



Hertfordshire Sufficiency Summary

The Accommodation of Children & Young People Living Away from Home

Annual Update 2025

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Foreword

Hertfordshire's vision is to give every child, young person and their family the opportunity to live happy and fulfilling lives. We work to ensure that every child and young person in our care is safe and protected from harm and exploitation and is encouraged to reach their full potential. We want our most vulnerable Children and Care leavers to have ambition, be emotionally and physically healthy and be supported and prepared for a successful adulthood.

We want to ensure that the right children come into our care and that those that do become looked after feel settled in their homes.

By working together, we are confident that we can deliver on strategies and create loving and stable homes, so children feel emotionally secure, ambition to succeed and a sense of belonging.



Outcome Bees

A single-vision Outcome Framework known as the 'Outcome Bees' has been developed to enable us to assess and evidence our impact across service areas.

This framework was developed with the involvement of young people and partner organisations to ensure those things which are most important to young people are identified and our performance against these are measured. The outcomes are inter-linked with all the 'bees' that are named as important for the child or young person. Each outcome area means many different things depending on the individual, so is used holistically on every occasion. This framework enables us to set clear and measurable targets across the seven domains.



Hertfordshire's Pledge

The Pledge is our promise to all our children and young people looked after by Hertfordshire and is structured around the outcome bees. It is based on what children and young people in Hertfordshire said was important to them. We have also made a promise to our young people leaving care which was developed by listening to individual experiences of leaving care and moving into adulthood.

Our Pledge to children and young people in our care can be found at the following link:

[Our pledge to children and young people in care | Hertfordshire County Council](#)

Our Care Leavers' Pledge can be found at the following link:

[Our pledge to children and young people in care | Hertfordshire County Council](#)

Introduction

The Children Act (1989) requires local authorities to take steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the Authority's area boundaries which meets the needs of children that the local authority is looking after, and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the local authority's area ('the sufficiency duty').

When assessing 'sufficiency', Hertfordshire County Council considers:

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

This Sufficiency Statement reports current levels of demand, our capacity to respond to that demand and key priorities for 2025/26. Data updates within this document relate to the period 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025.

Any slight variations are the result of the volatility of the data and the fact that snapshots are being taken at slightly different times.

Feedback [p1 of 2]

Bright Skies House – Rated Outstanding

“Children have made excellent progress from their individual starting points. One child, who lived in the home for more than two years, has completely transformed their life. The child, who previously did not engage in education, has now passed their GCSEs and attained a vocational qualification in hair and beauty. This child is now learning to drive and has been successful in volunteering and securing a part-time job.”

Willow House – Rated Good

“Staff are sensitive to the needs of the children. Staff recognise and manage low mood, anxiety and trauma-related behaviour. The staff have additional specialist training. Staff know how to respond to the children with empathy, acceptance and understanding”

The Lakes – ARC, Rated Outstanding

“The breadth of work undertaken with children and families is exceptional. The support families receive reduces the likelihood of children needing a long-term residential children’s home. Staff are highly skilled in working therapeutically with children at a pace to suit their needs”

Young Person Feedback – Cherry Tree Cottage

“This place has helped me realise that life is something to look forward to – and when I first came here, that wasn’t the case”

Feedback [2 of 2]

Woodland View – Parents feedback

“children and young people are happy, loved and well looked after at Woodland View. The staff are supportive and welcoming when visiting.”

Bluebell – Independent Visitor Report

“The home is beautifully and thoughtfully presented. There are a range of textures and colours throughout, with young person friendly art work and homely accessories such as plants and ornaments..”

Green Park House – Rated Outstanding

“The child has lived at the home since January 2024 and made exceptional progress during this time. The child was spoken to during the inspection.

The house is bright and very well maintained. Areas of the house are personalised to the child’s taste. The child’s toy construction and artwork are displayed around the home, which helps the child to feel a powerful sense of belonging.

When the child was asked how staff show they care about them, they said, ‘they get me, they listen, they teach me to think about things differently and they are always patient’.”

Strategic Position

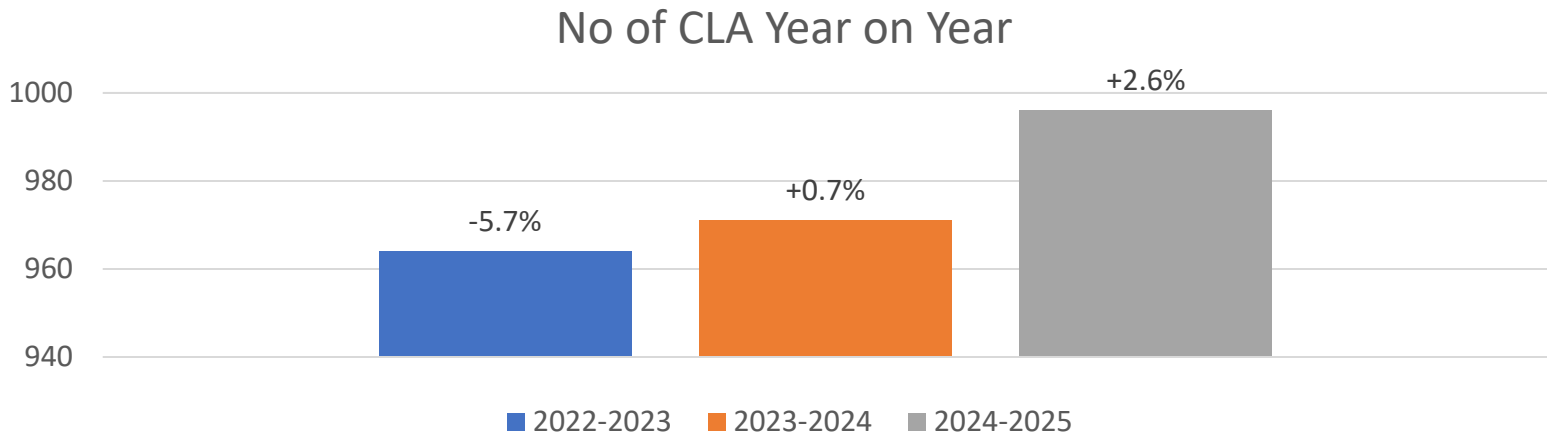
Where possible, we aim to keep children within their communities, if it is safe to do so. However, we are facing increasing challenges in placement location, availability and choice. This is a national challenge that all Local Authorities are facing mainly due to age, urgency of placement needed, presenting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

Hertfordshire County Council is constantly developing services to meet the changing and emerging needs of children and young people and being innovative to create fresh solutions. Our Residential Strategy continues to create more children's homes and placements within Hertfordshire and addresses the issue that too many children are still placed outside of the county in this type of provision. Commissioners have worked with neighbouring colleagues to jointly commission a new Approved Provider List of Independent Fostering Agencies to help place children locally and plan spend. A new Supported Accommodation Framework has also been awarded to ensure those children and young people preparing for adulthood can do so safely with appropriate support.

Children Looked After (CLA) Data

	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Number of CLA	964	971	996
Variance on Previous Year	-5.7%	0.7%	2.6%

The n996 Looked After Children includes n119 Separated Migrant Children (SMC) – representing 11.9% of the CLA population. This is a decrease on previous years by 4.4%, despite the overall number of children looked after increasing throughout the year.



Children Looked After (CLA) Data [p2 of 5]

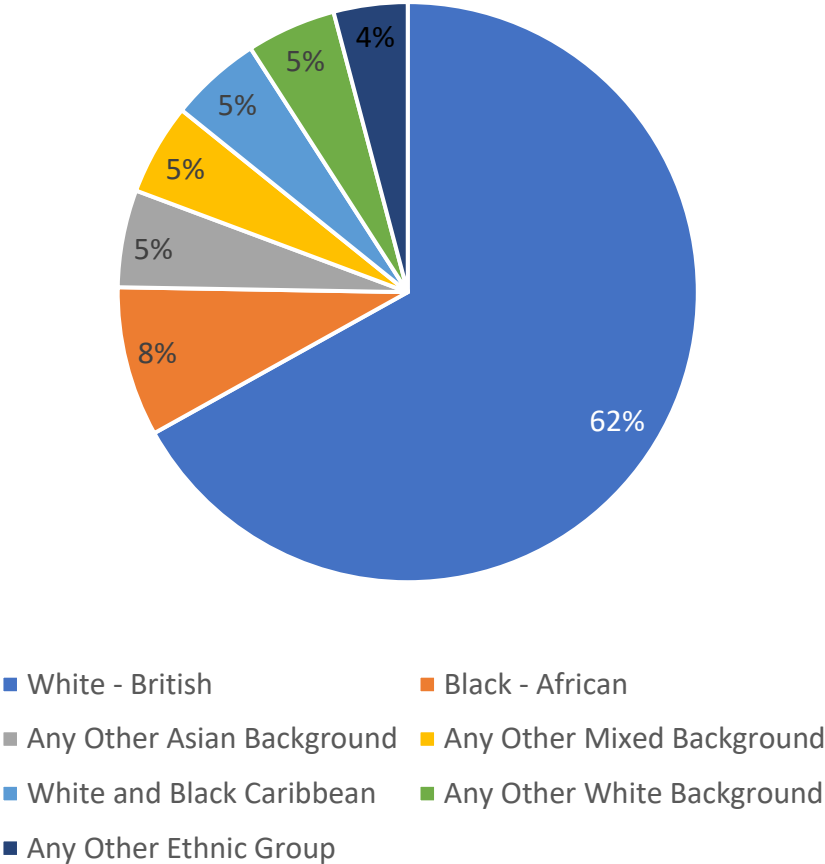
Age	CLA	% of CLA Population
16 - 17 years	331	33.2%
13 - 15 years	249	25.0%
5 - 9 years	156	15.7%
10 - 12 years	140	14.1%
1 - 4 years	87	8.7%
Under 1	33	3.3%

The age breakdown of Children Looked After indicates a continued concentration of over half (58.2%) aged 13-17 years, although this has reduced in the last year from 61.7%.

There have been more younger age groups requiring placements – n11 more children aged under 1 (+1.3%) and n13 more aged 1-4 years. This is reflected in the continued recruitment campaigns for more foster carers, commissioning a new Approved Provider List (APL) for Independent Fostering Agencies and the expansion of the Residential Strategy.

The gender split has changed minimally, with the majority of the population Male (57%) and 43% Female. There is an identified 0.1% as Indeterminate.

% of CLA Population



Ethnicity

The CLA population continues to be more diverse than the general Hertfordshire population, with data from the 2021 census indicating that 81.8% of the population were White British and 18.2% other ethnicities. The CLA population split is 62% White British and 38% other ethnicities as shown. The non-white CLA population has decreased in the past year by 3.3% but is still almost 7% more than 2022. Commissioned services will need to be well positioned to meet the needs of children from a variety of ethnicities.

Disability

The number of children and young people with a disability has continued to grow since 2022-2023, with the current number at n160. This represents 16% of the population and is higher than the general Hertfordshire population at 14.4%.

Children Looked After (CLA) Data [p3 of 5]

CLA Placement Type	At a Distance	Band 1	Hertfordshire	Total
Adoption placement order not with current foster carer (sect 21 of 2002 Act)	3	4	5	12
Adoption placement order with current foster carer (sect 21 of 2002 Act)			1	1
Adoption with consent not with current foster carer (sect 19 of 2002 Act)		1	2	3
Adoption with consent with current foster carer (sect 19 of 2002 Act)		1		1
All residential schools (unless home)	13	1	2	16
Family centre / mother and baby unit		2		2
Independent Living		17	27	44
K2 – Homes and Hostels	36	53	54	143
K3 – Regulated Supported Accommodation		2	8	10
NHS/Health Trust or other establishment			3	3
PI in hostels & other supportive resids	1	13	78	92
Placed with parents or other with p/resp	3	3	12	18
Residential care home (registered)		1		1
U1 Foster placement with relative or friend – long term	6	9	50	65
U3 Foster placement with relative or friend – not long term or FFA	5	15	71	91
U4 Placement with other foster carer – long term fostering	14	32	99	145
U5 Placement with other foster carer who is also an approved adopter – FFA			4	4
U6 Placement with other foster carer - not long term or FFA	22	103	218	343
YOI or prison		2		2
Total	103	259	634	996
Percentage of total CLA population	10.3%	26%	36.7%	

Ensuring that CYP are placed within Hertfordshire continues to be a challenge for commissioners. As of 31st March 2025, there were 362 children and young people placed outside of Hertfordshire borders, this is 14 less than the previous year despite having more CYP. This is a positive, especially with an increase of Children Looked After. Band 1 comprises Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Kent, London and Peterborough.

Children Looked After (CLA) Data [p5 of 5]

Provision	March 2021	March 2022	March 2023	March 2024	March 2025
Fostering	£1,071	£976	£1,234	£1,307	£1,232
Residential	£4,945	£5,060	£6,281	£6,981	£6,952
Semi-Independent	£1,631	£1,631	£2,263	£3,395	£2,544

Average placement costs with independent providers have varied over the past 4 years. In the past 12 months, Independent Fostering placements have reduced; they are currently costing on average the same as 2023. Independent Residential costs are slightly less than 2024, but still £2000 more than 2021; this is a reflection of the cost-of-living increases over this period.

The costs of Semi-Independent placements increased in 2024; this was in due to the introduction of regulation for Supported Accommodation by the Department of Education and registering with Ofsted. The increases that started in 2023 have slowed and are more reflective of the costs now incurred by providers.

To help with the stabilisation and predictability of placement costs, Approved Provider Lists, Framework Agreement and Block contracts that have been implemented throughout the last year. These contracts help to build predictable price increases for services so that the Council can prepare budgets and providers can plan service development.

Separated Migrant Children (SMC) Data

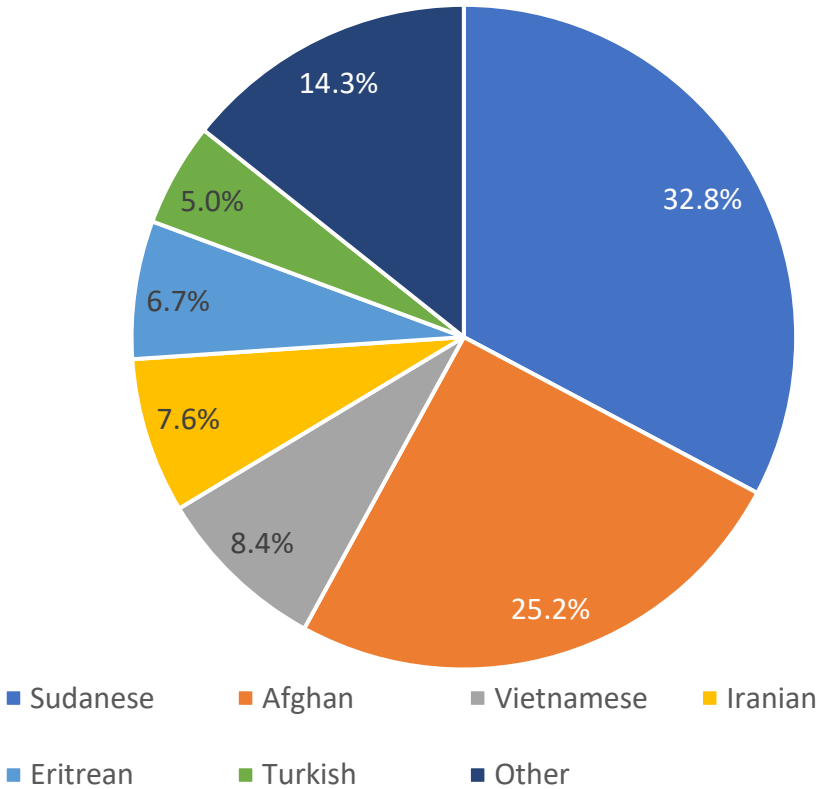
Age (years)	15	16	17
Number of SMC by Age	10	26	83
% of SMC by Age	8.4%	21.8%	69.7%

All Separated Migrant Children are aged 15 years or over, with the majority being aged 17 years (n83 69.7%) The majority of children (almost a third) are from Sudan, with a quarter being from Afghanistan.

This data has helped the Council to focus commissioning activities, including a 30-bed provision in Watford specifically for Separated Migrant Children to meet their identified needs.

All SMC are placed with in Hertfordshire (71%) or in Local Authorities deemed as Band 1 (29%).

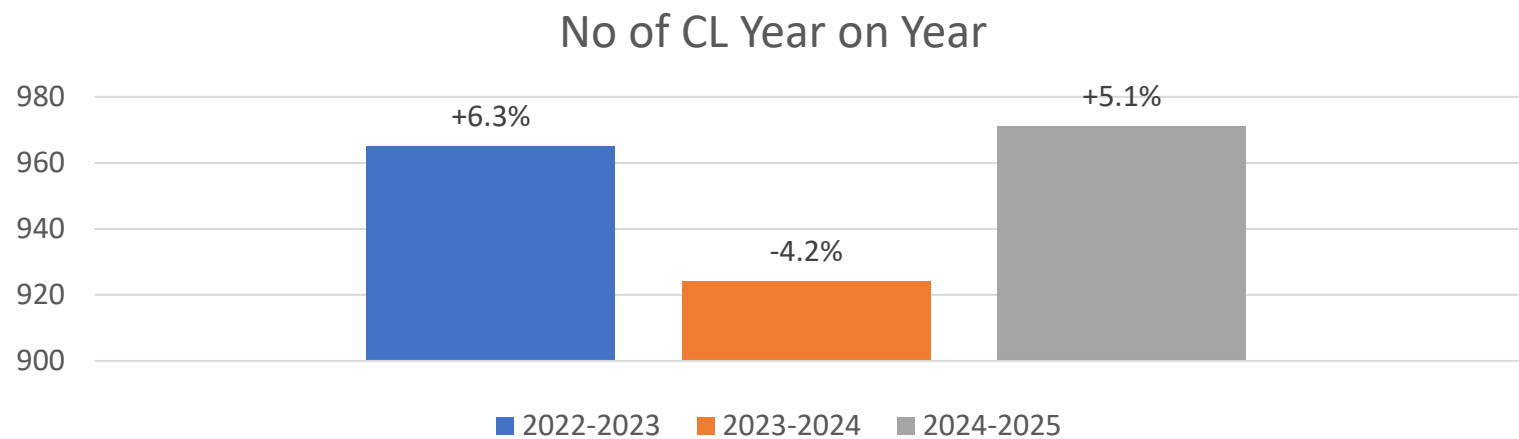
Ethnicity % of SMC Population



Care Leavers Data

	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025
Number of CL	965	924	971
Variance on Previous Year	+6.3%	-4.2%	+5.1%

Although there were fewer care leavers in March 2024, this number has now increased by 5% to n971. Despite the increase, this number is not far from the 2022-2024 figures.



The majority of Care Leavers are aged 19-21 years. The Housing Brokerage Team have worked to ensure support is in place for these young people as they transition to adulthood.



Residential Strategy

CLA Residential Strategy was established in 2019 to improve the outcomes for Children Looked After and their families by increasing the availability of local provisions, either managed in-house, or contract managed via our commissioning teams, to facilitate family contact and promote reunification.

The primary objectives:

- Improve the outcomes for CLA and their families.
- Ensure the right children are in appropriate care, at the right time.
- Increase the number of children placed within Hertfordshire's borders.
- To facilitate family time, promote reunification and be able to offer more homes locally to keep our CLA close in the county they know.
- Increase the availability of in-house and local commissioned homes, reducing costs by avoiding placing at a distance.
- Create the right type of residential provision in partnership with independent providers and in-house services to create stability and value for money, improved access to health and education provision and improved chances of step down to foster care or return to family.
- To provide at least 78% of residential placements within Hertfordshire's borders or in neighbouring local authorities by 2028.

Residential Strategy

[p2 of 3]

Key Achievements 2024 – 2025

Finalising the delivery of Phase 1 of the CLA Residential Strategy (31-beds)

- 6 beds due to be open (before April 2025) with the remaining 5 beds to be delivered by Autumn 2025.

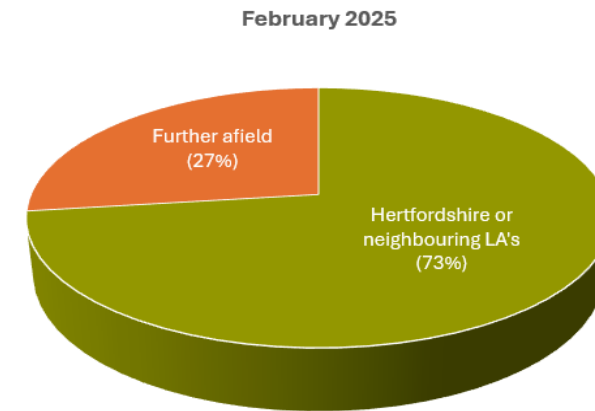
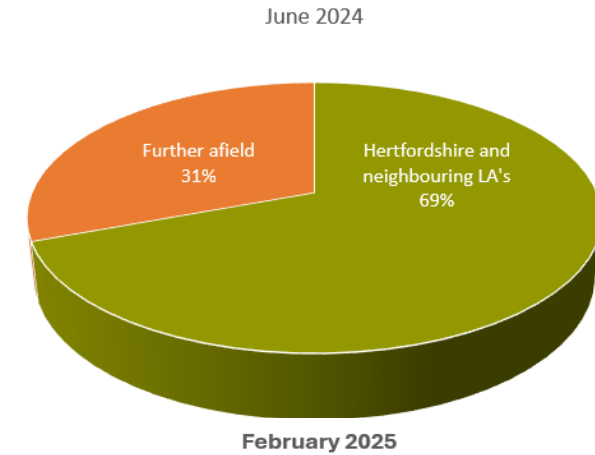
Launched Phase 2 of the CLA Residential Strategy (22-beds)

- 22 beds have been identified over 10 properties, these will be opened across 2025 and 2026.

Funding established for 17 additional beds

- Multiple properties to be sourced and secured.

Our sustainability figures for numbers of placements in and around the county have improved: as of February 2025, 73% of our Children and Young People (CYP) are placed either within Hertfordshire or within neighbouring Local Authorities compared to 69% in June 2024



Residential Strategy

[p3 of 3]

Placement Sufficiency

The CLA Residential Strategy has successfully increased the number of operational children's homes within Hertfordshire by 23 beds (at the time of publication) with an additional 30 in progress to be opened and 18 to be sourced. These homes will be managed by both In-House teams and commissioned services following on-going engagement and procurement with independent providers.

We continue to aspire to the ethos that only the right children enter residential accommodation with the best matching available, and that step-downs to foster care or return to family, where appropriate, and possible, are facilitated through improvements in the quality and support around placements. We aim to reduce the number of children in residential provision through linked initiatives including the "Inside Out" and the "Building Bridges" projects, supporting transitions and reunification as well as the Fostering Strategies.

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



SEND Commissioning

The SEND Strategy aims to improve outcomes for children with SEND and their families by maximizing the use of resources and ensuring that Hertfordshire is compliant with statutory requirements from the SEND reforms. The plan includes increasing Specialist School places, expanding the local SEND offer, and improving education and the transition to adulthood. The SEND Strategy will be updated during 2025 setting out the Hertfordshire SEND Partnership's focus and priority areas of work. This will formulate the next steps from the SEND Priority Action and Improvement Plan and will be underpinned by a refreshed SEND and Inclusion Improvement Plan.

SEND Independent Special Schools

SEND independent special school placements (day and residential) are monitored by Children's Services commissioners working closely with SEND and Education Teams and Virtual School colleagues. As of January 2025, 497 children and young people were attending Independent Special Schools, of which, 44 are children looked after.

	Non-CLA	CLA	Totals
Day Placement	420	24	444
Residential Placement	33	20	53
Totals	453	44	497

We have supported the National Safeguarding Children's Panel to undertake a review of all Children Looked After in Special Schools. Learning from this review has been shared nationally and locally, with oversight of the Hertfordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership. Findings provided reassurance around our placement oversight and identified learning needs that contribute towards our overall continuous plan for improvement.

Extended Stay Provision

Extended Stay Provision is in place to support children with SEND on the cusp of care. This model of extended stays is to address some of our most complex challenges:

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

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

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

Short Breaks

Short breaks give parents or carers of a child or young person with a disability the opportunity to have a break from their caring role.

Short breaks provide the child or young person with an opportunity to join in with fun activities that they could not ordinarily engage in because of their disability. Short breaks vary in length, they can last for one hour or a whole day. There are a variety of short breaks on offer across Hertfordshire, some can be accessed directly, and others will require a Social Worker assessment. Our short breaks include:

- Community Short Breaks:
 - Weekend activity clubs
 - School holiday clubs
- Overnight short Breaks (with an approved shared carer or in a residential unit Short Breaks)
- Support in the home (known as Homecare)

Community Short Breaks

A 35% increase in the short-break budget has resulted in re-commissioning of the service and increase in provision. We are currently supporting approx. 1300 children and young people and commission 40,000 hours of activities. In addition, SEND Commissioning has developed the SEND Community Activities Directory that promotes a wide range of activities for families and young people with SEND, a comprehensive resource for families and professionals. This is tailored for children and young people aged 0-25, and their families, this is a valuable tool for finding local activities and support groups in the community. The directory will create opportunities for families to discover, engage, and participate in a wide range of activities; some activities will also include discounts for families registered on our Hertfordshire Additional Needs Database (HAND).

Homecare

Children with very complex needs may be eligible for Homecare Services that may include:

- Personal Care - Help at home for families/carers who need extra support for their disabled child or young person with things such as showering, toileting, changing and feeding.
- Community Enablement - Support for a child or young person to get out and take part in activities in their local community. Activities could include sports, clubs, interest groups, or visits to local attractions. The benefits of this type of support include developing independence, social skills, a sense of personal achievement, fun and enjoyment. It could also provide well-needed and safe respite breaks for parents and carers.

Overnight Short Breaks (OSB) are residential services for children and young people with SEND and complex health needs that live in Hertfordshire. These services operate during evenings, weekends and throughout the day during the school holidays. The OSB service provides a break for parents and carers, whilst their children stay, for a short amount of time, in a safe and suitable setting. Having access to this support has important benefits for both carers and their children, helping the carer continue to care for their child and providing the child with a change from daily routine and an opportunity to develop new skills, stay away from home without their parents and mix with their peers.

The number of children and young people accessing OSB services at year end 2024/25 was 105, with the largest number of these children and young people having ASD and/or challenging behaviour, and second largest number having complex health needs.

In addition to OSB, each service provides an emergency bed for children and young people who meet the criteria and have an immediate need for accommodation because they cannot return home. The Emergency Bed is used only for short admissions and there is an expectation that the child/young person will be temporarily resident for no longer than 6 weeks.

Adoption

Adopt East

Hertfordshire is part of Adopt East. The Adopt East Alliance is made up of eight Local Authorities namely Bedford Borough, Essex, Hertfordshire, Luton, Norfolk, Southend, Suffolk and Thurrock. It is also made up of 2 Voluntary Adoption agencies: Adoptionplus and Barnardo's. Adoption UK represents the adopters' voice for the region. All eight local authorities aim to work collaboratively across all member agencies to recruit prospective adopters who can meet the needs of children across the region and also nationally. If prospective adopters are not matched with an Adopt East child in a timely manner, they are supported to look for a national match.

National Adoption England Strategy 2024 - 2027



One of the key strands of the strategy is to recruit adopters from diverse communities who are able to meet children's needs. Adopt East is connected with the national strategy group through the RAA leaders and the Recruitment Steering Group (NARSG). NARSG's ethos is built upon a commitment from all those involved in the adoption system across England, bringing together all the major stakeholders in the delivery of adoption services across England. Adopt East partners attend recruitment launches held by NARSG and make use of all the national resources available to support regional and local adopter recruitment.

In-House Residential

ARC Services

ARC Services is a trauma-based service that works therapeutically with families across Hertfordshire to prevent family breakdown and children and young people entering the care system. The service provides different interventions based on the needs of the family which is ascertained through a baseline assessment.

In the past year, our Rapid Response team has responded to 693 new crisis referrals, de-escalating crisis situations to prevent young people from entering the care system, being arrested or Placed in Police Protection, or to prevent them from presenting at Accident and Emergency with a mental health crisis. The Rapid Response bed is used to provide some support overnight as a last resort for families in crisis. In addition, it has been used flexibly to support young people waiting for placements to be identified, saving HCC high emergency placement costs and enabling planning in a child focused way.

Our Harmful Sexualised Behaviour Team works with an average of 21 families at a time, completing AIM Assessments (assessment of young people who have committed a sexual assault or harmful sexual behaviour) where deemed they are required, and following up with Harmful Sexual Behaviour Interventions. The team has prevented young people from being removed from home, excluded from school and isolated from communities.

Our Outreach team has accepted 75 new referrals during this period and worked with an average of 38 families at a time.

Our Residential Team have 3 beds to provide short stays as part of a families together short stays program. During this time, their occupancy was running at an average of 62% each month. Alongside the stays, the team provides support to the families at home and through family sessions / support calls and visits.

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



In House Residential

Our in-house residential services have seven homes currently operating which provides 32 beds for children in need of residential Care and 4 beds for Children on the edge of care. These comprise of:

- Three 5 bed longer term homes
- One 4 bed longer term home
- One 6 bed home for children with disabilities
- One 3 bed home to offer solo and short-term provision in 3 separate self-contained flats
- One 3 bed specialist home for short term step down from inpatient provision or to avoid an inpatient episode
- One short stay ARC provision with three beds for children on the edge of care and an Emergency Rapid response bed.

All of our in-House homes have achieved a “Good” or “Outstanding” rating from Ofsted. Our in-house provision achieved over 85% occupancy overall and offers stability and longevity for our Children Looked After in need of Residential. We support this with fortnightly placement planning meetings which include senior managers of the service and those whose children are living within the service. This supports good oversight and allows a whole system approach to supporting not only the children to have loving and stable homes, but to fully support the managers and staff teams working within those homes to be able to provide this.

Residential Academy

Hertfordshire's Residential Academy was launched in 2022 in partnership with then National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care (NCERCC).

The Academy was created in response to the workforce crisis in the Residential Sector and an initiative to attract more people to the industry by providing a sound theoretical and practical foundation to promote a change of career to Social Care. Previously, there was an expectation that those working in Residential had a background in the area; this made recruitment problematic, and we wanted to attract experience and expertise from a more diverse group. Hertfordshire's Academy gives an opportunity to those with an interest in the industry, but no current practical experience.

Going from strength to strength, the academy is now in its 3rd year, having taken 6 cohorts through the 6-month training and probation pathway. At the time of reporting, 100% of academy graduates from the first 2 cohorts were still in posts within the Council's Residential Service.

Having attracted new people to Residential work, the aim is to ensure those people graduating have the theoretical and therapeutic understanding to meet the needs of those children who have experienced developmental trauma to support them to make sense of their experiences and respond in ways which promote attachment, regulation and competency in their lives.

Independent Residential

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

There are currently 28 independent registered homes, an increase of 9 in the past year. Of these 28, eight are part of existing block contracts the Council has, including 5 operating from HCC properties.

There are a further 3 homes in various stages of mobilisation as part of the residential Strategy; all will be operated by independent providers for Hertfordshire children.

Of the n144 Hertfordshire children placed in residential provision, 37.5% are within Hertfordshire, 37.5% in Band 1 neighbouring authorities and 25% placed at a distance. Most children living at a distance are as a result of risk.

Fostering

In-House Fostering

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

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

In March, the service launched the 9th Mockingbird hub. The hubs support over 100 children and their foster carers. Hertfordshire is now the largest Mockingbird fostering service in the UK and feedback from carers and children receiving mockingbird support is overwhelmingly positive and has an impact on placement stability, as well as foster carer retention. An internal survey showed that carers within Mockingbird hubs are less likely to resign than carers without this support.

Nurture, Empathy and Supporting Transitions (NEST) Foster Carers were launched this year. This is a newly developed fostering role to provide safe homes for children who would otherwise be cared for in residential children's homes. Carers will receive specialist training and competitive pay of over £80,000 per year. Requirements include having one carer at home full time, a spare bedroom and no children under 16 living at home.



Independent Fostering

Independent Fostering

There are currently five Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) registered within Hertfordshire: an increase of one in the past 12 months. As of March 2025, the Council only had n9 children placed with one of the agencies.

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

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

The Council has worked with the Pan-Bedfordshire authorities in the last year to re-commission their Approved Provider List (APL) of contracted IFAs and joined the new contract starting in April 2025. The aims of joining with neighbouring authorities include efficiency savings on time and not replicating work for IFAs. Having set contract prices with agencies, categories ("Lots") based on authority need, and fixed agreed annual uplifts, will support the work of the commissioning team. Contract management will be undertaken jointly, but each authority will retain responsibility and oversight for their children placed with independent fostering families. There are 18 agencies that were awarded to the APL.

Supported Accommodation

Supported Accommodation Provision

For Young People aged 16 or 17, living in Supported Accommodation can be the best option to meet their needs, with the aim of supporting them to develop their independence as they approach adulthood. Supported Accommodation for Looked After Children and Care Leavers caters for children aged 16 and 17 who have relatively high or increasing levels of independence, who are ready to gain further skills in preparation for adult living, and do not need or want the degree of care or type of environment provided in a children's home or foster care. For young people who are ready for it, high-quality supported accommodation that provides a nurturing and protective environment can be a place where they can thrive and prepare for greater independence. This helps to ensure their safety and equip them with the skills required to sustain an independent tenancy long term.

The Council has awarded a Framework Agreement for the provision of Supported Accommodation for 16- and 17-year-old children in care from 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2027 – with a possible 2-year extension. Most children who access the Council's Supported Accommodation provisions are placed in Hertfordshire and sufficiency is not an issue with this cohort, as capacity is regularly reviewed and increased as required.

A 30 bedded provision in Watford has opened specifically for Separated Migrant Children (SMC) The provision had a phased opening from August 2024. With an increase in demand for this type of provision, more are planned in order to meet any increase in the number of allocated SMC from the Home Office.

Of the n146 children in placements in 2024-2025, n113 were placed in Hertfordshire, n32 in Band 1 authorities and n1 at a distance. The majority of the n33 children placed out of Hertfordshire were as a result of a risk to their safety if they remained in the county.

Prevention of Homelessness

The Homeless Hub provides the Assessment, Advice, Information and Mediation service to enable families with Young People aged 16-24 years (up to 25th birthday) to stay together by working intensively with them before the point of crisis and for those already in crisis to prevent homelessness which can lead to poorer outcomes for Young People. (e.g. poverty and unemployment). The Hub's critical function is to act as a 'front door' to services to prevent homelessness and have a primary function of enabling families/carers with Young People aged 16-24 years to stay together. This Spring, the Homeless Hub became the single point of contact for all homeless referrals (including from District/Borough Councils).

Outreach Housing Support

This service is to support Young People, providing them with support appropriate to their needs, enabling them to move towards independence including developing the life skills required to sustain an independent tenancy long term, thus preventing future homelessness. The Outreach Housing Support Service prioritises Young People aged 18+ years moving out of Supported Accommodation (some who do not have Care Leaver status) and deemed vulnerable. These Young People are not likely to be prioritised for 'move on' accommodation via Borough/District Councils and need support in accessing private rented accommodation.

Care Leavers at Risk of Homelessness/Rough Sleeping - Intensive Outreach Housing Support

Due to the high number of Care Leavers being threatened with eviction, the Council also has an Intensive Outreach Support service to prevent Young People losing their tenancies, using Government grant funding awarded specifically for this purpose. This service has a positive impact on the young people situations but also to partners involved. The service is unique in its ability to be creative in the support offered and tailor the support to the individual is working well. Feedback has been extremely positive, and levels of eviction have been minimal once this service has been involved.

Housing Related Support

Housing Related Support provides emergency and/or short-term accommodation to homeless Young People aged 16 and 17, who do not need to be accommodated by Children's Services and those aged 18 to 25 years (up to their 25th birthday) including Care Leavers, in order to offer an opportunity to:

- Assess a Young Person's comprehensive support needs
- Facilitate further work in order to support a return home to family/carer/s
- Facilitate access to longer term accommodation options

Young People who present as homeless are particularly vulnerable whilst awaiting the outcome of their homelessness application and are at particular risk of social exclusion. As such, priority is given to undertaking immediate work with his group of Young People, to avoid drift and being drawn into statutory services where this is not necessary.

The Council has Housing Related Support (HRS) contracts, that commenced from 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2027 with the option to extend for 1 year. This service provides hostel 'type' supported accommodation for homeless 16–25-year-olds, consisting of 268 general needs beds and delivered by 5 Registered Social Landlords across the 10 districts, with 9 Crashpad beds specifically for young people aged 16/17 years who are at immediate risk of street homeless.

Staying Close (Pilot Scheme) for Care Leavers aged 18

Staying Close provides accommodation and on-site support via grant funding to Care Leavers aged 18 who struggle to access the usual accommodation pathways open to them due to their complex needs. The aim is to reduce a young person's needs over time with a 'move on' from Staying Close likely being in a shared supported accommodation hostel and aims to be a steppingstone out of care, this is not a long-term accommodation option for young people up to a maximum of 6 months. The first 5 bedded provision opened in February 2024 and 2 further provisions opened in June and October 2024 now providing 15 beds. Further grant funding has been awarded for the next 2 years by the DfE to develop the service prior to a national launch.

Key Achievements in 2024/2025

- The Intensive Support Service for Care Leavers aged 18+ who are at the highest risk of homelessness/rough sleeping continues to have a positive impact on the young people. Feedback has been extremely positive, and levels of eviction have been minimal.
- Two further 'Staying Close' Supported Accommodation provisions opened providing 10 additional beds (now 15 in total) for Care Leavers aged 18 years with additional support needs who are ineligible for social housing.
- Tender completed for a Framework Agreement for the provision of Supported Accommodation and Practice Flats for 16+ Young People – contract commencement 1st April 2025 to provide various types of accommodation and support.
- Assist Supported Accommodation providers to meet the necessary quality standards to deliver high quality services under the DfE Regulations and Quality Standards, ensuring Providers qualify to be registered with Ofsted.
- Contracts awarded to 5 Providers of Housing Related Support Services (HRS) for Young People aged 16 to 25 years with contracts commencing 1st April 2025, providing 268 general needs bed spaces and 9 Crashpad beds.
- Increase of 30 Supported Accommodation Separated Migrant Children (SMC) bed spaces (totalling 84 SMC specific block booked beds) within Hertfordshire.
- Revised and amended the CCRAAG National Supported Accommodation contract to be used from April 2025.

Key Priorities in 2025/2026

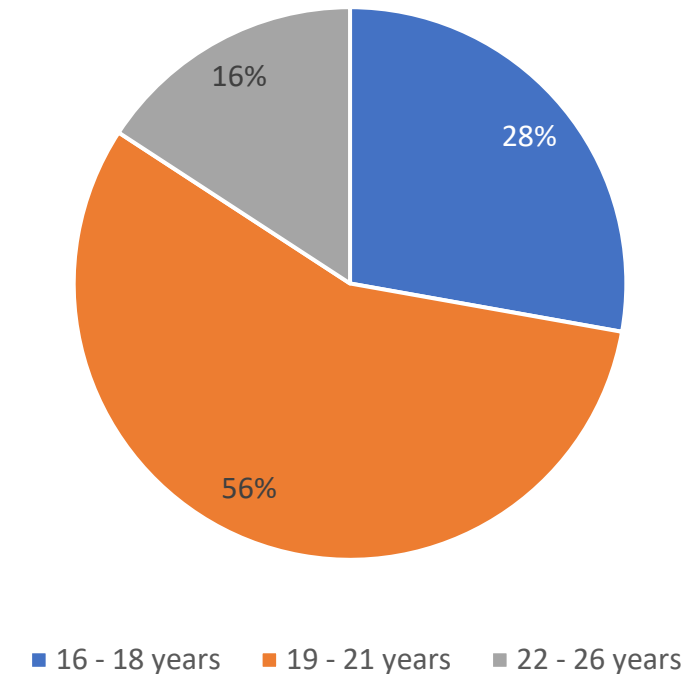
- Work with CCRAAG partners to develop a new monitoring process to implement a more targeted approach to avoid duplication with Ofsted inspections.
- Publicise and utilise the revised CCRAAG National Supported Accommodation contract from April 2025.
- Creation of an Age Assessment provision for Separated Migrant Children that are possibly adults and therefore must not be placed with other Looked After Children until assessed to be a child.
- Market engagement event with Registered Social Landlords to establish interest in supplying accommodation to Young People aged 16 to 25 years. This service has not previously been tendered, and HCC need to ensure there is no additional interest to identify if a tender is required in 2026.
- Development and roll out of a new wrap around service for 16- and 17-year-olds that will continue supporting them post 18. This would involve mapping local activities, resources, support groups etc. so that Providers can assist the Young People to engage with those appropriate to their needs.

Housing Brokerage

Housing Brokerage supports social workers with accommodation issues, including accommodation planning for Care Leavers after they leave their care placements at 18 years old. Housing Brokerage also provides accommodation for families with vulnerable children who are not eligible for accommodation from the Local District and Borough Councils within Hertfordshire.

The last year has seen many developments in the way the Housing Brokerage Team work. With the introduction of the Staying Close provisions between February and October 2024, the team have seen an increase in the accommodation options for care leavers with more complex needs. This cohort has been growing over the last 5 years and staying close provides a supported setting to help those that leave care from residential settings with higher support needs.

% of Care Leaver Population



Housing Brokerage and Care Leavers Accommodation

Throughout 2024/25 the Joint Housing Protocol (JHP) has been under review. The new document is still in development but will include some additional sections around care leavers with complex needs. The Housing Brokerage Team, along with the JHP Lead (16+ Accommodation Service Manager) are working hard with the Adult Care Services and the new 'Making Every Adult Matter' (MEAM) program to focus on a more developed pathway for these care leavers out of care and into the right statutory service as an adult. The new JHP will be launched around the summertime, and the Housing Brokerage Team will be working hard with both statutory and third sector partners to develop an improved Countywide response to care leavers with complex support needs and multiple-disadvantage.

Over the 2025/26 year the Housing Brokerage Team will build on the successful work of the previous year. This will include:

Growing Staying Close Accommodation:

Through funding from DfE (Department for Education), the Council will develop its pilot program of Staying Close accommodation for Care Leavers with additional support needs. This service has proved to be an essential accommodation option for many young people leaving care. However, it needs further development. The existing 15 provisions are able to work with those who have behavioural issues and low to medium level mental health needs. However, there are increasing numbers of Care Leavers with complex SEND needs and the Staying Close service is being requested for many of these young people. The service needs to grow and develop over 2025/26 to consider how best to support this cohort of young people, especially for those who present with Autism and ADHD/ADD.

Separated Migrant Care Leaver Accommodation:

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

Inside Out

Inside Out is a programme that delivers an innovative approach to improving outcomes and stability for Children Looked After. The programme builds on the pilot initially funded through the Department for Education's Innovation Fund.

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

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

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

The project supported 21 children and young people throughout 2024-2025 with 100% either remaining in their existing home or moving to what is considered to be a less intensive home (either foster family, Supported Accommodation or home to family) at the end of their coaching period.

Advocacy

The Council re-commissioned the independent advocacy service for Children and Young People. The service ensures that children and young people to have access to appropriate support and representation to ensure their rights are protected and their wishes and feelings are listened to and taken into account.

Hertfordshire have jointly commissioned services alongside Luton and Bedford Borough Councils from April 2024. Working with neighbouring Local Authorities has enabled collective purchasing power to be combined and be more attractive to providers. Views, thoughts and feelings of children and young people are at the heart of the service.

The service records young people's views:

- 66 % of YP felt their knowledge of rights increased
- 66 % of YP felt their knowledge of what was happening to them increased
- 69 % of YP felt they had better opportunities to express their views, wishes and feelings

Summary

As outlined throughout, there is a need to continue increasing local fostering, residential and specialist services for SEND provision. The national shortage of appropriate residential and fostering provision continues, especially in relation to teenage placements and placements for children with complex histories and high needs. Placement costs continue to rise placing pressure on placement budgets. A range of activity is planned over the coming years to address these challenges. Some of the key activity for 2025-2026 is outlined below.

- Timely Quality Assurance and monitoring of placements to ensure high quality care
- Mobilise 5 additional Residential Children's Homes Beds by Autumn 2025
- Commission additional homes under the Residential Strategy to increase the number of children and young people able to remain in Hertfordshire
- Utilise CCRAG resources to develop regional approaches to placement sufficiency via Commission East
- Implement the new IFA Approved Provider List
- Re-commission countywide Homecare services



Hertfordshire