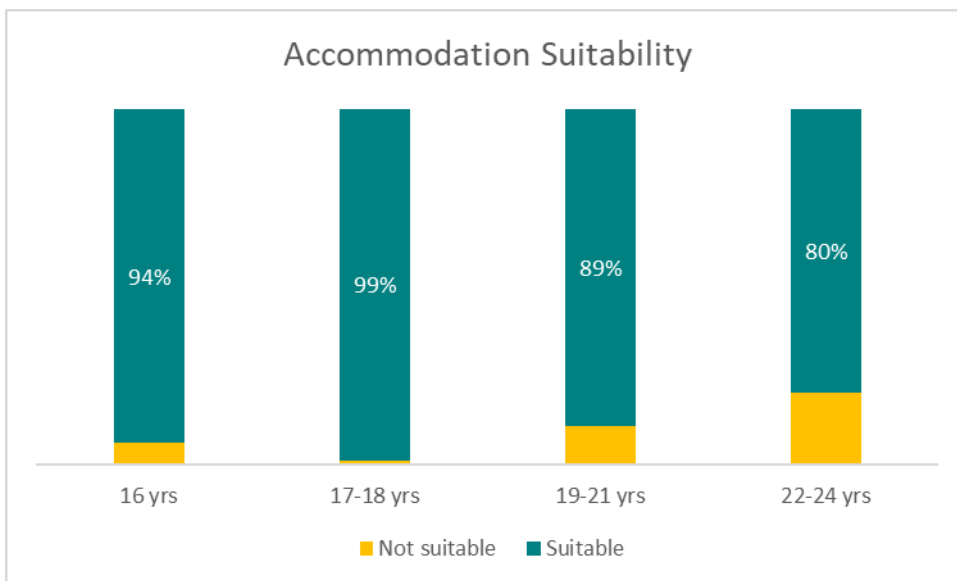


Figure 17: Care Experienced young people accommodation suitability.

5. Supply of Placements

Provision of placements

The majority of the BfC CLA cohort are placed in a family environment either in foster care, an adoptive placement, or placed with parents. Not all of the 76 in the BfC IFA are placed in an IFA foster home as those placed with friends and family are included in this figure, which accounts for 33% of this figure. Figure 18 below demonstrates that around 70% of the current CLA cohort are living in a family environment, which is slightly below the previous strategy target of 80%. This figure has fluctuated between the low and high 70's. The recent decline can be attributed to an increase in the use of residential placements which currently stands at 26; nearly 9.9% of all placements. During the course of the last strategy this fluctuated between 6.4% and 9.5%. This recent increase in the use of residential placements is attributed both to a lack of fostering provision and increase in complexity of children.

Placement type

	BfC	Private	Other	Total
Foster placement	76	92	8	176
Placed for adoption	0	0	1	1
Placed with parents	0	1	3	4
Independent living	0	21	2	23
Children's Homes	0	18	8	26
Residential Care	0	2	1	3
Other	1	22	6	29
Total	77	156	29	262

Figure 18: Placement type of BfC CLA cohort

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Location of placements

As depicted in Figure 19 below, a seemingly high proportion of CLA are placed outside of the Borough at 58%; indeed, this was 2% above the national average for 2023. As a small unitary authority covering only 25sq miles, however, placing in borough is a much bigger challenge than for some larger county councils that can cover hundreds of square miles. Therefore, the focus for this strategy will be on placing within 20 miles, as per DfE guidance. In 2023, the national figure for those placed within 20 miles was 70%, which as figure 20 below shows, BfFC is in line with, as 30% of all placements are beyond 20 miles.

30% of children placed 20+ miles from home

58% of children placed out of borough



Cost of placements

The Competitions and Markets Authority review of the children's social care placements market, 2022 described the challenges facing LAs, concluding that there are significant problems in how the placements market is functioning in England. The Children's Home Association's State of the Sector Survey 2023 highlighted similar, all leading to a dysfunctional market with soaring costs with private provider. This is the experience locally with providers leaving the South Central Framework and increasing their rates, leaving limited scope for negotiation when they are very often the only provider offering a placement for an individual child.

An increased demand and change in regulation for supported accommodation that came into force in October 2023 is also predicted to add £368m to LA spend on supported accommodation by 2026/27 (Newton 2023).

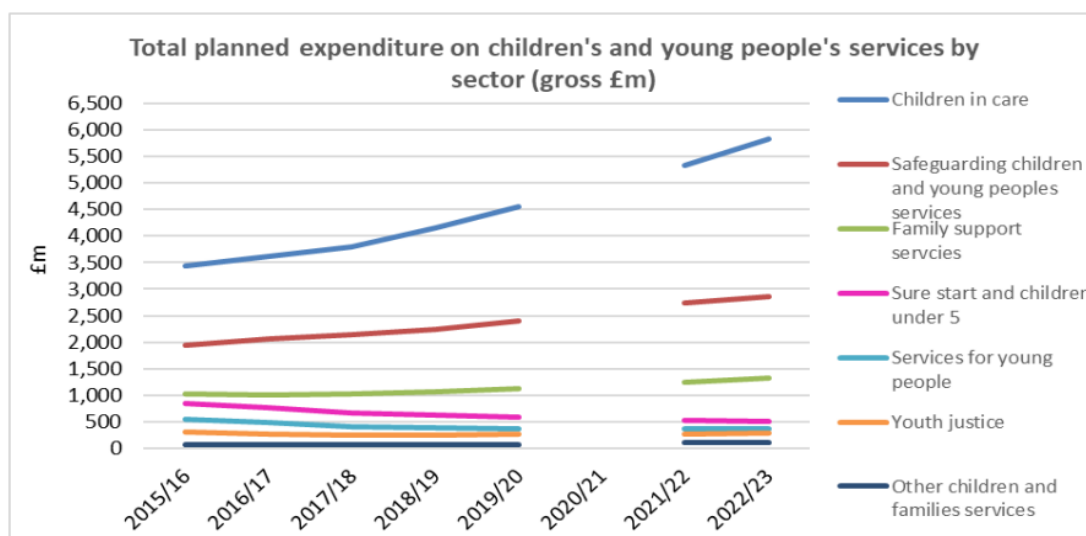


Figure 20: Total planned gross expenditure on children's service (not reported during Covid-19 pandemic – Source: Dfe 2022a)

The above table, figure 20, highlights how nationally, spend on children in care is the highest, least controllable and fastest rising, of all children's service costs.

The national context is reflected locally in figure 21, below. In Reading, there had been a reduction in the total number of children looked after since 2018, however, despite this there has been an annual increase in placement spend due to a combination of factors including complexity of need, market sufficiency and inflationary pressures.

Setting Type	Average weekly cost 21/22	Average weekly cost 22/23	Average weekly cost 23/24
Residential	£4806	£6524	£8843
External fostering	£1010	£1007	£1020
Internal fostering	£837	£837	£837
Supported accommodation	£703	£924	£1347

Figure 21: Average weekly placement cost by setting type

Residential and supported accommodation have seen the highest increase in the average cost; these figures increased by 84% and 92% respectively between 2021/22 and 2023/24. These figures are greatly impacted by the top 10 highest cost homes in these settings, to meet the needs of the increasing complexity seen in the CLA cohort. Whilst inflation did have an impact, the company set a cap on uplift requests at 5.06% in 22/23 and 9.8% in 23/24. These caps were successfully implemented in the vast majority of uplifts requests so therefore inflation cannot be attributed to the level of increased costs that have been seen. The cost of foster care has remained relatively stable, however with reduced sufficiency nationally in these homes, placing in foster care, which is often the preferred and most cost-effective options, remains a challenge. As a result, some young people end up in more costly residential homes when the preferred option is fostering.

Challenges in providing placements and related services

As is the national picture, a shortage in foster carers is means placing in foster homes is an increasing challenge in Reading. This is especially the case for older children aged 11-15, and those with more complex needs. This is resulting in more pressure being put on the residential market. Due to low

sufficiency for residential homes in the Reading area, this can lead to more children being placed in homes beyond 20 miles of Reading, increasing the overall demand for meeting placements. BfFC aims to address this by increasing its own provision, both residential and fostering, to increase local sufficiency and rely less on the external market and avoid placing at distance.

Similarly, challenges in providing related services also have an impact on the ability to provide placements. An increase in the complexity seen in children, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, has also led to increased waiting lists. The number of referrals into children’s social care has continued to increase leading to more children open in the service. Many of these children were not previously known to the service, with children and families presenting with multiple needs, unlike pre-pandemic. Post covid, neuro-diverse children also present with greater behavioural challenges, that parents are unable to meet, leading to an increase in the need for the company to provide homes. Post pandemic, children on child protection plans are presenting at higher levels of risk, escalating to pre-proceedings and proceedings and becoming looked after. With the increased pressure on key services, and longer waiting times to receive support for these needs, we are seeing more cases escalate, increasing the pressure on meeting placement demand.

6. Projection on demand of Placements

Looked After numbers

In 2021/22, the number of children looked after had reduced, as shown in figure 22 below, remaining below the national and statistical neighbour (SN) averages. During that same period, the number of UASC has tripled, in line with increased government Local Authority quotas (our quota of 0.1% of the child population). However, in 2022/2023 our CLA numbers started to increase steadily, with negligible movement in UASC numbers.

The increase in numbers of children looked after has a disproportionate impact on placement spend due to the fact that additional numbers mean we are less able to place with our own foster carers and increasingly reliant on independent foster carers or residential homes.

	20/21	21/22	22/23
Children Looked After	270	234	252
UASC (included in above)	19	23	34
CLA per 10,000 child population	72	64	68
Statistical neighbour per 10,000	65	70	67
National average per 10,000	67	70	71

Figure 22: Looked after children numbers

New starters and leavers

The rate of new starters across the years are set out in figure 23 below. These figures suggest that our rates of new starters have been lower than comparators over the last two years but rose in

22/23 to a figure that is still just below national and below (estimated) Statistical Neighbours. These rates will have been impacted by rising UASC numbers, especially in 22/23.

Reading	20/21	21/22	22/23
Children who started to be looked after during the year	94	79	99
Rate of children who started to be looked after during the year per 10,000 children	25	22	27
National- Rate of children who started to be looked after during the year per 10,000 children	24	26	28
SN- Rate of children who started to be looked after during the year per 10,000 children	27	31	28

Figure 23: New starter looked after numbers

The numbers and rates of children leaving the care system are set out below in figure 24. The figures suggest above average performance in terms of children ceasing to be in care until 22/23 when numbers dropped significantly. Rising UASC numbers have affected this figure, as UASC by definition rarely leave the care system except when they turn 18, but equally this is in line with the national increase. Looked after children cease to be looked after for several reasons including adoption, returning home, Special Guardianship and Residence Order as well as a range of smaller individual categories. There is also a category who leave care by virtue of turning 18 years old. The most significant categories from a Reading perspective are the return home and SGO/Residence Order numbers.

Reading	20/21	21/22	22/23
Number of children who ceased to be looked after during the year	101	116	82
Rate of children who ceased to be looked after during the year per 10,000 children	27	32	22
National-Rate of children who ceased to be looked after during the year per 10,000 children	23	26	27
SN-Rate of children who ceased to be looked after during the year per 10,000 children	25	29	30

Figure 24: Ceased to be looked after numbers

Our aim is to support more children to remain (or return) home in a safe and sustainable manner, as well as to step children down to foster homes. This must be managed in a careful and considered way, and to ensure that it is sustainable, requires additional specialist evidence-based support and interventions to prevent those children returning back into our care. Our target is to support a

minimum of 5 children in each year to return home or step down from residential care or fostering, which would generate cost reductions and reduce the number of CLA over a three-year period by 9 children. In addition, work would be undertaken with children and families to prevent additional children entering care, mitigating the current increase in the number of children becoming looked after and avoiding the cost of additional new placements. Based on this approach, figure 25 below, shows the projected number of supported accommodation, residential and foster homes that would be needed to ensure that’s 80% of children would be placed in a family environment, in line with the future plans outlined in section 3.5. As this strategy has described, sufficiency is a moving landscape at this time, with increased demand, increased complexity, and a dysfunctional market. With this in mind, this strategy will need to be reviewed in the next 12 months in order to establish that the transformation programme is successfully supporting meeting demand, and that the projections are accurate in order to meet the CLA sufficiency needs in Reading.

	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	Total
Returning home from residential	1	1	1	3
Step down from residential to fostering	2	2	2	6
Returning home from external fostering	2	2	2	6
Total	5	5	5	15
Less step down	-2	-2	-2	-6
Net reduction in placements	3	3	3	9
Total CLA	281	278	275	N/A
Total residential placements needed	28	28	27	N/A
Total IFA placements needed	180	178	176	N/A
Total supported accommodation placements needed	25	25	24	N/A

Figure 25: Projected placement numbers

7. Sufficiency Action Plan

Priority	Action	Owner	Timescales
Develop more high-quality, local fostering capacity that meets the needs of children and young people, including in the BfC IFA, ensuring as many young people as possible can live in a family home.	Increase BfC managed fostering capacity through strong recruitment and retention alongside roll-out of Mockingbird.	Director of Family Help and Safeguarding	2024-2026
	Ensure robust use of Family Group Conferences to identify family and friends carers for children where possible.	Director of Family Help and Safeguarding	2024-2026
	Continued use of SGO arrangements, where appropriate.	Director of Family Help and Safeguarding	2024-2026
	Strengthen contract management of external providers and prioritise local placements first.	Head of CCP	2024
	Development of contract to retain local external IFA carers.	Head of CCP	2024
Develop more high quality, local residential capacity that meets the needs of children and young people, including BfC run provision, and prevents the need to place at distance.	Development of a BfC residential children’s home	Transformation Lead	2024-2026
	Development of a BfC residential assessment homes	Transformation Lead	2024-2026
	Review of the BfC residential block contract with view to extending/expanding	Head of CCP	2024

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Strive to make placements in good or outstanding provision.	Through increased use of framework and block contract homes that have great quality assurance, reducing reliance on spot purchasing of homes where there is a reduced quality.	Head of CCP	2024-2026
	Development and increased use of own residential provision	Transformation Lead2	2024-2026
	Increased use of own BfC IFA	Director of Family Help and Safeguarding	2024-2026
Continue to develop our supported accommodation offer.	Review of the new Ofsted legislation in relation to supported accommodation	Head of CCP	2024-2025
	Review of current supported accommodation framework with decision on extending or reprocurring	Head of CCP	2024
	Identification of other possible frameworks to join to reduce need for any spot purchase.	Head of CCP	2024-2025
Ensure robust planning and decision making for edge of care, entries to care, and exits from care	Implementation of the Edge of Care transformation programme	Transformation Lead	2024-2026
	Developing a clearly defined and responsive edge of care and placement support offer	Transformation Lead	2024-2026
Improve placement stability	Development of BfC residential assessment home which is used for respite in order to prevent placement breakdowns	Transformation Lead	2024-2026
	The establishment of a support framework whereby services can be commissioned to support families and the homes of CLA in order to prevent breakdown	Head of CCP	2024

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	Developing a clearly defined and responsive edge of care and placement support offer	Transformation Lead	2024-2026
Explore how residential placement costs can be reduced/consider alternatives to Residential	Increased use of Frameworks and block contracts	Head of CCP	2024-2026
	Development of own residential homes	Head of CCP	2024-2026
	Increased use of specialist carers	Head of CCP	2024-2026
	Reduction in spot purchasing of residential placements	Head of CCP	2024-2026
Maintain an up-to-date Sufficiency Strategy for CLA and Care Leavers	Annual review of Sufficiency Strategy data and action plan	Head of CCP	April 2025
	Full review of Sufficiency Strategy	Head of CCP	April 2026