
Hertfordshire Sufficiency Statement Summary:

The Accommodation of
Children & Young People
Living Away from Home

Annual Update:
April 2024



Children's Services

CLA and Safeguarding
Commissioning



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Introduction

The Children Act (1989) requires local authorities to take steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the Authority's area boundaries which meets the needs of children that the local authority is 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').

When assessing 'sufficiency', Hertfordshire County Council considers:

- the condition of the local market, including the level of demand for specific types of providers in a particular locality and the amount and type of supply that currently exists
- the development capacity of local providers
- the current resource and overall budget priorities of the council

This Hertfordshire Sufficiency Statement reports current levels of demand, our capacity to respond to that demand and key priorities for 2024/25. Data updates within this document relate to the period 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024. Any slight variations are the result of the volatility of the data and the fact that snapshots are being taken at slightly different times.

Feedback

Fieldview itself is a beautiful home, offering young people a wealth of space to rest, relax and engage in activities. Efforts have been made to provide a comfortable and homely space, young people having been involved in the choice and placement of artworks and decorations throughout. Young person HW was paid to paint and decorate one of the home's bathrooms, offering him the opportunity to build on his skillset and earn additional pocket money.

... was made to feel very welcome during the course of my visit. Staff speak about young people with depth of knowledge and a therapeutic approach.

The home's care plan is well written, without jargon or complex language, which makes it accessible for [the young person]. The format is simple and effectively presents all necessary information. It provides adequate historic information, providing context to [the young person]'s current care. Her needs are explained with the home's manager ensuring how [the young person] will be supported is specific.

The child told inspectors that they like the staff, always feel listened to and can speak about any worries that they have. The child recognizes that staff care about them and are committed to keeping them safe.

Children are observed to be happy, playful and relaxed with the staff. Staff have meaningful relationships with children, and they show children genuine care and interest. Children feel secure, valued and loved.

Key Achievements in 2023-2024

Residential Strategy Continuing: Tenders completed to recommission 2 children's homes and to commission 2 new Children's Homes scheduled to open in 2024
Developed an innovative children's home in partnership with health colleagues to provide specialist support for young people with mental ill health
Partnership work with other Local Authorities continuing, including awarding joint contract with Luton and Bedford Borough Councils for Children's Advocacy
All in-house Residential Children's Homes rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' with Ofsted
Successful roll-out of the Intensive Support Service for Care Leavers aged 18+ who are at the highest risk of homelessness/rough sleeping
Launch of first 'Staying Close' Supported Accommodation pilot for Care Leavers aged 18 years with additional support needs who are ineligible for social housing
Increase in Supported Accommodation of both mainstream and Separated Migrant Children specific provisions to keep up with increasing demand
Assisted Supported Accommodation providers to meet the necessary quality standards to deliver high quality services under the new Ofsted Regulations and Standards by providing regular information, advice and guidance events to ensure a successful registration by them within the required timescale
Mobilised the additional home with the cross regional contract, creating a further 4 beds and increased overall Hertfordshire beds within the contract to 11
Development of Emergency Fostering hub with over 70 children placed

Strategic Position 2024/25

Where possible, we aim to keep children within their communities if it is safe to do so. However, we are facing increasing challenges in placement location, availability and choice. This is a national challenge that all Local Authorities are facing mainly due to age, urgency of placement needed, presenting needs and risks, the national shortfall in people wanting to foster and the residential market feeling under pressure and unable to manage the more complex children referred to them.

Hertfordshire County Council is constantly developing current services to meet the changing and emerging needs of children and young people and being innovative to create fresh solutions. Our Residential Strategy is creating more children's homes and placements within Hertfordshire and addressing that too many children are still placed outside of the county in this type of provision. The fostering service launched the Emergency Fostering Hub Scheme to provide 10-day emergency placements. The scheme has grown with 6 dedicated emergency fostering families offering care to children and young people.

Children Looked After (CLA) Data

	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Number of CLA	1030	977	978
Variance on previous year	+ 3.4%	- 5.1%	+0.11%

Separated Migrant Children

Of the 978 children, 154 (16%) are Separated Migrant Children (SMC). This is an increase from the same time last year, and a continuation of the growth in this category of CLA in recent years.

	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Number of SMC	111 (10.7%)	139 (14.2%)	154 (16%)
Total Number of CLA	1030	977	978
Variance of SMC as a % of CLA cohort on previous year	+2.2%	+3.5%	+1.8%

The majority of Separated Migrant Children are aged 17 years (n100 64.9%), with all arrivals being aged over 13 years. Of the 154 children, the majority are from Afghanistan, Sudan and Eritrea.

For the financial year 2023-24, there were 101 new SMC starters. Of the 101, 79 were on the National Transfer Scheme. The National Transfer Scheme (NTS) is a voluntary scheme whereby SMC are transferred between local authorities, ensuring that a small number of authorities are not disproportionately affected due to being points of entry.

Of the 79, the top 3 countries that new starters came from were, Afghanistan (21), Iran (13) and Turkey (9).

Of the 79, 87% (70) were placed in semi-independent placements. The remaining 9 were in a fostering placement.

Breakdown of CLA population as a whole

The CLA population continues to be more diverse than the general Hertfordshire population, with data from the 2021 census indicating that 81.8% of the population were White British and 18.2% other ethnicities. The CLA population split is 58.7% White British and 41.3% other ethnicities as shown. The non-white CLA population has grown since 2022-23 by almost 10%. Commissioned services will need to be well positioned to meet the needs of children from a variety of ethnicities.

Compared to previous years, there has been a change in age distribution for CLA. Whilst those aged 5-9 years and 10-12 years have remained static, there has been an increase for those aged 16-17 years by almost 4%. Children aged under 4 years has declined from 125 (12.8%) to 96 (9.8%)

CLA Age	Total	% of Population
Under 1	22	2%
1-4 years	74	7.5%
5-9 years	137	14%
10-12 years	141	14.4%
13-15 years	239	24.4%
16-17 years	365	37.3%
Total	978	100%

The gender split has remained the same as 2021-2022 and 2022-2023: 41% female (n403) and 39% male (n574).

Disability Data

The 2021 census indicates that 14.4% of the Hertfordshire population is considered disabled under the Equality Act 2010. The CLA population is reflective of the county, with 15.4% (n151) of children and young people having a disability. This is an increase on 2022-2023 of 24 children and young people, when the overall population remained static.

The majority of children with disabilities are placed with fostering families (55%) with the second largest provision type being residential children's homes (28.5%). This is

significantly higher than the percentage of the CLA population as a whole, where 11% of children and young people live in residential children's homes.

The Council has one in-house residential home for children with disabilities, plus a block contracted residential children's home operated by an independent provider in the county.

Location of Placements

Ensuring that children and young people are placed within Hertfordshire continues to be a challenge for commissioners.

Children placed outside of Hertfordshire borders

As of 31st March 2024, there were 376 children and young people placed outside of Hertfordshire's borders; 270 placed in Band 1 areas and 106 placed "At a Distance", of these, 36 were placed 100 miles or more from their home address (34% of all children placed at a distance). This is down by 7 (1%) from last year.

Band 1 comprises Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Kent, London and Peterborough.

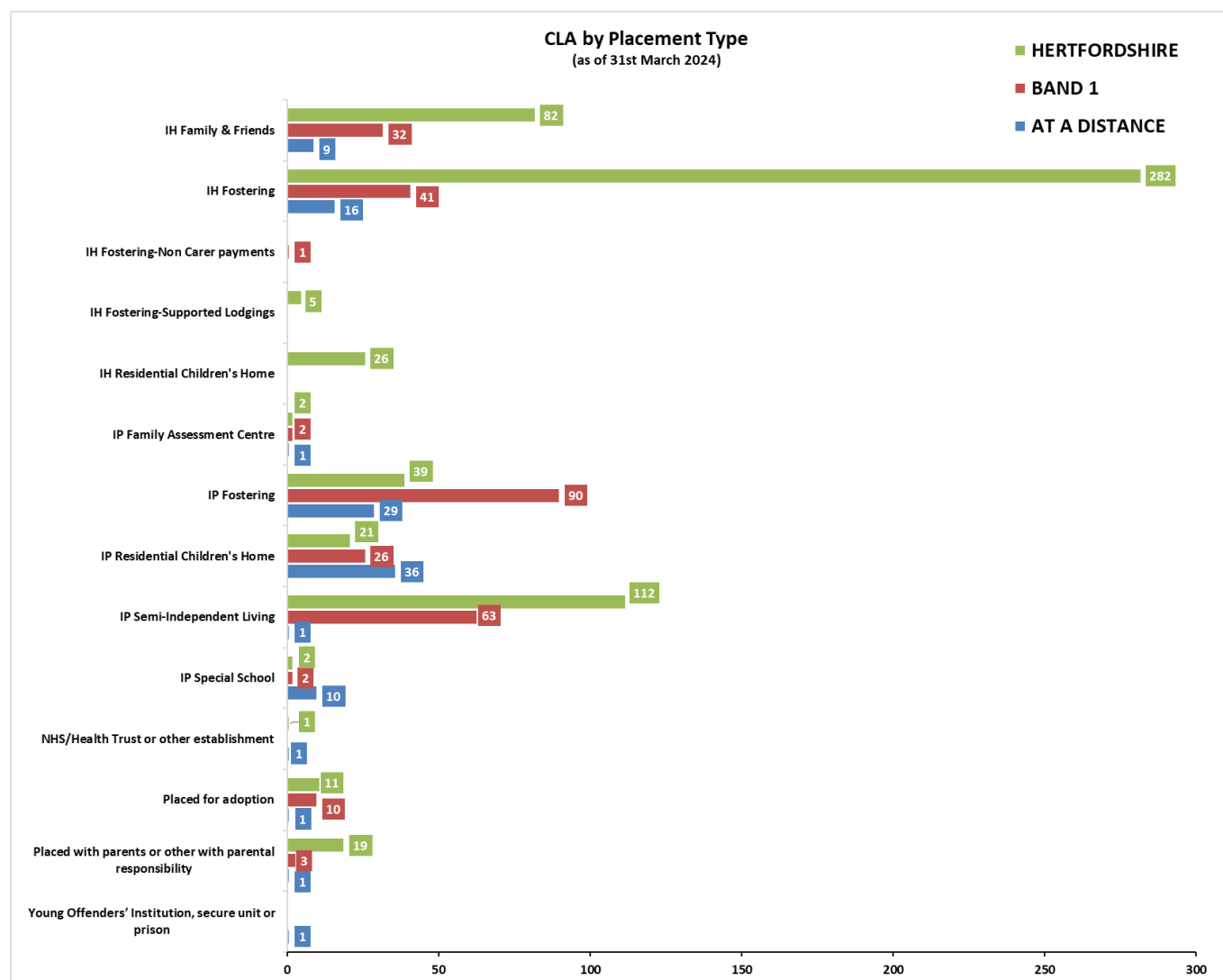
CLA-PLACEMENT TYPE	AT A DISTANCE	BAND 1	HERTFORDSHIRE	TOTAL
IH Family & Friends	9	32	82	123
IH Fostering	16	41	282	339
IH Fostering-Non Carer payments	0	1	0	1
IH Fostering-Supported Lodgings	0	0	5	5
IH Residential Children's Home	0	0	26	26
IP Family Assessment Centre	1	2	2	5
IP Fostering	29	90	39	158
IP Residential Children's Home	36	26	21	83
IP Semi-Independent Living	1	63	112	176
IP Special School	10	2	2	14
NHS/Health Trust or other establishment	1	0	1	2
Placed for adoption	1	10	11	22
Placed with parents or other with parental responsibility	1	3	19	23
Young Offenders' Institution, secure unit or prison	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	106	270	602	978

CLA placed at a distance by age is showing that the highest number of children placed at a distance (67) fall within the 13 to 17 age range.

There were 36 children placed 100+ miles from home, which equates to 34% of all children placed at a distance. This is a decrease compared with 43 in March 2023, which equated to 35% of all children placed at a distance.

Summary of all Placements

As at March 2024, placement types were as follows:



Placement Stability

There has been a small decrease in the number of children and young people experiencing placement instability, with 9% of children looked after experiencing 3 or more placement changes in the last 12 months. This figure was 9.36% in 2022-2023 and remains lower than statistical neighbours at 9.8%.

Independent Placement Average Weekly Costs

Provision	March 2020	March 2021	March 2022	March 2023	March 2024
Fostering	£1049	£1071	£976	£1184	£1291
Residential	£4017	£4945	£5060	£6693	£6339
Semi-Independent	£1386	£1631	£1693	£2263	£3320

Placement Sufficiency

Residential Care

Provision within Hertfordshire

There continues to be more residential children's homes operating within Hertfordshire than ever before. This is a result of the work invested in the Residential Strategy and the time taken to engage with independent providers. The Hertfordshire residential providers forum is now held quarterly with in-house service leads and independent providers meeting to share good practice, information and provide training opportunities.

There are currently 19 independent registered children's homes (up 4 from last year), operated by 10 (up 2 from last year) different independent providers, along with 8 local authority homes. Four of the independent homes include use of the Council's properties as part of the Residential Strategy.

In-House Residential

Our in-house residential services have seven homes currently operating:

- Three 5 bed longer term homes
- One 3 bed longer term home
- One 6 bed home for children with disabilities
- One 3 bed home to offer solo and short-term provision in 3 separate flats
- One 3 bed home for short term step down from inpatient provision or to avoid an inpatient episode
- One short stay ARC provision with three beds

All of our in-House homes have achieved a "Good" or "Outstanding" rating from Ofsted.¹

¹ One home is awaiting its first Ofsted inspection since registering

ARC Short Stays

ARC Services works therapeutically with families across Hertfordshire to prevent family breakdown and children and young people entering the care system.

The service provides different interventions based on the needs of the family.

In the past year, our Rapid Response team have responded to 736 new crisis referrals, de-escalating crisis situations to prevent young people from entering the care system, being arrested or Placed in Police Protection, or to prevent them from presenting at Accident and Emergency with a mental health crisis. The Rapid Response bed is used to provide some support overnight as a last resort for families in crisis. In addition, it has been used flexibly to support young people waiting for placements to be identified, saving HCC high emergency placement costs and enabling planning in a child focused way.

Our Harmful Sexualised Behaviour Team works with an average of 20 families at a time, completing AIM Assessments where deemed required and following up with Harmful Sexual Behaviour Interventions. The team has prevented young people from being removed from home, excluded from school and isolated from communities.

Our Outreach team has accepted 49 new referrals during this period, despite the waiting list being closed for 3 of those months due extensive waiting list caused by high demand and short staff at the time.

Our Residential Team have 3 beds to provide short stays as part of a families together programme. During this time, their occupancy was running at an average of 64% each month. Alongside the stays, the team provides support to the families at home and through family sessions / support calls and visits.

The whole service also provides creative, alternative interventions to the families they support including family therapy, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), Play Therapy, Video Interaction Guidance (VIG), Woodland Days, Non-Violent Resistance (NVR), Lego Group, Craft Events, Parent Groups, Family Links.

Independent Residential

There are now 20 independent homes within Hertfordshire offering up to 72 placements for children and young people. Not all of the placements are available to the Council. Some of the homes form part of larger contract arrangements, some part of Hertfordshire contract arrangements and others are available as spot purchases.

Of the 20 homes, 5 were registered in the last 12 months. Two further homes are in the process of registration and the Residential Strategy will also mobilise further homes in the next year.

In the year to come, the commissioning team will continue to focus on the mobilisation of Residential Strategy homes alongside independent providers as well as procurement activity on the final phase of the project.

Time will also be spent engaging with the local market to ensure that any new potential homes established meet the needs of children and young people locally and utilise local services. Given the gap between available independent residential homes and the number of young people in Hertfordshire who need a local provision, we encourage independent providers who wish to expand their services within the County.

Foster Care

In-House Fostering

As of 31st March 2024, there were 612 children and young people under 18 (SMC and not SMC) in foster placements (which include Mainstream, Independent, Family & Friends, Adoption and Supported Lodgings, but excludes those in “staying put” arrangements). Of the under 18s placed in an Independent fostering placement, there were 156 (26%).

There were 456 children placed in in-house foster placements as of March 2024. The table below indicates the breakdown of placement types:

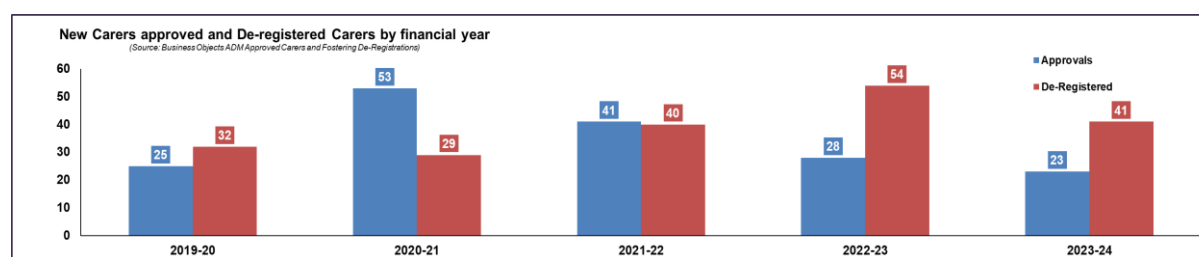
Provision Type	Placements
IH Fostering	337
IH Family & Friends	112
IH Adoption	3
IH Supported Lodgings	4

The Fostering Service is responsible for the recruitment and support of the in-house fostering resources for children in Hertfordshire. Fostering provides care and support for some of the most vulnerable children in Hertfordshire. The focus of the recruitment strategy is to ensure sufficient recruitment of mainstream foster carers. The service recruits foster carers from a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, to reflect the diverse needs of children in care. The service welcomes applications from the LGBT+ community.

New approvals in Hertfordshire over the last 5 years have fluctuated significantly and reflect the national challenge of sustained recruitment and retention of foster carers to undertake the complex but rewarding task of caring for looked after children in partnership with the local authority. In the last 2 financial years, Hertfordshire experienced a significant drop in fostering enquiries and assessments, as well as a high number of de-registrations. This is in line with regional and national data, which has been referred to as a national fostering recruitment crisis.

This can be seen with the fluctuating figures below:

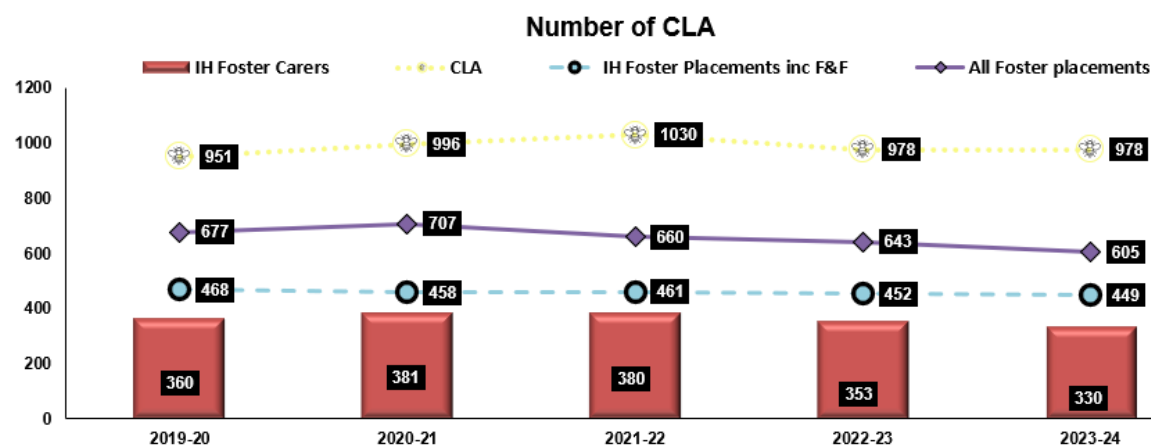
- Net loss of 20 foster carers for 2023/24
- Net loss of 26 foster carers for 2022/23
- Net gain of 1 foster carer for 2021/22
- Net gain of 24 foster carers for 2020/21
- Net loss of 7 Foster carers for 2019/20



Since 2019-20, when there were 360 households, there has been a loss of 30 carers (households). This figure includes those who have moved to Friends & Family, Shared Care and Supported Lodgings.

The ratio of in-house foster placements (including Family & Friends) to all foster placements has increased from 69% in 2019-20 to 74% in 2023-24.

The ratio of all foster placements to children looked after (CLA) has decreased from 71% in 2019-20 to 62% in 2023-24. There has been a significant decrease since 2020-21 in IP Fostering, with 2023-24 at the lowest.



We are challenged with a declining number of foster carers and this remains a huge worry, however by end of March 24, we still were placing similar numbers of children with in-house foster carers to those placed by the beginning of April 23. We have a dedicated Matching Co-ordinator in the Fostering Service working closely with the fostering teams and foster carers to ensure that we support carers who can care for additional children. Our utilisation rate in 2023-24 has consistently been over 90% with a peak of 96% in February 2024.

The number of children placed in independent foster agency (IFA) placements has declined, and, by end of March 2024, 74% of all fostered children in Hertfordshire were placed with in-house foster carers. Our aim is to continue to increase this number to ensure that children are placed locally with in-house foster carers.

In response to the increased number of children coming into care in an emergency, in October 2022, the fostering service launched the Emergency Fostering Hub scheme to provide 10-day emergency placements for children and young people. This scheme has been really successful and we now have 6 dedicated emergency foster carers offering emergency care to children. Since we launched the scheme 18 months ago, we have had over 70 children placed.

In 2024, we will be launching 2 new fostering schemes:

- First, we will launch a Fostering Short stays scheme, with dedicated short stay foster carers who will offer planned short stay care to children up to the age of 11 years to give families a break and will give children the opportunity to build positive relationships with a fostering family, take part in family activities and have fun.

Fostering short stays aims to offer early intervention and support to families to prevent family breakdown at a later stage and can consist of day care and/or sleepover care for up to 2 nights (ie Friday to Sunday). We will be utilising existing sleepover carers who currently have limited availability ie only free weekends or holiday periods due to work commitments.

- In addition to this, Fostering has been awarded funding to launch an Intensive fostering scheme to provide safe and nurturing foster homes for children who would otherwise be cared for in residential children's homes. Foster carers within the scheme, will be offered therapeutic parenting training/support and carers and children will receive ongoing support by a dedicated team of outreach workers, Fostering senior practitioner and a Therapeutic parenting practitioner.

Over the last 3 years, service development has been focused on improving the support offer through ARC Fostering (therapeutic parenting support) and the Mockingbird Family Model, to address the changing demands on foster carers to manage and care for older children with a complex profile and ensure that fostering remains a rewarding activity for all those already fostering and those wishing to foster in the future.

In Hertfordshire, we now have 8 Mockingbird hubs supporting over 100 children and their foster carers. Hertfordshire is the second largest Mockingbird fostering service in the UK and feedback from carers and children receiving mockingbird support is overwhelmingly positive and has an impact on placement stability, as well as foster carer retention. An internal survey showed that carers within mockingbird hubs are less likely to resign than carers without this support.

In addition to Mockingbird, Hertfordshire has over the last years launched other types of community hubs. The Under 7s hub supports over 30 families and, in 2023-24, we launched a similar community hub, Hearts hub, which offers support to children with additional needs and their carers.

In 2023, a new Fostering strategy was launched to focus on recruitment and retention of foster carers. Also, Hertfordshire joined with the rest of the Eastern region in forming FosterEast (regional pathfinder) which is a fostering recruitment initiative with the aim of increasing fostering approvals across the region.

Independent Fostering

There are currently four independent fostering agencies registered within Hertfordshire. As of March 2024, the Council only had children placed with three of the agencies fostering families (14) equating to 7.5% of all fostering placements available (185).

Historically, independent fostering agencies have reported that it is difficult for them to recruit foster carers within Hertfordshire due to the quality of the offer from the in-house fostering service. Independent agencies are experiencing the same difficulties in recruiting as the in-house service.

As the host of the Children's Cross Regional Arrangements Group (CCRAG) Hertfordshire has worked with partners to develop an early alert function within the CCRAG database. This allows independent agencies to send early alerts to host placement/brokerage teams when they become aware of upcoming vacancies. The alert function was introduced in 2023-23 and commissioners continue to promote its use so that children can be placed closer to home and within their local areas.

Placements with independent fostering agency families have decreased in the last 12 months by 39, representing a 20% reduction.

The focus for 2024-25 includes working with the Pan-Bedfordshire authorities to re-commission their Approved Provider List (APL) contracted IFAs and join the new contract starting in 2025. The aims of joining with neighbouring authorities include efficiency

savings on time and not replicating work for IFAs. Having set contract prices with agencies, categories (“Lots”) based on authority need, and fixed agreed annual uplifts, will support the work of the commissioning team. Contract management will be undertaken jointly, but each authority will retain responsibility and oversight for their children placed with independent fostering families.

It is hoped that greater relationships with IFAs will also help grow foster carer numbers in Hertfordshire and neighbouring authorities.

Semi-Independent/Supported Accommodation Provision

Provision within Hertfordshire

The Council operated a Framework Agreement for the provision of Semi-Independent/Supported Accommodation for 16 and 17-year-old children in care until 4th November 2023 and since then it has operated a spot contract market. Semi-Independent/Supported Accommodation is intended for those young people who can live independently with minimal support. Most children who access the Council’s Semi-Independent/Supported Accommodation provisions are placed in Hertfordshire and sufficiency is not an issue with this cohort, as the capacity is regularly reviewed and increased as required.

An 8 bedded provision in St Albans was opened specifically for Separated Migrant Children (SMC) in December 2023 and a 6 bedded provision was opened in Watford in January 2024 for mainstream young people and SMC (as a result of increased demand), with new developments planned in order to meet any increase in the number of allocated SMC from the Home Office.

Of the 176 children in placements in 2023/24, 112 were placed in Hertfordshire, 63 in local authorities bordering Hertfordshire and 1 at a distance. The majority of the 64 children placed out of Hertfordshire were unable to live within Hertfordshire borders due to a risk to their safety if they remained in the County.

The profile of the young people in Supported Accommodation ranges from young people who may present with mental health issues, challenging behaviour, risk of exploitation, whether that is Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) or Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), substance misuse and gang involvement/County Lines. The Supported Accommodation market consists of multi-occupancy accommodation, solo accommodation, specific provisions for SMC and also a five bedded pilot provision for ‘Staying Close’ (a service for 18+ Care Leavers who are not eligible for social housing due to their high needs).

The aim of all Supported Accommodation services is to support children/young people with their transition to adulthood and towards living independently post 18 years after leaving care. This is achieved by providing high quality accommodation and support whilst facilitating their personal well-being, ensuring their safety and equipping them with the skills required to sustain an independent tenancy long term.

Due to the high number of Care Leavers being threatened with eviction, the council has introduced the Intensive Outreach Support service to prevent young people losing their tenancies, using Government grant funding awarded specifically for this purpose.

The current average cost of Supported Accommodation beds in Hertfordshire (excluding additional support) is £1575 per week.

The council also has Housing Related Support (HRS) contracts, that provide hostel 'type' supported accommodation for homeless 16-25 year-olds, consisting of 328 beds and delivered by 5 Registered Social Landlords across the 10 districts, with 9 Crashpad beds specifically for young people aged 16/17 years who are street homeless.

Housing Brokerage and Care Leaver Accommodation

Care Leavers aged 18+ from 1 st April 2023 to 31 st March 2024	Total
18 years old	211
19 to 21 years old	535
22 to 26 years old	186
All Care Leavers 18 years +	932

Housing Brokerage works to meet Children's Services other accommodation needs, including accommodation for Care Leavers after they leave their care placements at 18 years old. Housing Brokerage also provides accommodation for families with vulnerable children who are not eligible for accommodation from the Local District and Borough Councils within Hertfordshire.

The Housing Brokerage Team have, until 23/24, primarily relied on accommodation services that have not been commissioned and are available on the open market, for example nightly let accommodation. However, in the year to come, there will be a number of areas where the team will look to develop newly commissioned services. These will include:

- Staying Close Accommodation:

Through funding from DfE (Department for Education), the Council will develop its pilot program of Staying Close accommodation for Care Leavers with additional support needs. This will provide up to 20 bed spaces across Hertfordshire, with 5

having been delivered in March 2024, a further 5 planned for delivery by May 2024 and 10 more by Summer 2024. This program provides accommodation for care leavers with complex needs that are not ready to live independently, and require higher support to develop their independent living skills post 18.

- Separated Migrant Care Leaver Accommodation:

This will be specialist accommodation for former Separated Migrant Children (SMC) who are, at 18, still waiting for their “Leave to Remain” from the Home Office, and who remain the responsibility of Children’s Services to accommodate. This accommodation is currently purchased on the open market as nightly lets, but these settings have no support. This cohort, while able to live independently, require additional support with their transition. Not only are they becoming adults, but they are also transitioning from one culture to another.

The Housing Brokerage Team will also work with the Separated Migrant Children & Care Leaver Service Manager as they review the Joint Housing Protocol (JHP). The JHP will have a light touch review of 2 sections, but will have a more in-depth revision of the Care Leaver section of the protocol to ensure that the pathways for them out of care are sufficient and working to support and stabilize care leavers through that transitional process into adulthood.

SEND Commissioning

Children who are, or have been, in care have been found to be more than twice as likely to have Special Educational Need and the lowest performance in terms of educational outcomes, compared to their peers.² The prevalence of SEN support in children looked after by local authorities in England for continuous period of 12 months was 56.2 % in 2020/21. The most common type of need was social, emotional, and mental health which accounted for 49.2% of the children in need receiving SEN support.³

The [SEND Strategy](#) aims to improve outcomes for children with SEND and their families by maximising the use of resources and ensuring that Hertfordshire is compliant with statutory requirements from the SEND reforms. The plan includes increasing Specialist School places, expanding the local SEND offer, and improving education, travel options and the transition to adulthood.

Data relating to Children Looked After with SEND is published in the [JSNA \(Joint Strategic Needs Assessment\) documents \(hertfordshire.gov.uk\)](#)

² Department of Education. Promoting the Education of Looked-after Children and Previously Looked-after Children; 2018

³ GOV.UK. Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England

There is a well-established SEND Commissioning team that facilitates commissioning across services. Working in close partnership with health commissioners, this team delivers against the joint commissioning strategy and operates a personalised approach to meeting the needs of our children and young people, rooted in co-production. This impacts how we are commissioning and designing services to work directly with children and young people and their families.

SEND independent special school placements (day and residential) are monitored by Children's Services commissioners working closely with ISL (integrated services for learning) and Virtual School colleagues. As of April 2024, 395 children and young people were attending Independent Special Schools, of which, 47 are children looked after.

	Non-CLA	CLA	Totals
Day Placement	314	25	339
Residential Placement	34	22	56
Totals	348	47	395

The Risk Assessment and Visit Schedule has been developed by Commissioners and is used to track any risks across all commissioned independent schools and a monthly meeting provides a coordinated and transparent approach to monitoring and review of any concerns raised. We supported the National Safeguarding Children's Panel to undertake a review of all Children Looked After in Special Schools. Learning from this review has been shared nationally and locally, with oversight of the Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership. Findings provided reassurance around our placement oversight and identified learning needs that contribute towards our overall continuous plan for improvement. The commissioning team regularly reviews placements to ensure that the support is appropriate and of a sufficient standard.

Children looked after (CLA) with SEND are well supported by the Virtual School which monitors the quality of planning and support. The Virtual School supports the work of the wider partnership well. The CLA cohort has a higher proportion of children who have Special Educational Needs compared to the general population in Hertfordshire. This is, in part, because the Virtual School work hard to identify and meet their needs with an effective virtual school offer. The Virtual School ensures that the education of children with SEND is good, through regular scrutiny, school visits, collaboration across Children's Services with key partners and training, advice and guidance for teachers and senior leaders in schools, both mainstream and specialist. The Virtual School also supports the monitoring of children and young people with SEND who are in residential placements through regular and effective reviews of personal education plans (PEPs) which are specific to the child's or young person's needs. PEP reviews consider strengths and progress and effectively capture the voice of the child or young person. The specific targets that are set as part of the PEP review process ensure that appropriate steps are put in place to support each individual child or young person's progress.

Provision in Hertfordshire

There is early commissioning work to support children with SEND on the cusp of care. We are currently looking at a model of extended stays to address some of our most complex challenges:

- Avoiding hospital admissions / step down
- Reducing out of county education provisions by providing respite and short stays
- Increasing resilience in our families

We recognise that access to timely respite supports children and young people to remain at home with their families and enables them to continue access to their school.

Hertfordshire has a Dynamic Support Register (DSR) in place which identifies approximately 70 young people who are at risk of admission to Tier 4 CYPMHS hospital. To prevent such admissions or unplanned moves, we want to work with families and offer timely respite. This will help prevent escalation and provide a needed break for families and young people. Families expressed that they need a break/respite, but found previously there has been a limited crisis response or emergency respite provision which can be utilised when a child or young person is displaying challenging behaviours. It is recognised that in some instances, respite is only needed as a one off to 'break the cycle' of behaviours, plus also giving parents time to recuperate. For some young people, we are not considering an admission or residential placement, but we do need to explore preventative measures to stop a child's behaviours escalating further and placing them at risk of exclusion. Access to respite as a preventative measure in such instances may support by offering a safe space to implement care and support/behaviour strategies.

Overnight Short Breaks

Overnight Short Breaks (OSB) are residential services for children and young people with SEND and complex health needs that live in Hertfordshire. These services operate during evenings, weekends and throughout the day during the school holidays.

The number of children and young people accessing OSB services at year end 2023/24 was 101, with the largest number of these children and young people having ASD and/or challenging behaviour, and second largest number having complex health needs. In addition to overnight short breaks, each service will provide an emergency bed for children and young people who meet the criteria to access the service and have an immediate need for accommodation because they cannot return home and for whom no other accommodation option is available. The expectation is that the Emergency Bed is used only for short admissions and that there is an expectation that the child/young person will be temporarily resident for no longer than 6 weeks. In addition, discharge planning will begin on admission, and will be co-produced with the family and child/young person, with

the aim of working towards returning the individual to the family home or a suitable long-term placement within the 6-week timescale.

A review of Section 75 Agreements with Health took place during 2023 to look at the number of children and young people that attend Overnight Short Breaks with complex health needs. This review supported the continuation of funding from the Integrated Care Board (ICB) for this service.

An extensive solo stay provision has been commissioned to support children and young people on the 'Dynamic Support Register' (DSR), providing step down provision and integration back with the family and OSB respite. A bespoke team to support the child or young person and involve the family, social workers, current carers, and anyone else who supports the child. Once the child moves into the home, they will receive wrap around clinical support, behaviour support, therapeutic support; based on the individual needs of the child. In addition, children and young people may have continued access to their local educational provision.

Short Breaks

A 35% increase in the short-break budget has resulted in re-commissioning of the service. This is currently underway, **informed by the views** of our parents and carers and will lead to an extension of the short break offer in 2024. Intensive market development has been undertaken to broaden the provider base and increase the number and variety of activities on offer for the 24/25 financial year, as well as providing a countywide offer, ensuring we cater for a variety of needs, complexity, and age ranges. A Community Navigation Officer has been appointed to increase support to families and children and young people with SEND, focussing on improving knowledge of, and access to, activities and clubs already running in the community. This information will be linked to the Local Offer.

Homecare

The Homecare Service is currently being re-commissioned to ensure there is countywide support to meet the complex health needs and behavioural support needs of our children and young people.

Residential Strategy

The CLA Residential Strategy was established in 2019 to improve the outcomes for Children Looked After and their families by increasing the availability of local provisions, facilitating family contact and promoting reunification. This increase is delivered through both in-house services and through independent homes which are contract managed via our commissioning teams.

The primary project objectives:

- Improve the outcomes for CLA and their families.
- Ensure the right children are in appropriate care, at the right time.
- Increase the uptake of in-house provision to reduce spend on independent provisions; includes growth of in-house provision.
- Increase the number of children placed within Hertfordshire's borders.
- Create the right type of residential provision in partnership with independent providers and in-house services to create stability and value for money, improved access to health and education provision and improved chances of step-down to foster care, or return to family.
- To provide at least **78%** of residential placements within Hertfordshire's borders, or in neighbouring local authorities, by 2028.

The strategy has two distinct phases:

Phase 1: Objective was to deliver 31 additional beds. This phase commenced in early 2020 and currently has 21 beds open and operational, with the remaining beds in development.

These homes are a mix of sizes including 4-bed, 3-bed, 2-bed, and 1-bed, some of which are short term/emergency, whilst others are medium to longer term placements. We have developed this mix in response to needs.

By establishing diverse provisions, we ensure that all our children, regardless of their individual needs, have access to excellent options and appropriate care. In addition to the new housing, we acknowledge the importance of a comprehensive approach to childcare, encompassing education, health, and social needs.

Phase 2: Objective is to deliver an additional 22 beds. This phase commenced in January 2024 and is currently developing 4 beds, with several future options under consideration.

We continue to aspire to the ethos that only the right children enter residential accommodation with the best matching available, and that step-downs to foster care or return to family, where appropriate and possible, are facilitated through improvements in the quality and support around placements. We aim to reduce the number of children in residential provision through linked initiatives including the “Inside Out” (intensive coaching) and the “Building Bridges” (reunification) projects, which are aligned to the Fostering Strategy.

By creating new accommodation within the residential strategy, we expect not only to improve outcomes for children and their families, but also to reduce a significant overspend on the independent placement budgets.

Inside Out

Inside Out is a programme that is testing an innovative approach to improving outcomes and stability for Children Looked After. The programme was initially funded through the Department for Education’s Innovation Fund and commissioned in partnership with Essex and Norfolk County councils and was delivered by The Children’s Society (TCS) on a pilot basis.

Following 3 successful years of the pilot project, the Inside Out project has been re-contracted within Hertfordshire. The Children’s Society (TCS) is the lead provider for the programme and continues to work in partnership with Essex and Hertfordshire to achieve positive outcomes for young people on the programme.

The Inside Out coaching service offers intensive support to children and young people in care, who may not be getting all the support they need from the current system of social care and support. The programme aims to provide the critical scaffolding to support a positive transition into adulthood. An Inside Out coach works 1:1 with a young person to establish a sense of stability by way of a positive relationship, encouragement to make positive decisions and resilience to face setbacks should they occur.

With the use of intensive coaching, the goal is to stabilise and enable children to return home, or successfully ‘step down’ to less intensive care wherever appropriate and possible. Other positive outcomes include engagement with education or training or a reduction in missing episodes.

The project supported 23 children and young people throughout 2023-2024 with 97.7% either remaining in their existing home or moving to what is considered to be a less

intensive home (either foster family, Supported Accommodation or home to family) at the end of their coaching period.

Summary

As outlined throughout, there is a need to continue increasing local provision. The national shortage of appropriate residential and fostering provision continues, especially in relation to teenage placements and placements for children with complex histories and high needs. Placement costs continue to rise placing pressure on placement budgets. A range of activity is planned over the coming years to address these challenges. The key activity for 2024-2025 is outlined below.

Key Priorities in 2024/2025

Prioritise placement stability initiatives across commissioning activity including the provision of additional support into placements
Timely Quality Assurance and monitoring of placements to ensure high quality care
Mobilise a further 2 children's homes; utilising existing HCC properties run by independent providers by March 2025
Continue to embed the fostering strategy to increase the number and range of in-house foster carers
Work with CCRAAG partners to develop the new monitoring module and publicise the Early Alert function to encourage local placements
Commission additional homes under the Residential Strategy to increase the number of children and young people able to remain in Hertfordshire
Housing Brokerage to monitor children and young people placed on housing register to ensure they are on the appropriate housing register with any issues of move on quickly addressed with the Local Housing Authority
Ensure existing and new supported accommodation providers meet the necessary quality standards to deliver high quality services to our young people under the new Ofsted Regulations
Jointly with partners, commission an Approved Provider List for Independent Foster Agencies
Explore new models of extended stays for children and young people within the 0-25 SEND service to address the most complex challenges
Re-commission the Homecare service countywide