Stockton-on-Tees Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy 2024-2026

Our sufficiency duty and purpose of strategy

It is a statutory sufficiency duty for local authorities to take steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within their area which meets the needs of children that are in the care of the local authority (Children's Act 1989).

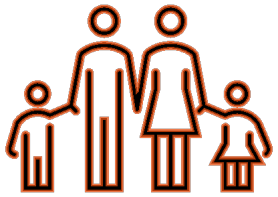
Our strategy sets out how over the next two years (2024-2026) we intend to meet our sufficiency duty for children on the edge of care, children with additional needs (disabilities), children in our care and care leavers so that we:

- Keep children with their families of origin, wherever it is safe to do so.
- Provide children with alternative, nurturing homes if they need short, or long-term alternative care or support arrangements.
- Enable our children and young people with disabilities to have the same opportunities as their peers to take part in activities to support their independence.

Key achievements following our last strategy

- **Developed an in-house adolescent approach** to reduce risks outside the home.
- **Developed an in-house edge of care** service to provide intensive support to families at risk of breakdown and prevent escalation into care.
- **Launched a social work academy** to support newly qualified social workers support through their assessed and supported year.
- **Introduced the No Limits Programme** to provide a voluntary opportunity for employees to spend time with a young person one-on-one to offer them opportunities to engage in social, leisure and recreational activities
- **Relaunched our Lets Take Action Group** – our children in care council to shape our priorities and services.
- **Implemented 3 Mockingbird Constellations** to nurture relationships between fostering families and build a caring community
- **Received DFE Capital Funding** for the development of 2 new residential children's homes
- **Refreshed our commissioning partnership with Tees Esk and Wear Valley Trust** to provide a Children in Care therapeutic support offer
- **Commissioned in borough Supported Accommodation Provision** specifically for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Young People
- **Opened our No Limits Hub in Stockton town centre** to give care leavers a dedicated space where they can develop a range of independent living skills

Our children and young people in care (April 2024)



2% (10) placed for adoption

14% (84) living in residential children's homes

62% of the children in our care aged under 18 years (322) live within the borough.

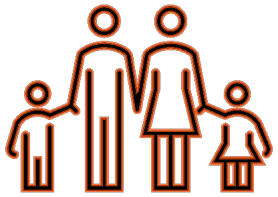
66% (384) living with foster carers:
160 – kinship foster carers
113 – independent foster agencies
111 – in house fostering

581 children and young people under 18 years in our care

6% (36) living in supported accommodation or supported lodgings

12% (67) living in other arrangements (placed with parents, young offenders institute)

Our Children and Young People in our Care - Now



1.6% (9) placed for adoption

13.8% (79) living in residential children's homes

572 children and young people under 18 years in our care

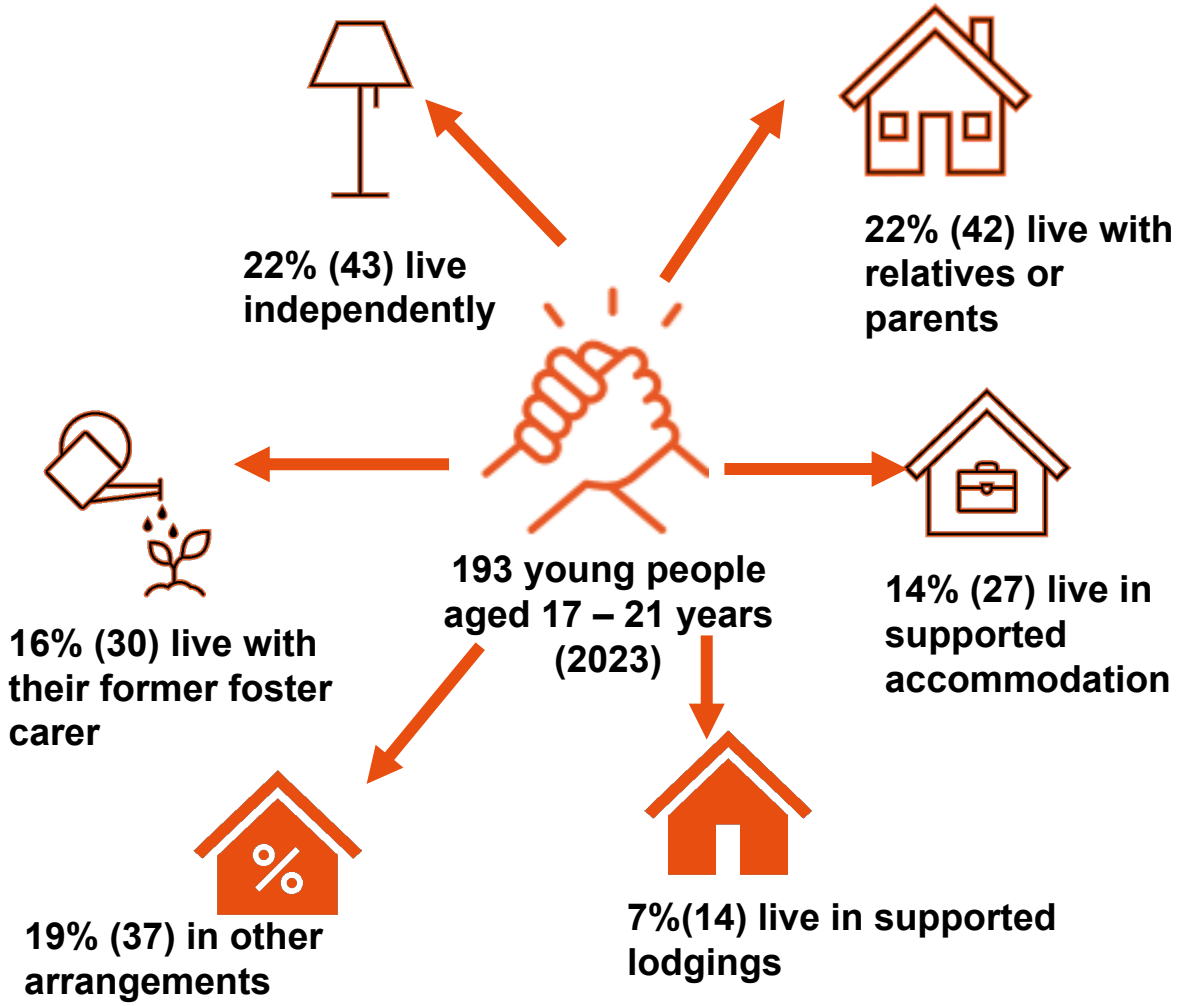
66% (379) living with foster carers

81% of the children in our care aged under 18 years (463) live within the borough.

11.5% (66)) living in other arrangements (placed with parents, young offenders institute)

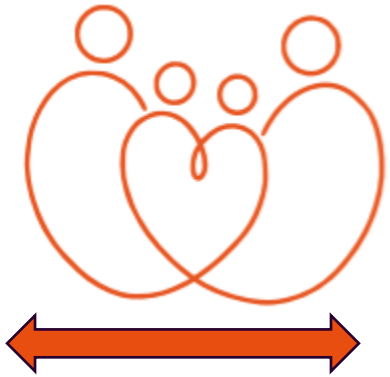
Data taken from Children's Services Analysis Tool December 2024

Our children and young people leaving care



Age Range	Proportion in suitable accommodation (April 2024)
17-18 years	86%
19-21 years	87%
22-25 years	51%

Our key sufficiency trends

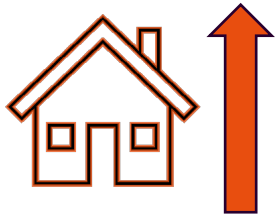


The rate of children in care has remained stable since 2020 (131 per 10,000) but is still higher than statistical neighbour averages

The number of in house foster carers has reduced from 103 in 2020 to 85 in 2024.

The number of children living with in-house independent fostering agency and connected carers has reduced from 408 in 2020 to 384 in 2024

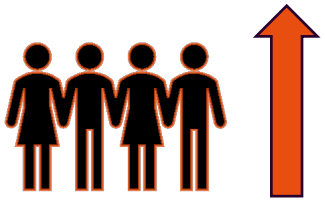
The majority of in house foster carers are between 54-63 years.



The number of children and young people in external children's homes has increased from 52 in 2020 to 63 in 2024.

We have 6 SBC in-house children's homes, with 22 places.

There are 11 externally run children's homes in the borough with 50 places. Children and young people from Stockton are living in 42% of the 50 places.



The proportion of young people in care aged over 16 years has increased from 13% in 2020 to 22% in 2023.

The proportion of children living more than 20 miles from their home was 9% in 2023, lower than statistical neighbour averages

The proportion of children in care for over 2.5 years, living in the same arrangement for over 2 years is 72% (2023) higher than statistical neighbour averages

Our costs – key trends

In 2023 the council paid an average weekly fostering expenditure per child of £375 (in house and external fostering combined), compared to a regional average of £540.

Our average annual cost per external fostering placement in 2024 was £46,352, an increase of approximately £6,000 per year from 2020.

In 2020 our highest cost external fostering package was £65,018, rising 70% to £110,798 in 2024.

In 2023 the council paid an average of £5950 per week for an external residential placement, compared to an average of £6,080 across the North East region.

During 2020-2024 the number of children in external children's homes increased from 52 to 63 (21% increase), during this time our overall costs increased by over £8 million (89% increase).

In 2020 our highest cost residential placement was £414,796 per year, rising 98% (over £400,000) by 2024 to £821,049.

Our key challenges

- The number of children and young people in care remains higher than our statistical neighbour averages, and we are seeing an increase in the number of young people aged 16 years and over in our care, due to the increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people in our care, young people remaining in care for longer and increasing complexity meaning young people are coming into or remaining in care during their teenage years.
- We have more foster carers leaving the profession than new foster carers registering, and a shortfall across all forms of our foster care offer, meaning not all children and young people who would benefit from family living environments are able to live in foster arrangements.
- We do not have enough prospective adopters who can meet the needs of our children and young people.
- There is an undersupply of children's residential homes in the borough, and an overall lack in the market of placements that can meet the needs of our teenagers with complex trauma, attachment or mental health issues.

Our key challenges

- We only have a small number of supported lodgings providers registered in the borough, and we know that our young people have better outcomes in these living arrangements.
- We have a lack of affordable housing options for our care leavers, and for our families needing larger houses for foster care or as part of reunification plans.
- There are gaps in our short breaks and respite provision for children and young people with additional needs and disabilities.
- For some young people with complex needs and high levels of risk there are a limited number of providers at a local, regional and national level that can meet their needs,. These placements are in high demand and at a premium. On occasion, bespoke packages of care are developed until an appropriate regulated placement can be secured.

Our key actions over the next 2 years

- **Redefine our strategy for Early Help within the Borough** collaborating closely with our partners, to support children, young people and families at the earliest stage, with the ambition to keep children and young people safely within family homes and local communities wherever it is safe to do so.
- **Embed a Family Networking approach** across Early Help and Social Care, working alongside families from the very first contact to identify family and connected persons who may be able to offer support.
- **Increase our fostering capacity** – both in house and as part of regional Independent Fostering Agencies to ensure our children and young people can live in family homes when it meets their needs.
- **Develop a Stockton first approach** with external Children's Homes providers within the borough, so for the small number of children and young people requiring residential care, this is provided close to their communities and support networks.
- **Develop a clear operating model for internal Children's Residential Homes** and a clear recruitment, retention, professional development and career progression strategy.
- **Register 2 new SBC children's homes with Ofsted**– increasing our capacity by 3 beds for young people with trauma, attachment and therapeutic needs, and by 4 places for short term support focused on reunification.

Our key actions over the next 2 years

- **Explore capital and invest to save resources to develop 2 solo children's homes** to provide care close to home for children and young people whose needs cannot be met in group settings.
- **Increase our supported lodgings providers by up to 10 placements** (maximum capacity available within existing in-house infrastructure) and explore invest to save resource to substantially increase this provision, as we know this provision can improve outcomes for our young people.
- **Develop a flexible commissioning approach for a range of dispersed supported accommodation options to meet the needs of our 16–17-year-olds** and care leavers increasing our commissioning of placements from 36 to 46 places and reducing the number of 'spot purchased' arrangements
- **Pilot a corporate rent guarantor scheme and private rental tenancy shortfall funding scheme** to support young people who are ready to move on from supported accommodation and are able to live independently. This will have a significant impact on our supported accommodation sufficiency
- **Work with strategic housing and private and social landlords** to increase access to affordable housing for our care leavers and families

Our key actions over the next 2 years

- **Support and upskill the Children's Services workforce** to further consider the impact of health needs (in particular neurodiversity and mental health needs) on placement requirements and to collaborate effectively with Health partners including the Children's Continuing Care team.
- **Increase our short breaks offer** to meet assessed needs through social care packages as we know this can help retain children with disabilities at home with their family of origin
- As part of the Council's Powering our Future transformation programme, work in partnership with adult services to **develop a life course approach to supporting transitions for children and young people**