



Somerset
Council

Sufficiency Strategy for Children Looked After and Care Leavers

2023 - 2028



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1.0 Executive Summary

There is nothing more important in a top-tier local authority, than our responsibility as corporate parents.

Many of the children and young people we support have suffered unimaginable trauma. Through our internal services and external partners, we offer these children and young people a safe and loving home to help turn their lives around. It's always best for children to stay with their family where it is safe to do so, and we work hard to reunite families where possible.

Our services and partners achieve amazing things...

Before Homes & Horizons

- 4.5 months on a paediatric ward, and 1 month on a CAMHS ward
- Unregistered provision broke down after the second self-harm event

Rose has now seen considerable positive developments: her self harm has significantly reduced, reintegration into a mainstream school began in September, and Rose has stated that she sees the Homes & Horizons home as her home, which she wants to stay at.

Rose

Initially, similar challenges were faced in Rose's Homes & Horizons home, however, after:

- Joint working with CAMHS and Homes2Inspire, sharing risk management across the home;
- Robust, nurturing support from the staff team to support Rose around good eating and exercise routines;
- Support from a tutor to engage Rose back into education;
- And, most importantly: a stable and loving home environment;

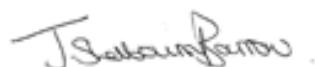


All our staff work tirelessly in assessing, supporting, commissioning and delivering loving homes – that offer the best outcomes and are cost-effective for Somerset Council. This sufficiency strategy which covers 2023 to 2028 is about us doing even better and delivering within our budget.

A big thank you to everyone committed to making these changes.



Richard Selwyn
Service Director Children's Commissioning



Jayne Shelbourn-Barrow
Service Director Children & Families

1.1 Somerset Children and Young People

As of September 2023, there were **565 children in care** in Somerset. As a percentage of our population, this is significantly lower than most other local areas, but also means those in care often have higher levels of complexity.

Children and young people come into care for the following reasons:

- **16%** following a relationship breakdown
- **23%** due to neglect, and
- **49%** had concerns relating to parental mental ill health, domestic violence or substance misuse.

The first five young people moving into our Homes and Horizons strategic partnership had Deprivation of Liberty Orders which are authorised by the courts when the young person poses significant risk to themselves or other.

The age profile of children and young people coming into care has remained broadly the same with 0-2 year olds being the highest number, followed by 16-17 year olds. For children coming into care over the age of 10 years, it has become increasingly difficult to find a family home that is able to support the range of needs that they present with. The trauma experienced by our children prior to them coming into care can present itself in challenging behaviours, dysregulation, physical aggression, poor emotional and mental health and self-harm.

38% of our children in care are living outside of Somerset, and not able to remain close to their family and support networks. The number of children out of county has risen significantly in the last ten years because we do not have enough sufficiency of homes in Somerset. The following table shows the current placements and associated costs (excludes Pathways to Independence (P2I block contract).

Placement type	Number of children
Residential	90
Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA)	129
Supported Accommodation 16-17	39
Staffing Support for Unregistered (under 16)	5
Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children	46
Secure children's home	3
Staffing Support at Home	1
Care - Unregistered 16+	1
Supported Accommodation 18+	8
Residential Parent & Child	2
IFA Staying Put	14
IFA Parent & Child	2

Figures are for September 2023

Whilst the number of children coming into care has been relatively static (excluding unaccompanied asylum seeking children) we are concerned about the impact of the cost of living crisis on families' lives. Poverty is the main driver of needs that lead to a child or young person coming into care – it is possible that we see a significant increase in demand nationally in the next few years.

1.2 Local and national market

The national market for children looked after placements is best described as broken. The Competition and Markets Authority report¹ makes sobering reading, for example, in just six years costs for residential care have increased by 105%. A lack of sufficiency is sometimes leading to profiteering at the expense of Council budgets and children's outcomes.

Somerset is working with over 200 external providers across the country which indicates that we haven't got the right mix of provision in place locally. Whilst there is a good range of providers across all sectors in Somerset, providers are sometimes reluctant to join more formalised contractual arrangements so we need to re-think and commission differently.

Somerset is part of the Peninsula fostering and residential frameworks which is a sub-regional commissioning arrangement with Devon, Plymouth and Torbay Councils. There are 14 residential providers on the framework which offers a total of 75 beds within the peninsula geography and a further 82 beds outside of peninsula. There is also a separate 'Innovation' residential lot where we can work more creatively with the market. There are 11 Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) on the Peninsula Fostering Framework. There are 17 residential providers operating in Somerset but just 2 IFAs.

For housing related support and accommodation for 16 to 25 year olds, a block contract for 100 beds will be in place in April 2024. We are also setting up a dynamic purchasing system for additional capacity.

Both costs and sufficiency are affected by national changes, for example:

- Mandatory participation in the National Transfer Scheme has significantly increased the population of unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Somerset.
- NHS England changes mean we now support more children and young people in care, who would previously have been in inpatient mental health beds.
- Many registered children's homes are reluctant to care for these children through fear of a negative impact on their Ofsted rating. This shortage drives up costs, can lead to profiteering, increases time and resources needed to find a place as well as poor outcomes for the child.

¹ Children's social care market study – Final report. CMA (2022)

1.3 CLA Outcomes Transformation

The sufficiency strategy assesses the needs of our children looked after population and those at risk of coming into care, and quantifies the quality and volume of support available from our in-house homes and external market.

This analysis is the foundation of our transformation programme. We want to:

- Better support children at risk of coming into care, before they come into care
- Increase the number of homes for children, especially foster care
- Design our in-house fostering, residential care and supported accommodation so we support the most complex needs
- Improve choice and match homes to children, significantly reducing out of county places
- Reduce costs so we are within budget.

To achieve these aims we have eight workstreams:

1. **Homes and Horizons** — we will continue to deliver award-winning high-quality support for young people with the most complex needs, so they experience a loving home with flexible staffing and therapeutic education. Homes seven and eight will be developed in 2024, with pods and annexes added to existing homes for young people stepping-forward to more independent living. Homes and Horizons is already saving £2.7m in 2023/24 and will continue to improve.
2. **Fostering Improvement** — for many children, a loving foster home and family is the best outcome. We will significantly increase the number of in-house foster carers by working in partnership with carers, improving support and accelerating recruitment and retention. We expect overall costs to reduce, but also improve the matching of homes to children. Through better support services, foster carers will also be able to look after children with more complex needs.
3. **Re-commissioning 16+** — we have appointed two providers to deliver housing related support and accommodation. The new service combines the previous Pathways to Independence (P2I) block and spot purchasing into a block contract, saving c. £3m in 2024/25. The new 16+ service is entering an implementation phase for an April 2024 launch and will support all but the most complex needs for 16 to 25 year olds. We are also reviewing the cost of support for unaccompanied asylum seeking children and setting up a dynamic purchasing system alongside the 16+ block contract.
4. **Edge of Care Support** — we are continuing to focus on keeping children at home with their families — Somerset has a lower rate of children in care than our neighbours and we want to keep it that way. Family Group Conferencing will be targeted at those at risk of coming into care and promoting reunion with birth families. We will pilot Family Safeguarding support to adults in the Family

Intervention Service. And we will test targeted analytics to identify young people missing education and at risk of care or criminality.

5. **Intelligence and Control** — we will develop a new Microsoft BI dashboard as a single version of the truth between Finance, Commissioning and Social Care. The dashboard is dependent on a re-designed invoicing process and new demand trajectories. We will also test Valuing Care to support better analytics, improve how we match homes to children, and step-forward care based on needs.
6. **Inflation Negotiations** — Negotiations continue with all providers.
7. **Shape and Manage the Market** — We need to significantly increase sufficiency of both fostering and residential homes — building relationships with local Somerset providers and building more capacity such as Homes and Horizons. We will explore options to bring in social capital investment — both at a local and national scale. And focus on the human and relational side of commissioning that is the foundation of provider relationships.
8. **Regional Commissioning** — we will continue to work with Peninsula colleagues and the wider region to increase sufficiency, particularly for more complex needs. We will test the new Regional Care Cooperative models for placements and fostering to understand potential benefits for Somerset children and young people.

The eight workstreams form a tight programme of activity over eighteen months to make a clear and focused difference to the Sufficiency Strategy aims and deliver within our budget.

Children Looked After Outcomes Transformation

Benefits

- Significant savings in 23/24, 24/25 & 25/26
- Cost controls
- Better data
- More carers
- Matching homes to children with choice
- More children stay in county
- Better market relationships



2.0 Introduction and purpose

Somerset Council's **Sufficiency Strategy for 2023-2028** sets out how we will meet our statutory responsibility to provide safe, secure and appropriate homes for children in care and care leavers over the next five years.

As corporate parents we have a statutory responsibility to **act as any good parent would**.

Our vision is that:

Somerset's children and young people grow up in a child-friendly county that supports them to be safe, happy, healthy and prepared for adulthood²

Key to this is ensuring that children live in stable homes that best meet their needs.

The Children Act 1989³ places a duty on Local Authorities to "*take steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the authority's area*" to support children in care. This is known as the **sufficiency duty**. This means that we must look at the whole range of suitable accommodation for our children, which can include:

- Family homes with foster carers and connected (kinship) carers
- Children's homes
- Residential special schools
- Specialist provision
- Supported accommodation for care leavers.

The sufficiency duty requires us to do much more than merely calculate the number of beds we need. A focus on **earlier preventative action** for children on the edge of care to prevent them coming into the care system, is crucial. It requires a **whole system approach**. Connect Somerset, The Early Help Strategy, The Education for Life Strategy, The SEND Strategy, The Young Carers' Strategy and Our Somerset are therefore all integral to our approach⁴.

It is about working with external providers to offer **a range of options for children and young people** to ensure homes that can meet the individual needs of children at any given time. It is also about generating **new ideas and developments that are sustainable, flexible and cost effective**. This strategy therefore drives both our social care practice and commissioning approaches for children on the edge of care, those in care and care leavers.

² [Somerset Children and Young People's Plan](#), 2022-24 & Children in Care in [Somerset Pledge](#)

³ S22G of the children Act (1989)

⁴ The Early help Strategy & [SEND Strategy and our plans \(somerset.gov.uk\)](#)

There are **eight key principles** that underpin this strategy:

1. We will support children to **remain with their families**, where they can.

However, where children and young people require care:

2. They will live in **safe, loving** and **stable** homes.
3. We will work closely with families and seek **reunification**, where possible.
4. Somerset children and young people will **remain close** to their families, wherever possible remaining in Somerset.
5. We will support all of our carers (including providers) to have a **long-term commitment** to our children.
6. We will work in **partnership**, using a relational approach to develop needs-led homes for our children.
7. We will ensure that all **carers** (internal and external) are involved in children's support.
8. We will develop clear care **pathways** for our children that are aligned to adult services and the services of our partners to ensure continuity of care and wrap around support.

The strategy sets out our approach over the next five years to achieve the following **priorities for action**:

1. Homes and Horizons
2. Fostering Improvement
3. Recommissioning of 16+ services
4. Edge of Care Support
5. Intelligence and Control
6. Inflation Negotiations
7. Shape and Manage the Market
8. Regional Commissioning

The Sufficiency Strategy has been developed through consultation and workshops with a range of operational and strategic managers, providers and children and young people.

The strategy is an internal document aimed at commissioners, practitioners and managers. Implementation will be tracked by an annual Programme Plan for children looked after, supported by annual sufficiency statements that will outline our progress in achieving our goals and next steps which will be published. This approach will ensure that the strategy is a living document that is relevant and takes account of any changes in Somerset over the next five years.

The Service Director for Children's Commissioning and Service Director for Children and Families are responsible for delivery. Oversight is through the CLA Outcomes Transformation Board, reporting to the Somerset Council Children, Families and Education Directorate Management Team and Corporate Parenting Board.

3.0 Context

3.1 National Context

3.1.1 Edge of Care

In 2022 Josh MacAlister produced a national social care review, which highlighted the need to bring together targeted early help services with support for children in need in line with the original intentions of the Children's Act 1989. The Care Review calls this '**Family Help**',

The Care Review's definition of Family Help is:

The support that aims to improve children's lives through supporting the family unit and strengthening family relationships, to enable children to thrive and keep families together, helping them to provide the safe, nurturing environments that children need.

This definition aligns with Somerset's Family Solutions, our long-standing Family Intervention Service (FIS) and Connect Somerset.

Technology and information sharing capabilities have moved on significantly in the last few years, with Somerset receiving government funding to explore safe and ethical resources in the field, and to support other authorities in sharing information well. Working Together to Safeguard Children (2014) has been updated to reflect a broader definition of safeguarding, and an improved understanding of consent. This work has potential to significantly improve edge of care services, targeting limited resource where it will have the best impact in keeping families together.

3.1.2 Children looked after

The number of children in care has been rising steadily across England, increasing by more than 15% from 69,470 in 2015 to 80,080 in 2020⁵. This figure is expected to rise to 95,000 by 2025. CIPFA trends in children's services spending found that **local authorities spent £11.1 billion on Children's Social Care in 2021/22**, a 41% rise compared to 2009⁶. As a result, local authorities are under increasing financial pressure.

Additional challenges in meeting the sufficiency duty include:

- An older profile of children in care and remaining in care
- An increase in children who require specialist provision that can support complex behaviours and needs

⁵ Demand and Capacity for Homes for Children in Care. A deep dive into trends, challenges and opportunities impacting on supported accommodation (2023)

⁶ [Performance tracker \(cipfa.org\)](https://www.cipfa.org), (2023)

- A lack of secure children's homes nationally, resulting in the need for alternative specialist homes
- Problems recruiting and retaining foster carers, residential care workers and other children services professionals
- An ageing population of foster carers
- Private providers having more power and ability to choose the children they take, resulting in local authorities having little or no choice.⁷

Many of these challenges are not new but some have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic⁸. A County Council Network (CCN) Report in July 2023 found that the number of children in care had increased by 10.1% year on year since the pandemic. This additional pressure had resulted in 83% of county councils being overspent on their children's budgets. What Works for Children's Social Care⁹ reported that post pandemic pressures were having a huge impact on local authorities' abilities to plan for their children. In fact, they found that only 56% of local authorities had published sufficiency strategies and that these often-lacked vital information and analysis particularly in relation to independent sector provision, costs and credible forecasting.

In 2021 the Competition & Markets Authority (CMA)¹⁰ launched a children's social care market study across the UK. The study found significant problems in how the placements market was functioning. It highlighted:

- **A lack of placements of the right kind in the right places.** This means that children are often placed in accommodation that does not meet their needs.
- **The largest private providers are making higher profits** and charging higher prices than the CMA would expect from an effectively functioning market. The consolidation and integration of providers is a significant factor in this.
- **Some of the largest private providers are carrying very high levels of debt**, creating risk and possible disruptions to children's placements.

A survey carried out by the Independent Childrens Homes Association (ICHA) in May 2022¹¹ provides further insight. **Providers are struggling to match children with increasingly complex needs**, with both their services' capabilities and with other children in the home. A failure to maintain good matching risks challenges from Ofsted and potential suspension or closure of their homes which is detrimental to their businesses and employees.

The survey notes the trend of increasing overall referral rates (particularly for those children with complex needs) but lower occupancy levels. Problems in safely

⁷ How local authorities plan for sufficiency of accommodation that meets the needs of children in care and care leavers. Ofsted (2022).

⁸ J MacAlister, The independent review of children's social care: final report". Ofsted (2022) & Children's social Care 2022: recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Ofsted (2022)

⁹ What can we learn from sufficiency strategies? What Works for children (2022)

¹⁰ Children's social care market study – Final report. CMA (2022)

¹¹ ICHA "State of the Sector" survey – 8 May 2022

matching referrals to vacancies in multi-occupancy homes can lead to more solo homes with high staffing levels, which not only reduces capacity but also results in higher costs.

The report also highlighted the private sector's approach to formal procurement and tendering, with over one third not engaging with formal processes and 22% reporting they had left a commissioned framework contract in 2023 (up from 17% in the previous year). A new way of working is therefore required.

The CMA market study concluded that the market would not improve without focused policy reform at a government level.

These reports, together with *The Independent Review of Children's Social Care*, by Josh MacAlister¹² and "The National Review into the Murders of Arthur Labino-Hughes and Star Hobson", led to the government's publication of "Stable Homes, built on Love"¹³.

This outlines the Government's strategy to "**rebalance children's social care away from costly crisis intervention to more meaningful and effective early support**". It seeks to address some of the urgent issues facing children's social care and provide a national direction for change. The strategy identifies six pillars for reform that they will focus on over the next two years:

1. Ensuring family help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive in their families
2. A decisive multi-agency child protection system
3. Unlocking the potential of family networks
4. Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being in care
5. Ensuring a valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one
6. Creating a system that continuously learns, improves and makes better use of evidence and data.

Work over the next two years is focused on **laying the foundations for a whole system reform**. This will include £200m to support the strategy, new guidance and a series of pilots, from which to upscale. Many of these should impact on edge of care support and sufficiency. Regional Care Co-operatives will be piloted (which have received challenge from Councils). There are also proposals to:

- Strengthen recruitment and retention of foster carers
- Further explore corporate parenting principles
- Provide funding for family finding
- Develop befriending and mentoring programmes
- Explore ways for care-experienced people to legally formalise lifelong bonds.

¹² Independent review of children's social care: final report. Josh MacAlister (2022). [Independent review of children's social care: final report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-report)

¹³ Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation. Children's social Care Reform 2023. DfE (2023)

3.1.3 Care Leavers

As well as this reform, we are beginning to see national changes impacting on our young people. **Ofsted has introduced a new separate judgement for care leavers** as part of the framework for inspecting local authority local children's services (ILACS inspections). **New quality standards for providers of supported accommodation have also been introduced.** Under the new regulations, providers who support 16 and 17 year olds must register with Ofsted by the end of October 2023¹⁴.

Supported accommodation placements have grown by 23% over the last 3 years, making it the fastest growing type of accommodation for children looked after and care leavers. In a survey carried out by Newton Europe in 2022, 80% of providers stated that they intended to register with Ofsted but 93% of these providers also said that they intended to raise their fees. Data gathered by Newton Europe indicates that the increase in unit cost is likely to be 15-30%. This has major financial implications for all local authorities. The size of this increase could be £500m-800m over three years.¹⁵

All of these changes are likely to have implications for Somerset's strategy and so we will take account of emerging national changes over the next 5 years.

3.2 Somerset Context

Somerset is a changing local authority. The 2021 census showed that **the Somerset population is increasing at a higher rate than the overall increase for England**.¹⁶ Based on recent growth rates, it is estimated that the 2023 population is 580,000. This is expected to rise year on year to 596,273 by 2028. **There are approximately 110,000 children under the age of 18 years and between 5,000 to 10,000 have a particular need.**

Although Somerset's CLA population remains stable **we are expecting the cost of living crisis to tip more families into poverty** which is a significant factor for children coming into care.

In April 2023 a new Somerset Council was launched, bringing together the county council and four district councils. The new council's plan¹⁷ recognises the challenging time for the council: the economic climate facing the country, long term strategic imperatives and ensuring financial support for care and reform. The council will have less to spend on the growing challenges, and this means **making difficult decisions to ensure support for those in greatest need**.

¹⁴ Guide to the supported Accommodation Regulations including quality Standards. DfE (2023)

¹⁵ Demand and Capacity of Homes for Children in Care. Challenges and opportunities in the provision of supported accommodation for young people aged 16+. (2023). CCN, LiiA and Newton.

¹⁶ ONS population date. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censuspopulationchange/E07000188/>

¹⁷ Somerset Council Plan 2023-2027

3.2.1 Our strengths

Children's Social Care was rated as "Good" in all areas by Ofsted in 2022. The report stated that:

Families are supported to make positive changes that avoid the need for court proceedings.

Decisions for children to come into care are timely and appropriate. An increasing number of children are settled in care, live in stable homes, and are making positive progress in their lives.

Our areas of good practice include:

- **Somerset Council values** the voice of children and families
- **A good early help and edge of care service**, meaning the number of children coming into care has remained relatively stable in Somerset.
- **Somerset has one of the lowest rates of children in need, children subject to child protection plans and children looked after** in the country, lower than our statistical and South West neighbours.
- **New work such as Family Solutions, the Family Safeguarding Model and Pause** are making a difference to families
- **The majority of children live in stable homes.**
- **Positive trusting relationships between children and their support workers.**
- **A strong focus on achieving permanency for children.**
- **Good outcomes for children who need adoptive families** as a result of our work through Adopt South West.
- **Strong support for foster carers.**
- **Good support for care leavers:** there are increasing numbers of care leavers in employment, education or training and data shows that 96% of care leavers were living in suitable accommodation on 31st March 2023.
- **A significant increase in the number of young people in staying put arrangements** in 2023.
- **Award winning innovation and partnership work** with the Shaw Trust and NHS Somerset to develop in-county, nurturing homes for children, high needs fostering and therapeutic education (Homes and Horizons).
- **Strong relationships with Somerset providers** that benefit our children.

3.2.2 Our challenges

Although our 2022 Ofsted grading was “good”, **sufficiency was identified as an area for improvement**, and in particular emergency accommodation for older children with complex needs. **Securing sufficient accommodation to meet children’s needs close to home remains a challenge.**

Other challenges include:

- **High transport costs** (compared with other authorities) due to geographical challenges in Somerset, which affects recruitment and service delivery
- **Slow integration of health and social care** and inefficiencies across the system
- **A significant increase in children coming into care due to relationship breakdowns**
- **A growing number of older children remaining in the care system**
- **A lack of foster carers** to meet the needs of children in Somerset
- **Recruitment and retention issues** in Somerset resulting in challenges to secure residential workers in children’s homes
- **Demand outstripping supply** in Somerset results in providers selecting which children they will take
- **Rising numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)**
- **Difficulties sourcing appropriate accommodation** for children and young people with complex needs. In particular: teenage boys involved in County Lines; children with autistic tendencies or aggressive behaviour; and girls who self-harm or have a suicidal ideation. Finding the right homes to meet these children’s needs can be costly and challenging.
- **High cost placements in unregistered homes** due to difficulties sourcing suitable homes. A small but significant number of children with complex needs have been living in unregistered homes where care and accommodation is commissioned separately. More than often this care does not meet needs and the cost associated with supporting these placements is disproportionate.
- **Detrimental impacts of the pandemic** on the health and development of young people. 2022 data shows that care leavers over the age of 16 in Somerset have increased mental health needs and high levels of involvement in substance misuse. They are also at greater risk of experiencing domestic abuse and exploitation.
- **Increased spend on spot purchasing of supported accommodation** for young people aged 16+ whose complex needs are too high to be supported by the current Pathways to Independence (P2I) block contract arrangements.
- **Ensuring cost effective placements through the sub-regional commissioning arrangements.**

These challenges mean that **over 38% of Somerset’s children looked after, are not living in Somerset** and unable to be close to their family and support networks.

Children’s Social Care is facing mounting financial pressures because of this crisis.

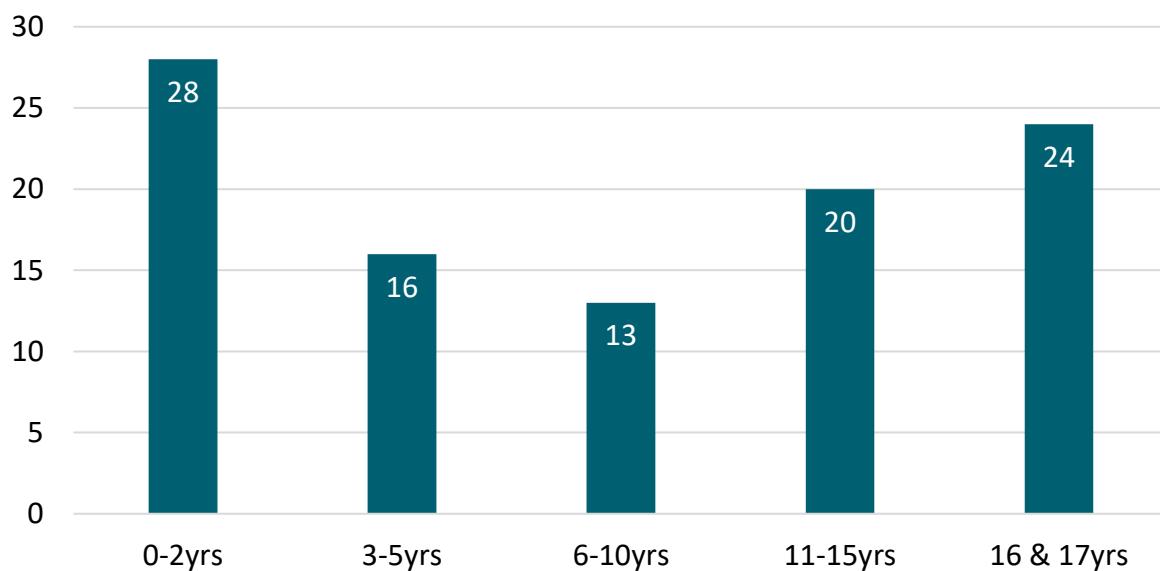
4.0 Summary of the needs of children on the edge of care

Ages of children coming into care have remained broadly similar over the last eight years, with the exception of 2 to 4 year olds which have increased. It is notable that these children were born shortly after financial constraints in Somerset led to a significant programme of cuts across the system. **The number of one year old children has reduced**, suggesting the impact of Family Safeguarding and Pause has begun to mitigate the effect of those cuts.

The age of a child coming into care can give us an indication of where the significant pressures are in families, where gaps may be in services, and how well identification and assessment are working in social care. The data rarely points to one issue, but knowledge of the wider system can help.

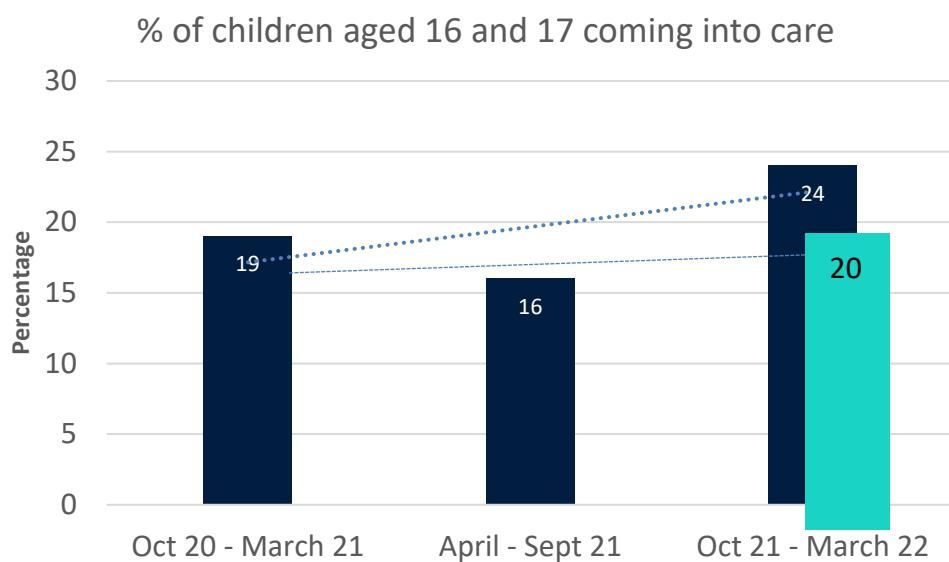
Babies and toddlers coming into care are much more likely to be adopted, and therefore to have a better chance of positive life experiences. A higher number in this group indicates a good identification and assessment process which catches problems early and limits the amount of trauma experienced by the child.

What age was the child when they came into care?



From April 2021 to March 2022, 27% of children in care were 0-2 years old. This had reduced considerably from the previous year (41% - April to September 2021, 35% - October 2020 to March 2021), demonstrating a downward trend.

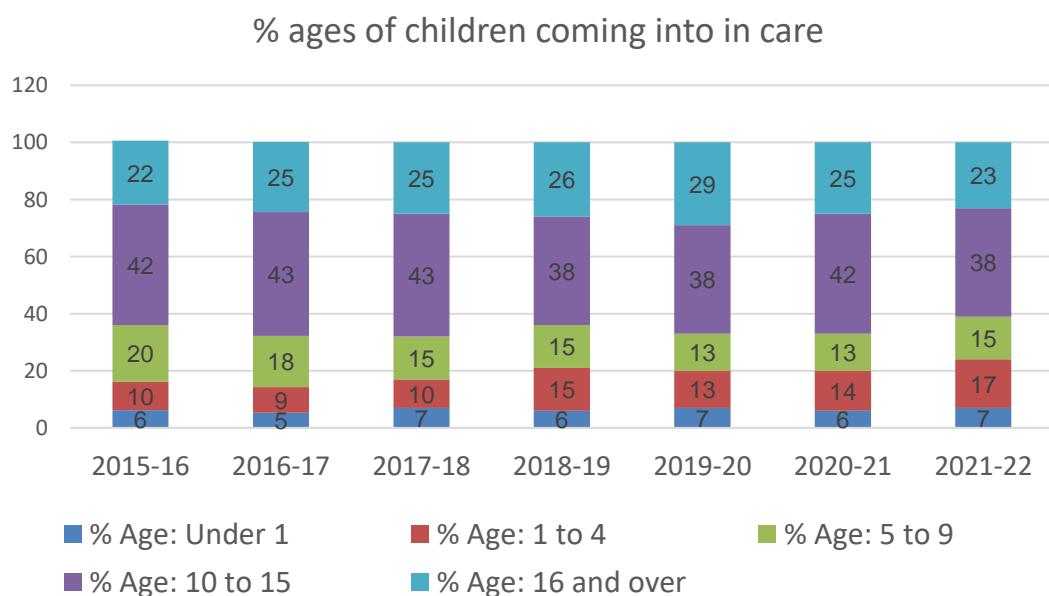
Factors impacting this downward trend could include Family Safeguarding, which has improved support to families so that they can remain together. There will also be an impact from the Pause programme, which has enabled approximately 40 women to end the cycle of their children successively coming into care, usually at birth.



From October 2021 to March 2022 24% of young people coming into care were aged 16 and 17 (16% - April to September 21, 19% - October 20 to March 21), demonstrating an **upward trend**.

However, this group included 4 unaccompanied asylum seeking children, without which the percentage is 20%, a less significant increase on the previous year. Research on young people's mental health following the pandemic suggests that families with teenagers have experienced considerable difficulties, which might suggest a rise in this age group entering care.

Since 2015, **ages of children coming into care has remained broadly stable**. In the graph below. An overall rise in 1 to 4 year-olds began in 2018/19, when significant cuts in spending across the system may have had an impact.



4.1 Reasons for children coming into care

During 2021-22, 16 children (15.8%) came into care following a relationship breakdown with their family. This represents a steady decline over the preceding 18 months. All of these children were over 11 years old, with the majority (10) being 16 or 17 years old.

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is a solution focused approach to bringing families together during times of conflict. In this group of 16 children, an FGC was held for only two children, and these were both aged between 11-15. Five children's families declined an FGC, and nine were not offered one.

Support for families with adolescent children is available through the Council's **Family Intervention Service** (FIS) as well as parenting programmes. However, this is an area where earlier support to help parents prepare for the changing needs of their children could be expanded.

- 50% of children aged 11 to 17 in care had **difficulties with education** prior to coming into care.
- 40% of children aged 16 or 17 in care were **not in education, employment or training** (NEET) or had **poor school attendance**
- 66% of children aged 11 to 15 in care were known to have **poor school attendance** or be on part-time timetables.

4.1.1 Neglect

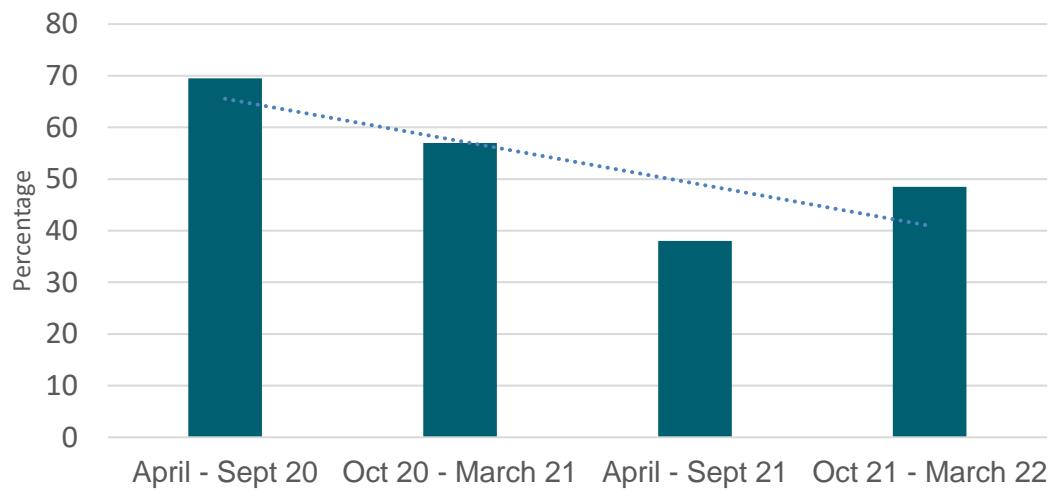
23 (23%) of children who came into care during 2022/3 had experienced neglect. All of whom had been known to us. **The majority of Somerset's children experiencing neglect are under ten years old.**

The care review stated that "**Social care is also often failing to identify or respond effectively to neglect in older children**" (Ofsted, 2018). This is therefore an area where Family Safeguarding interventions are expected to have an impact.

4.1.2 Hidden Harm

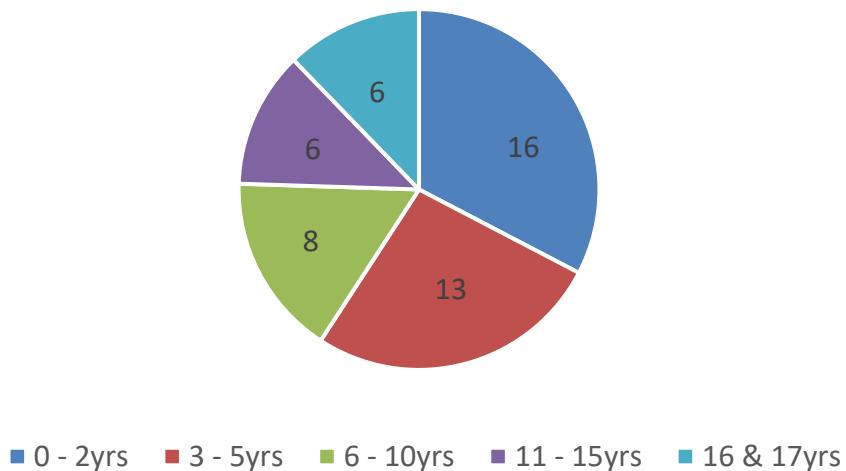
48.5% (49) of children coming into care had concerns related to one or more 'hidden harm' of domestic violence, parental substance misuse and parental mental ill health (38% April 2021 – September 2021, 57% October 2020 – March 2021, 69.5% April – September 2020).

% of children in care where concerns around 1 or more hidden harm



The 49 children, represents 36 families in total. The majority of these were known to us. Ages are broken down as follows:

Age categories of children in care where concerns around 1 or more hidden harm (October 21 - March 22)



The hidden harms reported in this audit can be broken down as follows:

- **Parental mental ill health:** 49% (24 children); after an initial jump from 17% (April to September 2020), this percentage has remained relatively **stable** over the last 18 months.
- **Domestic Violence:** 31% (15 children) – this percentage has remained relatively **stable** over the last 2 years.
- **Substance misuse:** 30% (19 children) - although fluctuating, this represents an overall **downward trend** over the last 2 years.

4.1.3 Children's mental ill health

6% (6 children) came into care due to their own mental ill health and parents/carers being unable to manage this (an increase from 1.7% in the last reporting period). 5 of these children were 16 or 17 years old.

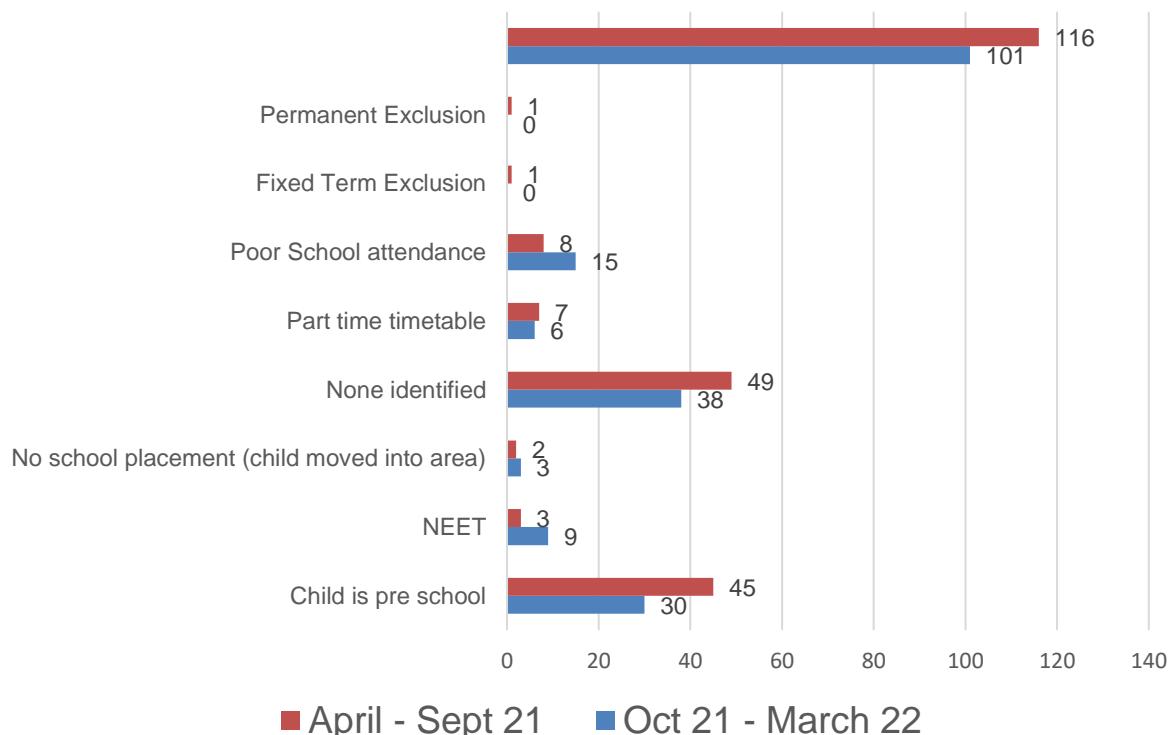
4.1.4 Case status prior to coming into care

Approximately 10% of CLA were known to early help or universal services. Data shows that just under half of these were previously on child protection plans.

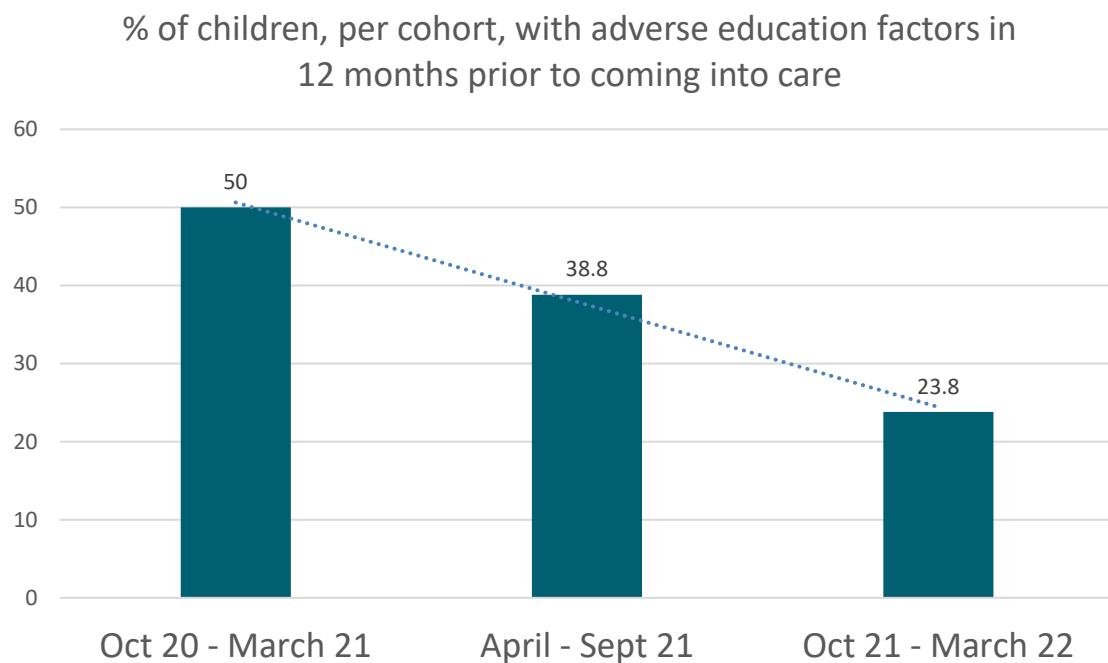
4.2 Education

The graph below shows the educational experience of children prior to coming into care.

Educational experience of children 12 months prior to coming into care



30 of the children in this cohort were pre-school age and have been disregarded from the analysis. The bar chart below shows that 24 of the school aged children (23.8%) experienced poor school attendance or were NEET at some point in the 12 months prior to them coming into care. This represents a steady decline in adverse educational factors being present for children coming into care.



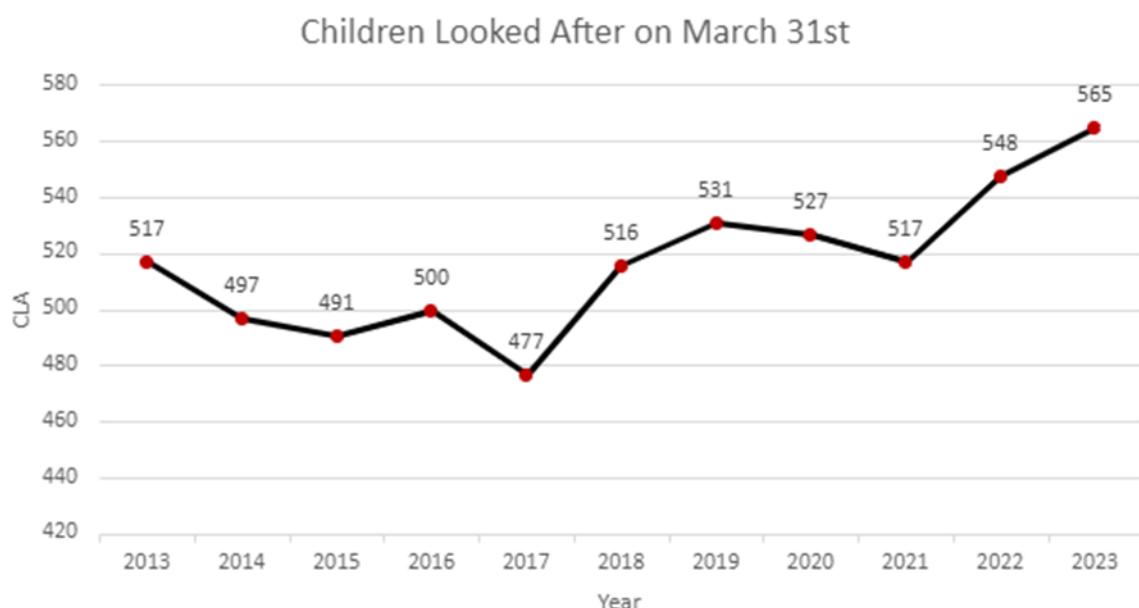
Six children (8.5%) from this cohort had a part-time timetable at some point during the 12 months prior to coming into care. None of the children had experienced either fixed term or permanent exclusions from school.

4.3 Spend

The council spends approximately £14m a year on preventative, children in need and child protection services directly focused on keeping families together. These services are successful, but more could be done to expand the offer to include multi-agency targeted early help, supporting more families at an earlier stage, and increasing family reunification.

5.0 Summary of the needs of Children Looked After (CLA)

In Somerset, the CLA population has increased at a slower rate than the national average. Data for 31st March 2022 shows that the rate of CLA per 10,000 in Somerset was 50 compared to a national average of 70 and 68.5 for our statistical neighbours. The graph below, shows that on 31st March 2023 there were 565 CLA compared to 527 on 31st March 2020. An increase of only 6.7% in the last 3 years. In fact, in the last year, if the 46 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were removed from the graph, it would show 519 children, a similar figure to 2021.



As highlighted in Chapter 3, most children continue to enter the care system because of abuse and neglect. However, **we have seen a significant increase in children coming into care because of family relationships breaking down.**

On 31st March 2023, the CLA population comprised:

- 51% male, 48% female and 1% identified as other.
- 86% of CLA were white and 94% excluding UASC; 4% had mixed heritage; 3% were black and 6% from other ethnic groups.
- 8.5% had a disability and 160 of these children were open to the Children with Disabilities (CWD) social work team.
- 46 UASC – 8% of the CLA population. A significant increase from 2022.

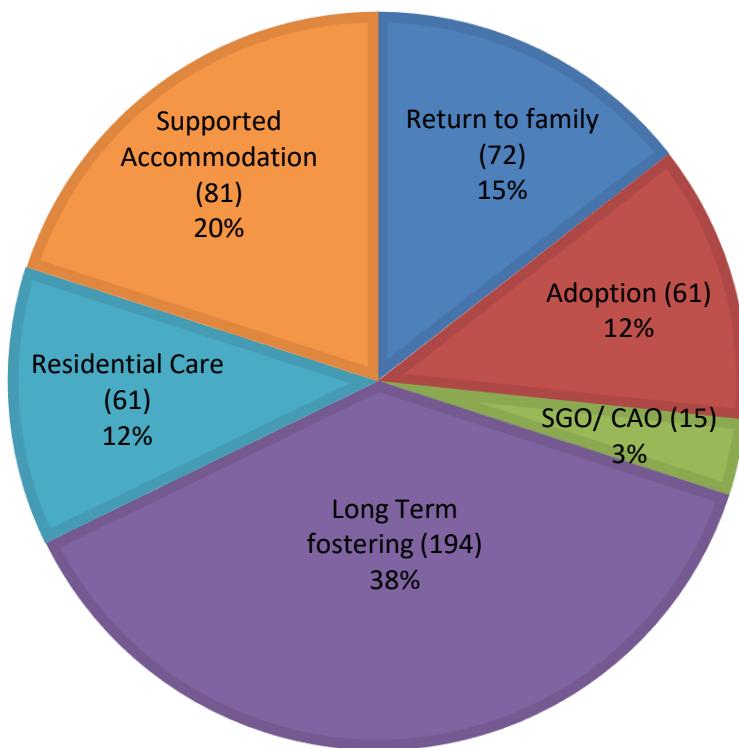
The age profile of CLA in Somerset is rising in line with other comparator authorities.

5.1 Permanency

Permanency is the term used to describe long term arrangements for children through adoption or with family members. 90% of CLA had a recorded permanency plan for the year ending 31st March 2023. For the majority of children, the plan was for long term foster care (194 children). Of these, 9.87% (53 children) were in kinship care arrangements. The chart below shows this breakdown.

Permanency Plans for Children in Care - 31/03/23

- | Plan Type | Count | Percentage |
|-------------------------|-------|------------|
| Return to family | 72 | 15% |
| Adoption | 61 | 12% |
| Long Term fostering | 194 | 38% |
| Supported Accommodation | 81 | 20% |
| Residential Care | 61 | 12% |
| SGO/ CAO | 15 | 3% |



Further work is needed to establish if plans are achieving permanence for children. However, data for the year ending 31st March 2023, showed that six children's plans were changed from adoption; 5 of these changed to long-term fostering and one to a special guardianship order. Whilst some of these changes ensured continuity of care, the changes were mainly due to a lack of appropriate adoptive homes.

5.1.1 Achieving permanency through adoption

In August 2022 the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) reported that **nationally the number of children moving into the adoption process continued to decline**, and children were waiting longer for permanence. Somerset's experience largely mirrors this. However, in 2021-2022 adoptions were

severely delayed in Somerset, following a technical irregularity and so only 6 children were adopted. This resulted in a backlog and 31 adoptions were granted in 2022-23. As a result, data is skewed.

In the first five months of 2023, there were:

- 10 adoption orders made
- 6 court hearings for adoption
- 20 children placed for adoption or foster for adoption arrangements.

A key element of our strategy is **early permanence arrangements**. This is where children are moved into permanent arrangements early. These are largely made through Fostering for Adoption arrangements (FFA), where children live with approved adopters, who are also temporarily approved as Somerset Council foster carers. On 31st March 2023 there were 14 children placed through early permanence, a similar figure to the previous year. This figure is low compared to neighbouring authorities. **Increasing the number of early permanence arrangements is therefore a key part of our strategy going forward.**

5.1.2 Achieving permanence through Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs)

More children are being placed with family members by the Local Authority under Regulation 24 which is the temporary approval of a connected person to become a foster carer to allow for sufficient time for a foster carer approval. Forty SGO's were granted in 2022-23. This was lower than 2021-22 but figures had been skewed that year. In the first five months of 2023, 26 SGOs were made.

5.1.3 Maintaining permanency

There are significantly fewer placement breakdowns in adoptive placements and SGOs than in long term foster care.

In the year ending 31st March 2023, four children who had been adopted came back into the care system. Two of these children had been placed in Somerset by other local authorities. A significant factor for these children had been the number of placement moves they had experienced in their lives. Early permanence arrangements might have reduced these.

Data for 2022-23 also shows that 11 children on SGOs also came into care. Of these 7 remained in care long term.

Whilst we have only recently begun to track breakdowns, it is apparent that **improving packages of support for those in permanency arrangements could have a significant impact on success**. In 2022-23, 82% of referrals for post special guardianship support resulted from crisis. **Identifying additional support earlier for children is crucial to keeping these families together** and is therefore a key element of our strategy going forward.

5.2 Pressures / trends in the CLA population

5.2.1 Accessing the right education for some CLA

The Education for Life Strategy recognises that school performance in Somerset is sometimes poor, and outcomes for disadvantaged children are in decline. There is also a **high percentage of exclusions**, which affects disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs disproportionately. The vision is that **education and social care will work together to ensure sufficient education and placements** are available to meet individual children's needs locally.

Work has begun to achieve this vision. Year one of the Education for Life Strategy includes two key projects. The first is a research project focused on **preventing exclusions by exploring what support was offered** to those children known to services prior to their exclusion. The second focuses on collaborative attendance - exploring ways of **strengthening partnerships between schools and parent/carers**. Pilots have also looked at strengthening trauma awareness in schools. Therapeutic Education is being developed in the new Homes and Horizons partnership.

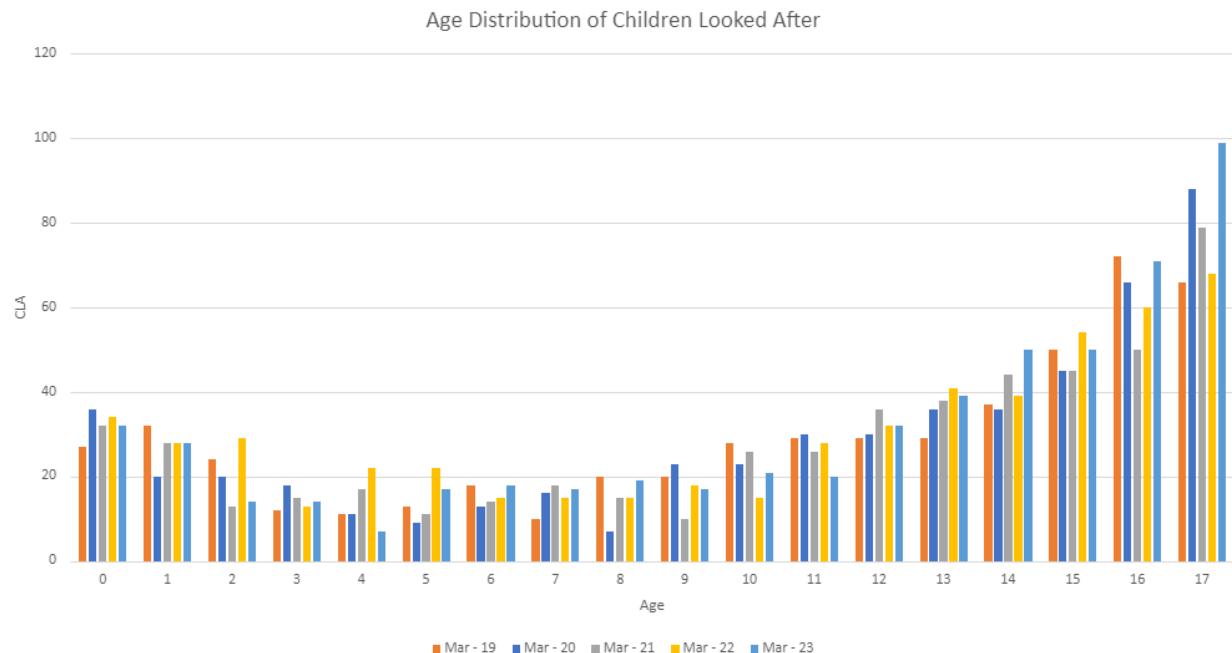
5.2.2 An increase in UASC

In 2022 Somerset's quota for UASC was only 2% of the CLA population. This was much lower than the national average and our statistical neighbours were at 7% and 6% respectively. In 2022 the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) increased our quota so that the number of UASC increased significantly from 10 children to 46 (8% of the CLA population) in the year ending March 2023. In addition, there were 43 care leavers who had been UASC. Whilst Somerset has received funding to support these children, it has not covered the true cost and the huge increase has placed additional pressures not only on homes for children, but also created pressures for community services in Somerset.

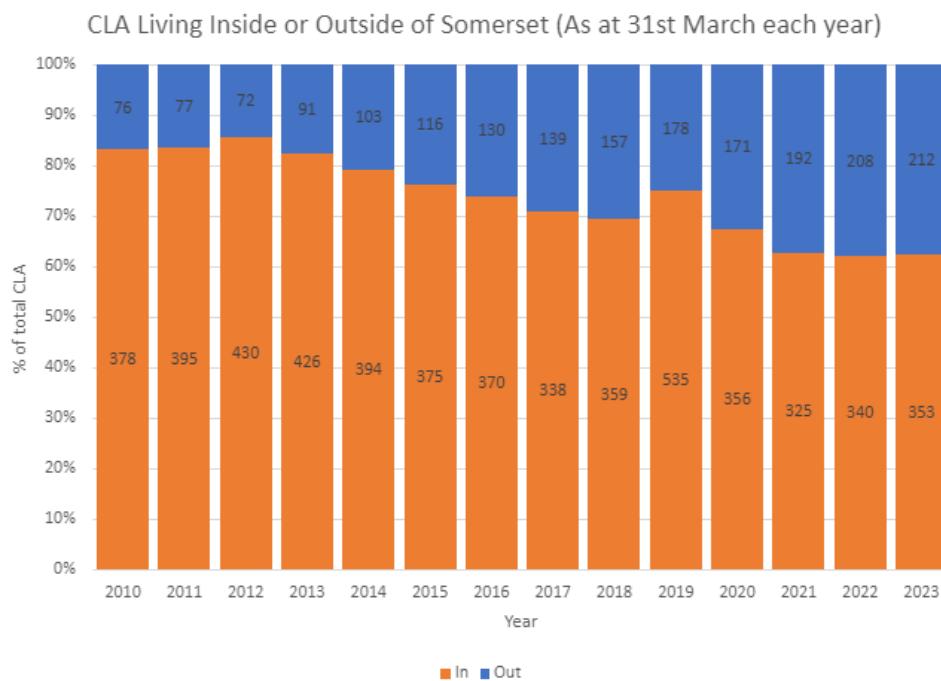
As we move forward **a clear pathway for UASC is essential**, as well as ensuring specific outcomes for UASC with providers through our new Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) within the new 16+ Service.

5.2.3 An increase in CLA with complex needs resulting in difficulties finding stable needs led placements.

Like the national trend, the number of older children in the care system is growing year on year. The graph below clearly illustrates this trend:



A small but growing number of CLA have highly complex needs. It is often difficult for us to meet these needs in-house or even within the county. The number of children living outside of the county has therefore increased significantly over the last 10 years, rising from 91 in March 2013 to 212 in March 2023: a rise of 57% shown in the graph below.



We know that we make good decisions for the majority of children. However, the **difficulties in finding the right homes for children is having an adverse impact** on stability for children and their outcomes. Both short-term and long-term stability indicators show that Somerset's performance is below that of comparator authorities.

In 2022 14% of children had more than 3 placement moves during the year compared to 10% or 11% in all other comparator groups. In the year ending 31st March 2023, this rose to 17% (95 children).

Managers' report that placement moves are often positive. The difficulties experienced in finding the right homes for children often means that moves are necessary to get the right home. This should therefore have a positive impact on long term stability. However, this is not yet the case.

For children who have been looked after for more than 2.5 years, Somerset's performance is below comparator authorities. In the year ending 31st March 2022, 67% had been living in the same homes for over 2 years (compared to 71% nationally and 72% for our statistical neighbours). This dropped further to 58% in the year ending 31st March 2023.

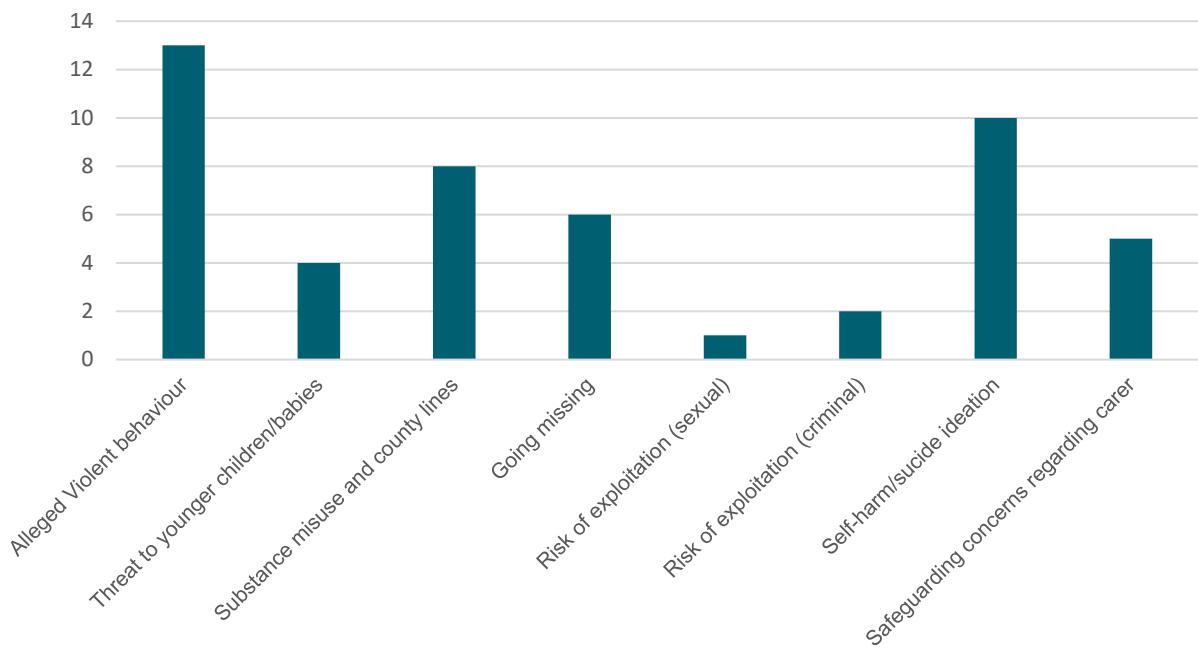
March 2022 data shows that **Somerset had a significantly higher percentage of placement breakdowns as a result of children's behaviour** compared to all comparator groups. 16% of placement moves were as a result of carers requesting the move because of children's behaviour, compared to 10% nationally and 12% in the South West and our statistical neighbours. This raises questions about matching and the support provided when difficulties are identified.

In January 2023, the IRO service undertook a dip sample audit of 12 **unplanned placement endings** that had taken place over the previous 18 months. The majority of children looked at were in foster care or kinship care (84%) and a small number in residential homes. Although this was a small unrepresentative sample, the audit revealed some helpful findings:

- 50% of children audited were living with siblings who also experienced similar endings.
- 58% of the children had received formal matching whilst no matching was carried out for 42% of the sample.
- Worryingly, 25% of the endings involved the young person making an allegation.
- Children's voices were actively heard and generally a lot of support was offered by children's social care and partners.
- Support offered was frequently at the point of crisis.
- Social work visits had not increased when there were signs that the placement was struggling.
- There was a lack of reflective conversations between social workers and managers about possible endings.

The audit has resulted in practice changes aimed at **early identification of placement difficulties and learning from endings**, which will form part of our strategy going forward.

Reasons for placement breakdown and children's complex needs for cohort of children leading to unregistered placements



5.2.4 A shortage of support and accommodation for children with disabilities

Providing short breaks to children and young people with disabilities is part of the statutory guidance¹⁸. Overnight breaks can be provided under Section 17 or Section 20 of the children Act (1989). This provision is therefore part of this strategy, if the children are deemed looked after. Over the past 10 years overnight short break provision and day care support has reduced significantly in Somerset:

- **The number of in-house short break foster carers have fallen significantly from 35 to 3.**
- **In-house short break homes have reduced by 50% from 4 to 2.** The current homes are registered for 8 beds in total but in reality, because of staffing issues, most weeks only 5 beds are available.
- **Somerset Supporters have almost halved in recent years** from over 30 to only 16 in July 2023. As a result, in July 2023 they were only able to support 28 children and there were a further 48 children waiting to be matched to a supporter.
- **The fall in the supply of provision has been met with a corresponding increase in demand for support.** In July 2023, 160 children received social care support through the CWD team, and 450 children received early help support.

¹⁸ Short Breaks. Statutory guidance on how to safeguard and promote the welfare of disabled children using short breaks. (2010). [Short breaks for disabled children - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/short-breaks-for-disabled-children)

Eighteen of these children were looked after. Their placements were as follows:

- 11 in long term foster care
- 6 in residential school settings
- 1 in a high-cost residential home outside of Somerset.

All 7 children in residential settings were living some distance from their home, community and support networks. **These placements are not only financially expensive – they also carry social and developmental costs for children.**

There were 22 disabled children in need (CIN) receiving short break provision and 4 on CIN plans living in residential school settings. A further 16 children with disabilities were deemed to be on the edge of care. All of whom had diagnosed neuro-diversity conditions. For many, the support was being provided through agency care in the community and was seen as not robust enough to meet needs. For these families, pressures are heightened, and the risk of family breakdown is increased.

Both the SEND strategy and local data show a steady rise in the number of CLA with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). In 2022, 50.4% of Somerset CLA had an EHCP. This was significantly higher than all other comparator groups and the SEND Transformation Programme is seeking to understand this further.

Whilst it is apparent there has been a drastic reduction in the sufficiency of accommodation and services for children with disabilities, there is very little analysis to identify how the needs of these children can be met in the future. **At present the service is largely reactive and there is limited data to inform sufficiency.** Going forward further analysis is needed to:

- **Forecast the numbers and specific needs of children with a disability likely to require services (from health prevalence data)**
- **Identify the number of short break bed hours required** to assess whether further developments are required (from analysis of those children on the edge of care)
- **Establish a business case for any future provision required** using costs of edge of care and CWD admissions to care following family breakdowns.

5.2.5 Increased child and adolescent mental health needs

CAMHS data from Somerset NHS Foundation Trust shows an increased demand in services since 2020. Referrals for the mental health support team increased from 300 to almost 700 and the average length of involvement also increased across all teams.

The emotional health and wellbeing team, which is a joint funded team across the Council and CAMHS, offers clinical therapeutic interventions for children looked after as well as supporting and offering training to professionals caring for those children and young people.

The team works with complex (developmental) trauma and with disturbed young people. Support is crucial to the ‘team around the child’ as relationships can be very challenging.

At the end of September 2023 the team had 113 open involvements which translates to 101 young people.

- 44.2% of open involvements are working with Care Leavers
- 54.0% of open involvements are working with CLA.

These involvements consisted of the following support:

- 31 - Direct work with carers
- 29 - Direct work with young people
- 26 - Support to professionals
- 15 - Multi-agency joint working
- 11 - Support to school
- 7 - Support to residential providers
- 6 - Direct work with birth family
- 2 - Psychological assessments

There is clearly a need for this type of multi-disciplinary support which should be looked at further to fully understand future requirements.

6.0 Summary of the needs of Care Leavers

Somerset has seen an average growth of 16–22-year-old care leavers¹⁹. On 31st March 2023, there were **572 care leavers in Somerset**. The vast majority (93%) of whom had remained in care until their 18th birthday. In August 2023, the age breakdown of young people worked with by the Care Leaver teams was:

- 12% aged 16 years
- 17% aged 17 years
- 18% aged 18 years
- 53% aged 18+

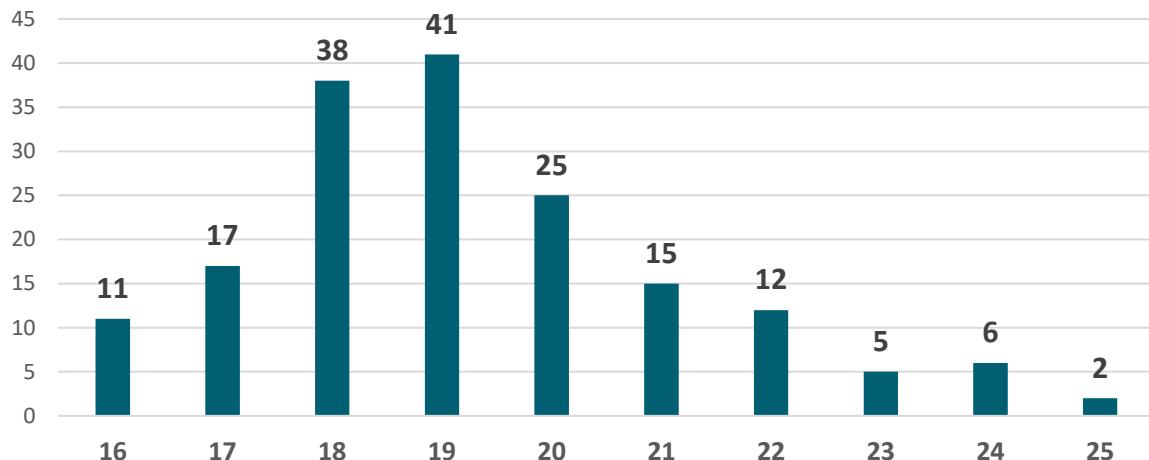
Data shows that:

- 99% of care leavers were still **in touch with their workers**
- 98% of 17–18 year olds and 94% of 19–21-year-olds were **in suitable accommodation**. A higher percentage to those of our comparator authorities
- 60% of 17 to 18 year olds are **in education, employment or training** (EET). This is similar to England and statistical neighbours but at 58% the number of 19-to 21 year olds who were in education, training or employment is higher than both the England and statistical neighbour averages (51% for statistical neighbours in 2022).
- 32% of care leavers are in **staying put arrangements**.

In August 2022, we undertook detailed work to obtain a greater understanding of the needs of those young people over the age of 16. The age profile of those 16 to 25 year olds in supported accommodation arrangements clearly show that **the greatest number of placements were made for 18 and 19 year olds**. It should be noted that these figures will include 18–25 year olds who are not known to children's social care but who are deemed in priority need and owed a housing duty, due to the nature of the current P2I contract.

¹⁹ Demand and Capacity of Homes for Children in Care. Challenges and opportunities in the provision of supported accommodation for young people aged 16+. (2023). CCN, LiiA and Newton.

Ages of Young People in 16+ placements



Providers, Social Workers and Leaving Care Workers provided a snapshot of 183 young people (as of August 2022) to identify their support needs. This showed that:

- 65% had a **mental health issue**, of which 53.3% are engaged with mental health services (64)
- 55% were at risk of or had experienced **domestic abuse**
- 50% were at risk of or had experienced **exploitation**
- 42% were **mis-using substances**, of which only 25% (19 of 76) were engaged with substance misuse services
- 24% had **physical ill health or a disability**
- 22% had a **learning disability**
- Only 11% were engaged in **offending behaviour**.

6.1 Pressures / trends in the care leavers' population

6.1.1 A significant increase in the number of young people staying put

The number of young people in staying put arrangements increased significantly in 2023 from 22% to 32%. We know that this will have a significant impact on these young people's lives. Research shows that **staying put arrangements enable young people to prepare for independence in a nurturing environment which results in greater engagement in education, employment and training.**

6.1.2 Fewer Care Leavers Living with family

Somerset has fewer care leavers living with parents than comparator authorities. In March 2022 the number of 16 and 17 year old care leavers living with parents or relatives fell to 8% compared to 16% in the previous year. Data for 31st March 2023 shows that 13% of all care leavers were living with parents or relatives. Only 3% of 16 and 17 year olds were living with family. This raises questions about reunification, the use of family group conferencing for CLA and care leavers and how we work with those families.

6.1.3 Increase in care leavers living in supported accommodation

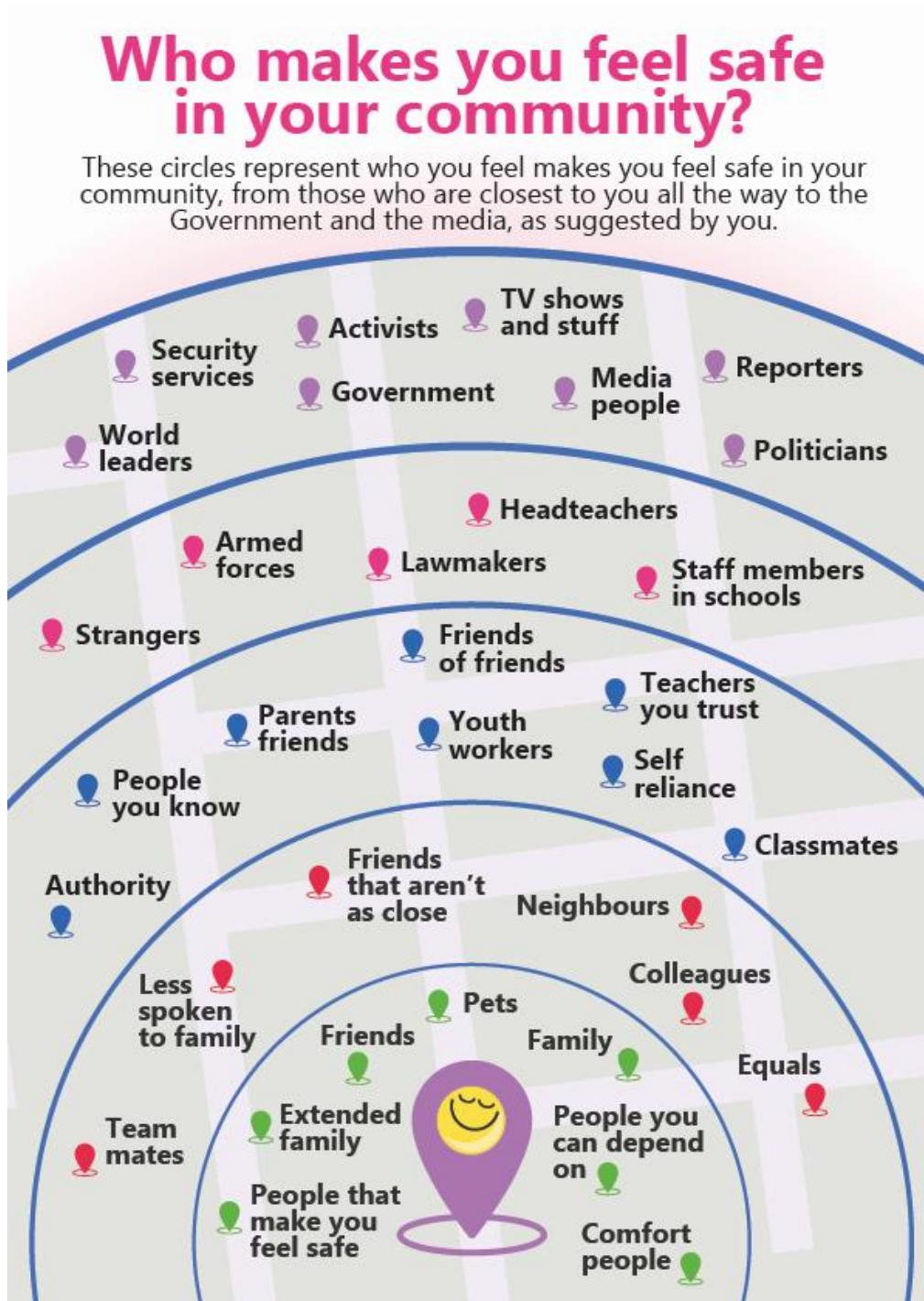
The number of care leavers aged 16-21 years old (including UASC) in supported accommodation has increased significantly. In 2022, 16 and 17 year old care leavers living in supported accommodation increased from 24% to 53% and for 19 to 21 year olds it increased from 13% to 21%. This is higher than comparator authorities. Placements were made up of a combination of Pathways to Independence (P2I), which is the Council's youth homelessness service, and spot purchased arrangements for young people with more complex needs.

6.1.4 Fewer Care Leavers Living Independently

Despite the above, **the number of care leavers 16-21 years living independently has fallen and is significantly lower than comparator authorities.** In August 2023 only 17% of all care leavers were living independently. This is in part due to the lack of suitable and affordable housing for young people but is also directly linked to the increase in semi-independent accommodation. The increase in serious youth crime and high-risk behaviours amongst care leavers has meant that fewer are able to live independently without support.

7.0 What Children Looked After and Care Leavers tell us?

Somerset's Youth Forum created the map below of people and professions who made them feel safe, called Circles of Community. Our aim is to ensure the people in the first three circles are supported and well informed, so that they can continue to be a safe community for Somerset's children.



We regularly consult with children looked after and care leavers, who stress the following messages:

1. **Consistency** – there should be fairness and equality for all young people wherever we live in Somerset
2. **Choice** – “Give me choice about where I want to live, and can I see it before I move in”
3. **Don't give up on us** – “sometimes I will make mistakes”
4. **Show an interest in us and get to know us well** – sometimes just asking me “How my day has gone” helps; “be interested in me”; “get to know me”
5. **Staff need to have good relationships with us** and they should be trained to understand all our traumas and needs
6. **Give us welcome packs** – I may not know how to use the washing machine or who I need to speak to if something in the home doesn't work or I want to give some feedback, also, where is the nearest shop
7. **Homes should feel like homes** – homes should be cosy
8. **Homes should include activities and entertainment** – pool tables and games consoles
9. **Homes for young people should include Fast Wi-Fi** and should be easy to get online – we all need to be able to use it at the same time
10. **Help us to make friends**
11. **We need help to understand tenancy agreements** – “it's a minefield”
12. **'Stage not age'** – we are all different and need to get the support and homes we need.

Consultation with a group of young people took place in October 2023 to seek their views on the sufficiency of homes. Their comments can be seen on the following page – showing how important it is for young people to continue to be involved in service design.

I did have a choice. After I was gold banded I was able to bid on properties. It felt good to have that independence especially after not having that most of my life.

I didn't get an opportunity to visit any of them first and lived out of my suitcase for a year

Benefits and financial support is not consistent with different providers

If I'm living out of Somerset I still want the benefits that I would get in County; eg we don't have to pay council tax but in some counties you do. Not my fault I am living out of Somerset.

I was moved to different hotels for a couple of months. I don't have a choice about that. I need to pay £150 in arrears to be gold banded to get out of this situation. I can't cook in the hotel and don't have the money to eat out. I am on UC and still trying to pay off £150 while not being able to cook is hard on my budgeting. The council must be paying more than £150 a week for me to be staying here and that is crazy, what a waste of money, I can't understand why some payments scheme was agreed so I could be gold banded rather than this waste of money.

I live in the middle of nowhere. Carers can't always take me so hard to get around.

Think back to when you moved to your present home...

What advice would you give to the people planning future homes for CLA in Somerset?

What's the best thing about where you live?

Creating a short video for new residents to watch before moving there. Things like this which gives us more of a picture would be good.

Make any new housing developments have a training flat and / or 1 bedroom flats for young people who are vulnerable included as part of the plan

Involve us with the planning

Listen to our lived experience

The Tenant Accreditation Scheme is a good way of preparing us for independence

When I was at Provider 'A' the worker was a mother figure to me

I live somewhere where I feel supported and not isolated

Travel links are good where I live and am near friends and family

I have independence!

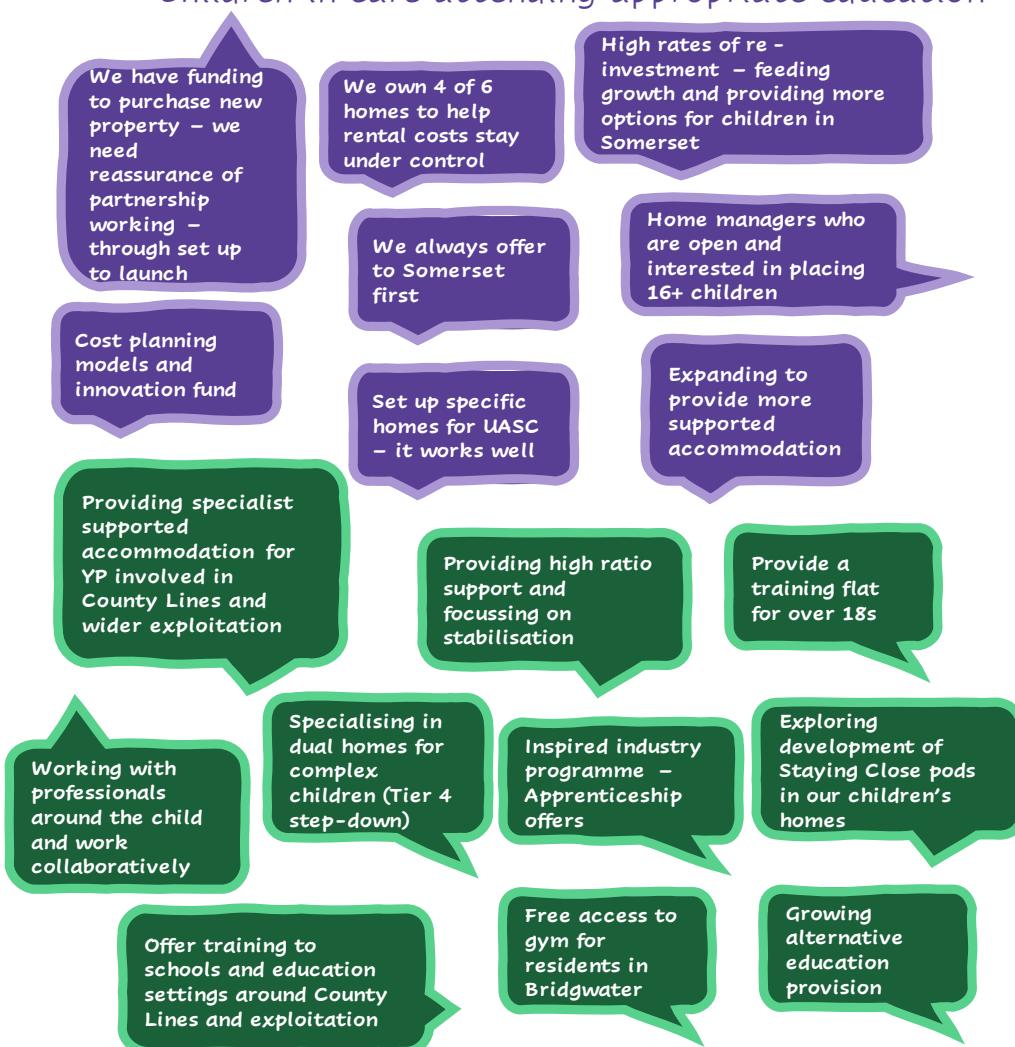
Maybe CLA and care leavers could have train or bus passes to help with challenge of travel in parts of the county

8.0 Working in partnership with providers

A workshop was held with a range of providers and commissioners in September 2023. The workshop focused on 2 exercises.

Exercise 1 – How are you currently working with us to meet our challenges around:

- Increasing costs
 - Not enough of the right homes in Somerset
 - Increasing numbers of UASC
 - Increasing number of older children in care
 - Lack of foster carers
 - Increasing number of children with complex needs
 - Lack of move-on accommodation for young people
 - Children experiencing numerous placement moves
 - Limited short break provision
 - Children in care attending appropriate education



Exercise 2 – What can you do to enhance sufficiency to meet the needs of our children over the next 5 years



9.0 How are we meeting the needs of children on the edge of care?

Somerset's **Family Solutions** service includes **interventions which families can choose to engage with**, as well as **services which are required** as part of a child in need or child protection plan.

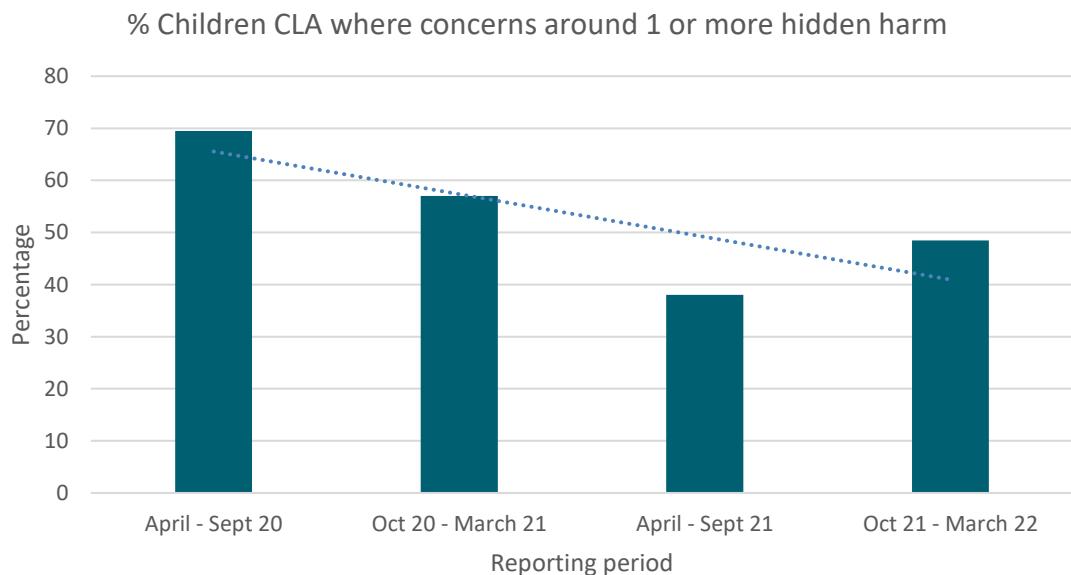
The purpose of Family Solutions and the Family Intervention Service (FIS) is to help keep families together safely, in a nurturing and loving environment. If safety cannot be maintained, or a child is not able to thrive, child protection processes will be enacted.

In addition to Family Solutions, Somerset is developing a more connected community offer, called **Connect Somerset**, which aims to bring together all the organisations who support families at the early help stage. This means that **Somerset will have a comprehensive offer to Somerset residents from early help through to statutory interventions**, helping families every step of the way.

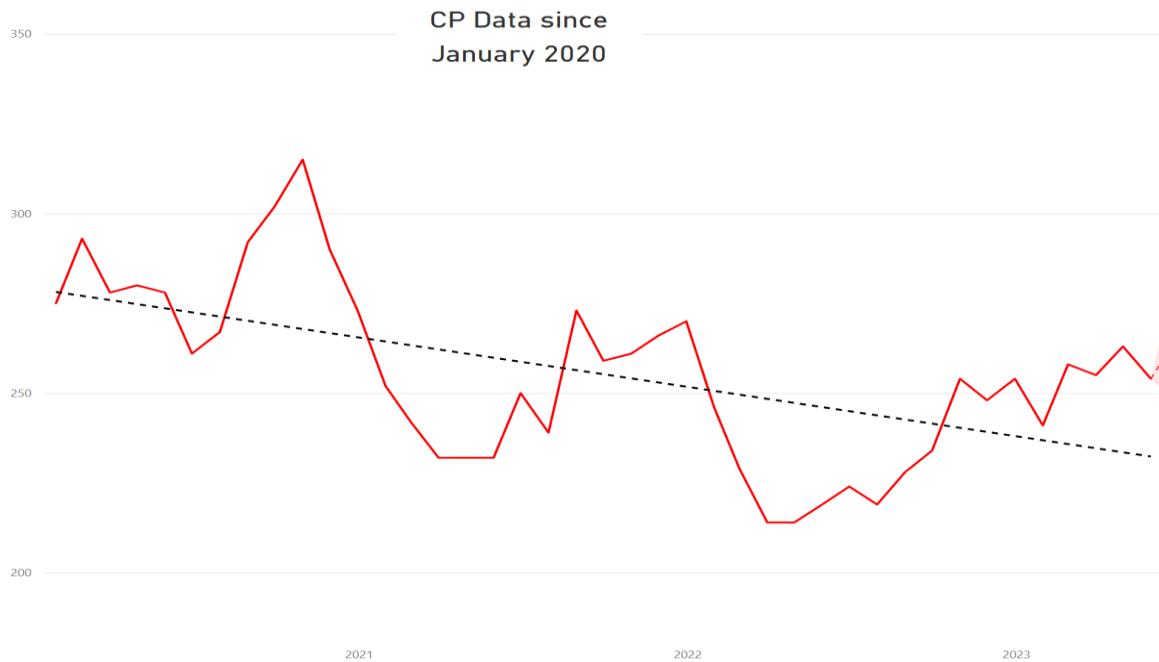
9.1 Family Safeguarding

Somerset's Family Safeguarding work results in fewer children in care than the approach used in Somerset's Wider Safeguarding Teams. In 2022/3 each Family Safeguarding Team averaged 5.25 children coming into care, while the Wider Safeguarding Teams averaged 8.5.

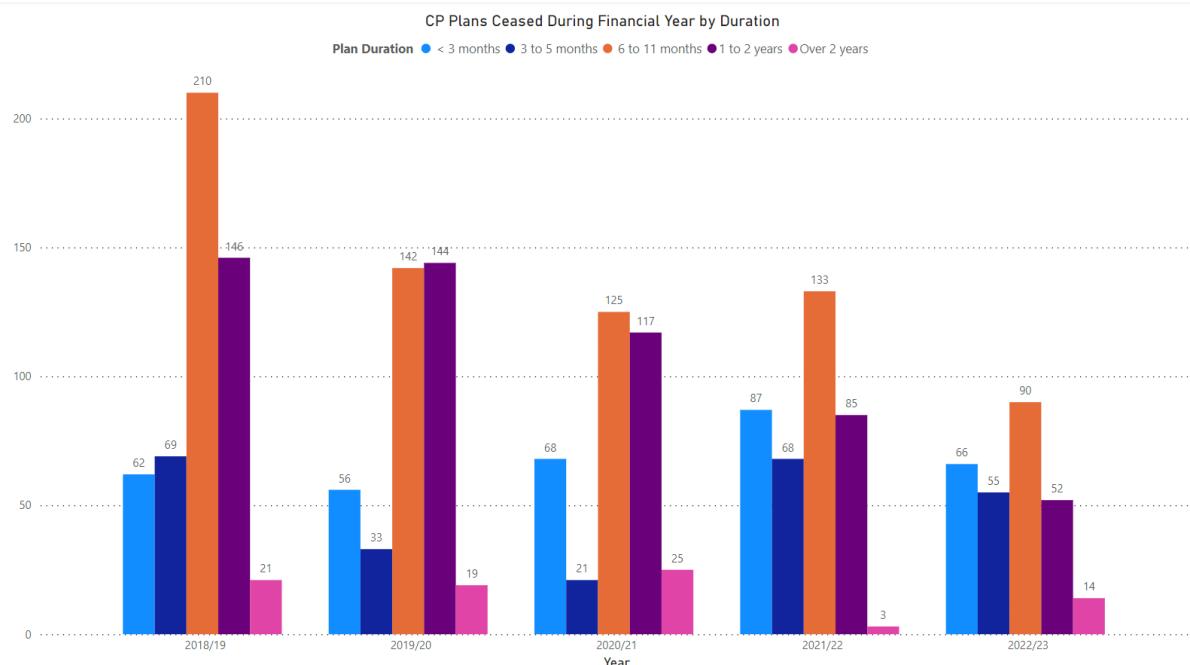
Family Safeguarding has resulted in a reduction in children coming into care because their parents were experiencing substance misuse, mental health or domestic abuse, ('Hidden Harm').



Family Safeguarding has also impacted the number of children subject to child protection plans from an average of 275 in 2020 to an average of 225 in 2023.



The time a family spends on a child protection plan has also fallen, showing the effectiveness of Family Safeguarding interventions. The number of plans lasting over 2 years has reduced from 21 to 14, and plans lasting between 1 and 2 years have reduced from 146 to 52.



It is therefore clear that for families who have reached a significant level of concern with a child protection plan, **Family Safeguarding is an effective intervention to improve parents' ability to care for their children and keep families together.** This reduces costs for the authority and improves outcomes for children, young people, their parents and their wider families.

FIS already merges early help with Section 17 child in need work, as recommended by the Care Review. Demand is greater than capacity and this team requires support from substance misuse, mental health and domestic abuse specialists in order to reduce length of cases, prevent returning cases, and reduce escalation. Linking FIS with Connect Somerset Area Champions and neighbourhood areas will strengthen the early help element of the service and enable families to build resilience within their communities.

Ofsted's inspection in 2022 identified **the quality of early help services provided to children by the Family Intervention Service (FIS) as strong:**

The service delivers a highly effective rapid response to children on the edge of care, which is successful in repairing relationships and preventing family breakdown, so helping many children to remain with their families.

9.2 Transform

Somerset has developed a way of collating inputs and outcomes from a range of partner agency databases, to give **one holistic view of a child and their family.** **Transform can act simply as an information tool**, giving practitioners up to date contact details, and **it can also act as a professional safety tool**, notifying domestic abuse incidents from as recently as the day before. More complex targeted analytics is possible, and this is currently being developed through DfE funding, working in partnership with Bristol City Council.

Early identification is essential in preventing children coming into care to create the best possible opportunity to prevent the situation escalating or the social issues becoming so entrenched, they are difficult to change, the use of data and analytics can effectively support this work. Early Identification of the risk of coming into care can be achieved by analysing various data sources, including historical case records, socioeconomic data, family history, and behavioural patterns. **By detecting patterns and trends, social workers, family workers and agencies can intervene early** to offer assistance and support to these families, thereby preventing situations from escalating.

10.0 How are we meeting the needs of Children Looked After and Care Leavers?

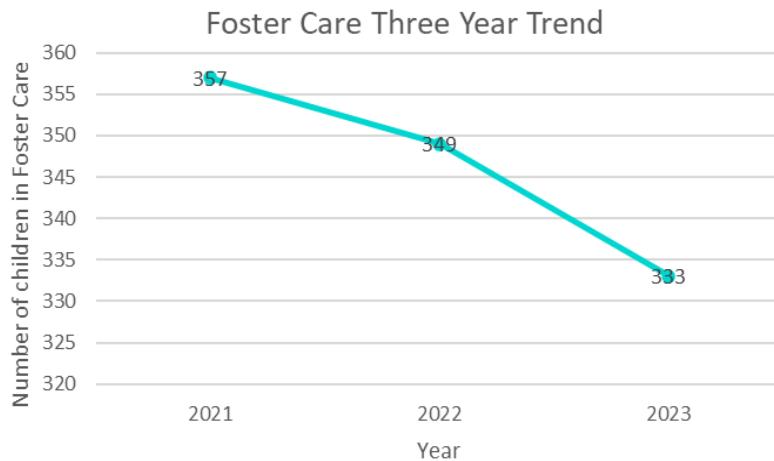
10.1 Where are children looked after living?

In Somerset **only 40% of CLA are living in local authority provision** compared to 46% nationally, 50% in the South West and 54% in statistical neighbouring authorities. 44% of our accommodation is provided by private providers, 6% higher than national use and that of our statistical neighbours (as at 31/03/22). This is not to say that we have not developed accommodation for our children. **We have strengthened our relationships with providers and begun to enter into strategic partnerships.**

One of these partnerships is the **Homes and Horizons** strategic partnership, aimed at providing appropriate nurturing homes and support locally for children with the most complex needs. We have entered into a 10 year partnership with Homes 2 Inspire (H2I), which is part of the Shaw Trust (a registered charity) to establish **8-10 homes for children with complex needs, each supported by a therapeutic education service.** The development of linked therapeutic foster carers will also enable these children to step forward to family living, when the time is right.

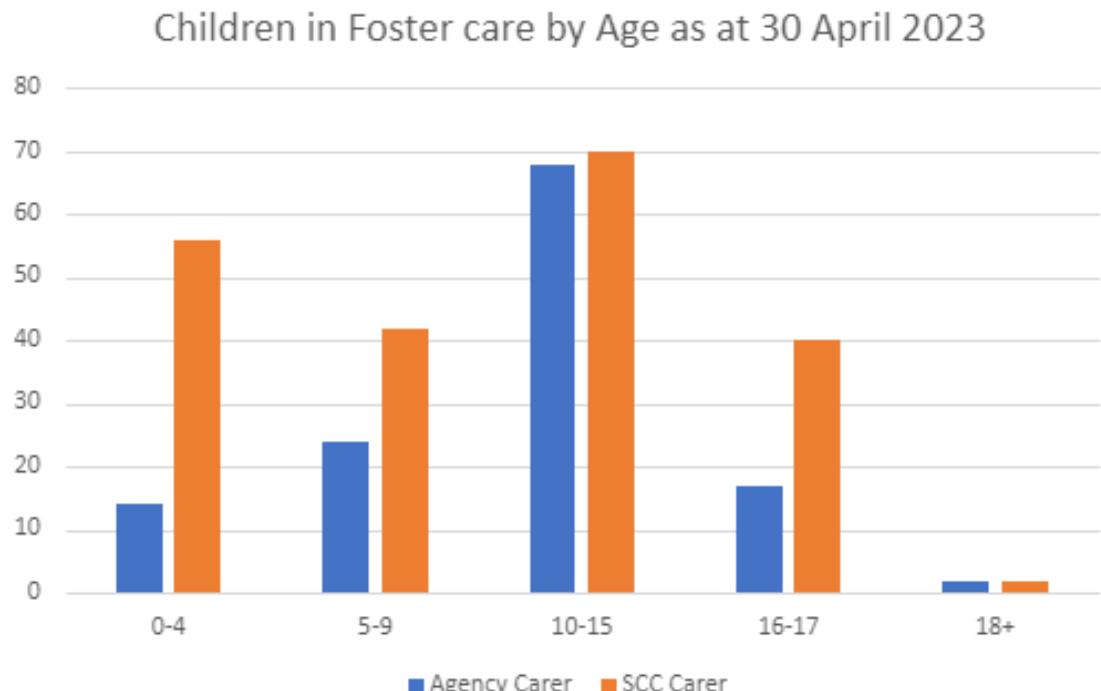
10.1.1 Children living in foster care

Data shows that in the 7 years until March 31st 2022, **children living with foster carers fell from 77% to 64%** of the CLA population. In March 2023, this fell further to 58%. The graph below shows the figures for the last 3 years. As part of our approach, **we would like to increase the ratio of children in foster care to 70%.**



55% of children living in foster care are male compared to 45% female, (similar to the overall CLA population – see Chapter 4). The age profile of children in foster care (below) shows that in-house carers meet the needs of all age groups. **The greatest number of foster care placements are for the 10–15 year age group,**

(both in-house and carers provided by Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA)), reflecting the increasing CLA in this age group. **Targeted recruitment of in-house foster carers for these children would therefore reduce the reliance on IFAs as well as reduce children living in residential homes due to lack of sufficiency.**



A total of 333 children in care were living with foster carers in March 2023.

Somerset has a lower percentage of in-house foster carers than comparators. In recent years in-house foster care households have declined. Between October 2021 and October 2022, the number of households fell by 48 households. In March 2022 there were 148 households. The decline continued and by March 2023 there were 134 (a drop of 10% during the year).

Data shows that in the 10 months from April 2022 to January 2023, there were **35 de-registrations of foster carers**. These were spread across all ages of carers, but the majority were aged between 40 and 69 years. 23 had been foster carers for over 2 years and there were a range of reasons for their de-registration. These included:

- A change in family circumstances (15 carers)
- Resignation (8 carers)
- An inability to comply with either minimum standards or the foster care agreement (5 carers)
- Retirement (3 carers)

In 2022-23 Somerset commissioned consultants to do a deep dive into internal foster care trends and spend. The true cost of internal foster care placements is not known. However, the review found that:

- Data quality needs to improve
- Recruitment needs to be maximised to improve conversion rates for enquiry to approval
- More work is needed to achieve sufficiency of homes
- Greater engagement of foster carers is needed, particularly when finding homes.

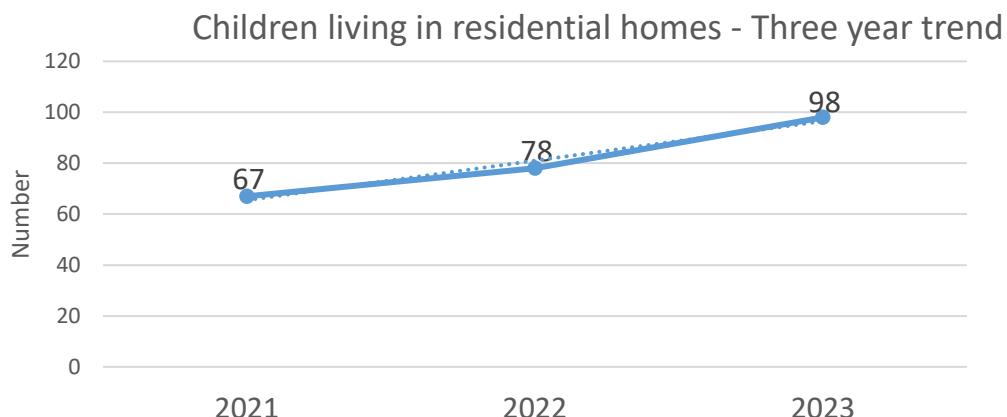
As a result, an in-house fostering change programme has been developed.

10.1.2 Children living in kinship arrangements

The number of children living in kinship foster care arrangements has been slowly falling over the last 3 years. In March 2021 there were 43 children; 39 children in March 2022; and in March 2023 this fell further to 36 children living in kinship arrangements. However, a total of 116 Connected Person Assessments were completed in 2022-23.

10.1.3 Children living in residential children's homes

The number of CLA living in residential homes has increased over the last 3 years.



As of 31st March 2023, **17% of children in care were living in residential homes.** The majority of these children were aged 10-15 years, followed by 16 and 17 year olds. There was also a higher number of boys in residential homes (63%).

10.1.4 Other homes for CLA

Other CLA were living in the following homes as at 31st March 2023:

- 2 young people in Youth Offending Institutes
- 7 children in parent and child placements (6 in IFA and 1 in residential)
- 37 children in Kinship arrangements
- 60 children placed with parents.

10.1.5 Secure Children's homes

Children who need places in secure children's homes (SCHs) are particularly affected by the lack of suitable accommodation. The secure estate is high risk and high cost. Running this type of provision is therefore a considerable undertaking for any local authority²⁰. **The number of SCHs has reduced from 29 in March 2002 to 14 in March 2022.** The number of beds has also reduced from 425 to 231 over the same period. In Somerset this has sometimes meant competing with 40 other live referrals when only 1 bed was available across the country.

10.2 Where are young people 16+ living?

The table below, shows the number of Somerset's 16 to 22 year olds in care or care leavers in different placements and as a percentage the total placements for the year ending 31st March 2022:

Type of Placement	Number	% of total placements
Supported Accommodation	158	34%
Independent Accommodation	115	25%
Fostering	50	11%
Staying Put	46	10%
Family	38	8%
Other	33	7%
Residential	25	5%
Total	465	100%

The Demand and Capacity of Homes for Children in Care Report showed that **Somerset's use of supported accommodation was average** when compared to the other 15 local authorities who took part in the research. However, Somerset had seen above average growth in the use of supported accommodation. Section 9 of this report shows the increasing cost of this and outlines developments as part of our strategy.

10.3 Tier 4 CAMHS Beds

Alongside the increase in demand for CAMHS beds there has been a significant drop in supply. In Q1 of 2017/18 there were 117,128 CAMHS Tier 4 bed days across the country. This dropped significantly to 70,001 in Q4 of 2021/22. In Somerset the drop in provision has been even more startling. In Q1 in 2017/18 there were 1,160 CAMHS Tier 4 bed days in Somerset compared to only 17 in Q4 of 2021/22.

²⁰ [How local authorities plan for sufficiency of accommodation that meets the needs of children in care and care leavers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-local-authorities-plan-for-sufficiency-of-accommodation-that-meets-the-needs-of-children-in-care-and-care-leavers)

11.0 External Placement Spend

Part of our strategy is to develop and apply cost and demand modelling recognised by the service and corporate stakeholders and used as the basis for joint medium-term planning and tracking. While CLA trends are hard to forecast, we plan to develop a “what-if?” range of parameters to assist with medium-term planning. We are working closely with external consultants and a cross-service reference group to develop a cost and demand modelling tool, which proposes “optimistic” and “pessimistic” scenarios for CLA and associated placement costs.

- The *optimistic* scenario assumes that the rate of CLA entering and leaving care is broadly consistent with the last five years i.e. that placement mix and unit costs will remain proportionally similar to the current position, and that the cost inflation will return to a level of around 3% per annum in 2025/26.
- The *pessimistic* scenario assumes that there will be an increase of children entering care due to the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, and that unregistered placements will increase due to market breakdown.

These trajectories will give us a practical range of costs for planning assumptions.

12.0 Governance and Next Steps

The development and implementation of this strategy is overseen by the CLA Outcomes Transformation Group. Further scrutiny of progress will be provided by the Corporate Parenting Board and Children and Families Scrutiny.

In order to track progress, the following indicators have been agreed which will be tracked on a quarterly basis:

- Number of CLA
- Percentage of CLA in foster care (in-house and external)
- Number of in-house foster carers
- Number of kinship arrangements
- Number of CLA living in and out of somerset by placement type
- Number of CLA with more than 3 placement moves
- Number of CLA who have been in placement for >2 years
- The number of children's homes and beds in Somerset
- The number of unregistered placements
- Placement spend broken down by placement type.

There will be an annual sufficiency statement, which will be shared publicly.
This will outline our progress in achieving sufficiency for our children and will in turn inform a wider annual programme plan.

By taking this approach we will ensure that the strategy is current and that we are responding to emerging and changing needs of our children. The overall strategy however will be revised in 2028.

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