Reading Borough Council
Working better with you

Sufficiency Strategy

for Children We Care For and Care Leavers

2026 - 2029



Contents

Forewords 3
Vision 4
Children's voices in Reading 6
Purpose 6
Strategic context and statutory framework 7
National policy drivers 7
Families First Partnership and Family Help in Reading 8
Care market: operating context and sufficiency 9
Reading context and market pressures 9
Demand on children's social care services 10
What we said we would do in our last sufficiency strategy 12
Achievements since the last Sufficiency Strategy: Progress and ongoing priorities 13
Commissioning and market achievements 13
Strategic impact on sufficiency 13
Where are we now in terms of sufficiency pressures and what do we need to plan for going forward? 15
Review of current homes for children we care for and data analysis 16
Children we care for by age profile: Historic data and future forecasts to 2029 18
Foster care provision in Reading 19
Analysis of residential and short breaks placement data and sufficiency implications for Reading 21
Residential sufficiency planning for 2029 22
16+ supported accommodation – sustaining sufficiency and future readiness 25
Children we care for living more than 20 miles from home 25
Kinship care capacity 30
Children we care for in semi-independent supported accommodation 31
Staying put offer 32
Finance 36

Forewords



Lara Patel, Executive Director of Children Services, Reading Borough Council

This strategy sets out Reading Borough Council's clear ambition to achieve local sufficiency, ensuring safe and appropriate accommodation for children we care for and those who are care experienced over the next four years. As strong and effective corporate parents, we are committed to having the right accommodation, in the right places, at the right time, so children can grow up with stability, safety and the opportunity to live within their own communities.

Grounded in our understanding of current and future demand, the strategy is explicit in its intent to reduce reliance on distant placements, strengthen family and community-based care, and ensure Reading can meet the needs of its own children locally wherever possible.

This is a practical and forward-looking strategy, focused on shaping the market, investing in local provision and working with partners to secure sufficiency. Our ambition is clear: children cared for by Reading should be able to live safely, securely and close to home, supported by services that know them and are rooted in their communities.



Councillor Wendy Griffith, Lead Councillor for Children, Reading Borough Council

I am incredibly supportive of this strategy and, most importantly, its focus on making sure we can meet the needs of our own children here in Reading wherever possible. Having a safe, secure and stable home can make such a difference to a child or young person's life.

We are committed to providing the right homes and the right support, so that children can grow up feeling safe, loved and able to thrive. This strategy sets out how we will achieve that. By strengthening prevention, improving fostering and kinship sufficiency, increasing our residential provision and maintaining a strong supported accommodation pathway, we can provide more of the care our children need closer to home.

I am incredibly proud of the hard work and care that has gone into developing this strategy. I am also grateful to everyone who has contributed to it, and proud to play a part in delivering this important long-term vision for children and young people in Reading.

Vision

Reading Borough Council's vision is to create a sustainable, locally focused care system where children and young people can grow up safely, with stability and opportunity, within their own communities wherever possible. We will take a proactive approach to managing demand and moderating the number of children entering and remaining in care, strengthening early intervention and family-based solutions, including fostering and kinship care.

At the heart of our vision is a system that increases local fostering capacity, expands supported accommodation as a core pathway for older young people, and delivers more local, needs led residential provision, reducing reliance on out-of-borough placements.

Working closely with the wider provider market and regional partners such as the Regional Care Cooperative (RCC), we will shape the market to improve availability, quality and access to local homes, while also reducing reliance on high-cost spot purchasing and securing more sustainable, better value home costs.

Building on the progress already made since our last sufficiency strategy, we will continue to grow local sufficiency and deliver a system that is planned, stable and financially sustainable, and able to meet the needs of Reading's children now and in the future.



At a glance: Sufficiency in Reading

Strategy overview | Data as of March 2026

38,963

Children aged 0–17 in Reading

277

Children we care for
as of March 2026

40%

Distance placements
Up from 32% - children living outside Reading

£13,600

Median weekly cost
Complex-need placements range £9k-£23.5k per week

£4m

Annual complex-need spend
£3.5m–£4.5m for highest-need group

Foster care (% of care arrangements)

Was 65% — Now 62% ⬇️

Children living out-of-area

Was 32% — Now 40% ⬆️

Rising cost pressure

A small number of children with more complex needs drive significant expenditure, while foster carer availability is declining and children are increasingly living further from home.

Children's voices in Reading

As part of developing this sufficiency strategy, we sought to incorporate the views of children we care for through Reading's Participation Strategy and engagement with the Participation Champions network. Their experiences have helped shape our understanding of what works well and where improvement is needed.

> I was given options. I took my time to decide (a week) and my decision was listened to.
>
> *- Young person cared for by RBC, about being part of decisions about them*

Young people told us that choice and involvement improve with age, but many felt they had limited influence over earlier decisions, often with little time to consider options. Experiences of multiple moves were common, highlighting the importance of placement stability.

Feeling settled and safe was closely linked to security, continuity and being closer to home. Reduced travel and stable relationships were key to positive experiences. Views on being listened to were mixed. Some felt heard, particularly by foster carers, while others felt this was not consistent across services.

What helps you feel settled and safe where you are now?

> A sense of security, like the placement is not going to end.

Children and young people described a good home as one that offers stability, belonging and positive relationships. They also valued having their own space, a comfortable environment and access to activities and food they enjoy. Above all, they highlighted the importance of carers who are kind, supportive, respectful and easy to talk to.

> I feel most listened to by my foster carer
>
> *- A child cared for by RBC, in response to being asked if they felt listened to*

These insights show that sufficiency is not only about numbers, but about quality, stability and the right support, particularly for those with complex needs. This reinforces the need to expand local, family-based care, improve placement stability, listen consistently to children, and support more children to remain close to their communities.

Purpose

This strategy sets out how Reading Borough Council will meet its responsibilities as a strong and effective corporate parent, ensuring that children we care for have access to safe, stable and appropriate accommodation.

It is informed by analysis of current demand, forecasted need through to 2029, changing market conditions, and identifying key pressures including increasing complexity and demand for specialist provision.

In response, the strategy defines Reading's priorities to strengthen sufficiency, including expanding local fostering and residential capacity, increasing kinship care, developing supported accommodation pathways and reducing reliance on out-of-borough and high-cost homes.

Through this approach, the Council will deliver a more balanced, locally delivered and financially sustainable placement system, improving outcomes for children and young people.

Strategic context and statutory framework

Reading Borough Council has a statutory duty under the Children Act 1989, to ensure that sufficient, suitable accommodation is available for the children we care for.

Under section 22G of the Children Act 1989, local authorities in England must ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that there is sufficient and suitable accommodation for children we care for and those who are care experienced within their local area, where this is consistent with the child's welfare.

Legal duties

We have several duties towards children in Reading which are related to the sufficiency duty under the Children Act 1989. In particular:

- Section 17(1) provides that it is the general duty of the local authority to provide a range of services to children in need and their families in the local area which are appropriate to their needs.
- Section 20 requires local authorities to provide accommodation for children in need within their area.
- Section 21 requires a local authority to accommodate certain children who are either removed or kept away from home under Part V of the 1989 Act or who are subject to a criminal court order

National policy drivers

National reform programmes, including *Stable Homes, Built on Love* and the *Children's Social Care National Framework*, set a clear direction for children's social care. They emphasise earlier intervention, strong family and kinship care, stable and loving homes and closer partnership working across systems. Collectively, these reforms are intended to address instability in the placement market and improve sufficiency, quality and sustainability.

National demand continues to rise, with record numbers of children entering care and increasing competition for homes. In response, national policy places strong emphasis on:

- Expanding fostering and kinship care to increase local placement capacity
- Improving placement stability and quality to reduce breakdowns and children moving homes
- Strengthening regional collaboration and market oversight to improve resilience and value.

Reading Borough Council is taking these priorities forward explicitly as part of our sufficiency strategy, translating national expectations into practical, place-based action. Locally, this means focusing on outcomes that directly strengthen sufficiency, including:

- Increasing local home capacity through growing and sustaining our fostering and kinship care offer and growing our children's homes
- Matching provision more closely to need by developing supported accommodation pathways that reflect the profile of our children and those who are care experienced
- Reducing reliance on distant and high-cost placements by creating smaller scale-based solutions
- Building a more resilient local market by working with regional partners where this adds capacity, stability and choice.

Through this approach, national reform is used as a lever to deliver clear sufficiency outcomes in Reading: more local homes, greater stability for children, better use of resources, and a system that can meet demand over time in a sustainable way.

Families First Partnership and Family Help in Reading

Early intervention and prevention are central to Reading's approach to managing demand and achieving long-term sufficiency. Through the Families First Partnership reforms and the development of a coordinated Family Help model, children, young people and families can access the right support at the right time, helping to identify needs earlier and reduce the likelihood of difficulties escalating into statutory intervention where this is safe and appropriate.

Families are supported through strengths-based assessments, whole-family plans and coordinated multi-agency working, helping to build resilience, improve outcomes and promote family stability. Family Hubs play a key role within this approach, providing accessible support from pregnancy through to age 19, and up to age 25 for young people with SEND. By bringing together a range of services including health, early years, parenting support and emotional wellbeing, Family Hubs strengthen protective factors for children and families and support positive outcomes.

Alongside Family Help, Reading continues to strengthen its Edge of Care approach, reunification work and family-based alternatives to care. While the Council continues to face sufficiency pressures in fostering and residential provision, these preventative services are an important part of managing demand at the front door of the system, helping more children to remain safely within their families and communities wherever possible.

Care market

The care market is changing, with growth in supported accommodation and smaller-scale residential homes, alongside reforms such as the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (2024) and the development of Regional Care Cooperatives (RCC). These changes reflect a clear direction of travel towards more planned, sustainable and locally rooted homes for children.

For Reading, this signals an opportunity to strengthen sufficiency by shaping the local market in ways that increase capacity, improve stability and reduce reliance on children living in homes at a distance. In practice, this means prioritising fostering and family-based options, making better use of supported accommodation where it meets needs, and working collaboratively at a regional level to strengthen, rather than replace, local homes. Together, these approaches support our ambition to ensure that more children can remain close to their communities in stable, safe and loving homes.

Care market: operating context and sufficiency

National context

The children's care market remains highly challenging nationally, with constrained supply, particularly for adolescents and those with complex or high-risk needs - driving increased competition and rising costs. Local shortages of regulated residential provision and foster carers, alongside limited availability of specialist, solo and bespoke placements, continue to reduce home choice and increase reliance on out of area provision across the system.

Reading context and market pressures

Within this context, Reading faces sustained sufficiency pressures, characterised by placement instability, high costs and limited local supply. While local residential capacity is increasing, demand continues to exceed provision, resulting in ongoing reliance on high-cost, out-of-borough placements. Recent data from June 2026 covering a cohort of approximately 10–12 high-cost placements, shows weekly costs typically ranging from £9,000 to £23,500, with a median cost of around £13,600, reflecting children with significant levels of need. Higher costs are associated with residential and bespoke placements, including those requiring enhanced or solo support.

These pressures are not evenly distributed and are often concentrated within a smaller group of around 5–6 young people, who require highly bespoke and intensive care packages due to their complex needs, risk and vulnerability, including neurodivergence, exploitation and trauma. Based on current placement cost data, this group represents an estimated £3.5m–£4.5m per year, demonstrating the disproportionate financial impact of a small number of high need cases.

Market conditions further intensify these challenges. Reading's proximity to London increases competition for placements, while rising property costs in Reading limit provider entry, constraining local supply and increasing reliance on the external market. At the same time, local fostering capacity has not kept pace with demand, reflecting national recruitment challenges and limiting home choice. Combined with a growing adolescent age group and rising complexity, this continues to drive reliance on residential and specialist provision.

Pressures are most acute for the Home Finding Team when sourcing solo and bespoke placements, where limited regulated supply reduces choice. The council is fully aware of the legal position regarding unregistered provision, particularly for children under 16. However, on occasion, and only as a last resort, a lack of available homes means unregistered provision may be used.

In these cases, arrangements are subject to senior management oversight and are actively managed, with a clear focus on moving children into Ofsted-registered provision as quickly as possible.

Demand on children's social care services

Nationally, demand for children's social care remains high and sustained, continuing to place pressure on placement sufficiency and local authority budgets. As of 31 March 2025, there were 81,770 children we care for in England, only a small reduction from the peak of 83,750 in 2023, indicating that demand remains at historically high levels.

Wider national evidence highlights that rising need alongside constrained supply has contributed to a system characterised by increasing competition for placements and rising costs. Shortages of appropriate placements, particularly for children with complex needs, continue to drive market pressure and reliance on out-of-area provision.

Children entering care are also presenting with increasingly complex needs, including trauma, exploitation, neurodivergence and mental health challenges, often requiring specialist or high support placements. This has been a key driver of rising costs and demand for bespoke provision.

In response, national policy has prioritised increasing fostering capacity, with DfE data showing that the number of fostering households has declined in recent years, reinforcing the need for recruitment and retention activity and investment in regional fostering hubs. These measures aim to improve access to family-based care and reduce reliance on higher cost residential provision.

Educational stability continuity and complex needs

Data snapshot: Educational need and complexity RBC Children We Care For

Indicator	Reading
Children We Care For with an EHCP (2021)	30.7%
Children We Care For with an EHCP (2025)	44.6%
Children in children's homes with an EHCP (Aug 2026)	80%
Children in children's homes attending specialist provision (Aug 2026)	72%

Placement and educational stability

We recognise that placement stability and educational stability are closely linked. The proportion of children we care for with an education, health and care plan EHCP or special educational needs (SEN) statement has increased significantly in recent years, rising from **30.7% in 2021** to **44.6% in 2025**. This highlights the increasing complexity of need within the care population and the importance of considering education alongside placement planning.

The data highlights increasing complexity within the care population. Almost half of Reading's Children We Care For now have an EHCP or SEN statement, while most children living in residential care require additional educational support or specialist provision.

Educational continuity and future provision

Where safe and appropriate, reducing the number of children living at a distance from their home communities can support educational continuity, attendance and achievement. Maintaining school placements, peer relationships and trusted professional networks can help improve stability and outcomes.

For a small number of children, educational needs are a factor in living further from home where specialist combined education and care placements are required and suitable provision is not available locally. As Reading develops local residential provision, children's social care, education, SEND and health services will continue to work together to improve planning and identify opportunities to strengthen local provision. Particular consideration will be given to children in Key Stage 4 and those undergoing an EHCP assessment, where educational disruption can have a significant impact on outcomes.

Children with complex and specialist needs

A significant proportion of placement demand arises from children with complex needs, including neurodiversity, social, emotional and mental health needs, trauma, exploitation and SEND. These pressures demonstrate the close relationship between care sufficiency and educational sufficiency.

Partnership working between children's social care, education, SEND and health services will remain central to future planning, helping to ensure children can access the right care, education and support while remaining as close to home as possible.

Early intervention and prevention

Early intervention services play an important role in supporting the Council's sufficiency ambitions. Family Hubs, early years providers, Family Help services and community-based support contribute to earlier identification of need, parenting support, improved inclusion, SEND early intervention and support for vulnerable and kinship families.

Strengthening these preventative approaches supports the wider aim of reducing escalation of need, preventing avoidable care entry and enabling more children to remain safely within their families and communities.

What we said we would do in our last sufficiency strategy

Fostering and residential provisions

- Increase high-quality local fostering options including within Reading Fostering Service (previously BFfC IFA) so more children and young people can live in a family home
- Develop more high-quality local residential capacity, including RBC/BFfC-run provision, to meet the needs of children and young people in Reading and prevent the need to place them at a distance

Strive to make placements in provisions rated by Ofsted as good or outstanding

- Continue to develop our supported accommodation offer
- Ensure robust planning and decision-making for edge of care, entries to care, and exists from care

Improve placement stability

- Explore how residential placement costs can be reduced / consider alternatives to residential
- Maintain an up-to-date sufficiency strategy for children we care for and care leavers

Achievements since the last Sufficiency Strategy: Progress and ongoing priorities

Since the last sufficiency strategy in 2024, Reading Borough Council has made important progress in strengthening early help and edge-of-care support and has taken steps to expand local residential homes, improving the system's ability to respond to children with complex needs. The introduction and embedding of the Edge of Care service has supported earlier intervention and improved decision-making for some children at the highest points of risk, helping to prevent escalation into care where it is safe to do so.

The development of three local authority children's homes has progressed well with all three due to open in summer 2026.

Alongside this, there has been clear progress in commissioning and market development, strengthening local sufficiency and improving access to placements.

Commissioning and market achievements

Since the previous sufficiency strategy in 2024, Reading has taken a proactive and targeted approach to commissioning, strengthening local sufficiency, improving access to placements, and increasing oversight of provision.

- A block contract with a local residential home provider ensures five local residential beds for children with low to medium complex needs, supporting planned local placements and the DfE ambition to keep children within 20 miles of home
- Participation in the Regional Care Cooperative (RCC) and regional commissioning arrangements has improved access to placements and strengthened collaboration and market intelligence
- Use of regional framework contracts for residential care and independent fostering agencies (IFAs) has enabled more consistent and quality assured placement sourcing adding to our sufficiency
- The semi-independent supported accommodation (SISA) dynamic purchasing system (DPS) for 16–25-year-olds has increased local supply and provider flexibility, supporting strong performance in securing local placements for 16–18-year-olds
- Strengthened relationships with local providers and developers are supporting the ongoing growth of in-borough provision, enabling more children to be placed closer to home.

Strategic impact on sufficiency

Together, these actions demonstrate clear and tangible progress since 2024, shifting Reading towards a more planned, collaborative and locally delivered sufficiency model. This has improved access to placements, strengthened local capacity and reduced reliance on reactive approaches, while providing a strong foundation for continued market development and sufficiency growth through to 2029.

Overall, while progress has been made in strengthening sufficiency, system pressures remain significant. Continued strategic action is required to expand local residential provision,

strengthen fostering and family-based care, improve placement stability and work with the market to increase availability and manage costs, ensuring a more balanced and sustainable placement system through to 2029.

Key messages:

Prevention and edge-of-care support have strengthened

Local residential capacity has grown, but not yet enough to meet demand.

Fostering capacity remains a significant challenge

Continued strategic action is needed to achieve a balanced, sustainable placement system to take us up to 2029

Reading is a dynamic and economically successful borough with a growing and diverse population. Despite deprivation levels being below the national average, inequalities persist within some communities. High housing costs, population mobility and increasingly complex needs continue to shape demand for children's services.

Reading Key Information and Data

38,963
Children aged 0-17 living in Reading.

277
Children in Care at 31st March 2026.

10 – 15-year-old trend
Children Looked After population becoming older and presenting with more complex needs

17%
Children living in relative low-income families (under 16), below the England average of **22.1%** but above the South East average of **14.5%.** T

£2,550
Weekly Unit Costs for Children Looked After 2024/25, above the England average of **£2,100** and South East average of **£2,335.**

Children's Homes
3 new children's homes providing 10 high-quality local beds, including a solo placement, helping young people stay local and reducing out-of-area placements

£354,805
Average house price in Reading (Dec 2025), above the England average of **£292,000** but below the South East average of **£378,800**

28%
Referral rates in Reading increased by around 28% between 2021 and 2024, reflecting sustained growth in demand on children's social care.

Foster Care
Reading's foster care use shows a clear downward trend, falling from 65% in 2021 to 63% in 2025

Sources: DfE Local Area Interactive Tool and UK House Price Index for December 2025

Where are we now in terms of sufficiency pressures and what do we need to plan for going forward?

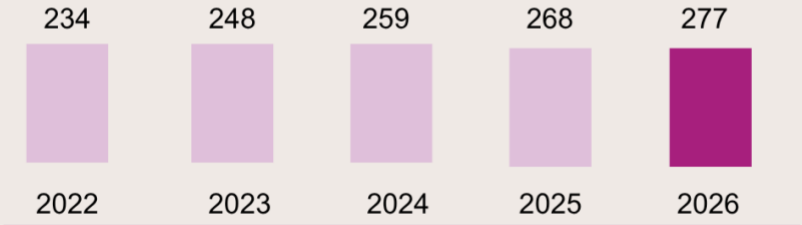
READING BOROUGH COUNCIL | CHILDREN'S SERVICES | PLACEMENT SUFFICIENCY

A borough with children coming into care faster than it can house them locally

Children entering care at an older age, with complex or trauma-based needs, adolescents nearing independence and a steady UASC caseload, with local care market that hasn't kept pace with need.

277 +18%

Children we care for, forecast to March 2026. Up from 234 in 2022.



What's driving it

Age profile

Older, more complex entrants

Trauma, contextual safeguarding and placement instability

Approaching adulthood

Growing semi-indpendent need

More adolescents need supported accommodation near 18

21 > 29 since 2022/23

Steady UASC young people

Below threshold but still need specialist provision

Response

Underway

3 x new residential homes

Adding borough-based placements directly

By 2027

Additonal residential home

Development of another local home to keep children local and further reduce out-of-area costs

Ongoing

New provider partnerships

- Growing capacity with developers and providers
- Move to regional fostering hub as part of govt fostering reforms

As yet unresolved

Structural gap

Limited local foster capacity

Building homes doesn't fix this on it's own

Consequences

Out-of-borough reliance

Higher cost, children placed away from their community

Why it matters

Outcomes and costs move together

Strengthening the local offer serves to resolve both

Reading Borough Council | Children We Care For Sufficiency

Review of current homes for children we care for and data analysis

Local demographics Reading

Reading 0–18 Population (ONS Mid-2024 Estimate)

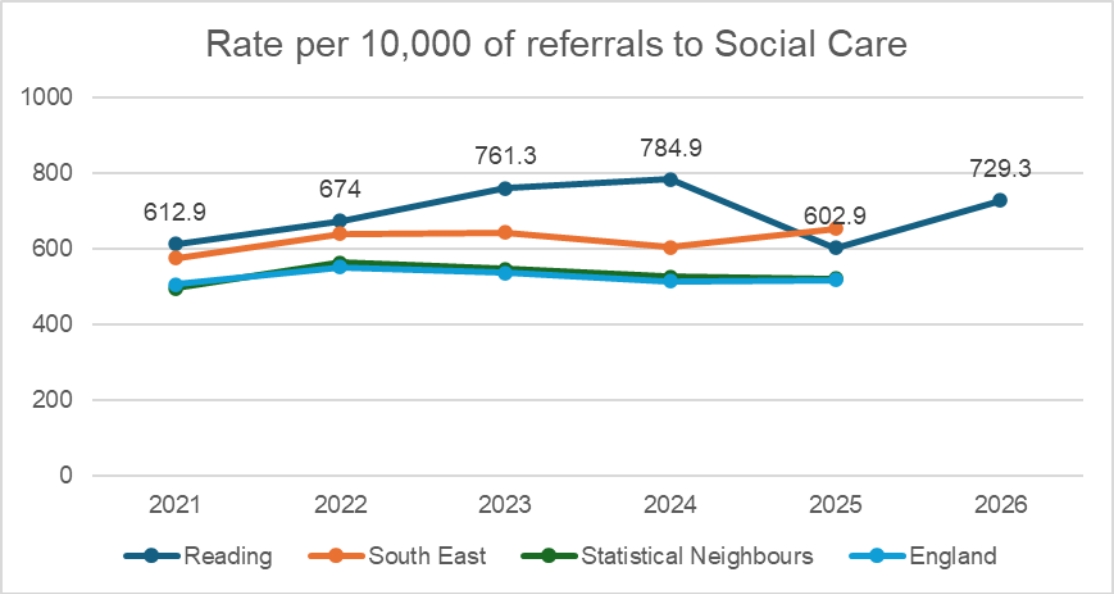
The ONS mid-2024 population estimate for Reading is 182,907 residents.

Reading has:

- 0–17 population: 38,963 children and young people.

Number of referrals per 10,000 to children's social care

Over the last five years, Reading's referral rate per 10,000 children dipped in 2020/21, rose steadily through 2022/23 and 2023/24, and then fell back in 2024/25 before increasing again in 2025/26. This reflects the national pattern of a pandemic related decline followed by rising referrals from 2021/22 onwards, although the more recent data shows continued fluctuation rather than a consistent upward trend.

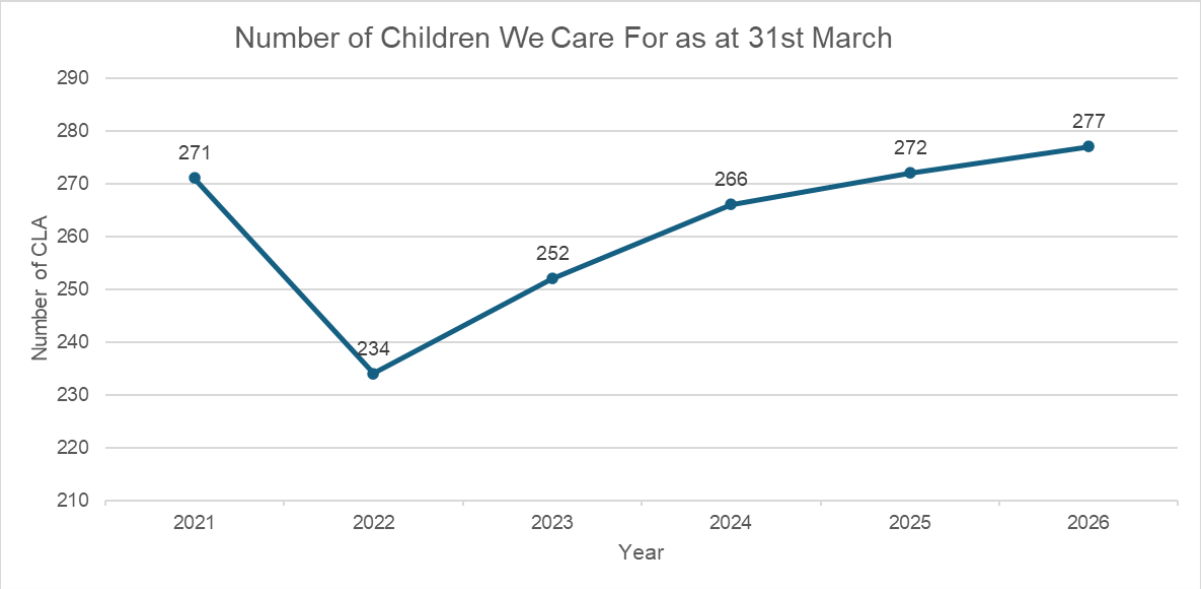


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Throughout this period the chart shows that Reading's rate has remained consistently higher than statistical neighbours, with a sustained gap across all years. While the Southeast shows a more stable trajectory overall.

Key trends for sufficiency – children we care for in Reading

The number of children we care for in Reading shows a reduction from 271 in March 2021 to 234 in March 2022, followed by a consistent year-on-year increase to 277 by March 2026. This represents an increase of 43 children (18%) since the 2022 low point, indicating sustained growth and a return to higher numbers which now exceed previous levels of demand.



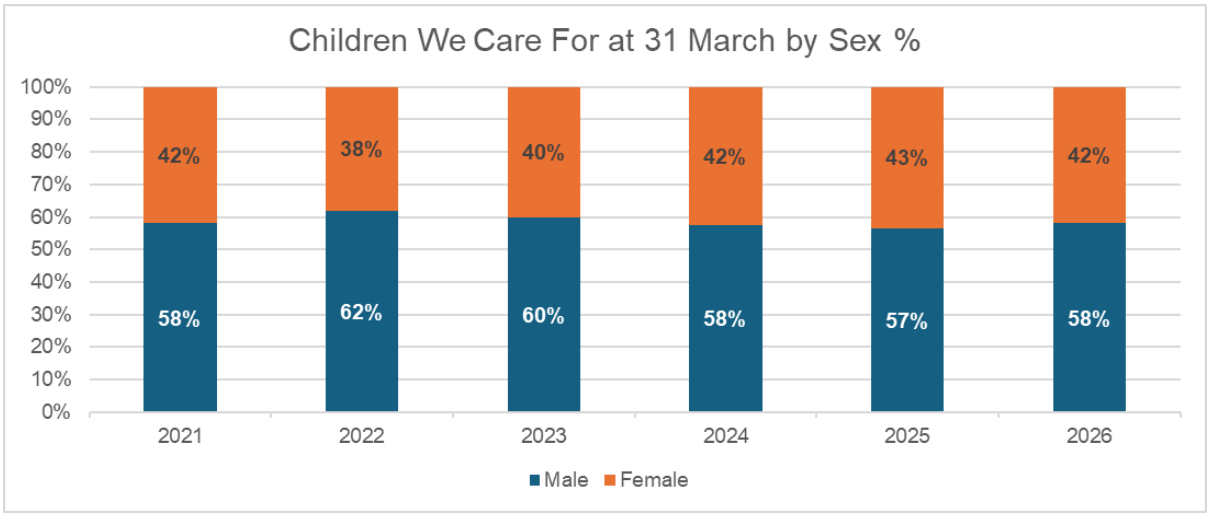
Sufficiency implications

The increase in children we care for since 2022 has clear implications for placement sufficiency in Reading:

- Increasing pressure on local foster care capacity, particularly for placements that can be sustained long term
- Higher demand for residential provision, reducing placement choice and intensifying market competition
- Reduced system flexibility, increasing the risk of out-of-area placements and higher unit costs
- Reinforcing the need for early, proactive sufficiency planning to ensure capacity keeps pace with demand

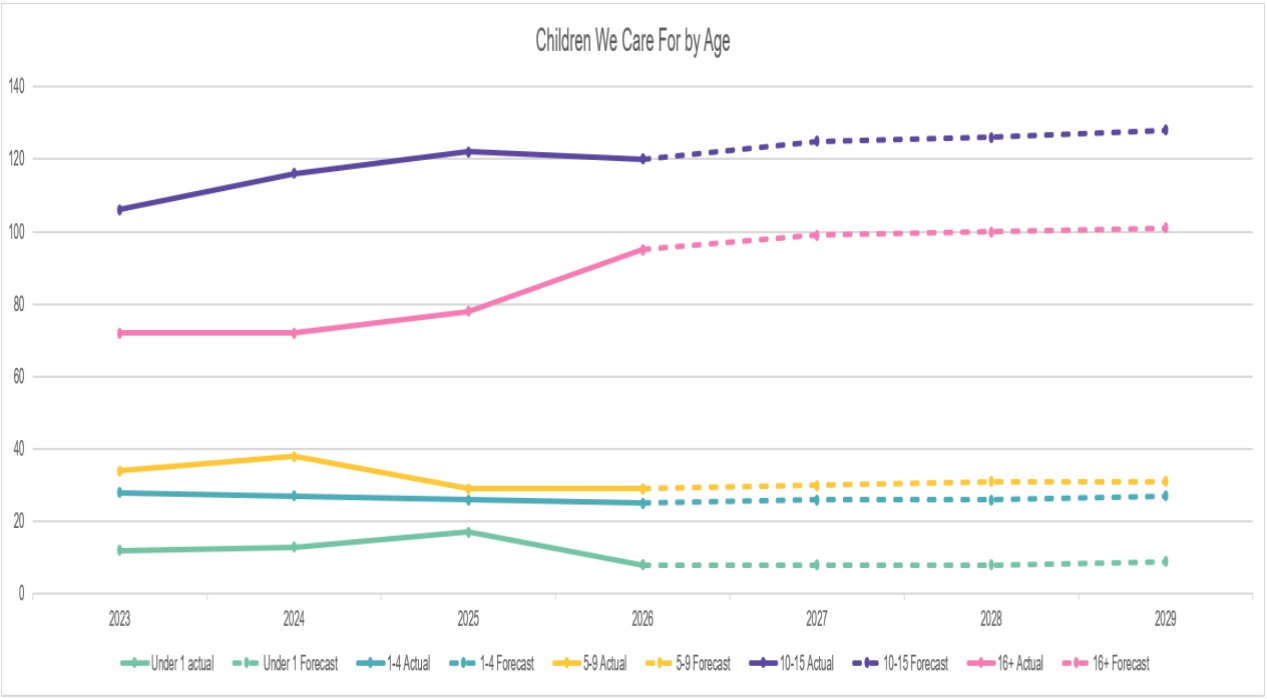
Gender profile

Reading's children we care for population shows a stable and consistent gender profile, with boys making up around 57–62% across the period 2021 to 2026. This pattern is in line with national DfE data, which consistently shows a higher proportion of boys in care. The data does not indicate a shifting gender trend, and instead supports sufficiency planning that focuses on age, need and complexity, particularly for adolescents, rather than gender-specific provision.



Children we care for by age profile: Historic data and future forecasts to 2029

Historical trends shows that Reading has consistently had more older children in care, with the 10-15 and 16+ groups forming the largest part of the cared for population. Adolescent groups have been steadily rising, while the younger age bands (under-1, 1-4, 5-9) have stayed flat or slightly declined. The forecast from 2026–2029 shows this pattern continuing. The 10-15 and 16+ cohorts are projected to grow year on year, while the younger age groups remain comparatively stable and much lower in number. This indicates that Reading's cared-for population will keep shifting towards older children and teenagers, rather than younger children, over the coming years.



Key highlights and trends:

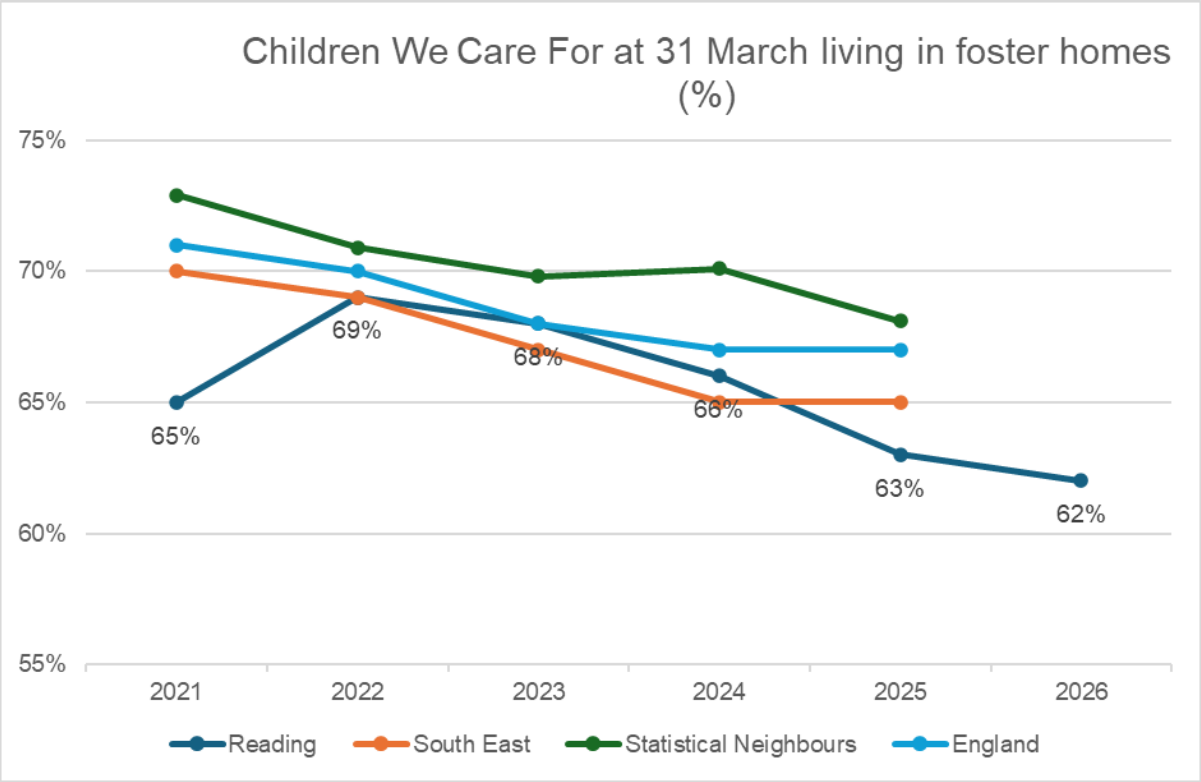
- Reading's cared for population is increasingly older and more adolescent focused, with growth driven by the 10–15 and 16+ groups, while younger age groups remain stable and significantly smaller.

Sufficiency implications:

- Reading needs more adolescent focused foster and residential capacity
- Expect increased costs and competition for teen placements
- Strengthening 16–17-year-old pathways (residential, high support fostering, supported accommodation) is essential.

Foster care provision in Reading

Reading's use of foster care has declined in proportional terms, falling from **65%** in 2021 to **62%** in 2026. While fostering remains the primary placement type, this reduction reflects the growing gap between demand and available local provision, particularly in-house fostering capacity. Compared to statistical neighbours, the Southeast and England, Reading places a lower proportion of children in foster care, with the difference increasing over time.



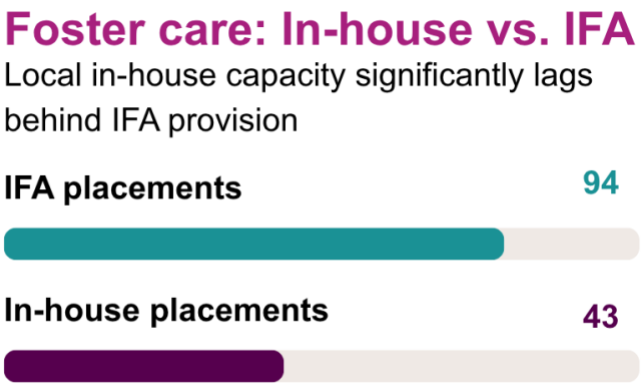
Current local placement performance data March 2026 shows a significant reliance on independent fostering agency IFA provision (94 placements) compared to in-house capacity (43 placements), indicating limited availability of local carers. This reduces placement choice, limits

the ability to place children locally, and increases the likelihood of placements outside of Reading, including beyond 20 miles from home.

As our Children We Care For become older and more complex, matching children to appropriate foster placements is increasingly challenging, particularly for those requiring specialist or therapeutic support. This reinforces the need to expand local fostering capacity, including targeted recruitment, and to develop therapeutic fostering models and work with our fostering hubs to support children to remain in stable families close to home.

Approved foster care placements

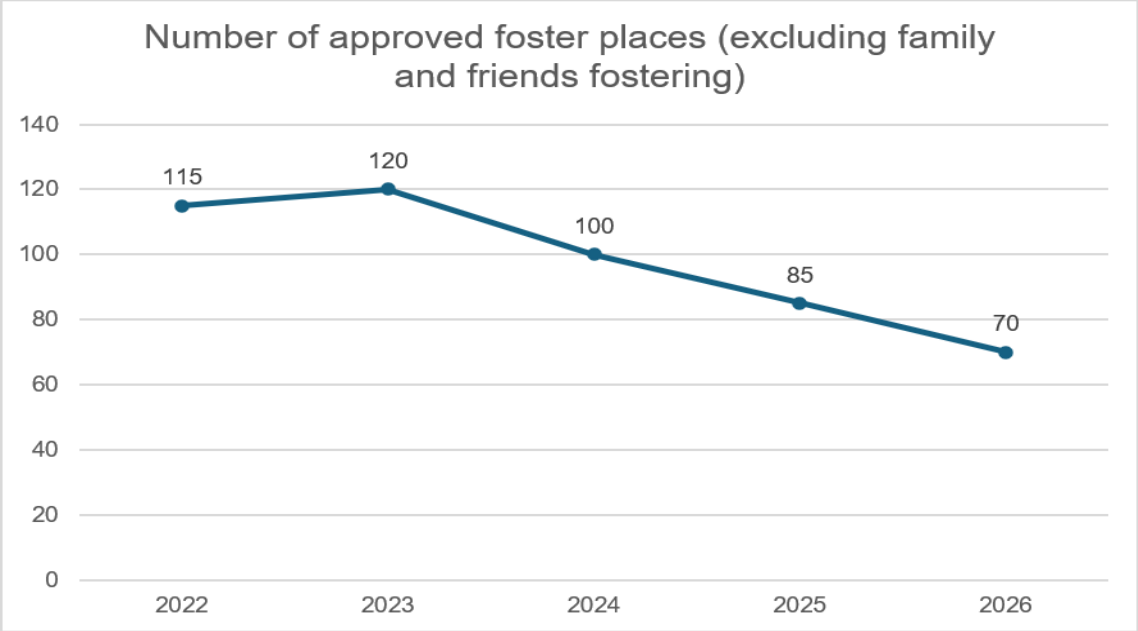
The number of approved foster placements in Reading has declined significantly in recent years, falling from 120 in 2023 to 70 in 2026. This represents a substantial reduction in local fostering capacity at a time when the number and complexity of children requiring care is increasing. This widening gap between demand and available local provision has contributed to a greater reliance on independent fostering agencies and out-of-borough placements, reducing placement choice and increasing costs. It also limits the ability to keep children living close to home with implications for stability, education and relationships.



Sufficency gap

IFA placements outnumber in-house carers by more than 2:1, reducing placement choice, increasing costs and making it harder to keep children close to home

This trend highlights the need for targeted action to grow local fostering capacity, improve retention, and develop specialist and therapeutic fostering provision to meet the needs of Reading's increasingly complex group.



Without targeted intervention to stabilise and grow local fostering provision, the sufficiency gap will continue to widen, increasing the likelihood that children are living in more expensive or less suitable alternatives, including residential and out-of-borough foster homes.

Sufficiency implications

- Foster care capacity is not keeping pace with demand, despite remaining the preferred home type
- The gap between Reading and comparator areas highlights the need for a renewed focus on recruitment, retention and support of foster carers, particularly for adolescents and children with more complex needs
- Strengthening local fostering provision is essential to restore balance across the placement system, improve placement stability and choice, and reduce reliance on higher cost residential and external provision.

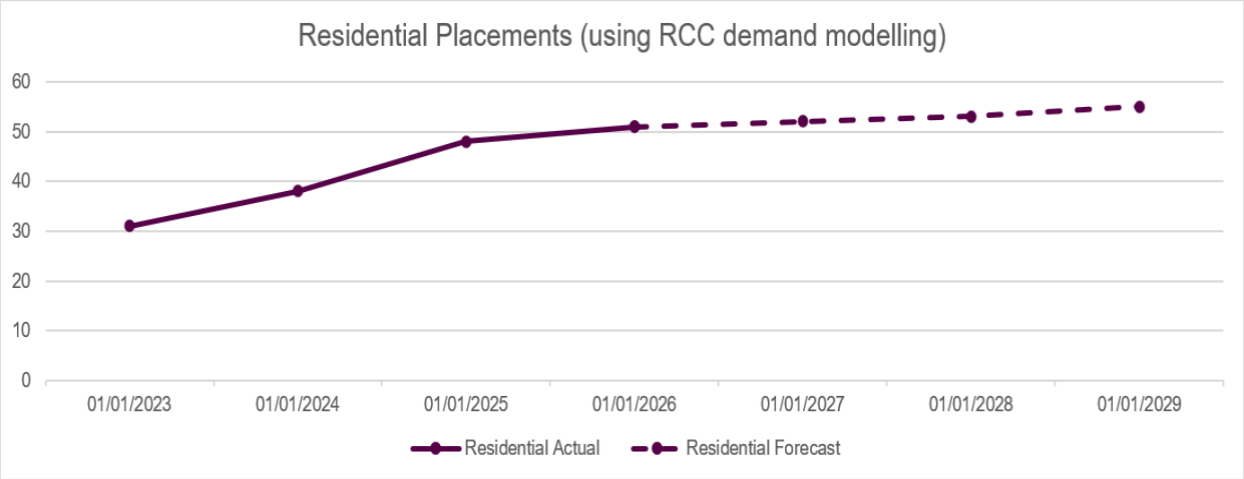
Analysis of residential and short breaks placement data and sufficiency implications for Reading

The RCC forecast suggests demand for residential and short breaks placements will remain broadly stable through to 2029, following significant growth between 2023 and 2026. While this provides a useful planning baseline, residential care demand remains highly sensitive to a small number of children with complex needs and should therefore be viewed as an indicative planning assumption rather than a precise prediction.

The forecast is largely based on recent trends and assumes current levels of residential provision continue. However, Reading's strategic ambition is to safely reduce reliance on residential care wherever appropriate through earlier intervention and family help, edge of care services, reunification, greater use of in-house fostering, and the effective use of local assessment and support provision. These approaches are intended to support more children to

remain safely within family-based settings and may influence future demand for residential placements.

As a result, ongoing monitoring of demand, complexity and placement sufficiency will remain essential to ensure that provision reflects both current needs and the council's longer-term ambitions for children and young people.



Residential sufficiency planning for 2029



Residential provision, short breaks and sufficiency

Reading has a well-established local residential and short breaks offer which supports children with a range of needs, from respite and shared care through to assessment, stabilisation, reunification and longer-term residential care.

Local provision

Cressingham and Pinecroft provide important local short breaks and shared care services for children with profound and complex needs. Together, these services support families to continue caring for children at home, provide planned respite, and help prevent unnecessary escalation into care where appropriate.

Alongside this, Reading has invested in the development of three new local authority children's homes, all expected to open in summer 2026:

- Cherry House (2 beds) – providing assessment, stabilisation and emergency support for children with complex needs or at risk of requiring more restrictive provision.
- Oak House (4 beds) – providing assessment, stabilisation and reunification support, helping children safely return home where appropriate and reducing the likelihood of longer-term residential care.
- Lime House (4 beds) – providing medium and longer-term residential care for children whose needs are best met within a residential setting.

Together, these homes will increase local capacity, strengthen placement choice, and improve Reading's ability to support children closer to home**.**

Demand and sufficiency

Despite recent investment, Reading currently has approximately 15 local residential beds and will continue to rely on some out-of-borough provision. To reduce this reliance and improve placement stability, the Council will continue to develop additional local residential capacity.

Residential sufficiency planning and managing demand to 2029

Reading will continue to review how best to meet the needs of children requiring residential care through a balanced mix of internal and externally commissioned provision. This will include ongoing assessment of demand, complexity of need, placement availability and value for money.

Recognising the challenges within the residential care market, Reading will continue to work with local and regional providers to stimulate the market, strengthen sufficiency and secure access to high-quality provision for children and young people when required.

As demand and need continue to evolve, the council will keep its sufficiency approach under review to ensure it remains responsive, sustainable and aligned with the best interests of children and young people.

Key highlights and trends

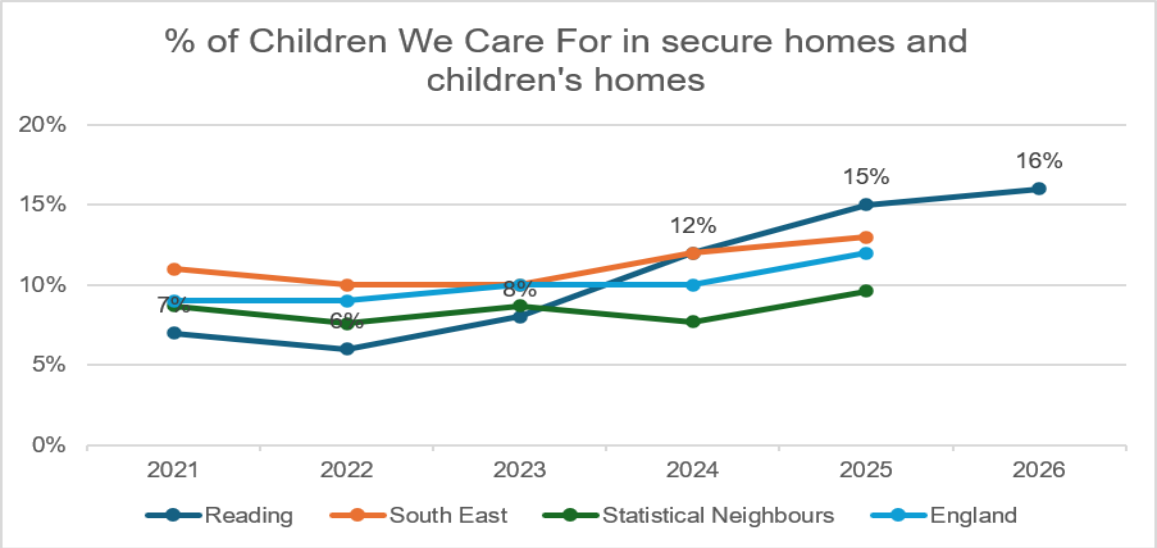
- Residential demand remains sensitive to changes in the needs of a relatively small number of children with complex needs.
- Reading will continue to review how best to meet demand through a balanced mix of internal and commissioned provision, working with local providers and regional partners to maintain sufficient, high-quality placement options.

Residential and secure care placements – comparative analysis

The proportion of Children We Care For in Reading living in children's homes and secure settings has increased from 7% in 2021 to 16% in 2026. This represents a clear upward trend and a faster increase than comparator areas, with Reading now above the Southeast, statistical neighbours and England.

It is important to provide context for this measure. The data combines children's homes and secure placements. Reading use of secure residential care is low, and historically numbers have been very small (typically only a few cases). This means the increase is almost entirely driven by greater use of residential children's homes.

Overall, the data reflects a growing reliance on residential care, rather than an increase in secure provision. While Reading has the highest proportion in this measure, this should be understood as system pressure and increased residential usage, not a high use of secure placements.



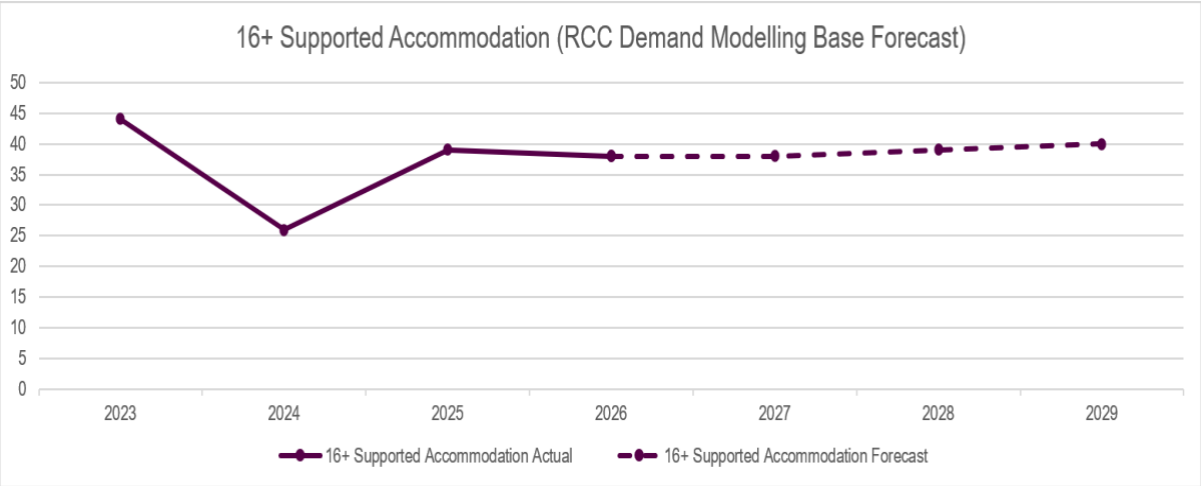
Key highlights and trends

- The proportion of children in residential and secure settings has increased significantly from 7% (2021) to 16% (2026), with Reading now above all comparator areas
- The increase is driven almost entirely by residential care, as Reading currently has no children in secure provision, with historically only very small numbers
- Overall, the trend reflects growing reliance on residential placements and system pressure, rather than increased use of secure care.

16+ supported accommodation – sustaining sufficiency and future readiness

Demand modelling and scenario planning analysis

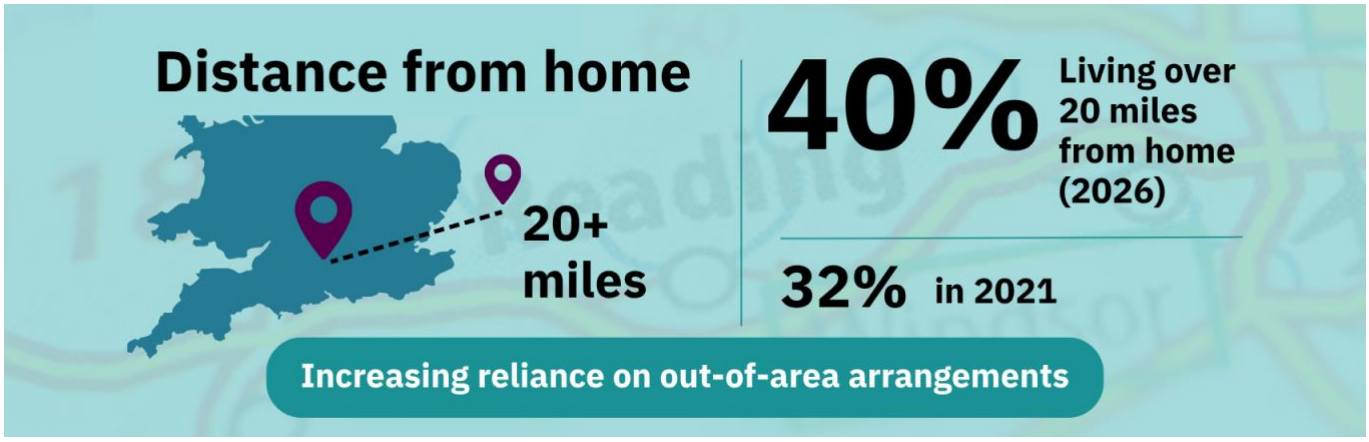
Overall, supported accommodation remains an area of relative sufficiency and strength, but is not static. The SISA Framework will be going out to tender with a new four-year contract to be in place by August 2027 which will help maintain a flexible and responsive market to manage modest growth



Key highlights and trends

- Demand remains stable with only modest growth expected
- Strong local capacity supported by a well-established provider market
- Overall position reflects good sufficiency
- Well placed to manage moderate increases in demand, keep children closer to home, while improving stability, outcomes and value for money

Children we care for living more than 20 miles from home

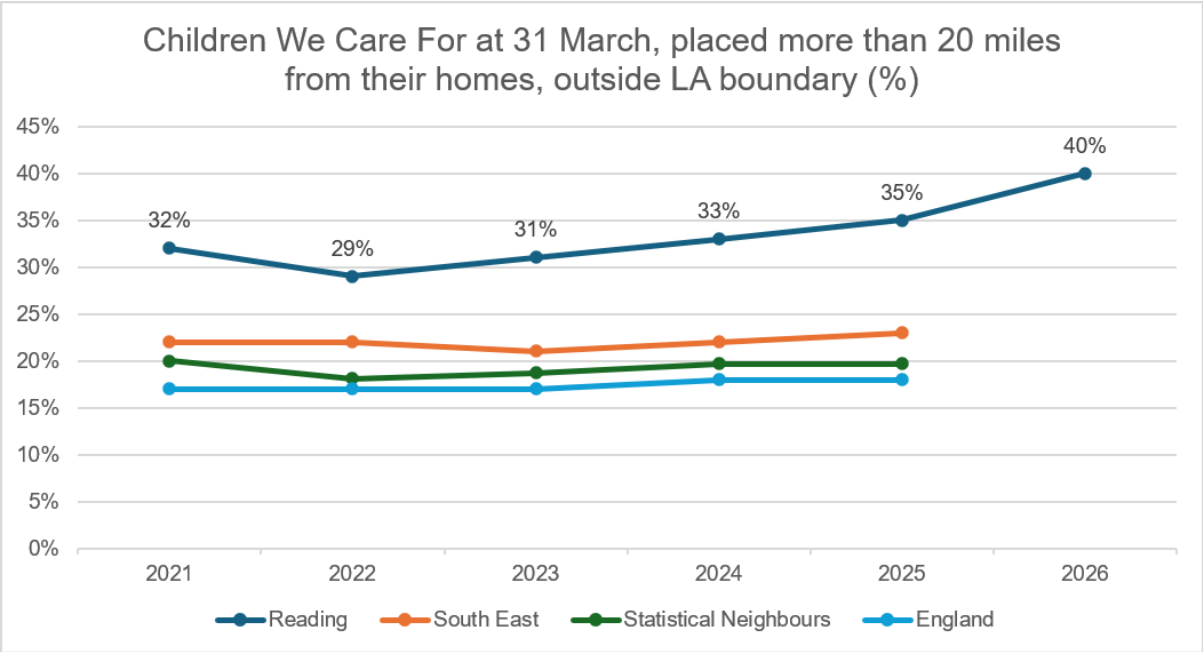


Out-of-area placements and distance from home

Reading has seen an increasing reliance on placements outside the borough, resulting in a growing proportion of children being cared for at a greater distance from their home communities. This trend is higher than that seen in many comparator authorities and reflects ongoing challenges in securing sufficient local provision across fostering, residential care and specialist services.

The pattern has important implications for children and young people, as placements further from home can impact family relationships, educational continuity and placement stability. It also creates financial pressures, as out-of-area placements are more likely to be externally commissioned and attract higher costs.

The profile of out-of-area provision has also changed in recent years, with increasing use of supported accommodation alongside continued reliance on residential placements for children with more complex needs. Taken together, these trends highlight the importance of maintaining a sufficient range of local and commissioned provision, while continuing to work with providers and partners to secure the right placements for children and young people as close to home as possible.



Key highlights

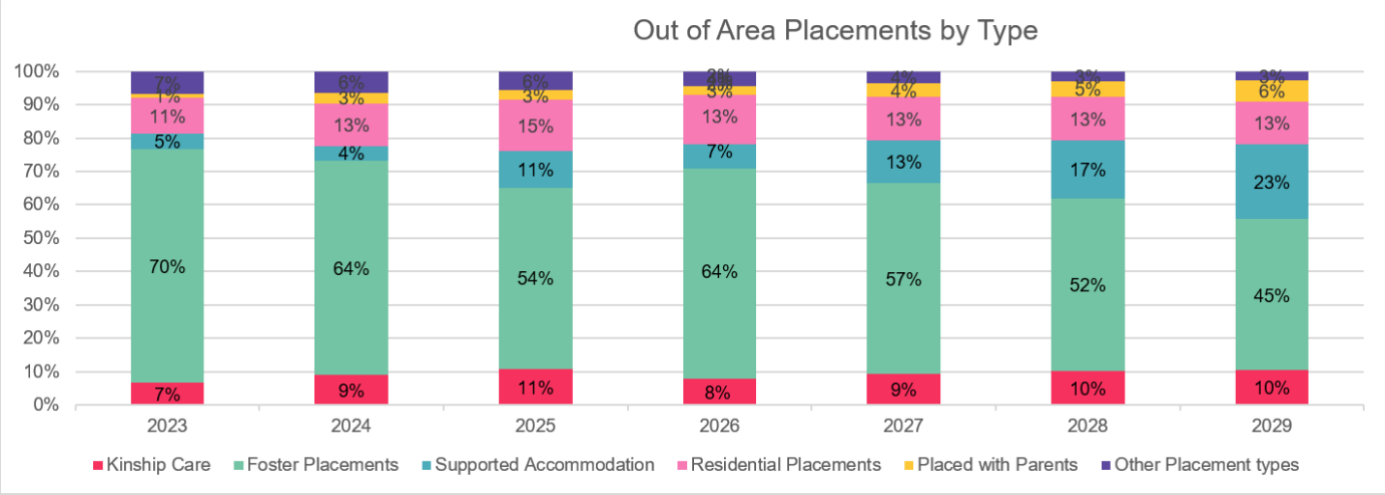
- Increasing reliance on out-of-area placements has resulted in more children being cared for at a distance from home.
- Distance placements can impact stability, education, family contact and placement costs.

- Changes in the profile of external provision highlight the need for ongoing sufficiency planning across fostering, residential and supported accommodation services.
- Reading will continue to work with providers and partners to ensure access to the right mix of high-quality placements that meet children's needs as close to home as possible.

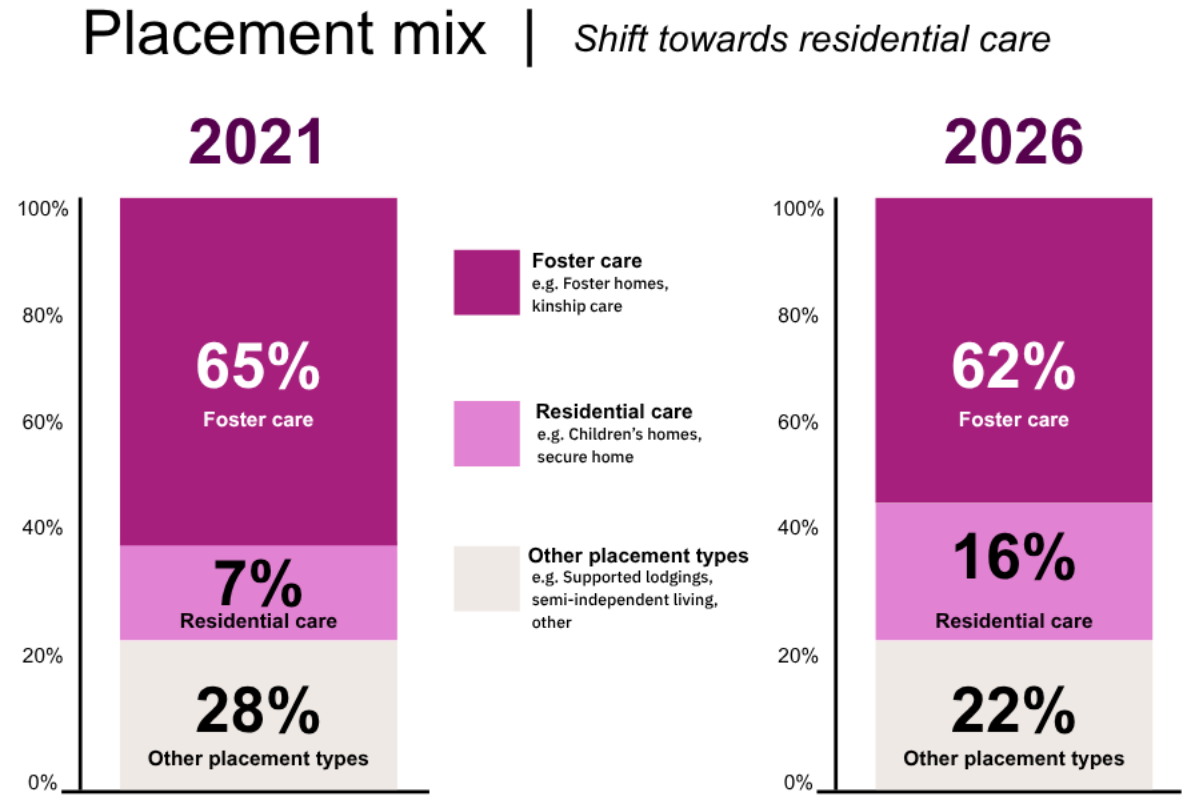
Out-of-area placements by type

There has been a changing profile of out-of-area placements since 2023, with a reduction in the proportion of foster placements and increased use of supported accommodation. Residential placements have remained a consistent element of the placement mix, reflecting the needs of children and young people requiring more specialist support.

These changes suggest that the nature of external provision is evolving over time. The growth in supported accommodation reflects the needs of an older cohort of young people, while the reduction in fostering provision highlights the importance of maintaining a sufficient range of placement options to meet differing levels of need.



Current placement type (Children We Care For)

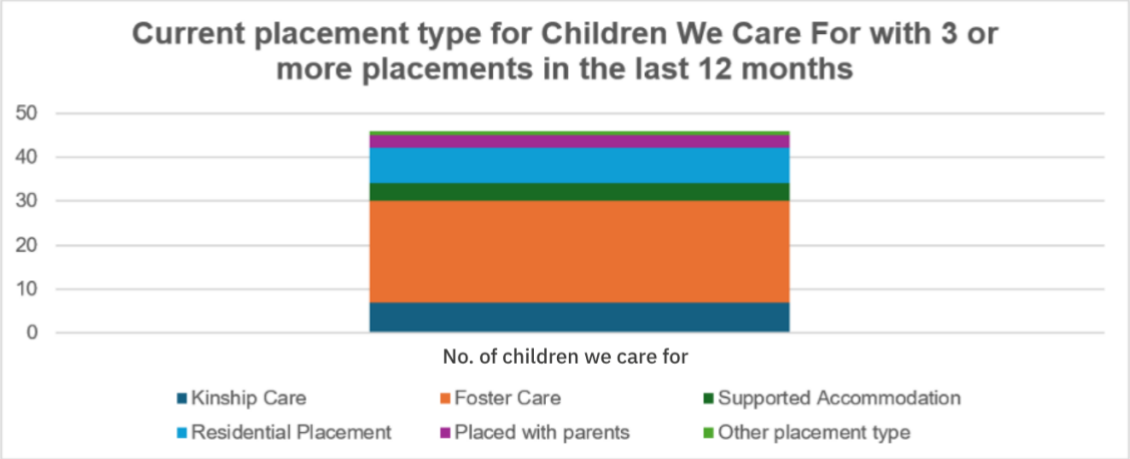


Children experiencing placement instability are most commonly placed in foster care, which accounts for around half of those with three or more moves. This indicates significant pressure in maintaining stable foster placements, particularly for children with more complex needs.

A smaller number are in residential placements, likely reflecting escalation following placement breakdown. Instability is present across all placement types but is concentrated within a relatively small cohort who are more vulnerable and resource-intensive.

This highlights the need for targeted action to improve stability, including strengthened support for foster carers, improved matching, and increased access to specialist and therapeutic provision to prevent placement breakdown and reduce escalation into higher-cost care.

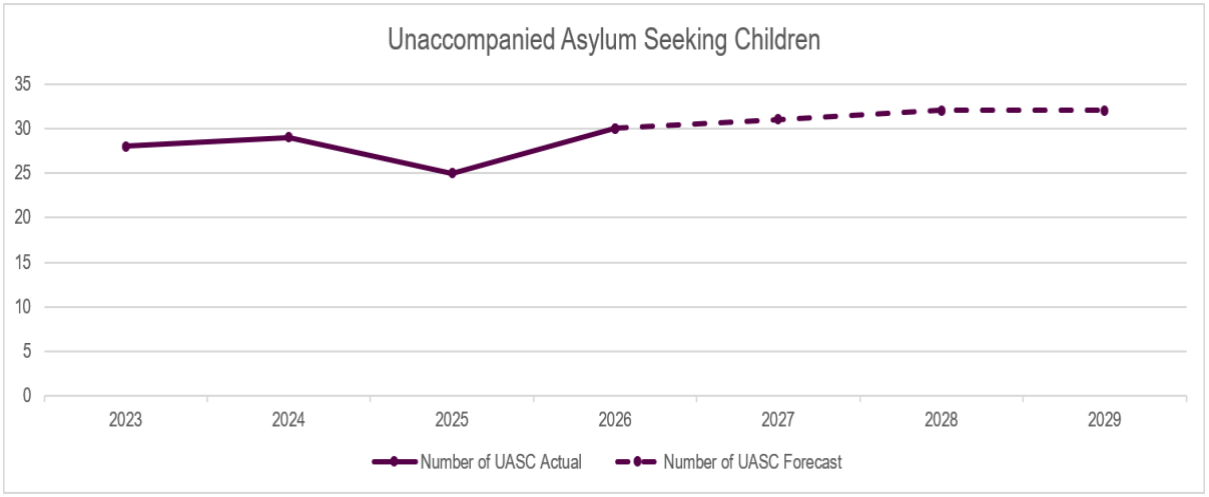




Unaccompanied asylum seekers



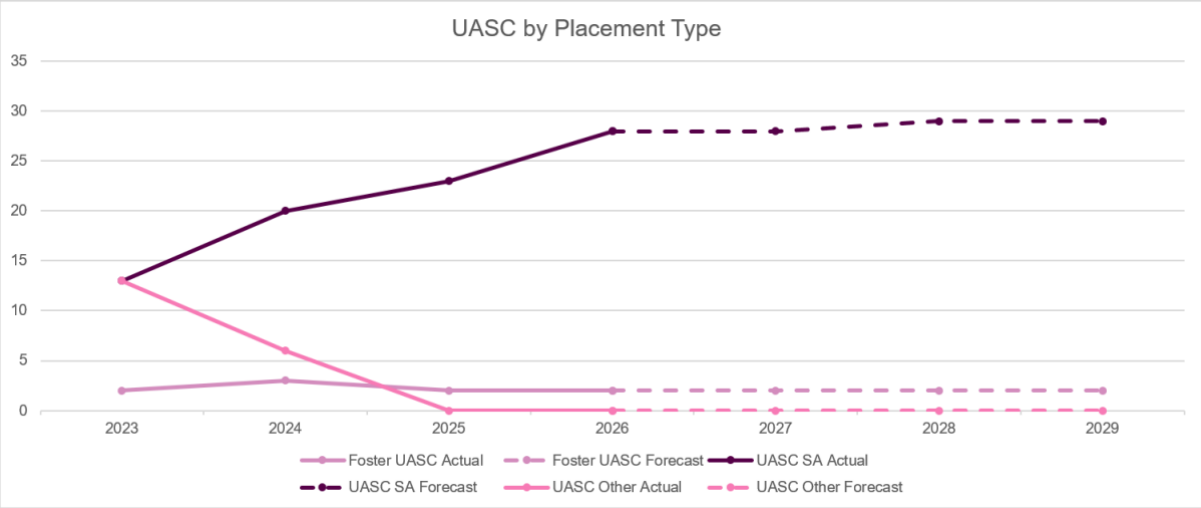
Overall, the data suggests a position of relative stability, though future demand may be influenced by national transfer schemes and changes in policy, meaning some upward movement remains possible.



Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) by placement type

The data shows a clear and sustained shift in the placement profile for UASC, with supported accommodation now the dominant and stable provision. Numbers increased between 2023 and 2026 and have since levelled off, indicating a consistent and established placement model. Foster care remains minimal, reflecting the age and needs of the cohort, while the removal of "other" placements demonstrates improved use of appropriate, regulated provision.

Overall, the forecast indicates a position of relative stability and good sufficiency, though it may be slightly conservative due to the influence of national transfer arrangements and policy decisions. Given the small cohort size, even minor changes can have a noticeable impact. The key requirement is to maintain flexibility and capacity, particularly within supported accommodation, to respond to any future changes in demand.

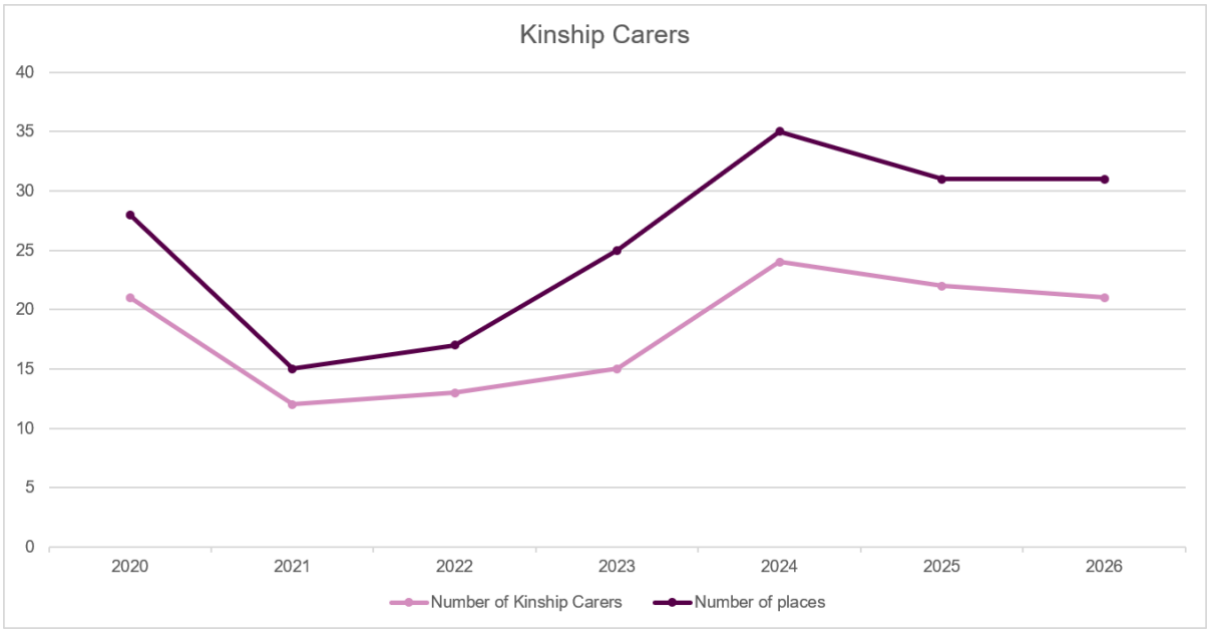


Kinship care capacity

Kinship care capacity declined significantly between 2020 and 2021 but has since recovered strongly, reaching a peak in 2024 before stabilising at around 21 carers and 31 places. This indicates that kinship provision is now well established and stable, although recent data suggests growth has plateaued following a period of expansion.

Kinship care remains an important area of strength within the system, supporting children to remain within family networks and helping to reduce reliance on external placements. National Families First reforms place increased emphasis on supporting children within their families wherever it is safe to do so, with kinship care identified as a key priority.

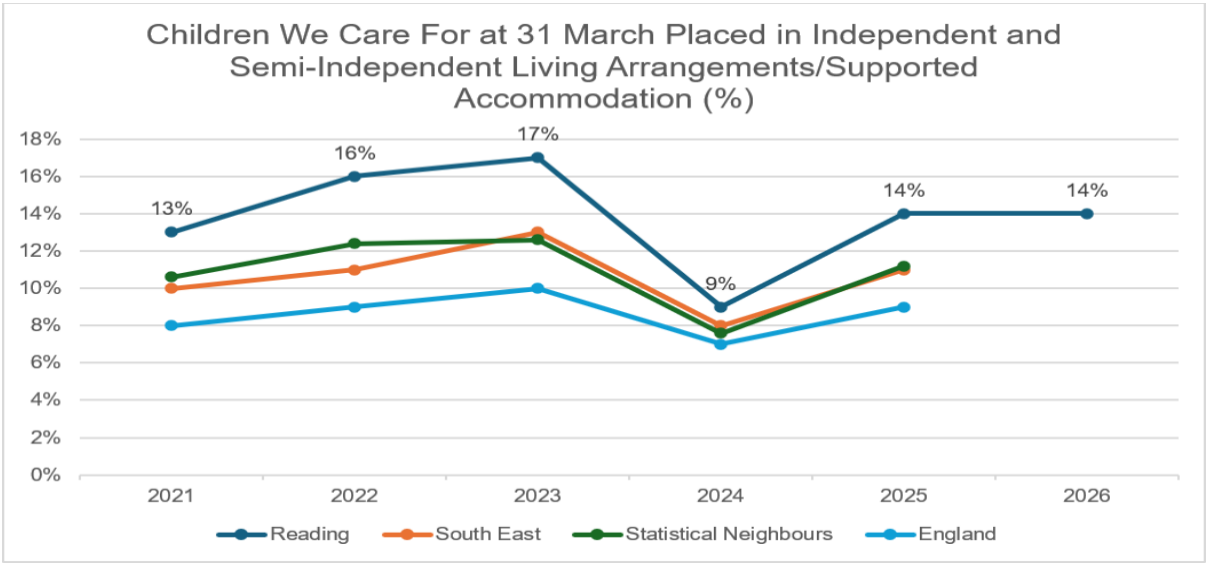
For Reading, this reinforces the opportunity to build on current strengths through earlier identification, improved support and a more proactive approach, maximising the role of kinship care in improving sufficiency, stability and outcomes, while reducing reliance on formal care placements.



Children we care for in semi-independent supported accommodation

The data shows that Reading has consistently placed a higher proportion of children in supported accommodation compared to comparator areas, reflecting a strong local provider market and effective pathway planning. Levels increased steadily to 2023 before a reduction in 2024, followed by a recovery and stabilisation at around 14%.

This pattern suggests a system that has adapted and rebalanced following changes in demand and supply and now operates at a more stable level. Overall, supported accommodation represents an area of relative strength within the placement system, although ongoing oversight is required to ensure placements remain appropriate and responsive to changing need.



Staying put offer

The data in the chart below shows that Reading has a strong and improving Staying Put offer, with over half of eligible care leavers remaining with their former foster carers in 2025 and 2026. This is significantly higher than comparator areas and national averages, indicating effective support to both young people and carers.

This represents a key area of strength within the system, contributing to improved stability and better outcomes, while also reducing demand on supported accommodation and other placement types. Maintaining this position will be important to sustain overall sufficiency and system resilience.

Staying put *is working*

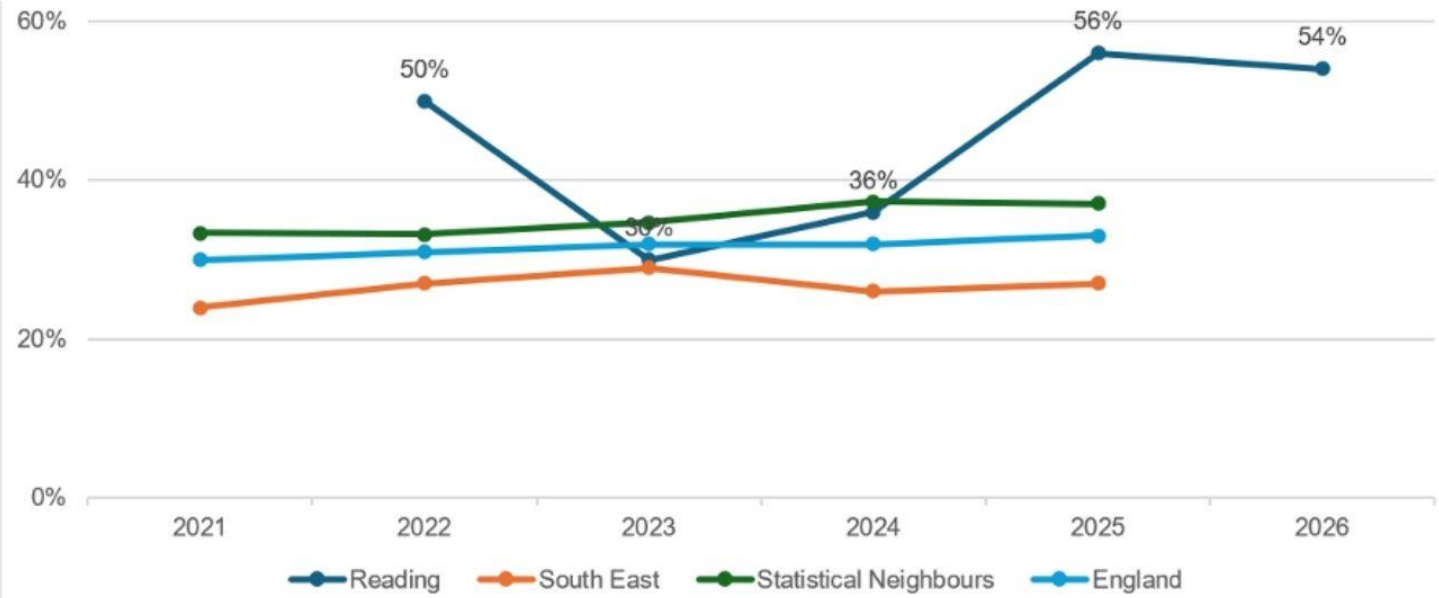
More than half of Reading care leavers stay with their former foster carer past 18, well ahead of comparator areas.

54% **LATEST | 2026**

remain with their former foster carer, significantly higher than the England average.

THE TREND, 2021-2026

Reading has pulled well ahead of its peers



LATEST POSITION

How Reading compares

READING	STATISTICAL NEIGHBOURS	SOUTH EAST	ENGLAND
54%	37%	27%	33%
2026	2025	2025	2025

WHY IT MATTERS

A strong **Staying Put** offer means better stability for care leavers and less pressure on supported accommodation and other placement types. Sustaining this position will be key to overall sufficiency.

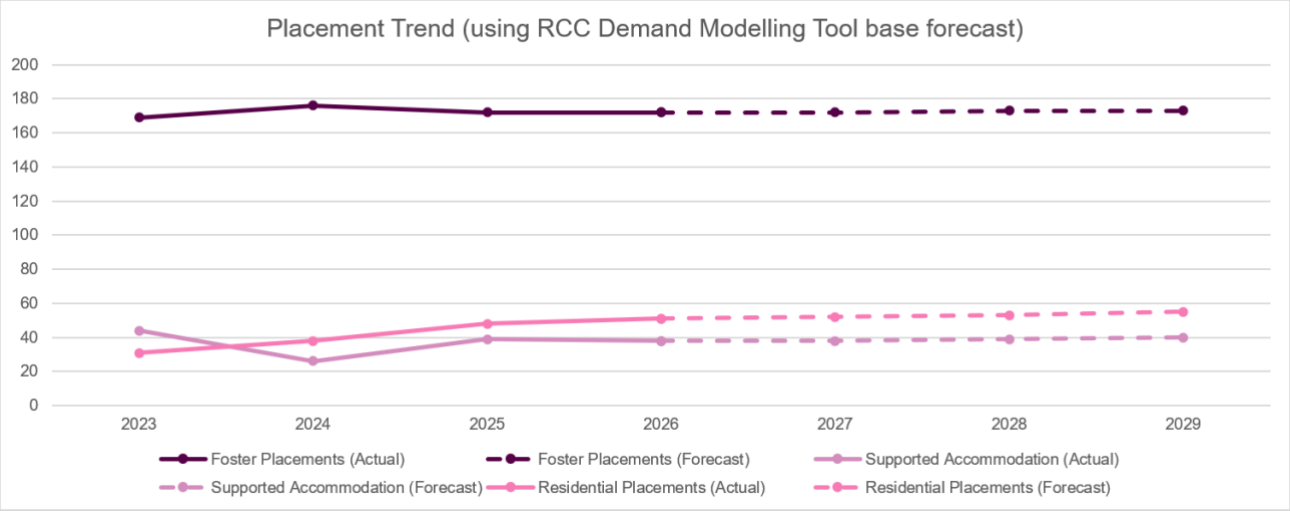
Regional Care Cooperative (RCC) demand modelling tool – base forecast

The RCC demand modelling provides a useful baseline for planning. The forecast suggests foster care demand will remain broadly stable, supported accommodation will stabilise, and residential demand will continue to increase, although at a slower rate than in recent years.

The most notable trend is the growth in residential placements. While the RCC forecast suggests this growth may begin to slow, residential provision remains the area of greatest demand pressure.

The forecast should be treated with caution. It is based on a relatively small number of historical data points and assumes a slowing trajectory. Small groups mean that a small number of children with highly complex needs can have a significant impact on demand and cost.

Overall, the modelling indicates a more complex placement profile, with continued pressure on residential provision and limited growth in fostering capacity. This supports continued investment in local residential provision, fostering, supported accommodation and step-down pathways to strengthen sufficiency and reduce reliance on out-of-borough placements.



Housing and accommodation for care leavers: A strategic approach

Reading Borough Council recognises that access to safe, stable and suitable accommodation is central to positive outcomes for care leavers. It is also a key indicator of effective corporate parenting. We have strong foundations in place, including a committed Leaving Care Service, an improving local offer, and consistent support from personal advisors as young people move into adulthood.

However, accommodation pathways need to be strengthened. Greater consistency is required in quality and suitability. This includes more planned transitions, improved placement matching, and stronger support to help young people sustain tenancies and achieve independence.

To deliver this the council will work with a range of local housing and accommodation markets. This includes supported accommodation providers, housing associations, and the private rented sector to increase access to suitable move-on options. This will be supported by closer joint working with internal housing services alongside partnerships with specialist providers to support more vulnerable young people and reduce the risk of tenancy breakdown.

Our approach over the next three years (2026–2029)

Over the next three years, Reading Borough Council will further develop this sufficiency strategy, with a stronger focus on the quality of accommodation and alignment to corporate parenting priorities.

This will include:

- Developing clear accommodation pathways, so young people access the right housing at the right time
- Strengthening joint working with housing and partners to improve access to stable, high-quality accommodation
- Ensuring accommodation is safe, suitable and responsive to individual need
- Improving transition planning and preparation for independence
- Expanding support to help young people access and sustain accommodation





Finance

Across the three-year period, the data shows increasing financial pressure, largely driven by growing demand for higher-cost homes, particularly residential care. While there are periods of short-term stability, the overall trend reflects rising complexity and sustained demand in parts of the market where local sufficiency is most constrained.

Over the medium term, spend within Children's Social Care is becoming more concentrated in a smaller number of externally provided, higher-cost placements. This reduces flexibility and increases exposure to market pressures.

Strengthening the local sufficiency offer is therefore important to:

- Improve outcomes for children
- Reduce reliance on high-cost placements
- Create greater financial resilience

This will enable resources to be used more effectively across early intervention, local homes and longer-term sustainability.

Benchmarked placement costs

CareCubed

Strengthening oversight of residential care placement costs

Reading Borough Council will use CareCubed, a nationally recognised benchmarking tool, to strengthen awareness and understanding of placement costs and value, particularly in residential care. This will support a more consistent and transparent approach to reviewing costs, uplift requests and provider pricing.

CareCubed will enable the council to:

- benchmark placement costs against comparable providers
- understand cost drivers and market variation
- support more informed engagement and challenge with providers

This will improve financial oversight and commissioning, making sure placements are appropriate to children's needs and competitively priced, while supporting a more sustainable local care market.

Strategic sufficiency programme and delivery timeline to 2029

Reading Borough Council will continue to strengthen sufficiency through a balanced and sustainable approach that responds to changing demand, increasing complexity and wider market pressures.

Our programme focuses on four interconnected priorities:

- Strengthening prevention, Family Help and Edge of Care to help more children remain safely within their families and communities wherever possible.
- Improving fostering sufficiency through recruitment, retention and greater support for carers, particularly for adolescents and children with more complex needs.
- Ensuring access to sufficient residential provision through an appropriate mix of internal and commissioned placements, informed by ongoing review of demand and need.
- Maintaining a strong supported accommodation pathway that helps young people remain close to home and successfully transition to adulthood.

Together, these priorities will support improved placement stability, increased placement choice, better outcomes for children and young people, and a more resilient and sustainable care system.

The roadmap below sets out the key priorities, outcomes and milestones for delivery between 2026 and 2029.

Strategic **Priority**	**Strategic Outcome by 2029**	**2026-27 Milestones**	**2027-28 Milestones**	**2028-29 Milestones**
1. Residential Sufficiency and Market Development	Ensure access to sufficient, high-quality residential provision through an appropriate mix of internal and commissioned placements.	Review residential demand, complexity, placement availability and market capacity. Continue implementation of existing residential provision and strengthen	Monitor demand and sufficiency requirements, working with providers and regional partners to maintain access to appropriate provision and respond to	Maintain a responsive and sustainable residential care offer, supported by ongoing market engagement, sufficiency planning and regular review of need.

		engagement with local and regional providers.	emerging needs.	
2. Strengthen Supported Accommodation as a Core Pathway	Maintain sufficient supported accommodation capacity and positive outcomes for young people.	Undertake SISA recommissioning and provider engagement.	Mobilise and embed new SISA arrangements.	Maintain a flexible and sustainable supported accommodation market that supports independence and transition to adulthood.
3. Strengthen Fostering Sufficiency	Increase placement choice and stability through a stronger fostering offer, particularly for adolescents and children with more complex needs.	Deliver targeted recruitment and retention activity. Develop IFA retainer-based arrangements. Continue work with RCC and regional fostering partnerships.	Strengthen support, training and specialist fostering pathways. Improve placement stability and matching.	Maintain a sustainable fostering offer with greater access to local family-based care and reduced reliance on external provision where appropriate.
4. Strengthen Prevention, Family Help and Edge of Care	Reduce avoidable escalation into care and support more children to remain safely within their families and communities where appropriate.	Embed Families First reforms, Family Help and Edge of Care approaches. Strengthen family-based alternatives, including kinship care.	Continue developing early intervention, reunification and whole-family support. Improve placement stability and reduce repeat placement moves.	Prevention, Family Help and Edge of Care operate as core components of Reading's sufficiency approach, helping to manage demand and improve outcomes for children and families.

Reading Borough Council
Working better with you

This information is reported by Reading Borough Council children's services.

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Sufficiency Strategy for Children We Care For and Care Leavers in Reading
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