

Cared for Children Sufficiency Statement

March 2025



Foreword



In Sefton we hold a deep and enduring commitment to the children and young people in our care. As corporate parents, we want for them what any good parent would want for their children: to be safe, happy, healthy, and loved—and to have every opportunity to grow, learn, and thrive.

Our ambition is clear. We want every child and young person to have the support they need to become confident, fulfilled, and independent adults. Achieving this means ensuring access to high-quality, compassionate, local accommodation and support services that are responsive to their individual needs, wants and aspirations.

This Sufficiency Strategy sets out our priorities for the next three years. It outlines the actions we will take to ensure that children and young people receive the right care, in the right place, at the right time. It reflects our determination to support more of our children to live locally, within stable and loving family environments. It also highlights our commitment to strengthening our commissioning approach — ensuring that our services are not only fit for today but are also equipped to meet the changing needs of our cared-for and care-experienced children and young people in the years ahead.

This strategy is both a statement of intent and a call to action. It reaffirms our shared responsibility to provide the best possible start in life for every child and young person in our care.

**Councillor Diane Roscoe,
Cabinet Member for Children, School and Families**

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Introduction

In Sefton, we believe that for most children, the best place to live is with their families of origin. However, there are circumstances where some children need to live in alternative care arrangements. Sefton Council is the corporate parent for children in our care and we have high aspirations for them. Our duty goes beyond the provision of safe placements for these children and requires us to do all that we can to ensure that they have the support and resources to achieve the best possible outcomes.

We have both a moral and legal duty to ensure, as far as it is practicable, that there is sufficient and high-quality accommodation for children who are in care within the local area and that we address any identified gaps in provision through robust commissioning strategies. This duty is set out in Section 22G of the Children's Act (1989) and was further outlined in statutory guidance issued by the Department for Education (2010). This Sufficiency Strategy sets out how we will meet this duty and the steps we will take to secure sufficient accommodation which can provide children with the love and support they need to achieve their full potential.

Section One sets out how we work in Sefton and the key principles that inform and underpin what we do. Section Two provides an overview of our cared for children population, identifying key themes/trends and highlighting current and emerging areas of need. Section Three provides information about the referrals that we make, and Section Four provides information about the local supply of care provision. The Strategy concludes with key priorities for the next two years which set out the actions that we will be taking to ensure that we can source local, loving and stable homes.

Section 1: How we work in Sefton

As corporate parents for cared for children and care experienced young people, we want the same things for our children and young people as any good parent would want for their child. We want our children and young people to have a healthy and happy childhood, to feel valued and loved, and to have the chance to grow, develop and learn so that they can find their own way in the world as successful and fulfilled adults.

Our commitment to supporting cared for children and care experienced young people is set out within our Corporate Parenting Strategy (2023-25). In addition, our Sefton Pledge – which was co-produced with young people - sets out what our children and young people can expect from us. Both documents inform how we operate as a local authority and underpin this Sufficiency Strategy. Our Sefton Pledge for cared for children and care experienced young people is as follows:

- ✓ We promise you will have a named Social Worker who you know how to contact and who will keep in touch with you.
- ✓ We promise we will involve you in all of the decisions that affect your life.
- ✓ We promise we will work hard to sort out any problems or worries you have.
- ✓ We promise that you will have a Care Plan that is up-to-date and meets your needs.
- ✓ We promise we will do our best to find a home that suits you.
- ✓ We promise we will help you, where possible, to stay in touch with your family and any other people who are important to you
- ✓ We promise to help you to do the best you possibly can at school and in your future education, employment, and training.
- ✓ We promise to encourage you to develop your talents, interests and hobbies and to support you to do things you enjoy
- ✓ We promise to take an interest in your health and wellbeing, and encourage you to be healthy
- ✓ We promise to work with you to give you all the help and support you need to make a success of moving on from care

Listening to our children

The voices of children and young people influence decision making at both an operational and strategic level, through service delivery and policy development. It is important we listen to children and young people in our care to help us understand their lived experiences so that we can continue to improve the services that support them. Our Participation Team provide opportunities for children and young people to tell us what they think about the services that support them. Young people can participate individually, through input into their own care plans, and collectively through group forums.

Sefton has two well-established Cared For Councils which are split by age group (7–11-

year-olds and 12-17-year-olds) and a Care Experienced Council for young people aged between 18 and 25 years old. These groups meet regularly in-person and online and provide an opportunity for young people to come together to share their experiences, supporting the council to improve services for all children and young people in Sefton.

Our young people are involved in staff interviews, including senior management roles, and deliver training sessions to staff and foster carers. Young people are also represented on our Corporate Parenting Board.

We have developed a Young Inspector's Program for care experienced young people. The role of the Young Inspector is to support the Compliance and Quality Assurance Officer to inspect the quality of care and support being provided by services that have been commissioned by the council.

Cared for and care experienced young people are regularly invited to share their thoughts through surveys, participation newsletters and feedback forms. The Pledge Survey is conducted annually over two age groups (5- 9 and 10–17-year-olds). This survey has been in place since 2009 and gives the council the opportunity to take a 'temperature check' of the experiences of cared for children in relation to the support and services we provide for them. We also run a Care Experienced Survey for 18–25-year-olds. Feedback from these surveys is used by us to plan improvements in both our practice and process. We also use the information to assess the impact that any changes that we have made have had from the perspective of young people.

An example of where feedback from young people has led directly to changes in our services is our work to improve our housing offer for care experienced young people. Following feedback, we co-produced a Care Experienced Housing Charter which set out in detail what our young people could expect from the local authority. Working with local housing providers, we also developed our 'House to Home' pilot which is supporting young people to decorate their new homes.

Our work with young people will be further strengthened with our planned investment in the Engagement and Participation Service during 2025. This investment will enable us to recruit more staff which will increase our team's capacity to do more proactive engagement with young people, ensuring they continue to feel engaged and are able to actively shape our services.

Keeping families together

We are committed to supporting children and families to stay together whenever it is safe to do so. Our practice framework is about a 'family first' approach, supporting and developing resilience in families to remain together. We believe that individuals, families, and communities are capable of growth, learning, and positive change, and that they are experts on their own lives. Our approach fosters empowerment and self-determination, building resilience in families and communities by highlighting their strengths and placing them at the heart of our purpose.

When things go wrong within a family and a child is at risk or is suffering harm, we will in

the first instance always work to keep a child within their family networks and create change through the child protection framework or using the legal framework of the pre-proceedings processes in the Public Law Outline.

When children are placed in care, we will regularly review the child's care arrangement to ensure that they continue to meet the changing needs of children. Our 'family first' approach means that (where appropriate) we will always consider if children could be supported to return home, and what support children and families might need to enable this to happen. To support this, we develop and implement comprehensive Going Home Plans that includes clear goals, timelines, and strategies to address any barriers to Going Home, following the NSPCC Going Home approach. This approach emphasises the importance of involving children and young people in the process, preparing families, and providing ongoing support for both children and families.

We anticipate that work to support families will be further strengthened by our decision to move our Family Group Conference Service under the operational management of our Support and Protect Service. This is in recognition of the important role that family group conferences can have in helping to find family-based solutions and prevent the need for children to come into care. This will come into effect in April 2025.

Focusing on the needs of children in placement planning

We recognise that not all children are able to remain with their parents or family networks and need to be safeguarded within alternative care arrangements. This Sufficiency Strategy will ensure that for these children we have the right care options which are in the right place, made at the right time and are of high quality.

We recognise that stable, resilient, and supportive relationships are a key factor in improving outcomes for children and we achieve this through our practice and in securing safe and caring homes for our children. Through the effective implementation of our Sufficiency Strategy and a child focused approach to care planning we will work to deliver the following for children in our care:

- The individual needs of children will inform the placement planning process.
- We will always look for our children to live locally and maintain connections with local communities.
- We want all our children to be loved, feel safe and be encouraged to be the best that they can be.
- We will take a holistic approach to placement planning, working with education and health partners to ensure children can access the support they need.
- We will strive for placement stability and encourage children to maintain safe and secure relationships with friends, family, and other trusted adults.

Family homes for our care experienced young people

We have ambitious plans for all our care experienced young people and want to continue to offer a nurturing, caring and stable home life in a family environment up to age 21 and beyond. We are working hard to extend our [care experienced offer](#) to ensure that the majority of our care experienced young people can experience this through 'Staying Put' arrangements (with former foster carers) or with Supported Lodging Carers.

We recognise, however, that for a small number of young people these family options will not meet identified need or may not be what the young person wants. For this cohort, our 'Here on Hand' project will support young people to access bespoke services that continue to support transition to successful independent living. The services put in place to support young people vary but include Ofsted registered Supported Accommodation.

Regional partnerships

There is increased focus nationally on how local authorities can work regionally to commission services more effectively. The Department for Education has recently funded two pathfinder projects to develop Regional Care Co-operative, which build on the recommendations for regional commissioning from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (MacAlister 2022)¹. In this context, Sefton will continue to actively explore opportunities for working in collaboration with other local authorities across the region.

Sefton is currently a partner of two regional commissioning arrangements: Placements Northwest (24 local authorities) and the Liverpool City Region Partner Provider Arrangement (6 local authorities). Working in partnership enables Sefton to achieve efficiencies through the sharing of information and resources. It also helps the local authority to deliver value for money by maximising the collective purchasing power of local authorities. These partnerships also help to ensure a standardised regional approach to procuring services, which is something that we know many of our providers greatly value. Sefton is committed to remaining an active member of both these partnerships.

Collaboration with providers

We recognise the importance of working closely with education, care and support providers, particularly those that are operating within Sefton. Developing and maintaining strong and effective working relationships with providers underpins effective commissioning and will support the council to realise the actions set out within this Strategy. Sefton is committed to continuing to invest in strategic commissioning and developing strong working relationships with local providers. We will continue to hold regular engagement sessions with local providers and promote relational commissioning.

Our Commissioning and Quality Assurance Team will continue to provide robust challenge and support to providers, supporting them to deliver the best possible services to our young people. This includes dedicated support to local Supported Accommodation providers, helping them to prepare for Ofsted regulation, which was introduced in October'23.

¹ [Independent review of children's social care - final report](#)

Section 2: Understanding our population of cared for children

This section provides some context about Sefton's care population and identifies key themes and trends. Where possible this has been contextualised with information from neighbouring authorities and statistical neighbours.

Falling cared for numbers, but still above the national average

As of March 2025, there were 512 children that were being cared for by Sefton Council. This was a 11.7% reduction from the previous year and a 16.7% reduction from March 2023. This downward trend contrasts to national data which shows that the number of cared for children in England remained relatively static over the last two years², following fifteen years of growth.

Figure 1: Sefton's Cared for Population: 2021 – 2025

	March 2021	March 2022	March 2023	March 2024	March 2025
No. cared for children	613	596	611	581	512

Despite this reduction, we continue to have a higher proportion of cared for children compared to regional and national averages. It also continues to be higher than our statistical neighbours (*which are local authorities that the Office of National Statistics has deemed to have similar characteristics to us*). This is set out in figure 2 below (*note that benchmarking data for 2025 is not yet available*):

Figure 2: Rate of Children Cared for per 10,000 (2020 – 2025)

		2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Rate of children cared for per 10,000 children	Sefton	116.0	112.0	114.0	109.3	94.9
	Stat Neighbours	90.0	90.0	93.0	92.0	
	Northwest	98.0	97.0	96.0	94.0	
	England	59.0	70.0	71.0	70.0	

The reduction in the number of cared for children is in part due to the 20.5% reduction over the last 12 months in the number of children entering the care system (down from 200 in 2023/24 to 159 in 2024/25). Another contributing factor is the work of our new Discharge

² The number of looked after children in England was 83,840 in 2023 and 83,630 in 2024. National figures for 2025 are yet to be published.

Team who are, where appropriate, working to discharge children from care. During 2024/25 the team have supported 68 Care Orders to be discharged.

A key focus of the team is supporting Connected Carers (typically carers from a child's wider family network) to be granted Special Guardianship. When a child moves into a Special Guardianship arrangement they cease to be looked after. The child's birth parent will retain shared parental responsibility, and the special guardian will have control of all day-to-day decisions. This is a positive move for many of our children as it provides them with a long term and stable family home.

The team are also working to address the high number of cared for children living with their parents and are working to discharge Care Orders where appropriate. In March 2022, 94 (16%) of our cared for children were living with their parents, which was significantly above the 7% national average. As of March 2025, there are 42 children living with parents which is equivalent to 8% of the cared for population and more in line with national averages (currently 6%³).

Continued demand for external placement

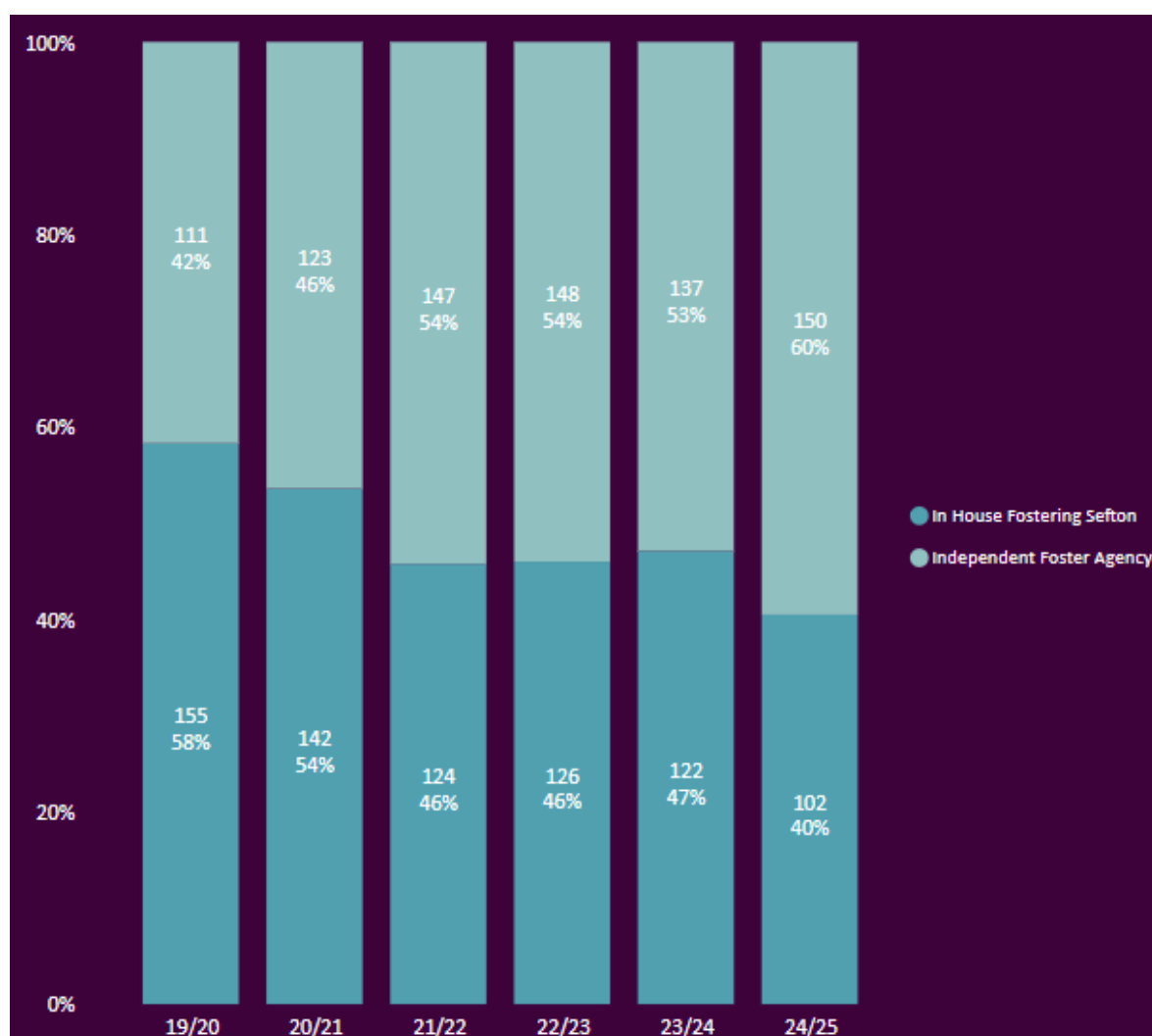
Despite a 16.7% reduction in the total number of cared for children over the last two years, the number of children in independent placements has marginally increased (*independent fostering is up 1.4% and independent residential is up 3.8%*). These increases, together with the overall reduction in cared for numbers, mean that as a percentage this cohort of children now accounts for a far greater proportion of our care population, moving from 42% in March 2023 to 51% in March 2025.

During 2023/24 the number of children in independent fostering and residential did fall but subsequently increased to the current levels which are the highest the council has experienced. Between 2023/24 and 2024/25 the number of children in independent fostering increased by 9.5% and there was a 9.3% increase in residential.

The increase in external fostering is in the context of a reducing number of children living with in-house foster carers. Indeed, Figure 4 below shows that over the last six years there has been an increase in both the number and proportion of children that are supported by foster carers from the independent sector. As of March 2025, 60% of all fostering placements were with independent providers.

³ [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

Figure 4: Number and proportion of children in foster homes (in-house vs Independent) *(This excludes connected carers supported by our in-house team)*



High numbers of children in residential care

Sefton has a significantly higher proportion of cared for children in residential care, compared to national averages. As of March 2025, 82 of our children were in residential care, which is equivalent to 15.9% of our cared for population. In comparison, only 10% of cared for children nationally live in residential care⁴.

The proportion of children in foster care (including connected carers) is in line with national averages. In March 2025, there were 346 children in foster placements (67%) which is in line with the 2024 national average⁵.

We have 29 young people in Supported Accommodation as of March 2025, which represents 5.6% of our care population. This is below the national average of 7%.

⁴ [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

Figure 5: Overview of Placement Types (2020/21 – 2024/25)

	20/21		21/22		22/23		23/24		24/25	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Fostering (Independent)	123	20.0%	147	24.7%	148	24.1%	137	23.4%	150	29.1%
Fostering In-house incl. connected cares	289	47.0%	245	41.2%	255	41.6%	253	43.2%	196	38.1%
Children's Homes	58	9.4%	66	11.1%	79	12.9%	75	12.8%	82	15.9%
Supported Accommodation	20	3.3%	26	4.4%	28	4.6%	26	4.4%	29	5.6%
Residential Schools			1	0.2%	1	0.2%				
Residential Family Centre	3	0.5%	4	0.7%	3	0.5%	1	0.2%	1	0.2%
Residential Care Home (CQC)	1	0.2%			4	0.7%	2	0.3%	4	0.8%
Placed with Parents	99	16.1%	94	15.8%	80	13.1%	79	13.5%	42	8.2%
Adoption	18	2.9%	5	0.8%	7	1.1%	10	1.7%	8	1.6%
Other	4	0.7%	7	1.2%	8	1.3%	3	0.5%	3	0.6%
Total	615	100	595	100	613	100	586	100	515	100

Age profile of our cared for children

Compared to national averages, Sefton has a higher proportion of children aged 5-9 years old (25% in Sefton compared to 18% nationally) and a lower proportion of 16-17 years olds (21% in Sefton compared to 27% nationally⁶). This variance can be seen in Figure 6 below.

The lower proportion of 16–17-year-olds in Sefton's may account for our slightly below average use of Supported Accommodation (5.6% of care for population as opposed to 7% nationally).

For children entering the care system, the most prevalent age cohort are children aged under one years of age. During 2024/25, this cohort accounted for 17% of all care entrants which was significant, although a reduction from 2022 when this cohort represented 25% of new entrants. In recent years there has also been an uptick in children entering care aged 16 - 17, and in March 2025 this cohort accounted for 19.5% of all new care entrants. In comparison, this cohort made up 10.6% of care entrants in 20/21 and 12.9% in 21/22.

Figure 6: Age of our Cared for Children, March 2025 (Sefton vs National Average)

⁶ [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

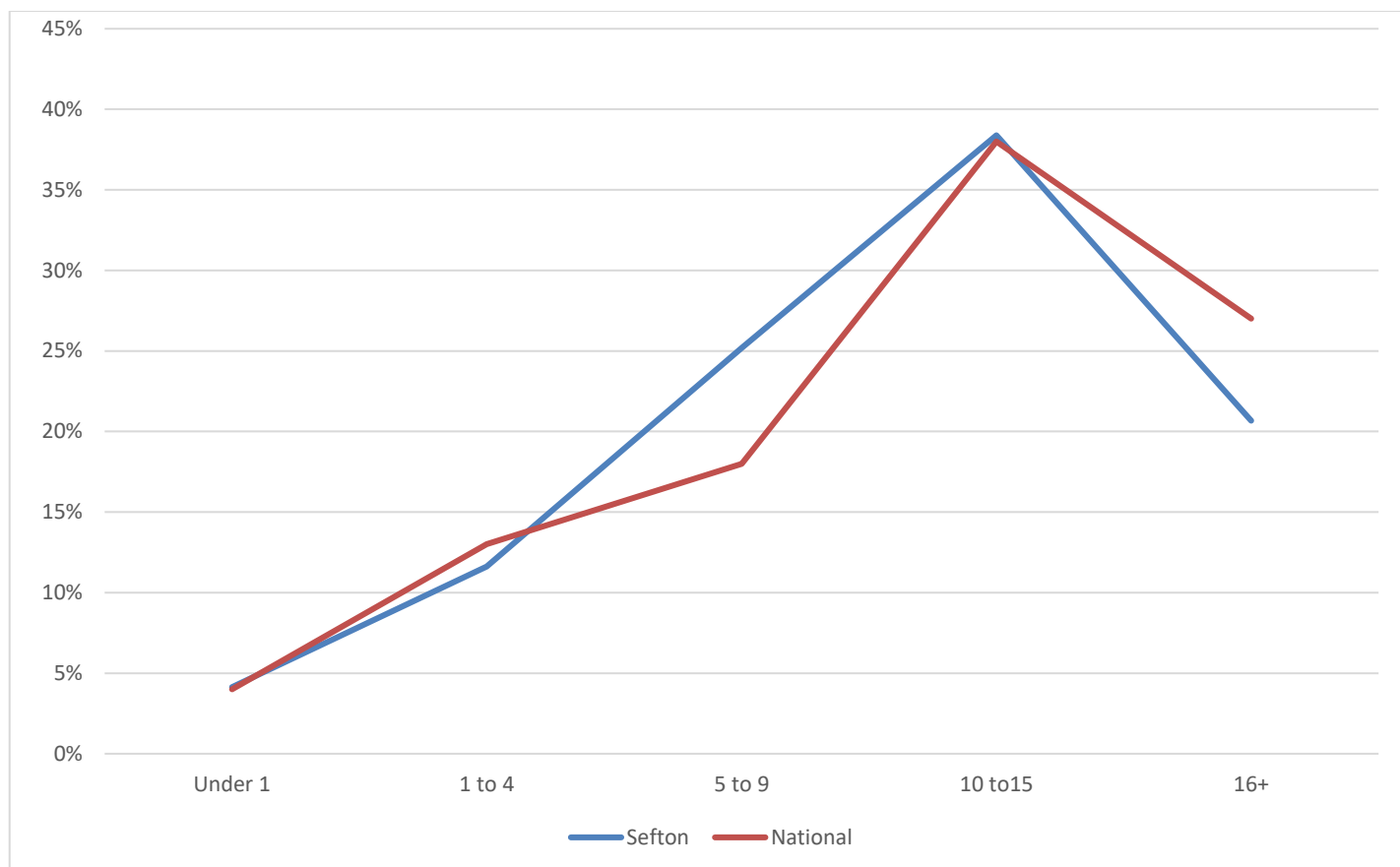
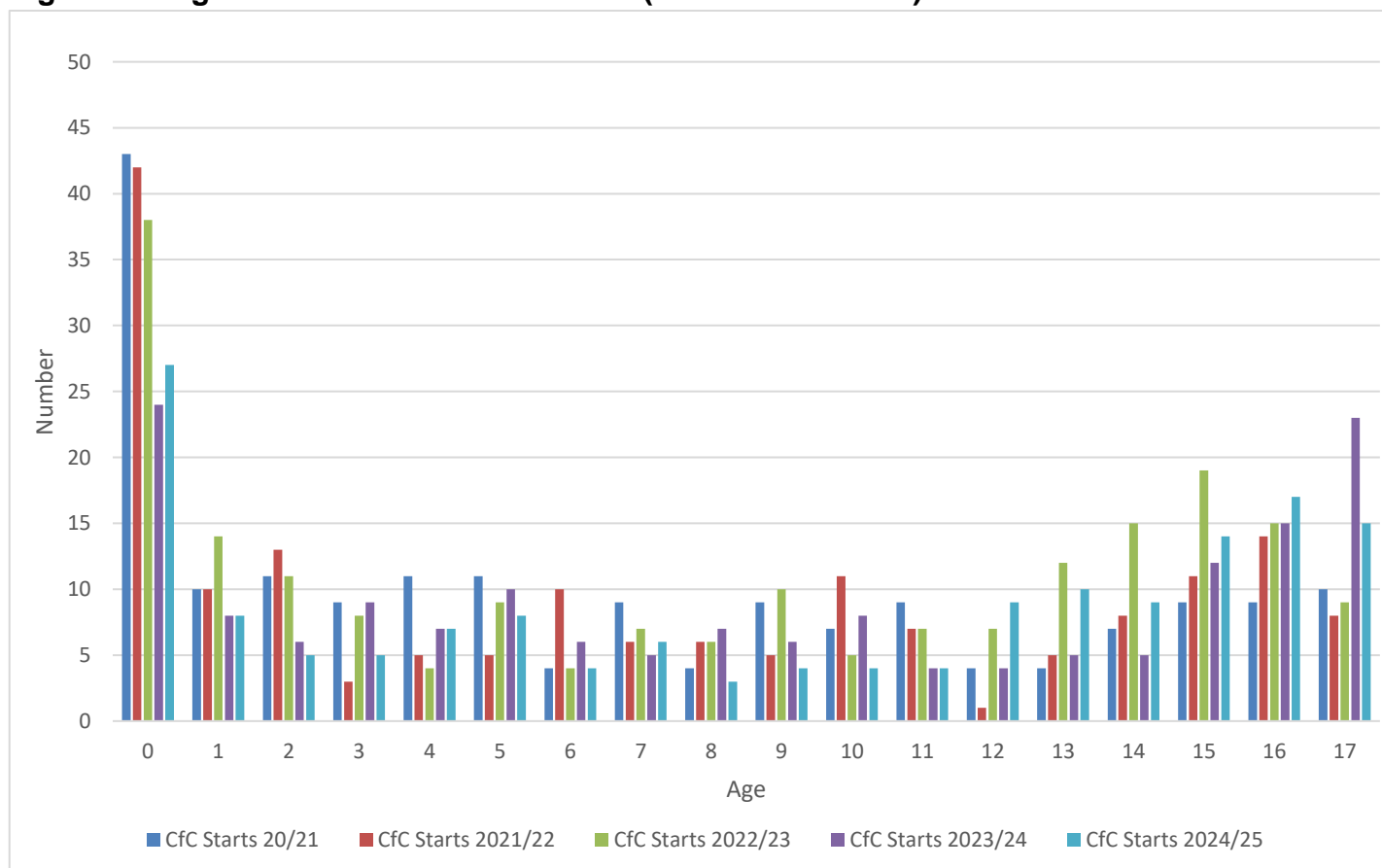


Figure 6b: Ages that children entered care (2020/21 – 2024/25)

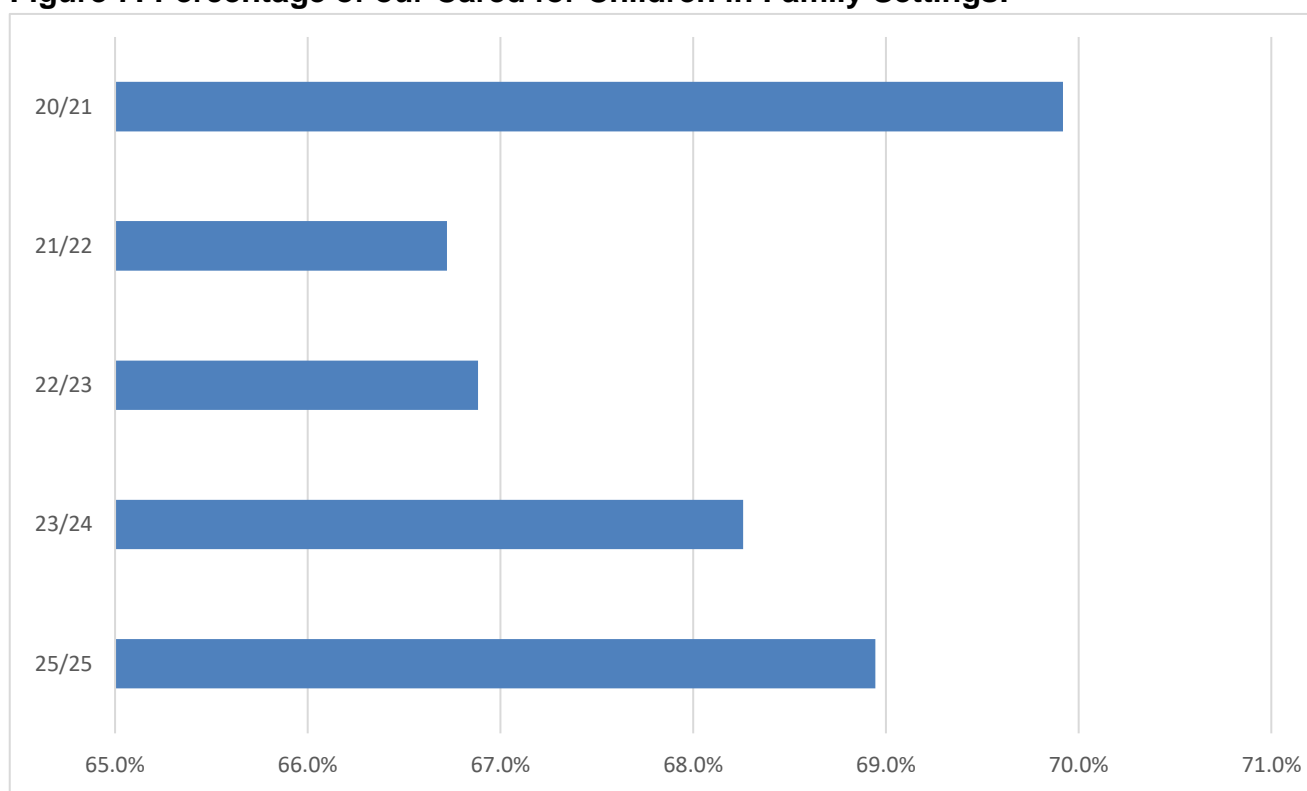


More of our children living in families

In March 2025, 353 of our cared for children lived in family settings⁷, which was equivalent to 68.9% of our care population. Over the last three years the proportion of our children living with families has been incrementally increasing. We are though below the 69.9% achieved in 2020/21.

Over the last 12 months there have been some quite significant changes in the types of family placements used. The number of Connected Carers⁸ have reduced by 31% whilst the number of independent fostering placements have increased by 9.5%. There has also been a 16% decrease in the number of mainstream in-house foster carers (from 122 in 23/24 to 102 in 24/25).

Figure 7: Percentage of our Cared for Children in Family Settings:



Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

Local authorities across the country support asylum unaccompanied seeking children (UASC) and are given a level of funding to do so by the Home Office. As of March 2025, there were 16 UASC within our population of cared for children. The number of UASC increased during 2022/23 but have since been stable, as set out in Figure 8 below:

⁷ Placement types included in this calculation are: fostering (in-house and IFA), Connected Carers and children placed for adoption.

⁸ Sometimes referred to as family and friend carers. These are DfE placement type category U1, U2 and U3.

Figure 8: Number of UASC (2019/20 to 2024/25)

Year	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Number UASC	3	5	7	14	16	16

The majority of these young people (69%) live in supported accommodation, with the remaining either living with family or in residential care. As per national trends, the majority (88%) are male and aged between 16-17.

Local authorities work towards a target of supporting a number of UASC which is equivalent to 0.07% of their total child population. At present Sefton is below this figure and so it is anticipated that there will be an increase in numbers over the next year, although this will be dependent on external factors.

A high proportion of cared for children do not live in Sefton

As a council we do all that we can to support children in our care to live within Sefton, close to their local communities and networks of family and friends. As of March 2025, there were 512 cared for children, of which 279 (54%) lived within the boundaries of Sefton. Compared with the national average of 55%⁹, we therefore have a slightly greater proportion of our children and young people living out of area.

It is apparent from our data that we find it particularly challenging to find suitable local residential placements for our children. Children in residential care are not only likely to live out of area but are also likely to live geographically further away from Sefton than other placement types.

Figure 9a: Percentage of out of area placements by placement type (March 2025)

Placement Type	Total Number	Numbers outside Sefton	Percentage which are out of Borough
Fostering (IFA)	149	86	57.72%
Residential Children's Home	81	62	76.54%
Supported Accommodation	28	13	46.43%

Figure 9b: Average miles from home by placement type (March 2025)

Placement Type	Miles from Home
Fostering (in-house)	11.9
Fostering (IFA)	17.7
Residential Children's Home	24.2
Residential School	13
Supported Accommodation	5.1

⁹ [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

Supporting our care experienced young people

We are committed to supporting as many of our care experienced young people to live within stable and loving family settings up to the age of 21 and beyond. We do though recognise that this is not always the right option for some young people and our 'Here on Hand' Project therefore supports young people by putting alternative packages of support in place, including Supported Accommodation. Since the launch of our Here on Hand Project there has been a significant increase in the number of post-18 supported accommodation packages commissioned by the local authority.

As of March 2025, we are supporting 24 young people in Staying Put arrangements (with former foster carers) and 15 young people live with Supported Lodgings carers. There are 29 young people in Supported Accommodation.

Section 2: Summary

- **A falling number of cared for children, down 16.7% over two years. Numbers do though remain above regional and national averages.**
- **Key drivers for the reduction in cared for children over the last 12 month are:**
 - **20.5% reduction in children coming into care;**
 - **31% reduction in connected carers, and**
 - **47% reduction in children placed with parents.**
- **There is a continued demand for placements from the independent sector. Over the last 12 months there has been a 9.5% increase in independent fostering placements and a 9.3% increase in residential placements.**
- **Over the last 12 months the number of children with in-house foster carers has reduced by 16%. The majority of our foster placements (60%) are now provided by Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs).**
- **The proportion of our children in Residential Care is significantly above the national average (15.9% in Sefton, compared to 10% nationally).**
- **More of our children (69%) now live in family settings.**
- **46% of our cared for children live outside of Sefton. On average, our children live 15.5 miles from the homes of their birth families.**
- **Three quarters of children in residential care live outside of Sefton, and an average of 24.2 miles away from home.**

Section 3: Demand for Placements

Referral Data: Cared For Children

We record detailed information about the number of referrals that are made by our Homefinding Team when searching for placements from the independent and voluntary sectors. This information provides an insight into the local authority's demand for new placements and how this has changes over time. This is set out in Figure 10 below.

Figure 10: Referrals for external Ofsted registered provision for cared for children

YEAR	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Fostering	109	186	210	198	166	233
Residential	87	105	170	193	131	153
Residential Parent and Child	12	38	33	34	26	29
Supported Accommodation	58	50	51	112	128	154
All External Placement Searches	266	379	464	537	451	569

The data in Figure 10 shows that the number of external searches made by Sefton is increasing. Between 2019/20 and 2024/25, the number of referrals has increased by 114%. With the exception of the year 2023/24, there has been incremental growth in the number of referrals each year. This is in-keeping with the data within Section 2 which shows an increasing number of external placements, particularly in residential and fostering.

The data highlights the 40% increase in number of fostering referrals over the last 12 months. This aligns with our data from Figure 5 above which highlights a 9.5% increase in fostering over the same period and a likely corresponding 16% reduction in the number of mainstream in-house carers. As of 2024/25, fostering searches now account for 41% of all referrals made by the Homefinding Team.

As set out within the Sufficiency Action Plan, work is ongoing to consider how additional information can be captured at point of referral to further deepen our understanding of the needs and characteristics of children at point of referral. This includes capturing information about referrals for in-house fostering, which is currently outside of the scope of our Homefinding Team. A one-off review of referrals did though take place in March 2025, which identified the following:

- The lack of external fostering provision has been identified by the Homefinding Team as the most pressing challenge for the local authority.
- There were significant challenges finding foster care placements for sibling groups and for children and young people with highly complex needs - in particular those with health or special educational needs.

- The difficulties finding suitable fostering placements in a timely manner was seen as a key driver in the increased number of residential children home placements. A review of 60 residential placements made during 2024/25 found that for 30 of these (i.e. 50%), the local authority had first sought (and been unable to find) a foster care placement.
- Residential placements could normally be identified in a timely manner, but they were often not within Sefton which led to some young people being placed outside of the area. A review of 60 residential placements made during 2024/25 found that 34 (i.e. 56%) could not be placed within Sefton.
- It was particularly difficult to find local residential placements for 12-16-year-olds who were displaying behavioural issues, some of whom were also subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders.
- Supported Accommodation placements could normally be identified in a timely manner, but it was not always possible to identify suitable provision within the Borough. A review of 80 supported accommodation placements made during 2024/25 found that 22 (i.e. 27%) could not be found within Sefton.

Referral Data: Care Experienced Young People

The Homefinding Team also source placements for care experienced young people aged over 18 and their data shows that there has been a significant increase in the number of Supported Accommodation referrals for this cohort. This increase is likely being driven by the launch of the council's Here on Hand Project in 2023/24 which made a commitment to care experienced young people that if other types of accommodation were not appropriate the local authority would support them to live in Supported Accommodation.

Figure 11: Sefton Referral Data (18+ Supported Accommodation)

	2022/23	2023-24	2024-25
Referrals for 18+ Supported Accommodation	1	4	56

Section 3: Summary

- **Sefton is making an increasing number of referrals for external placements (up 114% over five years).**
- **Significant increase in referrals for 18+ Supported Accommodation as a result of our 'Here at Hand' Project and commitment to supporting care experienced young people find suitable accommodation.**
- **The lack of local fostering placements is a key issue for Sefton.**
 - **40% increase in referrals over 12 months**
 - **Challenges finding placements for siblings and children with complex needs - in particular those with health or special educational needs.**
 - **Challenges are contributing to the increase in use of residential care**
- **It is increasingly challenging to find residential and supported accommodation provision within Sefton.**
- **There are opportunities to capture additional information at point of referral to further deepen our understanding of local sufficiency.**

Section 4: Understanding Local Supply

Residential Children's Homes (Private and Voluntary Sector)

As of March 2025, there are 33 Registered Children's Homes within Sefton with a combined total registered capacity of 106 beds. These 33 homes are run by 20 organisations (1 of which is a voluntary sector organisation and 19 of which are private companies). The providers operating in Sefton are diverse and range from small organisations that operate a single home, to far larger national organisations which run up to 60 Children's Homes across the country.

The 33 homes vary in size (between 1-7 registered beds). The most common configuration is two bedded homes, although there is a mean average of three registered beds per home. The majority of homes support children with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) but five homes can support young people with learning disability.

The total number of homes within Sefton is increasing. Since 2023, six new homes have opened, with a total of 17 beds. This is equivalent to a 16% increase in capacity over two years. This growth in local residential capacity is taking place at a faster rate than the increase in the number of our children in residential care (which was 79 in 2023, rising to 82 in 2025 i.e. 4% increase over two years)

As of March 2025, there are 82 cared for children living in Residential Children's Homes, of which 19 are living within Sefton. Sefton children therefore account for 18% of the total 106 available residential beds within the Borough. This means that the remaining 82% of local capacity is not being used by Sefton and is either void (i.e. no young person is living there) or filled by other placing local authorities.

Residential Children's Homes (Local Authority)

Sefton has a Residential Children's Home which provides short-breaks for children with acute special educational needs and/or disability. It provides respite care for one night per fortnight (26 nights per year) and currently supports 27 children per annum.

This is a really valued resource for the local authority and there is significant local demand, with a waiting list of seven children (as of March 2025). We have therefore recently taken the decision to increase resourcing within the home which will enable us to support up to 12 more children per annum. We believe this will go a significant way to meeting local demand. Delivering the service in-house is also very cost effective for the local authority.

In addition, the local authority has a Residential Children's Home which is currently not operational. The home was recently renovated, and we are actively progressing plans to re-open this during 2025/26. Work is ongoing to define the nature of the service, but it is anticipated that it will act as a provision to support children on the edge of care, with the service providing intensive support to children and families to ensure that wherever possible children can remain at home.

Supported Accommodation

Since the 28th of October 2023 it has become mandatory for all providers of Supported Accommodation to be Ofsted Registered. As of March 2025, there were 76 Ofsted Registered Supported Accommodation services within Sefton, with a total bed capacity of 135. These services are run by 17 different organisations.

The Supported Accommodation services in Sefton, include: 41 single occupancy flats; 7 supported lodgings carers; 23 ringfenced services and 5 non-ringfenced services. Services that are ringfenced can solely support children in care/care leavers aged 16+, whereas non-ringfenced services can also support young people who are not in care or care experienced. Based on national trends (and due to the backlog with Ofsted registration) we anticipate there will be an increasing number of registrations during 2025/26.

As of March 2025, there are 28 cared for children living within Supported Accommodation placements. Of these, 15 young people are living within Sefton. Sefton children therefore account for 11% of the total 135 available beds within the Borough. This means that the remaining 89% of local capacity is not being used by Sefton and is either void (i.e. no young person is living there) or filled by other placing local authorities.

Fostering (In-house)

Over several years there has been a reduction in the number of our children that are being supported by in-house foster carers. Demand for foster placements does though continue and there has been a corresponding increase in the number of children supported by independent fostering agencies. This is set out in Figure 12 below.

Figure 12: Fostering Placements (in-house and IFA) between 2019/20 and 2024/25
(Placement Types are U4, U5 and U6. It excludes Connected Carers)

YEAR	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
In House Fostering	155	142	124	126	122	102
Independent Fostering Agencies	111	123	147	148	137	150
Total	266	265	271	274	259	252

As a council we are committed to increasing the proportion of our cared for children living with in-house carers. This is because we know they deliver an excellent quality of care and that it increases the likelihood that our children can live locally (see figure 9b). Delivering this service in-house also delivers value for money for the local authority.

To increase the number of children that are being supported by our in-house service we have invested, and will continue to invest, in trying to recruit more carers and retain the carers that we have. Recent steps that we have taken include:

Recruitment

- ✓ **Investment in our Team:** We have increased capacity within the team that assesses new foster carers (from 2 to 4 Social Work Assessors). We have also recruited an apprentice to respond to initial fostering enquiries.
- ✓ **Website:** In August 2024, we launched our new Sefton Fostering website which is designed to establish a competitive digital presence and attract new carers.
- ✓ **Advertising:** We have significantly increased our investment in digital advertising to attract prospective new carers.
- ✓ **Enquiry Management System:** Invested in an ICT system to streamline how the council responds to enquires from prospective carers.
- ✓ **Foster Care Advocates:** We have recruited some of our foster carers to act as advocates. Their role is to champion fostering with Sefton and they support at various events/engagements.

Retention

We have developed our service so that it better meets the needs of foster carers. This includes:

- ✓ More generous allowance for our foster carers, particularly those that support multiple children.
- ✓ Established a 'Fostering Development Board' with foster carer representatives. This ensures that carers are involved in shaping our ongoing improvement journey.
- ✓ Improved quality of supervision and support to foster carers.
- ✓ Established fostering support groups (both online and in-person), which include the establishment of the Sefton Foster Carer Association. This has raised the profile of foster carers in Sefton, along with developing closer joint working arrangements with Children's Services Teams.
- ✓ Established an Annual Conference for Sefton Carers.
- ✓ Subscription to Foster Talk which includes a wide range of benefits, including: support with tax returns, access to legal advice and independent support for foster carers.
- ✓ Reviewed all key policies in collaboration with our carers.

In addition, we have worked to improve our offer to foster carers, in recognition of the significant contribution that carers make to their local communities. This includes:

- ✓ Free parking in Sefton's Car Parks
- ✓ Free leisure passes and golf club membership
- ✓ Max Card which gives free or discounted entry to events and attractions

- ✓ Band A status for foster families applying for social housing.
- ✓ Peer mentoring

Feedback from carers has so far been very positive and we are proud of the improvements that have been made. We know that there is more for us to do, and we will continue to work with our carers to further develop the service.

Our investment in an Enquiry Management System will streamline the process for new carers, as well as improve the quality and availability of data. Over time this will help to further refine our recruitment and retention strategy.

Over the last 12 months there has been an increase in the number of new carers that have been recruited, rising from four in 23/24 to eight in 24/25. The Service has a target of recruiting 10 new foster carers in 2025/26 and 15 new carers in 2026/27.

Figure 13: Fostering Placements (in-house and IFA) between 2019/20 and 2024/25
(Placement Types are U4, U5 and U6. It excludes Connected Carers)

	Registrations	De-Registrations	Difference
2020 – 2021	5	7	-2
2021 – 2022	8	9	-1
2022 – 2023	11	9	+2
2023 – 2024	4	7	-3
2024 – 2025	8	6	+2

In addition to the above we are actively looking to learn from best practice and are exploring opportunities for further collaboration with neighboring local authorities

Fostering (Independent and Voluntary Sector)

Placements Northwest survey independent fostering providers across the region on a quarterly basis to record the number of fostering households within each local authority, including Sefton. This is snapshot data and there are some inconsistencies as not all independent providers respond. The scale and regularity of the return does though provide useful trend data. The data suggests a downward trend in the number of foster carers, and between 2022/23 and 2023/24 the number of fostering households fell by 10%.

The apparent reduction in local capacity, together with increased demand for fostering placements, is likely a key contributing factor in the current challenges sourcing local foster care placements identified in Section 3 above.

Section 4: Summary

- **There are currently 33 Registered Children's Homes in Sefton from the independent sector, with a registered capacity to support 106 children.**
- **The total capacity of local Residential Homes has increased by 16% over two years, which is at a faster rate than the corresponding 4% increase in number of Sefton children that are in residential care.**
- **As of March 2025, 19 Sefton children were living in local Residential Children's Homes, which is equivalent to only 18% of the total capacity.**
- **There are 76 Supported Accommodation Services within Sefton, with a total registered capacity to support 135 children**
- **As of March 2025, 15 Sefton children were living in local Supported Accommodation, which is equivalent to only 11% of the total capacity.**
- **We want to support more young people in in-house fostering and are investing in the service.**
- **There has been a reduction in the number of fostering households living within Sefton who are with Independent Agencies.**
- **There are opportunities to improve the data recorded and reported on by our in-house fostering team to deepen our understanding of sufficiency and inform the business development of the service.**
- **We are expanding our in-House Residential Short Breaks service to support 12 more children per annum with acute special educational needs and/or disability.**
- **We plan to re-open our in-house Residential Children's Home during 2025/26. This service will likely support children on the edge of care, with the service providing intensive support to children and families to ensure that wherever possible children can remain at home.**

Priority 1: More children living in families

For the majority of our cared for children, the best place for them to live is in a loving and stable family environment. Over the last three years the proportion of children living within families has increased and now accounts for 68.9% of our care population. We know though that there is more to do and some significant emerging challenges that we need to address.

The challenge ...

- Fostering referrals have increased by 40% in 12 months (*see figure 10*)
- Our Homefinding team have identified the lack of fostering placements as the most pressing sufficiency challenge for the local authority (*See Section 3*)
- Continued growth in the number and proportion of children in residential care. Currently 15.9% compared to the national average of 10% (*see Section 5*).
- For 50% of all residential placements made during 2024/25, we had initially sought (and been unable to find) fostering. This suggests a lack of fostering is contributing to the rising number of residential placements. (*See Section 3*)
- The number of children that have been supported by mainstream in-house foster carers has reduced by 34% over five years (*see Section 4*).
- Within Sefton there are reducing number of fostering households from the independent sector and only seven Ofsted registered Supported Lodgings carers (*Section 4*)

What we will deliver ...

- 1. We will increase the proportion of our cared for children living in family settings. By 2027, this cohort will account for 72% of our cared for population.**
- 2. We will reduce the number and proportion of our cared for children in Residential Children's Homes. By 2027, this cohort will account for 12% of our cared for population.**
- 3. We will increase the number of in-house foster carers and by 2027, 50% of fostering placements will be provided by in-house carers.**

How we are going to do it ...

✓ **Foster Friendly Employer Status:**

Sefton Council will become a Foster Friendly Employer, and we will actively support any of our staff who want to foster. We know that many foster carers come from the public sector and therefore we will encourage our statutory partners through Corporate Parenting Board to also adopt this standard and champion fostering within their organisations. We will also work with the local business community, encouraging them to adopt Foster Friendly policies and champion fostering across their organisations.

✓ **Grow our in-house fostering service:**

We will continue to invest in our in-house fostering service and by 2027 we will be approving 15 carers per annum. We will also actively explore opportunities to work with other local authorities in the Liverpool City region, to drive efficiencies and raise the profile of fostering as a career.

✓ **Supported Lodgings**

We will grow the number of supported lodgings carers in Sefton and explore developing a new in-house service. We recognise that for some families who are not able to commit to fostering, becoming a supported lodgings carer may be a potential option. We will therefore look to build this into our end-to-end recruitment pathway for prospective foster carers,

✓ **Work in Partnership with Independent Fostering Agencies**

While we have ambitions to grow our in-house service we do value, and increasingly rely on, the independent sector to provide foster carers. We will work with local providers to understand barriers to growth and how we can work together to meet our needs.

✓ **Support transitions from residential to foster care**

We know that some of our children living in Residential Homes would benefit from living in a family environment. Working with both our in-house fostering team and Independent Fostering providers we will develop a 'Family Step-Down' Project to actively support transition for this cohort of children.

✓ **Support to children with acute and special educational needs**

We will expand our Residential Short Break Service to support an additional 12 young people per annum from 2025/26. We will also consult on our admissions policy to ensure that it continues to be equitable and supports children and families with the greatest need.

✓ **Support to children and families at the edge of care**

We will re-open our in-house Residential Children's Home to support children and families at the edge of care, supporting children to stay at home wherever this is possible and to plan transitions back to family, where it is safe to do so.

Priority 2: More children living in Sefton

For the majority of our cared for children, the best place for them to live is within Sefton so that they are close to families and local community networks. However, we know that 46% of our children live outside of Sefton, and are on average 15.5miles from their birth families.

The challenge

- More of our children live out of area, compared to national averages (Section 2)
- Over three quarters of children living in Residential Care Homes are outside of Sefton (see figure 9a) and live on average 24 miles from home.
- An increasing number of our children live with carers from independent foster agencies (up 9.5% over 12 months). We know that 57.7% of this cohort live out of area and are on average 17.7 miles from their birth families.
- There is increasing demand for foster placements (referrals are up 40% in 12 months) but the number of local fostering households from the independent sector are reducing (see Section 4). We also know that the number of children supported by our in-house Fostering Service is falling (see figure 12) and that feedback from our Homefinding Team is that it is increasingly difficult to find local fostering placements. In this context, there is a risk that the number and percentage of out of area fostering placements could increase.
- There is limited utilisation by Sefton of local Residential Children's Homes. As of March 2025, we were only using 18% of the total 106 available capacity in the Borough.
- There is currently limited utilisation by Sefton of local Supported Accommodation. As of March 2025, we were only using 11% of the total 135 available capacity in the Borough.

What we will deliver ...

- 1. We will increase the proportion of our cared for children living within Sefton. By 2027, this cohort will account for 60% of our cared for population.**
- 2. We will reduce the number and proportion of residential placements made outside of Sefton. By 2027, only 60% of residential placements will be made outside of the Borough.**
- 3. We will reduce the average distance that children live from their homes. By 2027, this will reduce from 15.5miles to 12miles.**

How we are going to do it ...

✓ **Grow our in-house fostering service**

We will continue to invest in our in-house fostering service and by 2027 we will be approving 15 new carers per annum. We know that our in-house carers are local to Sefton and on average under 12 miles from the family address of our cared for children.

✓ **Working in Partnership with Independent Fostering Agencies**

While we have ambitions to grow our in-house service we do value, and increasingly rely on, the independent sector to provide foster carers. We will work with local providers to understand barriers to recruitment and how we can work together to meet demand.

✓ **Support transitions from residential to local foster care arrangements**

We know that some of our children living in Residential Homes would benefit from living in a family environment. Working with both our in-house fostering team and independent fostering providers we will develop a 'Family Step-Down' project to actively support transition for this cohort of children. This will focus, where appropriate, on supporting young people living out of area to return to Sefton.

✓ **Investment in market development resource to support increased utilization of local provision**

We will invest in market development capacity within our commissioning team to understand the barriers to accessing local provision. We will then work in partnership with local providers to address them.

✓ **Increase supply of local residential provision**

We are committed to increasing the utilisation of local residential provision but given the significant number of children living out of area and the continued demand for residential placements, we also believe that some additional residential provision within Borough is required. We will publish a Market Position Statement during 2025/26 setting out in more detail the nature of the requirement and our 'offer' to prospective suppliers.

✓ **Review internal practice**

We will review our internal practices, with a focus on the end-to-end process for finding homes for children. This is to assure ourselves that we are doing all we can to support our children by finding them local homes to live in.

Priority 3: Improve the Quality and Availability of Data to Support Sufficiency Planning

For a Sufficiency Strategy and subsequent commissioning activity to be effective, it needs to be informed by a robust evidence base. Data is essential to ensure we fully understand the current and forecast needs of our children and the extent to which this need can be met by local provision. Data can also be used to measure the impact of any commissioning activity.

The challenge

- More analysis is needed to help us understand the reasons for the limited utilisation of local provision.
- We do not have robust forecasts which enable us to predict with certainty the number of cared for children that will be supported by the local authority over the coming years.
- A key aspect of effective market shaping is '*providing accurate and credible signals of the likely and future needs of children to existing and potential providers*' (CMA 2022)¹⁰. Sefton holds a significant amount of granular data about our current demand, but we are not sharing it with providers in a way which might be useful to support business planning; enabling them to be more responsive to current and emerging need.
- We know that we could collect more information about the needs and characteristics of children at the point of referral to help us develop a more nuanced understanding of local sufficiency.
- We know that we need to use data more effectively within our in-house fostering team, to help us further refine our recruitment strategy and to enable us to identify gaps in our service offering.

What we are going to do ...

- 1. Ensure our Sufficiency Planning activity is evidence led and informed by data.**
- 2. Provide accurate and credible signals of the likely and future needs of children to existing and potential providers**

¹⁰ [Children's social care study - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/research-data-and-analysis/publications/childrens-social-care-study)

How we are going to do it

✓ **Produce Market Position Statement**

A key aspect of effective market shaping is providing data about current and future needs to existing and potential providers. This is to inform the business development of care providers, to ensure that they are responsive to our changing requirements. We will work with local suppliers to identify the datasets that they would like to access. We will then publish this information in a Market Position Statement and commit to updating this at least annually.

✓ **Forecasting**

We will develop robust forecasting models to predict with more certainty the number of cared for children that will be supported by the local authority over the coming years and the types of placements that they will require.

✓ **Utilisation Analysis and Action Plan**

We will work with local providers to understand the route causes for the limited utilisation of local residential and supported accommodation provision. During 2025/26, we will then develop a detailed Local Utilisation Action Plan, setting out how we are going to increase utilisation and support more of our children to live locally.

✓ **Referral Data**

During 2025/26 will review our end-to-end process for finding placements and consider what additional information could be captured which might provide us with additional insight into the needs of our children and the extent to which the local market is able to meet these needs.

✓ **In House Fostering Data**

Maximizing the benefits of our new Enquiry Management System, we will record and report on information to support the ongoing development of our Recruitment Strategy. In addition, we will look at the data that is captured at point of referral to help our service better understand need as well as the cohorts of children that we are not able to support. This will help us to develop a more nuanced and detailed understanding of the gaps in the service which in turn will inform our recruitment and service development.

