



Sufficiency Statement for Children and Young People in Care 2023-2026



West Berkshire
COUNCIL

Contents

1.	Foreword	3
2.	Introduction	4
3.	The legal duties	4
4.	Our ambition and aims	5
5.	The profile of our children	7
6.	What our children and young people say	9
7.	Family Safeguarding and early interventions	10
8.	Children coming into care	11
9.	Commissioning Arrangements	12
10.	Achieving Permanence	13
11.	Fostering	16
12.	Private Provision- IFA's and Residential	17
13.	Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children	19
14.	Semi-independent provision	20
15.	Care experienced young adults	21
16.	Developing the market	22

1. Foreword

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this Sufficiency Statement for Children and Young people. The purpose of this document is to provide assurance that the resources, plans and processes in place are sufficient to meet the needs of children and young people in care.

As you are aware, children and young people in care face unique challenges and require a high level of support and care to help them thrive. It is a fundamental responsibility of society to ensure that they receive the love, protection, and guidance they need to grow into happy and successful adults.

This statement represents a thorough and comprehensive examination of the current state of affairs and a projection of future needs and capabilities in West Berkshire. It has been developed with the goal of ensuring that children and young people in care receive the best possible support and care. We hold high ambitions for them and we are committed to giving them the support they need to reach their full potential.

As you read through this document, I encourage you to consider the level of detail and rigour that has gone into its preparation. It is a testament to the commitment and dedication of everyone who supports our children and young people.

I hope that this sufficiency statement serves as a valuable resource for you and assures you that we have everything in place we need to support the children and young people in our care.

Cllr Heather Codling

Portfolio Holder for Children and Education

2. Introduction

The provision of good quality services to children in care is a core strategic priority for West Berkshire Council. The Council has a high functioning service for children in care which received a 'Good rating' from Ofsted in the March 2022 inspection. The publication of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in 2022, the extensive media coverage of rising costs have placed a greater focus on the experiences of children in care and those young adults who have left care.

Performance of services for children in care in West Berkshire across is strong when compared with the English national average and statistical partners. Partnerships and multi-agency arrangements to support children in care are robust and well developed. When children can no longer live at home or with family, our aim is to provide the best quality care in West Berkshire or as close to home as possible, enabling children to stay connected to their families, communities, school, and friends.

Maintaining high quality care is challenging in the current environment, with a combination of rising demand, increased costs and a backdrop of a national shortage of places for children. There is particular concern for children with the most complex needs and sourcing residential placements that meet the regulatory requirements for this group.

This Sufficiency Strategy describes the current demand and supply situation for children in care, assesses the likely future state of the market and sets out the strategy by which West Berkshire Children and Family Service (CFS) will ensure future provision meets the needs of children in the care of the council to a high standard

3. Our Legal Duties

The Children's Act 1989 requires local authorities to ensure they secure and provide a range of sufficient accommodation that meets the varying needs of children in care.

Section 22G of the Act requires local authorities to take strategic action in respect of those children they look after and for whom it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation within their local authority area. In those circumstances, .

Section (22c) Children Act 1989 sets out additional factors that local authorities must take into consideration when deciding the most appropriate placement.

- allowing the child to live near his/her home;
- not disrupting the child's education or training;
- enabling the child and a looked after sibling to live together;
- meeting the needs of disabled children; and
- providing accommodation within the local authority's area unless that is not reasonably practicable.

4. Our ambition and aims for our children

We hold high ambitions for all our children in care and care experienced young people. We are committed to ensuring that they live in loving homes providing support and other services that are always of a high quality and appropriate to their needs. We know that stable, sustainable placements and the relationships that are built as a result are the foundation for our children's healthy development and future success helping them to achieve their potential and dreams.

We place permanence at the heart of our planning decisions, making sure that all of our work with children and young people focusses on the best options for them to achieve or retain permanent, lifelong relationships with people who are the most likely to meet their needs to the best standard possible.

We know our children in care well through reviewing in detail the needs of our children, so that we have a thorough and up to date knowledge about the types of placements and other help that they require. By doing this, we will develop our services to address the current needs of our care population, and we will be more able to accurately predict the future needs of those children in our care, promoting more effective future planning.

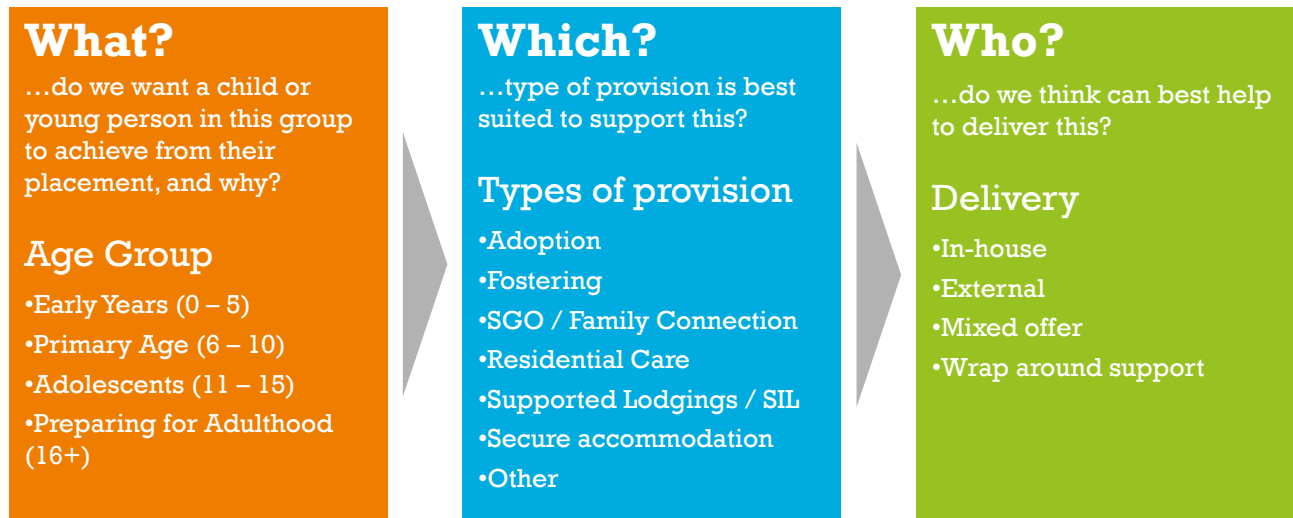
We will drive a partnership approach to children in care by maximising the contribution that partners make to the education, health and other needs of children in care. We will promote the joint ownership of the corporate parenting function, sharing decision making functions and costs to the right level, and jointly commissioning services in the interests of our children.

We will always keep our children close to West Berkshire when this is right for them and suitable to their needs. We will create and source local placements with our foster carers and local providers to meet the assessed needs of our children. We will use commissioning frameworks and local contracts to secure good quality, value for money placements for our children. We will always seek to listen and act on the views and experiences of our children in care by finding a range of ways to engage with and seek the views of children in care, so that they inform our work and inform developments and improvements across the council and with partners.



Preferred provision for age groups

Identifying the strategic approach for core placement provision



5. The profile of our children

The 2021 census shows that in West Berkshire the proportion of the population aged 5-14 has grown by 8% the last decade, while that of 0-4 has declined by 18%. The fall in numbers of young children might suggest a fall in demand in future years, however, the impact of the pandemic and cost of living has increased pressures on families and demands on Children and Family Services.

Children in care in numbers

Studies undertaken by the ADCS over a 12 year period evidence increasing demands on children's social care nationally. Since 2021 demand has grown significantly in West Berkshire. The disruption to support services and household routines from Covid, economic pressures, a reduced service offer across some agencies and high profile child abuse cases have all contributed to more 'front door' demand. Key partner agencies in safeguarding such as the Police and NSPCC helpline all report noticeable increase in demand.

The numbers of children in need and subject to child protection plans have also risen from 199 in December 2021, to 278 in December 2022. There is a proven correlation between the rise in numbers of children on protection plans and a future rise in children in care. We should expect the number of children in care to rise during 2023.

Numbers of children in care- West Berks

2018-19	151-171
2019-20	171-158
2020-21	158-146
2021-22	146-166
2022 - 23	166-198

In previous years the number of children in care in West Berks has remained consistently around 150-160 children, however, towards the end of 2022 the number was approaching 200 children. This figure shows a 36% increase against the 2020 figure and a 19% increase against the 2021 figure.

	Children coming into care	Children ceasing to be in care	Net CiC population change
2018-19	77	53	+24
2019-20	60	77	-17
2020-21	47	58	-11
2021-22	78	58	+20
Nov 2022	70	38	+32

A contributing factor to the increase is a higher number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in care. In January 2021 West Berkshire had 12 UASC in its care, in January 2022 this had risen to 27 and at the end of 2022 the number has increased to 33. Changes in the National Transfer Scheme in December 2021 mandated all Local Authorities to take responsibility for a number of UASC equivalent to 0.01% of its child population. In West Berkshire this number is 35 and we should expect to have this number of UASC in our care for the foreseeable future.

The ethnicity of children in care West Berkshire does not wholly reflect the wider population mix. In 2022 the proportion identifying as White stood at 84%, while the 2021 census indicates that 88% of the West Berkshire school age population identified as White. However, when adjusting the figures by excluding UASC, the proportion changes to 90%/10%, which is closer to the general population mix.

Age profile for children in care snapshot in 2022

Age groups	West Berkshire	England Avg. 2020-21
Under 1	3%	6%
1 to 4	17%	13%
5 to 9	18%	19%
10 to 15	29%	39%
16 to 17	33%	23%

According to the available figures in the table above, West Berkshire has a higher comparable proportion of 16 and 17 year olds in care than the national average but the England average is taken before the mandated changes to the National Transfer Scheme. This is also an explanation for the higher numbers of children in West Berkshire for children accommodated under section 20 Children Act 1989, a voluntary arrangement. The systems for reviewing the legal status of children in care in West Berks is robust and we are confident that we seek parental responsibility through the Courts when necessary. Our lower figure for the 10-15 age group might show we are better able to support children to remain at home but teenagers remain our biggest pressure in terms of placement finding.

Legal status for children in care snapshot in 2022

Legal status	West Berkshire	England Avg. 2020-21
Placement order	6%	6%
Section 20	25%	15%
Care Orders	69%	79%

Placement Types

Placement provider for children in care snapshot in 2022

Own provision- Fostering	104
Independent Fostering Agency	20
Placed for adoption	7
Semi-independent/supported lodgings	39 (30 UASC)
Residential Care	17
Other	2
Parents or other person with parental responsibility	9

The vast majority of children are placed in a family setting, mostly through foster care and either with in house carers or with connected carers (family and friends). We also currently have a relatively high number of children (7) placed with their adoptive family and who will be adopted in the coming months. Most of our unaccompanied asylum seeking children live with supported lodgings carers and this is our most cost effective and successful route for this group.

6. What our children and young people say

Our Children in Care Council is called 'R Vue' and it represents all children in care and care experienced young people in West Berks. Our pledge to children in care recognises the importance of ensuring that children in care and care experienced young people have access to the right placements, at the right time, with the right support. This helps them to achieve success and ensures they maintain family relationships, friendships and interests.

We are committed to ensuring children are involved in the decisions that affect them both as a group and in individual care planning. Children tell us they want to live in stable homes that support them achieving well in education or employment, keeping healthy and having a good sense of wellbeing. We give children and young people a say in where they live, who they live with and where.

7. Prevention, Intervention and Early Help

West Berkshire has developed a Prevention and Early Help programme whose effectiveness was recognised by Ofsted in its 2022 inspection. This has a strong focus on reducing the risk of families and children reaching a stage where more significant intervention is needed. This is complemented by our partnership work with health, public health, Children & Family Services and the voluntary sector which are pivotal to ensuring a strong and robust offer to families. Key initiatives that will be maintained and/developed are:

Family Safeguarding

The social work model in West Berks is the Family Safeguarding Model (FSM). This was introduced in April 2018 and has been fully embedded and operational for the past four years. All practitioners are trained in Motivational Interviewing. The model continues to be effective, reducing risk for children, helping children remain with their families, parents accessing services they need to bring about changes in behaviour for them. Feedback from families through independent consultation and evaluation showed they feel they have been worked with and not “done to”. Most also said that their chances of making lasting beneficial changes to their lives had improved as a direct result of Family Safeguarding



Early Response Hub

Within the Contact Advice and Assessment Service (CAAS) is the Early Response Hub (ERH). This service has embraced an ‘Earlier Response’ model to meet the needs of those children and families whose needs require a higher level of input than Universal help, but do not yet reach statutory threshold.

Family Hubs

The three West Berkshire Family Hubs provide direct support for families through individual support, targeted and universal group sessions and by working closely with health, schools and local early years providers. Initiatives such as Flying Start have been developed to operate through the Family Hubs.

Emotional Health Academy

The Emotional Health Academy (EHA) is unique to West Berkshire and its purpose is to provide emotional health support to children, young people and their families earlier, before problems become severe and enduring.

8. Children coming into care

Any agreement for a child to come into care is made by the Head of Service for Children and Families or Head of Service for Education. All children coming into care are referred to the Family Placement Team to search for a fostering placement unless the child can be placed with their extended family.

If no in house fostering placement is found, our Commissioning Team will look for an external placement, either independent fostering, residential placement (or secure accommodation if needed). The commissioning provision dedicated to placement finding for children supported by workers in the Family Placement Team.

When children are placed with connected persons under regulation 24, the assessment is carried out jointly between the child's allocated social worker and a social worker from the Family Placement Team.

Support and Solutions Panel

We strongly believe that children and young people have the right to be brought up by their parents and within their families unless there is clear evidence that doing so is harmful to their overall wellbeing and development. Where possible, services should be provided to enable children to remain at home and when they have come into care in an emergency help them return home or to their extended family.

The Support and Solutions Panel was introduced to ensure that children and young people and their families, receive the appropriate level of intervention/support before a decision is made that they enter the care of West Berkshire.

The multi-agency panel consider all the requests for voluntary admissions into care are appropriate and that an early return to family or other options for permanence are facilitated and actioned as soon as possible.





9. Commissioning arrangements

West Berkshire Council is a member of the South Central Frameworks for both Independent Fostering Agencies and Residential Placements. This is a consortium of 14 Local Authorities established with the region to commission care from private providers, agreeing unified terms and conditions and negotiating placement costs for members. West Berkshire have been a member of the Frameworks since 2017. In the past there was proven positive outcomes in terms of standards and collective purchasing power, but more recently the reality of the shortage of supply, particularly for residential care placements means they have struggled to deliver meaningful value with the majority of new placements being spot purchased outside of the Framework.

West Berkshire will continue to part of the regional frameworks as these are renegotiated over the coming years. However we note that the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in 2022 made strong statements on the way the market is not meeting current needs. Its key recommendation is that Local Authorities need help to take back control of the care home system through establishing new Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs). These RCCs will take on responsibility for the creation and running of all new public sector fostering, residential and secure care in a region, as well as commissioning all not-for-profit and private sector provided care for children as necessary.

It is suggested that the scale and specialist capabilities of RCCs will address the current weaknesses in the system and establish organisations able to transform the care system for the future. Local Authorities will have direct involvement in the running of RCCs but to work they must be mandated rather than voluntary arrangements. Children will continue to be in the care of individual local authorities.

10. Fostering

In house provision

The Family Placement Team is made up of social workers, family support workers and business support who undertake a number of statutory functions, ensuring good quality services meeting the National Minimum Standards. These functions include:

- The recruitment, training and support of foster carers.
- Assessing, matching and supporting new placements for all children coming into care or existing children who require a new home.
- Completing a range of assessments including Form F's, Viability Assessments, Regulation 24, and Special Guardianship Order Assessments.

Children in Foster care provision

	LA foster carers	Connected Persons Carer	Independent Foster Agencies (IFA)
31 March 2019	72	23	31
31 March 2020	53	25	32
31 March 2021	49	26	26
31 March 2022	59	26	20
Nov 2022	66	38	20

In recent years we have increased the numbers of children placed with in house carers relative to IFA's and we currently have 104 children placed with in house carers compared with 20 placed with IFA carers. There are currently 87 households fostering in West Berks.

Connected Persons Carers (Family and Friends)

West Berkshire has a good record of supporting children to live within their family and friends network. We ensure that, where it is assessed as the right thing for the child, the family member is supported and equipped to become a foster carer, with many of them committing to this for the remainder of the child's childhood. As a result, over the last five years we have seen an increase in the number of connected persons carers and we have increased the percentage of Foster placements with family carers as shown below (Figure 5).

The focus on family placements is recognised by OFSTED in the March 2022 inspection, they state that

'A real priority is given to trying to place children within their wider family networks under connected carer arrangements, explored in family group conferences. As a result, many children are safely and securely living with connected family members, maintaining and developing their familial cultural ties and identities'.

The Hub model

In June 2021 we introduced a 'Fostering Hub Pilot' and this is now expanded to a fully developed model with three hubs operating across West Berkshire. The model identifies a geographical group of foster homes and we recruit an experienced foster carer to take the lead in providing and coordinating support to other families in the hub. The model is based on the notion of the extended family where members are available to provide day to day support and build lasting relationships.

The hubs are supported by a Supervising Social Worker and a Family Support Worker. The Supervising Social Worker provides regular support and supervision to the hub carer and ensure that the hub expectations are met. The Family Support Worker offers more practical support to the families within the hub (such as assisting with training and transport support of the non-driving carers). The Family Support Worker also attends regular coffee morning events and provides feedback to the service.

The hub model has proved successful and foster carers report that they feel well supported and engaged with the model. The hub model is leading to improved support to children in placement and increased stability for children.

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

The recruiting of in house foster carers remains a high priority but this is in a climate of a highly competitive market, with Local Authorities and IFA's attempting to recruit and train new carers. There are documented studies in the fostering press of a shortage of foster carers nationally. In August 2022, Community Care reported that half of the nation's foster carers were considering quitting due to the cost of living crisis. This is compounded by there being less households with a spare bedroom as more bedrooms are used as home offices following Covid.

Our Strategy:

- To recruit a wide range of foster carers that can meet the needs of our children in care population using a variety of marketing initiatives.
- To provide a high-quality support service, supervision, and training to our current foster carers to ensure they feel valued and part of our fostering community.
- To develop the Team and Service to meet the needs of our children in care, to ensure we have a workforce who have a variety of expertise and committed to building the service and going the extra mile for our foster carers and children.
- Using the hub model to ensure the highest level of supports to our children and carers
- Provide out of hours social work support
- Access to, and support from the Children in Care Mental Health service
- Events and activities to ensure foster carers feel valued and part of a successful team
- Careful matching of children with foster carers to ensure right children are placed with right foster carers
- Valuing foster carers as professionals who play a significant part in the child's life, ensuring they are part of the planning and communication about the child

- Buddy and mentor scheme to support new and existing carers
- Actively support the activities of West Berkshire Foster Care Association and regularly meet with them
- regularly review our fostering payments scheme and the financial incentives to foster

Children in care Mental Health project

This is an initiative with health partners and the three Berkshire West Local Authorities, Wokingham, West Berkshire and Reading. The aim of the project is to ensure children in care have quicker access to dedicated specialist mental health and wellbeing services. The main objective being improving the stability of placements; supporting carers and professionals to form plans and strategies to prevent placement moves and breakdowns. It is funded by the Integrated Care Board paying half the costs and the remainder split between the three local authorities.

The objectives of this specific service are:

- To prevent placement breakdown and placement moves for children in care.
- To provide evidence based mental health assessments for children in care.
- To inform multi-disciplinary care planning and inform interventions (clinical and non-clinical) that are available to support children in their placements.
- Share knowledge, expertise and advice, providing guidance to professionals (including foster carers) to make better and more informed decisions for, and with children about their lives.
- Provide training to professionals (including Foster carers) about children's presentation of need to enable adults to identify needs earlier, respond in a knowledgeable and empathic way.
- Provide evidence based therapeutic interventions directly with children and carers that support improved outcomes for emotional wellbeing and mental health.

The service is funded for 2022-2024 and recruitment began early in 2022. There has been difficulties recruiting to the full complement of the staffing establishment due to staff shortages and other difficulties in the NHS, but the top tiers of management and clinicians are in place and have been providing services to the relevant children across Berkshire West during the latter months of 2022. There is some early evidence that this service is bringing stability to our most volatile and risk taking children and young people.

The outcomes and impact of the project will be formally evaluated and reported on in the autumn of 2023.

11. Achieving Permanence

Our aim for all children in care is for them to live somewhere which is seen as their home for the whole of their childhood and wherever possible, into early adulthood. For some children this might be by securing a forever home outside of the care system, for others we strive for children to live in an arrangement that is a long term match and again, wherever possible, within a family.

Adoption

West Berkshire remains part of the Regional Adoption Agency, Adopt Thames Valley (ATV), in partnership with a number of local authorities. West Berkshire maintain good performance across all adoption KPI's and children are placed with their adoptive families within good timescales.

Most of our children are placed with ATV adopters with a small number going through voluntary adoption agencies secured by ATV. We have always achieved very good figures on timeliness and matching and we anticipate this will continue with the current cohort. We have a number of young children we are parallel planning for whilst we are in care proceedings to ensure no delay should the final outcome be a Placement Order. We have four children in 'early permanence' meaning they are with foster carers who intend to adopt

Adopt Thames Valley provide a good service and a regional adoption agency increases efficiencies and offer value for money. We anticipate a further eight adoptive placements per annum over the next three years.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) carers

We strongly believe that children should be supported to live with their 'forever family' outside of the care system wherever possible. We have a robust assessment and support framework for carers applying to be Special Guardianship carers. In most instances this will be family or other 'connected persons' coming forward to be assessed during care proceedings. In addition, we have a small number of foster carers supported to become SGO carers for children they have fostered. We agree a post SGO support plan for all families which is endorsed by the courts. This details the financial and practical support that will be given to families.

Prior to 2021, support for carers following an SGO was provided via the contractual agreement with Adopt Thames Valley (ATV). This service was brought back in house in 2021 when we concluded that this service could be better provided in our Family Placements Team. We have a specialist social work post within the team to contribute to the review and delivery of support for post SGO carers. We currently support 84 children at varying levels, and evidence suggests this has had a positive impact for children in SGO placements.

12. Private Provision- Independent Fostering Agencies and Residential Placements

Expanding the IFA market locally

Our provider of Supported Lodgings (Step By Step) is a registered charity and is in the process of setting up an IFA agency in addition to their supported lodgings scheme. They have had a registered manager in post for a number of months and are in the process of meeting the regulatory requirements with Ofsted. Their experience is with teenagers and young adults and they are hoping to convert some of their supported lodgings carers to foster carers in the early months of 2023. We have held a number of discussions with them about our needs and they are keen to work with us a 'preferred partner' given our long history of working well together. We are hoping to have our first matches for children late spring/early summer.

Residential Care

Our numbers of children in residential care have remained consistent over recent years, being between 17 and 20 children. However, the costs associated with this provision has increased substantially as private providers have been able to increase costs where there is no capacity in the market, placements in high demand and provided at a premium.

As with other Local Authorities, we have been in the unfortunate position of having to use unregistered placements on a small number of occasions during 2022, but in all instances we have secured Deprivation of Liberty Orders to ensure the oversight of the Courts on the veracity of plans and kept Ofsted informed of all actions being taken to secure a registered placements as quickly as possible.

There has been evidence of movement in the market over recent months and we have been meeting with two separate providers about how to meet the needs of West Berkshire children into the future through local residential provision.

- A not for profit company currently operating in the West Midlands looking to expand in the local area and open a number of children homes, including in West Berkshire. This is an initiative with the South Central Framework and places will be available to Local Authorities within the framework.
- A local provider of a number of children's homes already operating a number of homes in West Berkshire. They already have planning applications in for two small homes and plans for at least one more. We are working closely with them to help achieve planning permission and secure placements solely for West Berkshire children. This is a highly respected, experienced provider keen to work with us.
- Discussions have taken place within the Thames Valley Local Authorities to develop a new project with the aim of setting up a number of small (one or two beds) residential provision across the region for those children who currently have the highest need but where placement finding is proving extremely difficult. All the LA's are finding themselves in the position of having to place a very small number of children in highly expensive, unregistered placements. This project aims to provide for this cohort of children. Oxfordshire are leading on the project and are creating an implementation plan.

- An existing and well respected provider of semi-independent provision has made an application to Ofsted to open a children's home and we have already identified a young person to move into this provision once approved.

We hold regular 'Step Down' meetings to review the circumstances all children in residential care to explore whether an alternative option is available, appropriate and can be planned for. In many instances we have active plans, including family finding to help children move from residential when it is right to do so and we are confident a move can be supported to be successful. We have moved three children through this initiative this year.

Strategy

- Work with our Supported Lodgings provider to identify early potential matches for children through the Step Down project.
- Work with our planning department to ensure they are aware of the council's need for local residential placements. The Service Manager for children in care is now on the consultation list for any new applications.
- Continue to explore and secure preferred partner relationships with residential providers through commissioning and contracts.
- Consider signing up to the Thames Valley residential care initiative once the project plan is produced and discussions have matured.



13. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

West Berkshire Council has a long history of supporting refugees and asylum seekers. This was partly due to the motorway service stations located in the area where freight from the south coast ports regularly stop. There are now very few children presenting as UASC through this method and we now have a regular flow of children through the National Transfer Scheme. The scheme has been mandatory since December 2021 with an expectation that each local authority expected to have a number of UASC equivalent to 0.1% of its child population. For West Berks, this number is 35 children. We reached that figure in November 2022. The number of UASC reduced to 25 during January 2023 as a number reached 18 years old. We should expect to get up to, or near 35 quickly as we receive children through the NTS as the Home Office allocate children in hotels in Kent.

When children arrive they are matched with a mentor from our existing community of UASC to help them settle in and navigate living in a new country. We have various groups and activities for the children to participate in and these are well attended and developed. We support young people with appointing a solicitor and attending appointments with them and the Home Office.

All young people in our care have regular health reviews. We support the young people to register with universal health services and ensure they are all offered Blood Born Virus (BBV) screening. Working closely with colleagues such as the child in care nursing team we promote healthy living and escalate any health concerns in a timely way.

Education is offered to all Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children through both schools and college. We also access additional tutoring services to support with learning English for those that need it.

In the Ofsted Inspection in March 2022 Ofsted said that unaccompanied asylum seeking children received high quality services and were 'greeted with kindness'.

Living options for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

All children presenting as under 16 are found a foster family. Most of the children present at 16 or 17 years old and are placed in the emergency accommodation within our Supported Lodgings Scheme whilst an assessment of their needs is undertaken. Some 16 or 17 year olds will move to a foster family but most have lived independently for some time and their history of travelling means a supported living environment best meets their needs. We have a block contract with Step by Step to provide 20 supported lodgings beds in addition to the three emergency beds and this is our preferred option for our asylum seeking children. That said, some 16 or 17 year olds move on to semi-independent living in the community when they are unable to remain in supported lodgings for various reasons.

We also support 18 year olds to remain with their supported lodgings carers whilst there asylum claim is finalised and/or whilst we support them to secure permanent social housing. However the rise in numbers of UASC arriving through the National Transfer Scheme means that the scheme is full. We secured a further three spot purchased beds in October 2022 and plan to commission a further three in early 2023 for one year. This will mean the supported lodgings service offered by Step by Step will be 23 contracted beds and 6 spot purchased beds during 2023/24.

The need for move on accommodation

There is an increasing demand for accommodation for young people aged 18-21 who were, or remain asylum seekers. We have some young men placed in supported lodgings who want to move on and who we want to help move on but their options are limited, often meaning they move to expensive semi-independent provision in the absence of other options. This is an issue that has developed with a reduction in available rented properties and securing tenancies for people without a settled status and access to public funds. We further experience difficulties in securing tenancies and licences for this group of young adults. The need has been exacerbated by the growing numbers of UASC reaching 18.

We have been working closely with our housing team on this problem and have a plan to secure HMO's or similar lodgings agreements in the local community. This may involve the local authority taking on the management of properties on behalf of Landlords or by providing HMO's with a small support element from our social housing provider. We have an immediate need for a 15 beds at the end of March 2022 and anticipate this rising to a consistent 25 beds during 2023..

Strategy

- Extend the provision of supported lodgings to 29 beds through spot purchasing a further 6 beds.
- Secure up to 20 beds in HMO's or similar lodgings agreements (mainly in the east of the district or in Reading) for UASC aged 18+.

14. Unregulated placements

There is provision in the Children act 1989 for children aged 16 or 17 years to be able to live in environments not regulated by Ofsted if this is in line with their care planning and wishes and feelings. West Berks is fortunate to have a number of providers operating locally who provide a good service for this group. The largest number in this cohort are UASC and the majority of the provision for them is through the supported lodgings scheme as outlined previously. We have a small but consistent number of 16 and 17 year olds who are unable to live in a family or residential setting for many reasons, including those who present as homeless. We spot purchase semi-independent beds from a number of providers and we regard these as good quality services.

Ofsted are to introduce a new set of regulations for this group of providers during 2023. This is a step we welcome and all of our providers intend to register with Ofsted.

15. Care experienced young adults

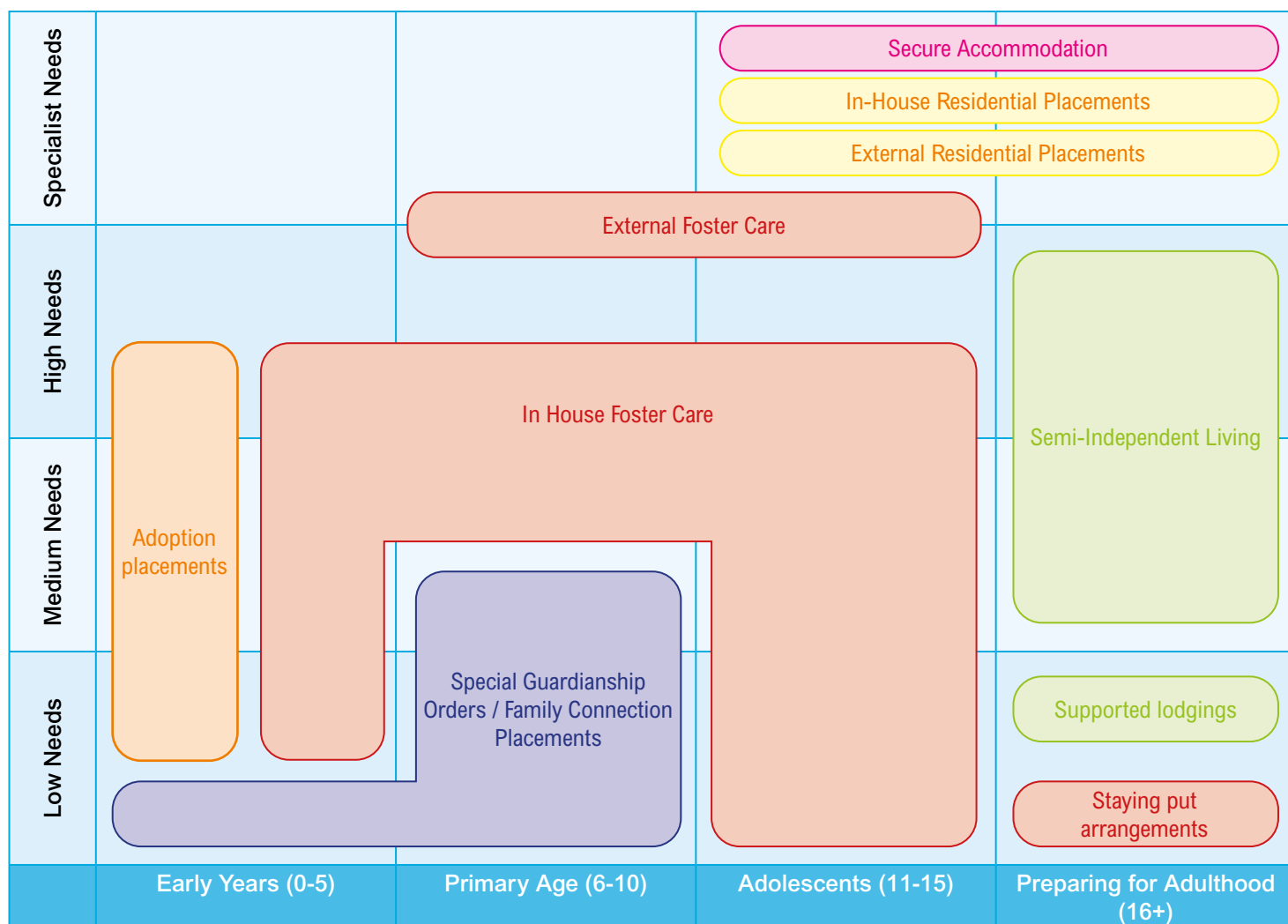
Under the provisions set out in the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 the local authority has a duty to support care experienced young adults aged 18-21 years, in 2018 this was extended to care leavers up to 24 years (if the young person requests advice and support after their 21st birthday).

There are currently 100 young people aged 18-21yrs receiving support from the leaving care team. Of the 100, 36 presented as unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). There are a further 23 young people receiving Personal Adviser support aged 22-24 years. We always encourage our children to remain with their foster carers under a 'staying put' arrangement and we currently have 26 young adults who are supported to continue living with their carers.

The housing allocations policy was updated in early 2021 to include 5% ring fenced provision for care leavers. This has made a real positive impact for young people accessing social housing with 18 young people being allocated social housing since the change. Prior to this there were very few allocations to care leavers with their claims being assessed and prioritised in line with the general population. Some 18 year olds continue to have needs that mean they are not ready for independent living and there is ongoing work to help them with this important and often, difficult step. In these circumstances we often support young people to remain in their semi-supported accommodation with an agreed plan on the actions needed to help reach readiness for independence. We have access to a number of group living options through private providers

All of our children in care are offered one or two further 'statutory reviews' chaired by their Independent Reviewing Officer to help with transition planning and settling into the new world of adulthood.

16. Developing the Market



In order to have an effective development strategy we must:

Understand existing and emerging trends in demand In addition to increased volumes of children. There has been a rise in the number of children and young people requiring specialist and targeted provision and similar increase in children or young people presenting in crisis. Their accommodation and support requirements are as varied as the young people themselves. Using evidence, insight and analysis we intend to respond appropriately to this increase in demand, complexity and volatility by developing new partnerships and growing in-house provision to meet the specific needs of individual children.

Understand and work with the local market. As a unitary authority, West Berks is surrounded by other LA's looking to place children near to home, including within West Berks. This has led to an extremely competitive local market which in turn is limiting the supply available for our own children and driving up prices. We intend to monitor, manage and engage more proactively with existing and emerging suppliers to ensure a sustainable and affordable market of both IFA and residential care. We will continue to work with colleagues in neighbouring authorities and across the South East to build the sufficiency of good quality, local provision for children in care and care experienced young people.

How can we effect change in the local market of care providers?

- Share market intelligence: ensure providers and partners understand the existing and emerging trends and demands
- Consider use of leased, owned or acquired assets to stimulate investment and sustain sufficiency
- Adopt a more proactive and supportive approach to relationships with providers e.g. through planning applications
- Jointly design, develop and deliver new and specialist types of provision with the market which reflect emerging specialist accommodation
- Redesign purchasing arrangements through stronger commissioning to strengthen availability and affordability of supply

This statement should be read in conjunction with West Berkshire's Council's strategic plan.