

Sufficiency Strategy

January 2024 - 2027



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Foreword

In Cheshire East, we consider the care of our children and our role as corporate parents to be a crucial responsibility held by councillors, senior leaders, and everyone across the partnership who works with children and young people.

We are committed to providing the best support for children and their families as soon as they need it. It is our aim to keep children and young people within their families and their communities when it is safe to do so. When children need to be cared for by the local authority, we need to ensure they receive love, nurture, and opportunities in safe and stable homes. This three-year strategy outlines our intention to secure every child a stable, love-filled home - fostering the childhood everybody deserves.

When children are in care, the local authority assumes the role of the child's corporate parent - a responsibility we approach with privilege and significance. This collaborative role is well-understood, with councillors and practitioners working together to offer high support and challenge for excellent care and support, maintaining high aspirations for our children and young people's futures, but there is recognition that we could always do more. Therefore, my plea is for anyone reading this strategy to share its contents far and wide,

raising awareness of the vital role of foster carers and support services, to ensure our children have loving homes in which to thrive into young adults.

Our sufficiency strategy highlights our strengths but also our plan of action for the coming three years to improve the sufficiency and choice of homes to support our children and young people. Our approach is flexible, diverse, and influenced by the feedback of our children and young people. Thank you for taking the time to read it.



Deborah Woodcock

Executive Director of Children's Services, Cheshire East Council

Introduction

Our aim is for this sufficiency strategy to support us to achieve resilient and responsive services, so we can support the well-being and potential of every cared for child or young person. At the heart of this strategy lies a collective call to action, urging children's services to unite in collaborative efforts that transcend traditional boundaries during these unprecedented times.

We believe that embracing the government's 2023 '[Stable Homes Built on Love](#)' and implementing the six pillars of reform will lead to greater sufficiency within Cheshire East, and have therefore chosen to use these pillars as the foundation for this strategy. This vision is underpinned by the fundamental principle of the Children Act 1989 that children's welfare is paramount. Stable Homes Built on Love outlines that the ***“best way of promoting children's welfare is very often by supporting children's families and the loving relationships around them. To achieve this vision, we need to rebalance children's social care away from costly crisis intervention to more meaningful and effective help for families, so that it achieves the outcomes children deserve. Achieving this will require a major reset that puts love and stable relationships at the heart of what children's social care does”***.

Our strategy champions early help: strategically designed to provide timely support, guidance, and resources to families in need. We believe that children are best supported within their families and their

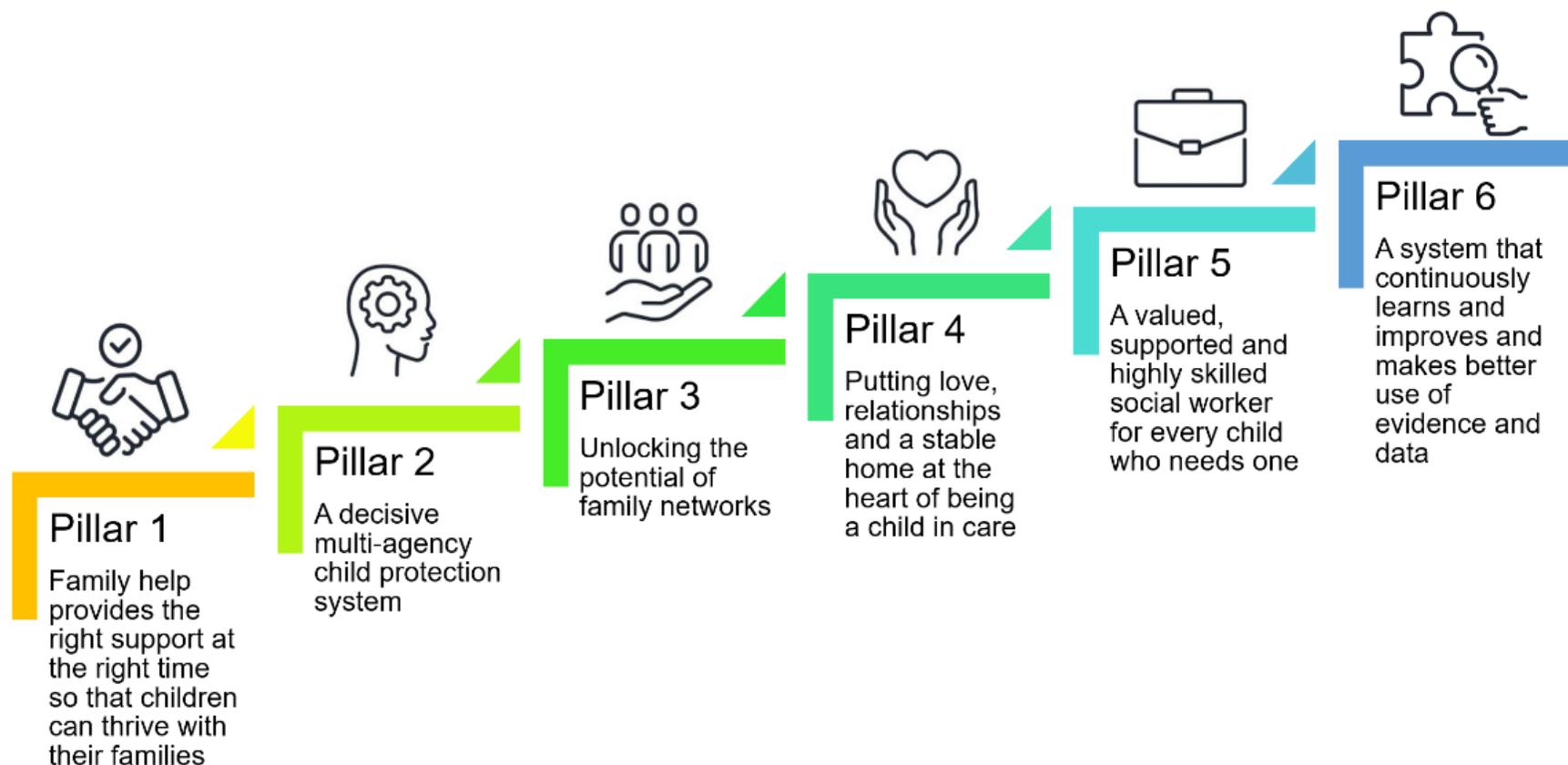
communities, and we want to keep children within the nurturing embrace of their family homes when it is safe to do so, reinforcing familial bonds and fostering stability. Our drive to work with families, hand in hand, to ensure children stay with their family or return to their families as quickly as possible, is a clear driving force for this strategy.

In addition, to meet the diverse sufficiency needs of our cared for children and young people, we have embarked on an ambitious journey to increase the number of foster carers, empowering our communities to play a pivotal role in the care and development of our cared for children. We are also cultivating our own residential children's home portfolio, ensuring that every child requiring residential care experiences an environment that mirrors the warmth and familiarity of a nurturing home.

Our collaborative action extends to a close partnership with local residential and supported accommodation providers, fostering a network of interconnected support structures that enable seamless transitions for our children and young people. The 'staying put' initiative within foster care is championed, recognising the significance of maintaining stability and consistency during crucial developmental stages, alongside our new 'staying close' offer, which aims to mirror the support for children leaving residential care.

Our commitment extends beyond our immediate borders as we actively build relationships with providers of children's placements across the country, to ensure our wider sufficiency needs are met and to prevent the need to call on unregulated provision. By establishing strong ties with these providers, we aim to create a network that keeps our children within their local communities, reinforcing the bonds that ground them in familiar surroundings, whilst providing the very best, regulated care.

In the pursuit of sufficiency, our strategy is not merely a roadmap; it is a testament to our unwavering dedication to the welfare of our children. **TOGETHER**, let us forge a future where every child in Cheshire East thrives within the embrace of a supportive and caring community.



Our Journey

In 2023, Cheshire East Council's children's services became more integrated, officially uniting family help and prevention services with children's social care services under one director.

As we embarked on this transformative path, our shared goal was, and is, to work at **PACE**:

Providing
Accommodation
Collaboratively
Every time

This starts with our intention to see our children and young people living with their family or extended family members whenever possible.

We currently have **533** cared for children (as of December 2023) compared with 557 the same time last year in 2022 (a 4.3% decrease). The most significant increase in our cared for population was in May 2023 (appendix 1), when our cohort reached its highest number to date at 583 children. This increase took place around the time of our integration and since then we have seen a steady decline in the number of children required to be cared for, demonstrating the impact of our efforts to reform.

Trends

A concerning trend is that appropriate, well-matched care isn't readily available for children with increasingly complex needs. A large proportion of private providers have used this to their advantage, by not only raising prices but also selectively choosing children with fewer complexities, pushing local authorities to resort to unregulated and very costly options. Children's homes, originally designed for three beds, are transforming into solo accommodation yet still charging the fee for three children for one placement, which is also skewing the national residential data.

As of 31 March 2023, there was a 9% increase in the number of children's homes (to 2,880) and a 7% increase in the number of places (to 10,818) compared with 31 March 2022. This continues the long-standing trend of the number of homes rising faster than the number of places. Regionally, the North West has the largest proportion of children's homes (26%) and 2,458 beds available ([2023 government statistical data set – table 3](#)), but this does not drill down into how many beds have been blocked by private providers choosing to charge the same amount but operate as a solo provision for children with more complex needs. As of 31 March 2023, private companies ran 85% of children's homes (2,450) providing 81% of places (8,791) compared to local authorities who only ran 12% (333) of children's homes providing 14% of places (1,529), highlighting a worrying imbalance that has ultimately significantly driven up costs.

We are also observing a concerning trend where children aged 10 to 15 face challenges in securing foster homes as part of their care

plan. While Cheshire East has a sizable cohort of foster carers for infants and toddlers and utilises supported accommodation for those aged 16 and above, the children aged between 10 and 15 can often end up in residential care or experience a number of moves, due to insufficient options to meet their needs.

To address the rising demand for suitable, nurturing homes, the council will open three of our own children's homes by April 2024 with plans for additional homes within a 12-month period. This initiative aims to provide a total of nine beds and one emergency bed, supporting our goal of keeping children within their communities. It will also allow us to work on an exciting project to support young people in residential care to move into specialist foster care (known as the STRETCH programme - stepping through residential enabling transition in Cheshire East).

We take pride in successfully implementing our PACE ethos and we have a clear protocol to avoid using unregulated placements. While on rare occasions unregulated placements may be used as an absolute last resort, we act swiftly to move our children into matched placements where they can begin to thrive.



Pillar 1: Family help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive with their families

We want to provide support to families early so they get the support they need as soon as they need it, and to prevent issues from becoming more serious.

Cheshire East has a wide-ranging early help offer that is designed around evidenced need. We have a locality approach to delivering services so we can be responsive to local needs. The integrated front door provides a holistic whole-family approach to advice, support and referral to appropriate services across the continuum of need.

The council's early help offer is delivered through targeted family help teams and our strong start service, all aligned to the eight collaborative areas within our partnership [family hubs](#).

The council's @CT and @CE teams support our sufficiency strategy by supporting children and young people who are on the edge of care and by supporting children and young people to return home:

@CT (Achieving Change Together) work alongside children's social care to support children and young people on a child in need or child protection plan who are at high risk of exploitation. They also provide support to children on the edge of care, and where there is a risk of placement breakdown. Currently 80+% of children supported by @CT remain at home with their families.

@CE (Achieving Change Early) work with children and young people on extra family help plans or targeted family help plans to provide short term, intensive support to children who are showing multiple vulnerabilities to exploitation including: poor education attendance, missing episodes, anti-social behaviour and family conflict.

Cheshire East's youth support service, virtual school and our commissioned services, such as Change Grow Live who provide support for drug and alcohol abuse, all contribute to our integrated offer and support our sufficiency strategy by supporting children and young people to thrive with their families.



Pillar 2: A decisive multi-agency child protection system

We have a proactive multi-agency approach to ensure that children and young people in Cheshire East feel and are safe. There are several ways we support this collaborative approach which are outlined below.

Legal advice meetings (LAM) - LAM is a weekly forum which consists of representation from children's social care teams, fostering service, legal service and Adoption Counts. The purpose of LAM is to consider cases where the threshold for significant harm has been met or a child is at continued risk of significant harm and agree an appropriate course of action for the child or young person.

Where this threshold is met, the council will use the pre-proceedings process as a last attempt to engage the family and to try and keep children and young people at home where possible. Within the pre-proceedings process, contingency options are explored and twin tracked, such as viability assessments of connected carers (under regulation 24) to support children to remain within their family network. At times it may be unsafe for children and young people to remain with their parents at this stage and children may be placed with connected carers under section 20 or regulation 24 arrangements during pre-proceedings. If positive change is made, the child/ young person can be rehabilitated home without the need to issue care proceedings. Where it is felt that children and young people are unable to remain with their parents, the council may need to issue care proceedings.

Children and young people who may need to come into care are considered by the **Resource and Accommodation Panel (RAAP)**. RAAP considers what resources are needed to best meet the individual needs of children and young people in a holistic and cost-effective way. RAAP meets weekly and includes representatives from across social care, early help, health, education, fostering, and partner agencies. It is chaired by heads of service and provides scrutiny, collaboration, and timely decision making to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people.

Legal tracker is a weekly meeting held with heads of service, fostering and our legal colleagues. Social workers and team managers also join to discuss specific children and young people. This meeting ensures that all parties are working together effectively to achieve permanence for children and young people at the earliest opportunity.

Newly formed **Triple-S (step-up, step-down, stability)** set up in July 2023 meets weekly and includes the placements team, social workers, team managers, independent reviewing officers, commissioning, fostering, and education. Triple-S considers children and young people who are experiencing issues in their current home (stability), who may need to have more support (step up) such as increased staffing or a move from foster care to residential, or who may need to move back to foster care, move on to independence or supported accommodation (step down). This panel looks at sufficiency across all areas and is chaired by the head of service for provision.

Ignition Panel is for young people aged 16 and over who are thinking about where and how they would like to live when they begin their transition to adulthood. Ignition is made up of a range of partners; housing, social landlords, YMCA, P3 and Forum Housing Supported Lodgings. Young people attend Ignition and describe their current situation and where they would like to be in the future. The agencies listen and then describe what they have to offer or what they could develop to meet the young person's needs. Young people can visit different provisions to inform their choices. Ignition also considers young people who have been supported to move on; this helps ensure that the home is still meeting their needs and develops our learning and knowledge of the available homes. Ignition supports us to identify any gaps and good practice and it has led to greater stability and choice for our cared for young people.

Adoption Counts is a regional adoption agency commissioned by Cheshire East Council which brings together professional expertise and specialist skills from four local authorities across Cheshire and Greater Manchester.

Our **improvement and impact plan** for early help and children's social care is driving improvements to our work to support children, young people and families. Progress against this plan is scrutinised by an independently chaired improvement and impact board, the Children and Families Committee and the council's chief executive through the corporate accountabilities meeting.

Ref	Action <i>What we will do</i>	Action Owner	By when
2.1	Develop a monthly step down panel to review the care plans for all cared for children who are not currently in foster care or planning to return home.	Head of Service Safeguarding and Quality Assurance	April 2024



Pillar 3: Unlocking the potential of family networks

We want to support children and young people to stay with their family whenever it is safe to do so. Currently 22.2% of our cared for children live with a parent or family member but this number has the potential to increase. 21% of our children are accommodated under section 20 where there is a possible opportunity for them to return home or live with their family.

In January 2024 we formed a family group conferencing service. This service will support families and the people that are important to them (their family network) to build effective plans to keep children and young people safe at home or with people who already know and care about them. This service enables families and communities to support to children and young people and help keep them safe.

The family group conferencing service collaborates closely with the fostering service to conduct regulation 24 assessments for family and friends with the goal of assisting families to obtain a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) wherever possible, as we feel passionately that children's cultural and identity needs are best met within their connected family.

Ref	Action <i>What we will do</i>	Action Owner	By when
3.1	Track the impact of the family group conferencing service to ensure it is effective in supporting children to stay at home or with their extended family whenever possible. Quarterly reports to be presented to the Sufficiency Board.	Principal Social Worker	Quarterly 2024-2027
3.2	Special Guardianship Order (SGO) service to be reviewed and integrated with family group conferences so families know what is involved.	Head of Service Early Help and Prevention	Consultation in February 2024



Pillar 4: Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care

Foster care

We had a modest rise in approved foster carers in 2022-23 compared to the previous year but this was significantly short of our annual target. Shortage in foster carers has led to seeking options outside Cheshire East, incurring high costs for independent fostering agencies or even the need to use residential provision.

Our existing foster carers are very skilled, committed and passionate, and the addition of two mockingbird constellations has enhanced stability and matching for children and young people. To address our goals under PACE we've collaborated with seven neighbouring local authorities, establishing a unique recruitment hub and marketing package for 2024, to attract new foster carers and enhance sufficiency in our fostering service.



What's going well:

- ✓ **Seven fostering families**, with a total of nearly **160 years' service**, were **presented with their Cheshire East long service award** at a special event in December 2023, demonstrating how committed and passionate our foster carers are.
- ✓ We have **125 children and young people living with Cheshire East mainstream foster carers** (86 fostering households).
- ✓ **92 children and young people are living with connected foster carers** - 69 are living with their extended family under an approved regulation 24 and a further 23 are living with their extended family who are waiting to be approved through our fostering panel.
- ✓ In total **217 (40.7%) children and young people are fostered with Cheshire East carers**.
- ✓ **62% cared for children are living in foster care** (including with both Cheshire East carers and independent fostering agencies).
- ✓ Cheshire East is part of a collaboration of eight local authorities that has secured over **£2.3million** in Department for Education (DfE) funding to transform fostering recruitment and retention across Cheshire and Merseyside. The funding will assist us to

recruit and retain more foster carers and improve placement sufficiency across the region.

- ✓ Our **Foster4 recruitment hub**, which will launch in April 2024, will help us to deliver a **more joined up approach to foster care recruitment** and provide an offer that is attractive and supportive to prospective carers.
- ✓ We have two **Mockingbird constellations**, with a further constellation on the way in early 2024. Mockingbird constellations offer foster carers and children and young people the additional support that families would receive through extended family members.
- ✓ We provided our foster carers with a **fee uplift in April 2023** and also increased the staying put fee. These fees will be kept under ongoing review in line with inflation.



What isn't working so well:

- ✗ **We need to increase the number of foster carers.** We have 118 children living with foster carers from independent fostering agencies, along with young people who are ready to live in foster care who are currently living in residential. Positively 27 of these children are living within Cheshire East which enables them to stay connected to their communities, and 137 children are long-term matched with their carers.
- ✗ **We need to make better use of our capacity.** We have mainstream fostering capacity for 184 children, **however 59 of those are not being used** (we are at 67% occupancy) due to a variety of reasons from ill health, matching difficulties, or family circumstances.
- ✗ **Engaging family networks is taking place too late** so some children need a mainstream foster carer when they potentially could have lived with someone they already know. Our new family group conferencing service will support us to work with family networks earlier.
- ✗ **We are not increasing the number of foster carers fast enough.** We had two new mainstream foster carers approved in 2021-22 and three in 2022-23. However, from April to December 2023 we recruited seven new foster carers and have five applicants going through an assessment which would take the yearly total to 12.
- ✗ **Lack of emergency or weekend carers** can often force unsuitable matching or unregulated providers to be considered.

Ref	Action <i>What we will do</i>	Action Owner	By when
4.1	Support good communication between the council and foster carers, and continue to review foster carer fees to effectively support and retain our carers and increase stability.	Head of Service for Fostering	Continual
4.2	Look to build a specialist foster carer offer (PACE foster carers) to support children and young people to move from residential into specialist foster care.	Head of Service for Fostering	2024-25
4.3	Work in partnership with the other local authorities to build our Foster4 offer, ensuring there is an effective front door to the fostering service and increasing the number of foster carers within Cheshire East.	Head of Service for Fostering Service Manager for Fostering	April 2024
4.4	Understand why our current foster care capacity isn't being fully utilised and aim to achieve 85% occupancy for this coming period.	Service Manager for Fostering/ Placements	February 2024
4.5	Develop our third mockingbird constellation to increase support for foster carers and children and young people in foster care.	Service Manager for Fostering	September 2024

4.6	Promote different kinds of foster care (e.g. respite, emergency, weekend/ half term carers) during our Foster4 recruitment.	Foster4	April 2024
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Residential Care

Currently, we have 42 children and young people living in residential children's homes. 21.4% of these are children and young people with disabilities.

Only 10 of the 42 children and young people live within Cheshire East. We know that living away from where they used to live can be difficult for children and young people and can significantly impact on contact with friends and family, education, and being part of a community. Placing children and young people away from the borough can also increase costs for the council. While the majority of the remaining 32 are on the borders of Cheshire East, there is a considerable sufficiency issue as the council doesn't have its own residential provision. To address this, plans are underway to establish three children's homes by April 2024 and an additional three by 2025. By April 2024 this will increase our sufficiency by 9 beds plus one emergency bed, but it still falls short of bringing all our children back to the borough.

Ongoing collaboration with private providers, whilst monitoring homes applying for change of use into children's homes, has begun to take place but needs more commitment to ensure we increase children's homes within our borough. Recruitment is underway for a placement service manager to spearhead these crucial conversations and to ensure private provider costs do not continue to increase outside of normal inflation.

What's going well:

- ✓ **Only 8% of our cared for children and young people live in a residential children's home.**
- ✓ **The children and young people who live in residential care are doing well** and these homes have given them stability and nurture.
- ✓ **No children and young people are in unregulated placements** (January 2024).
- ✓ **We are planning to open our own children's homes in Cheshire East** with the first home opening in early February 2024 and a further two opening by April 2024.
- ✓ We will be **recruiting a new placements service manager** to support work with private residential care providers.
- ✓ **Some children and young people have successfully moved from residential children's homes** to their families, to foster care, or to independence.



What isn't working so well:

- ✘ **Not having our own children's homes already**, forcing us to use external providers which is significantly driving up cost.
- ✘ **Low levels of availability for homes that can meet the needs of children with complex behavioural and mental health needs** that are affordable and sustainable.
- ✘ **Children's homes within the area are not prioritising Cheshire East children** to support them to stay within their communities.
- ✘ **Children and young people are remaining in residential care for too long** because the right home is not available for them to move to. We hope to see this improve as we implement our STRETCH programme and grow our PACE foster care offer, coupled with improvements in supported accommodation commissioning.
- ✘ **Lack of emergency provision.**
- ✘ **35.7% of our children and young people living in residential children's homes are under the age of 13** due to the lack of foster care sufficiency and specialist carers. This remains a focus area for us to work on.
- ✘ **Pressures with sufficiency for young adults** (aged 16 and over) **with complex needs** (learning difficulties, physical disabilities and mental health) who are not old enough for adult social care services, but there are very limited options for within children's residential care.

Ref	Action <i>What we will do</i>	Action Owner	By when
4.7	Open three Cheshire East Council residential children's homes before April 2024, which will include one emergency bed.	Head of Service Provision	April 2024
4.8	Appoint a placements manager to forge new relationships with both existing and new children's homes within the private sector and ensure there is regular quality assurance of homes.	Head of Service Provision	March 2024
4.9	Source new options in the market with a focus on supporting children with additional needs, mental health support beds (including block beds) and tight control of current provision costs.	Children's Commissioner Head of Service Provision	April 2024 and ongoing
4.10	Recruit residential staff for our new Cheshire East Council residential children's homes.	Residential Service Development Manager	March 2024
4.11	Deliver our new residential training programme, to include foster carers thinking of supporting the STRETCH programme.	Head of Service Provision Head of Service Cared for Children and Care Leavers	December 2024

4.12	Explore opening solo provisions as part of the council's residential children's home offer in 2024-25, in order to meet the more complex needs of our children who may not be suitable for foster care but cannot be matched easily in a group home.	Head of Service Provision	By 2025
4.13	Await the outcome of the regional care cooperative tender to ensure we are aligned with our statistical neighbours.	Head of Service Commissioning	April 2024



Supported Accommodation and Supported Lodgings for 16+ and Care Leavers

We have a strong support team for our care leavers and our offer includes supported independent living, supported lodgings with host families', dispersed properties with the offer of floating support, and staying put arrangements, but there is still much more than needs to be done.

We currently have 78 young people living in supported accommodation with the majority living in Cheshire East. It is important to note that a number of our young people want to live outside Cheshire East, for example to live in a larger city where there might be greater job opportunities, or where they have extended family.

	In Cheshire East	Outside Cheshire East	Total
Supported Accommodation	53	25	78



What's going well:

- ✓ **Young people are well supported by our strong care leavers team.** We are in touch with 98% of our care leavers (aged 17-21, as at 2 January 2024).
- ✓ **Commissioned YMCA provision** in the south of Crewe is working well and continues to **provide safe, quality accommodation** for our cared for young people aged 16 and over. This provides two emergency beds, three supported accommodation beds and 16 dispersed properties in the community.
- ✓ **Commissioned provision Watermill House (P3)** in the north of Macclesfield, consisting of one emergency bed, five supported beds, and two dispersed properties. We continue to maximise this commission and are due to review an expansion of this contract.
- ✓ **We have a commission with Forum Housing for a contract of 10 hosts** to support our young people who need more care and support with moving forward with their independence.
- ✓ **For the last four years, more of our young people have stayed put with their foster carers,** higher than our local statistical neighbours and the England average for 18-20 years olds (apart from a slight dip in 2022-23 for 18 year olds, appendix 3).

What isn't working so well:

- ✗ **We are not maximising our commission with Forum Housing** and we need to raise awareness of this supported lodging service.
- ✗ **Our supported accommodation providers are increasingly uplifting their costs,** predominantly due to the recent requirement to register with Ofsted, which means that in some cases the cost is nearing that of residential care.
- ✗ Since our supported accommodation providers have needed to register with Ofsted, **we have seen providers become nervous about the amount of support they can offer as they fear this may be deemed as 'care'.** We have begun working with the National Association of Supported Accommodation Providers (NASAP) to outline the difference and ensure our care plans and placement requests are clear.

Ref	Action <i>What we will do</i>	Action Owner	By when
4.14	Lead on securing more provision that meets a diverse range of needs, while managing existing providers' cost expectations.	Children's Commissioner	Throughout 2024-25
4.15	Work with Cheshire Homechoice to increase the number of individual tenancies.	Children's Commissioner	Throughout 2024-25
4.16	Tender for 16+ and care leavers accommodation.	Children's Commissioner	2024

Staying Put / Staying Close

Staying put allows our young people to remain with their foster carers until the age of 21 and it is still one of the best ways in which they can achieve permanence and stability as they enter adulthood. Whilst our current figure of 33 young people staying put represents an increase from last year, applying the DfE national averages to our population of 18, 19 and 20 year old care leavers shows that we still have more to do in this area.

A survey conducted in November 2023 of our staying put arrangements enabled us to hear from our carers and we increased our staying put fees in line with our foster fee increase.

Earlier this year we were successful in applying for DfE funding for staying close. Staying close mirrors the staying put offer for young



people who have either lived in residential care or in 16+ accommodation. It will mean that in each of the first two years, 25 of our most vulnerable care leavers will receive the additional support and stability that they need. We have recruited our staying close team and launched staying close from January 2024. This offer will support us in our sufficiency by supporting young people leaving residential care with their independence, education, employment and training, accommodation, and emotional wellbeing.

Ref	Action <i>What we will do</i>	Action Owner	By when
4.17	Implement changes in response to the feedback from the staying put survey carried out in November 2023.	Fostering Service Manager	September 2024
4.18	Increase awareness of staying put through improved information to foster carers and through collaboration at Ignition Panel.	Fostering Service Manager Care Leavers Team Manager	Throughout 2024
4.19	Continue to grow our staying close service and evaluate the impact of this offer, providing regular updates to the sufficiency strategy board.	Care Leavers Service Manager	2024-25
4.20	Secure staying close accommodation for young people aged 18+.	Care Leavers Service Manager	February 2024

Children with Disabilities and Short Breaks

The council's children with disabilities social work team is currently working alongside 147 children and their families, ensuring their needs are met and providing necessary support. 125 of our children and young people are subject to ongoing assessment or child in need plans delivering specific support. The remaining 22 children are cared for.

As part of our efforts to recruit new foster carers for children and young people with diverse needs, we intend to leverage our marketing resources to enhance short break availability. Presently, we sporadically procure short breaks, leading to notable delays and increased costs, compounded by breaks often being located outside the area, escalating transport expenses. Upholding our commitment to keeping children local, we aim to collaborate with nearby providers to reassess our short breaks offer, empowering families to have more choices to navigate the challenges posed by a dynamic landscape.



We know we need to improve transition between children's services and adult services for young people with disabilities and will be developing a transitions strategy to support us to do this.

Ref	Action <i>What we will do</i>	Action Owner	By when
4.21	Review our current short breaks packages and look to source new local provision to increase our offer and choice.	Children's Commissioner	March 2024
4.22	Foster4 marketing to focus on attracting new foster carers who might be able to offer full time or short break care.	Foster4	June 2024
4.23	Establish a formal contract with Cheshire West and Chester Council to gain access to Pine Wood for Cheshire East families.	Children's Commissioner	August 2024
4.24	Cost and scope the opening of a Cheshire East Council children's residential home for children with additional needs.	Head of Service Provision	2025-26
4.25	Develop a strategy to improve transitions between children's, health and adult services.	Service Manager Child in Need and Child Protection /CWD	March 2024

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

In the past year (2023), our population of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) has grown at a significantly faster rate than anyone could have predicted. Since 2016 when we started this work in earnest, our cohort has grown to over 120 unaccompanied young people, either as cared for children or care leavers. There is naturally a growing impact on placement sufficiency and options for our UASC remain very limited. Each council in the North West regional strategic migration partnership is reporting that they are frequently struggling to find placements, particularly in foster care, and that supported accommodation often lacks the 'care' that these young people need having experienced such trauma.

Three significant factors have led to this dramatic increase:

- Improved security at the lorry and rail hubs in the French ports caused the people traffickers who organise this activity to switch their operations to the small boat crossings that now dominate much of the news agenda; as a result, many more asylum seekers have been able to cross the Channel than in previous years.
- The voluntary National Transfer Scheme rota (NTS), which was introduced in July 2021, did not work as intended; to address this in November of 2023 legislation which already existed within the Immigration Act 2016 was enacted to make participation in the NTS mandatory.

- Delays at virtually every stage of the immigration process mean that the Home Office must house large numbers of asylum seekers in hotels across the country, four of which are now located in Cheshire East and in which this summer, capacity was doubled overnight. Frequently, young people who are either clearly under 18, or who are within the borderline 17-20 age range (in which definitive age assessment is virtually impossible) are transferred to these hotels in error, and then subsequently become our responsibility under the Children Act 1989. In the calendar year so far, approximately three times as many young people have been admitted via this route than have been referred in via the NTS.

We could not have forecast the impact that Home Office hotels have had on our placement sufficiency, but to respond swiftly to this increase we are issuing a new tender to significantly expand the number of commissioned beds that we have in the borough, both for UASC and for the increasing numbers of our young people who struggle to live independently at 18 and above; this will include our new staying close project.

The disproportionate impact of Home Office hotels can be seen in our 2023 figures: in the calendar year, we received 86 referrals relating to 75 asylum-seeking individuals; of these, one was a spontaneous presentation on the M6, 10 young people came into our care via the National Transfer Scheme, 32 were admitted via the hotels while in a similar number of other cases, we rejected claimants as adults.

What's going well:

- ✓ **We currently have an excellent, highly trained team working to ensure our UASC receive the best support once they arrive in Cheshire East.**
- ✓ **We have recruited two mainstream foster carers who specialise in supporting unaccompanied children**, a number of our existing foster carers have also supported our UASC, and our independent fostering agencies are working collaboratively with us to ensure we match our children.

What isn't working so well:

- ✗ **Commission of new services to support our accommodation offer for UASC.**
- ✗ **We need more foster carers to support our UASC who are under 16.**

Ref	Action <i>What we will do</i>	Action Owner	By when
4.26	Commission a new tender to support our unaccompanied children and young people.	Children's Commissioner	September 2024
4.27	Work with our Foster4 collaborative to raise the profile of fostering our UASC.	Foster4	April 2024
4.28	Ensure our existing providers are upskilling their staff to meet the needs of all our children and young people, with a focus on UASC.	Placements Manager	April 2024



Pillar 5: A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one

Workforce stability is a key component of providing good quality support to families. We know that having a consistent social worker allows children, young people and families to build a trusting relationship which enables change and confidence.

Cheshire East has a strong, qualified workforce which, like other local authorities', can fluctuate at times, but for the most part remains stable. Whilst there has been a need to use agency staff at times to cover sickness and vacancies within some teams, we have had a consistent leadership team driving forward our vision and leading to greater sufficiency within the workforce.

We continue to demonstrate our commitment to our workforce by offering a comprehensive training pathway which strengthens the support we offer to children, young people, and families. We are extremely proud of our offer and recently embarked on a restorative practice model to assist us in putting relationships at the heart of everything we do.

To support our workforce to grow and develop and be sustainable long-term we have embarked on an ambitious apprenticeship training programme for those who want to become social workers, offering the opportunity to internal as well as external candidates. By using this model, we are able to 'grow our own' practitioners,

encouraging and fostering the values that we are proud to hold. Our apprentices work within our teams and study at our local universities to learn what it is to be a social worker and what qualities are required. We began our apprenticeship journey in 2020 and since that time have welcomed 22 practitioners onto the programme with six qualifying and taking up social work positions in our frontline teams.

Our integration of early help and children's social care has seen a reduction in social workers' caseloads, as work with families is starting earlier wherever possible. This reduction supports social workers to have time to develop more meaningful and impactful relationships with our children and their families, allowing for permanence to be achieved quicker, adding to our improved efficiency.

Pillar 6: A system that continuously learns and improves, and makes better use of evidence and data

We want to continually improve the support we offer to children, young people and families. We regularly evaluate what is working well and where we need to improve to drive developments. Three examples of improvements we have achieved in 2023 include improved timeliness of assessments which improved to 94% in October 2023, a reduction in the number of cared for children, and improved quality of practice as shown through our audits with more cases judged to be good quality.

Cheshire East has a business intelligence team that supports the collection and analysis of our data. We use a system called LiquidLogic that enables us to keep information about children and families safe and secure. A tool (Power BI) enables leaders and managers to view data and trends at any time to monitor performance and evaluate outcomes for children and young people. Managers hold weekly performance clinics to review performance with their teams and ensure visits, assessments and plans are completed within timescales. This supports us to be responsive to any issues as they emerge.

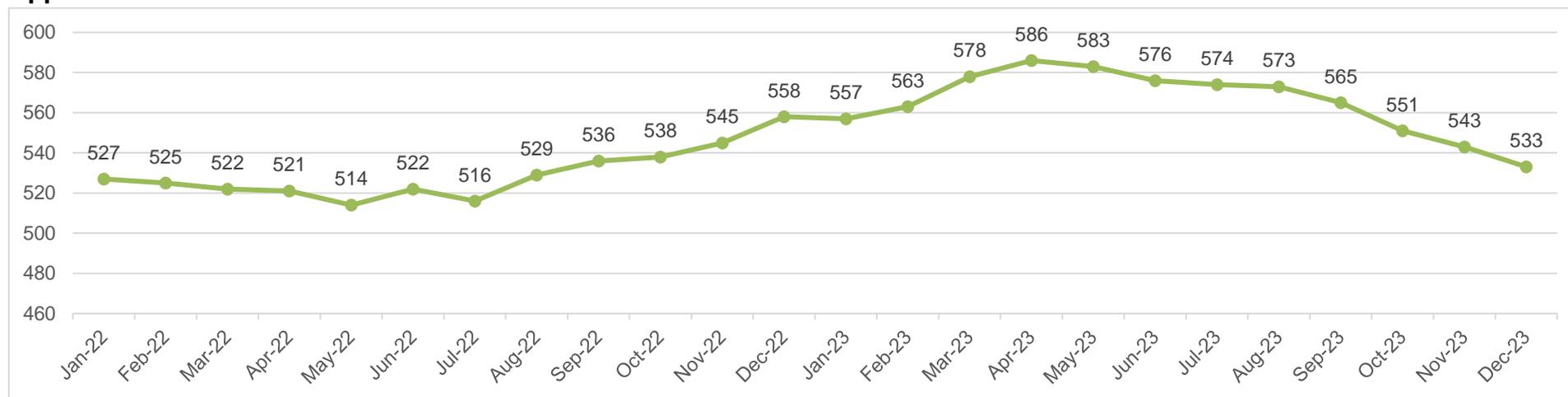
At the end of 2023 we launched a new quality assurance framework which includes monthly audits so we have an up to date picture on the quality of practice across our teams. We better understand how our involvement feels for families, and its impact, through the inclusion of visits to the family by the auditor and social worker as part of our audit process.

We are ambitious for children and are working on a number of service development projects to improve the support we offer including family hubs, embedding the restorative practice model, staying close, work with the sector led improvement programme on improving contextual safeguarding and care leaver services, and a regional project on social work recruitment.



Appendices

Appendix 1: Number of cared for children in Cheshire East from 2022-2023



Appendix 2: Legal status of cared for children in Cheshire East

Age band	Interim Care Order	Full Care Order	Section 20	Placement Order granted	Emergency Protection Order	Police Protection in local authority accommodation	Remand/ trial/ sentence Local authority accommodation	Total
0 to 4	53	34	6	25	0	0	0	118 (22%)
5 to 10	15	63	7	7	0	0	0	92 (17%)
11 to 15	13	129	17	0	0	0	0	159 (30%)
16+	0	81	83	0	0	0	0	164 (31%)
Total	81 (15%)	307 (58%)	113 (21%)	32 (6%)	0	0	0	533

Appendix 3: Care leavers remaining with foster carers as of 2 January 2024

Remain with former foster carer

