

Children's Placements Sufficiency Statement 2023

Ensuring good quality, local provision of placements, accommodation and support informed by our children and young people, which offers choice and makes best use of available resources.

1. Executive Summary

In June 2022, the London Borough of Sutton set out a five-year (2022 - 2027) home placement commissioning strategy for children in the care of the local authority and care experienced young people aged 0 - 25 years. This strategy was published on the London Borough of Sutton internet site (as per this [Link](#)). This strategy set out the Local Authority's vision to ensure:

Good quality, local provision of placements, accommodation and support informed by our children and young people, which offers choice and makes best use of available resources.

The London Borough of Sutton has delivered a range of activity in support of this strategy over the last year.

1. Development and recruitment of a dedicated Housing and Development Manager for Children's Social Care to lead on property initiatives to increase the local provision of homes, care and support for vulnerable cohorts of children and young people and make best use of the council's and the area's assets.
2. Completion of a deep dive analysis of the profile of children in residential and unregistered placements which has prompted the local authority decision to establish two smaller satellite homes to extend and provide additional flexibility to the Willow Rise in-house residential offer.
3. Launch of a new Dynamic Purchasing System to replace expired council frameworks and establish flexible local approved provider lists for residential, independent fostering agency and family (parent and baby) centre placements.
4. The borough's supported housing offer for care experienced young people and vulnerable homeless young people has been recommissioned with new contracts awarded to Depaul UK and Barnardos, which were mobilised in November 2022.
5. Expansion of the flexible support accommodation offer with the addition of two shared house properties for care experienced and unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in the borough using London Borough of Sutton's property assets and existing block contracts with providers.

Key factors in the commissioning environment in 2022/23 which continue to inform the Local Authority's work to deliver the vision set out in the 0 - 25 home placement strategy are set out below:

1. A national shortage of foster carers and a reducing number of vacant foster placements has resulted in more children, particularly those transitioning to and in adolescence, being placed in children's homes, which in turn is putting a pressure on the residential care system.
2. The residential care sector has witnessed significant change in recent years which has disproportionately reduced the home placement opportunities for London Borough of Sutton. The private sector's share of children's homes in England has risen significantly and capacity has been disproportionately added in areas outside of London. For instance the North West has recorded an increase of 30% of new home placements, as compared with London which has only enjoyed an increase of 4%. The average size of children's homes has also fallen with most now providing four or fewer placements with an increase in solo placement homes. The reduction in supply or placements alongside an increase in Authorities' demand for placements has resulted in an increase in residential care prices in recent years.
3. Services such as residential care and specialist foster care are in high demand. We are aware that these same services are struggling to recruit and retain staff, particularly in London and the South East where average wages and house prices are higher. This is driving workers into alternative employment and reducing the number of placements available.
4. The Department for Education has developed new National Standards for supported accommodation placements for 16 - 17 year olds. Local Authorities will need to ensure all placements of this kind are with providers that have completed stage 1 of their Ofsted registration by 28 October 2023 to remain compliant.

5. London Care Services closed their regional commissioning arrangement at the end March 2023. The London Borough of Sutton has used this regional arrangement for commissioning of IFA and residential care placements.

2. Key Placement Information

Children and Young People in our Care

The population and demographic profile of children in the care of the local authority in 2022/23 has remained broadly similar.

- As of March 31, 2023, the number of children looked after in Sutton remained stable at 237, consistent with the figure recorded in the previous year (March 31, 2022: 238). Notably, three children were under the care of the local authority due to extended short breaks provision, mirroring the end-of-year position in 2022.
- The Children in Care rate for Sutton as at 31 March 2023 is also steady and has remained at the same rate as recorded for the borough for the last three years, 48 per 10,000 of children and young people in the borough. This was significantly lower than the reported rate for England in 2022 (70). It was also lower than the 2022 rate reported for Sutton's statistical neighbours (49.20) but higher than the 2022 rate for other Outer London boroughs (46).
- Of the children in the care of the London Borough of Sutton as at 31 March 2023, 147 (62%) were male and 90 (38%) were female.
- 36 of the children in our care as at 31 March 2023 (33 males and 3 females) were Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), compared to 29 the previous year. The majority of the UASC in the care of the Local Authority are aged 14 - 17 years with one young person as young as 10 years.
- 66% (156) of the children in the Local Authority's care were aged 12 - 17 years, with 34% of the total care cohort aged 16 - 17 years. Compared to the previous year, there were higher numbers of children in the care of the local authority aged 13 to 15.
- 70% of children in the care of the local authority, excluding UASC, as at 31 March 2023 identified as white, as compared with 57% of Sutton's population aged under 18 years (as reported in the 2021 census). Children that identified as mixed ethnicity made up 18% of the borough's children in care population (excluding UASC) in 2022/23, as compared with 11% of Sutton's under 18 population (2021 Census).

Children and Young People Starting a Care Placement

- Children coming into the care of the Local Authority in 2022/23 tended to be either very young (under 1 year) or aged 15 to 17 years.
- 59% (58) of the new starters were male, and this increased to 76% among new starters aged 15-17 years.
- 2022/23 witnessed a reduction in the number of UASC that started care placements with 21 UASC recorded as starting a new placement in 2022/23, compared to 27 in the previous year. Of these 21 UASC starting a care placement, 81% (17) were aged 15 - 17 years and the remaining 4 young people were aged 13 or 14 years.

Profile of Needs

Data from March 31, 2023, reveals similarities in the primary reasons reported for a child entering the Local Authority's care.

- Abuse or neglect remains the most frequently recorded category, representing 40% of the care population, consistent with 39% in 2022.
- Familial issues, such as family stress or dysfunction, account for 31% of the care population, down from 35% in 2022.

- Notably, absent parenting saw a slight increase, with 18% of children in care in 2023 compared to 14% in 2022.

The needs profile of the borough's care population has experienced some change. There has been a growing need for placements for young people with significant emotional and behavioural difficulties and complex mental health diagnosis amongst adolescents. The borough has witnessed an increase in the need for solo placements and for young people with Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards requiring a high ratio of staff.

Types of Homes

Sutton has observed changes in the profile of placement types employed for children in care. While the majority of care placements continue to be in foster care, there is a noticeable increase in the use of children's homes and semi-independent accommodation placements.

- The distribution of placements in Sutton reflects national trends, with 59.5% of children in care accommodated in foster placements. This marks a decrease, as compared with 2022 (72%) and falls below figures observed pre-2015 when foster placements accounted for 75-85% of placements.
- There was an approximate 60:40 split, with c. 60% of children placed in foster care through an Independent Fostering Agency and the remaining 40% in in-house foster care.
- There has been a year on year increase in the number and percentage of children and young people cared for in residential care homes and supported accommodation homes. As at 31 March 2023, 27 children (or 11% of the looked after cohort) were cared for in children's home (2022: 17 or 7%) and 48 (20%) of the children in the care of the Local Authority were accommodated in supported accommodation (2022: 35 or 15%).
- A combination of an increasing complexity of presenting needs for some young people entering or starting a new care placement, and a high demand for placements compared with supply, particularly in London, has resulted in an increase in the number of placements local authorities, including Sutton, are having to make with unregistered partners. All unregistered placements are made with providers who are in the process of registering with Ofsted.

Placement Outcomes

- **Placement Stability:** Over the last four years, the London Borough of Sutton has witnessed fluctuations in placement stability. The majority (64.6%) of children in care have had one placement, although there was a slight reduction in this percentage from 2021-22 to 2022-23. Conversely, in 2022/23, despite the stable numbers of looked after children, there was an increase in the number of children and young people that had 3 or more placements during the year rising from 27 in 2022 to 47 in 2023. The percentage of children as at 31 March with 3 or more placements during the year was higher than that experienced in Outer London boroughs and Sutton's statistical neighbours. Less children and young people were in placements for at least 2 years in 2022/23 than in previous years (2023: 66; 2022: 75).
- **Placement Distance:** The London Borough of Sutton continues to secure placements for the majority of the children in its care less than 20 miles from the child's home address. 135 of children with a home address (200 excluding UASC or homeless children) were placed less than 20 miles from their home address, of which 57 children were accommodated in the borough. 80% (211) of the 237 children in care as at March 2023 were cared for in London or the South East. The London Borough of Sutton reported a year on year reduction in the percentage of looked after children placed more than 20 miles from their homes at 28%¹ as at 31 March 2023. This was higher than the 2023 rate reported in other Outer London boroughs (18%) and Sutton's statistical neighbours (25%).
- **Emotional and Mental Wellbeing:** Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire reports indicate an increase in presenting needs around emotional and mental health. In 2023, there has been an increase in the number of children and young people in local authority care with a "cause for concern" score (2023: 44; 2022: 27). This could be a result of

¹ Please note, this figure is taken from SSDA 903 data reported on the Local Authority Interactive Tool, which includes all children looked after as at 31 March excluding those looked after under an agreed series of short term placements.

many factors including the longer term effects of the pandemic restrictions, which had an unprecedented effect on children and families.

- Education: Although 2022 reported an increase in the percentage of unauthorised school absences for the cohort (2022: 2.2%; 2021: 0.7%), figures compared favourably with England, 2.3% and London, 2.7%. Children in care continue to achieve well in Key Stage 4 assessments and London Borough of Sutton ranked 4th nationally in the KS4 average attainment 8 score for looked after children.

Key Commissioning Priorities 2023/24

In support of the London Borough of Sutton's 0 - 25 Children and Young People Placement Commissioning Strategy (2022 - 2027), our commissioning priorities in 2023/24 are to:

1. Reduce the number of children and young people in residential home placements or unregistered placements by further developing residential and foster carer provision with a focus on developing provision in the borough.
2. Expand the scope of the Dynamic Purchasing System for 0 - 25 care placements to incorporate semi-independent accommodation placements.
3. Ensure supported accommodation provision for young people aged up to 18 years is compliant with new National Standards.
4. Increase the supported accommodation options for care experienced young people, specifically those on low incomes, in the borough.
5. Reduce the average cost of care placements with focused work on highest cost placements to ensure best value and continued delivery of positive outcomes for the children and young people in the care of the Local Authority.