

Croydon Children Looked After and Care Experienced Adults Sufficiency Strategy 2024-27

Introduction

For most children and young people, the best place for them to thrive, develop and meet their potential is with their family and this is one of the founding principles of the Practice Framework for Children's Social Care (CSC) in Croydon. However, we understand in some instances where there isn't enough safety in the child's family, it may be necessary for them to come into care either for a short period, or on a long-term basis.

When a child comes into our care the Local Authority becomes the "Corporate Parent". Like any good parent, we want our children to grow up in an environment where they are happy, healthy, secure, well cared for and loved, enjoying good relationships, doing well at school and having opportunities to develop their interests and talents so they grow up confident about themselves and their future. The quality, stability and location of their home strongly relates to children and young people doing well in and beyond care. We want children in our care to live

We take our Corporate Parenting role very seriously and through our Corporate Parenting Board we set out how we aspire to be the best parents we can be. Our Corporate Parenting Strategy (2023) set out our pledges to children in care and care experienced adults in Croydon alongside our strategic priorities:

Pledge 4

We will provide you with a place to live that is safe and happy for you.

This sufficiency strategy for children in our care and care experienced adults sets out what we will do to realise these ambitions and it has been developed in consultation with service leads, external providers, and most importantly our care experienced children and young people.

Strategic Priority 3: Permanence, Stability

Croydon Council and partners will work together to secure children's futures with their families wherever possible. When they cannot live with their parents, we will secure the best plan to meet their needs in their timescales. Wherever possible children and young people will experience their home and care in the borough of Croydon. When this is not possible it will be important to ensure that every effort is made to maintain and support links with family, significant others, and community.

We will create stability, care, and love in the lives of the children and young people we care for. We will listen to children and young people and incorporate their views and wishes into their plans and lived experiences.

We will continue to develop our policy framework to ensure that we deliver a coherent approach across the system.

The legal framework

The Sufficiency Duty, Section 22G 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 are 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').

The statutory guidance of securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children states: *Having the right placement in the right place, at the right time, is a vital factor in improving placement stability, which in turn is a critical success factor in relation to better outcomes for looked after children.*

The National Context

Recent studies by Local Government Association, Competitions and Markets Authority and the Independent Review of Children's Social Care have concluded that the national picture for commissioning placements is deeply flawed. The reduction in Councils' direct provision aligned to the growth of the "for profit" independent sector has created a situation in which demand for homes outstrips supply, and the available supply does not support children's needs either in terms of location or the ability to match suitable care to children's needs. DfE have set up a Market Interventions Advisory Group to look into the costs associated with Children's care. Ofsted have also produced a report on ownership.

Recommendations from each of these bodies has led to regulatory change and the development of different approaches to solving the problem. These include the creation of Regional Hubs to recruit Local Authority foster carers alongside Regional Commissioning Cooperatives, and in London a Pan-London Vehicle currently working to deliver a Secure Children's Home. It is too early to judge the impact of these initiatives, but it is important for local commissioners to keep abreast of and make good use of any national and regional opportunities that increase success in providing stable, loving homes for children.

90,000 Under 18s
Highest in London
(ONS Census 2021)

Age banding
(ONS Census 2021)

Age Band	Population
0 to 4	~24,000
5 to 9	~23,000
10 to 14	~25,000
15 to 17	~10,000

48.5% of live births
in Croydon to
mothers born
outside UK
(ONS 2021)

63.6% 0-24 Yr Olds
Non-White
Ethnicity
(ONS 2021 Census)

153 Schools
5 LA Maintained Nursery
86 Primary (28 LA, 58 Academy)
25 Secondary (4 LA, 21 Academy)
9 Special (5 LA, 4 Academy)
2 Alternative Provision (1 LA, 1 Academy)
26 Independent
(Jan 24 School Census)

65,470 pupils
(Jan 24 School Census)

4,556 Pupils with EHC plan
(DfE 2024)

12,300 Children (u16) living
in families with relative low
income
(DWP 22/23)

457 YP NEET
(or Not Known)
(DfE 2023)

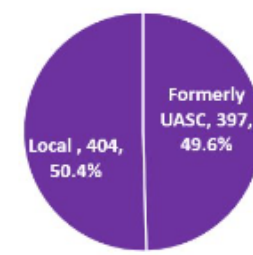
204 per 100,000
Juvenile First Time
Entrants – Youth Justice
(MoJ 2023)

No of contacts requesting Children's Social Care (2022/23)	9,069	C&F Assessments Completed (2022/23)	4,921	Children In Need (Open Referrals - Aug 2024)	4,252	Child in Need Plan (not CWD - Aug 2024)	810	Child Protection Plan (Aug 2024)	663
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Location	Count	Percentage
Local	427	82.4%
UASC	91	17.6%

2022/23	Croydon	Stat Neighbours	London	England
CLA - Rate per 10,000	59	57	51	71
Local CLA - Rate per 10,000	47	50	44	64

Care Experienced
801
(Aug 2024)



What do we know about our children in care

1. Numbers of children in our care

Over the past five years the number of children in Croydon's care has fallen significantly as can be seen from the chart below. Work we have done under the umbrella of the CSC improvement and transformation programme has reduced the numbers of local children needing to come into care. At the same time the number of unaccompanied and separated children seeking asylum has also fallen from what was historically one of the highest in the country because of the Asylum Intake Unit at Lunar House in the borough. Unaccompanied children currently make up around 19% of all Croydon's care population, down from 34% in 2021. Changes in overland routes for those seeking asylum and the introduction of a mandatory transfer scheme in November 2021 have contributed to this reduction. In contrast, nationally there has been a significant increase in this cohort of children, up by 29% in 2023 following the 37% increase in 2022 (DFE statistical release Nov 23). A significant proportion of our current care experienced adults were formerly unaccompanied children as the previously larger cohort of children progresses to leave our care.

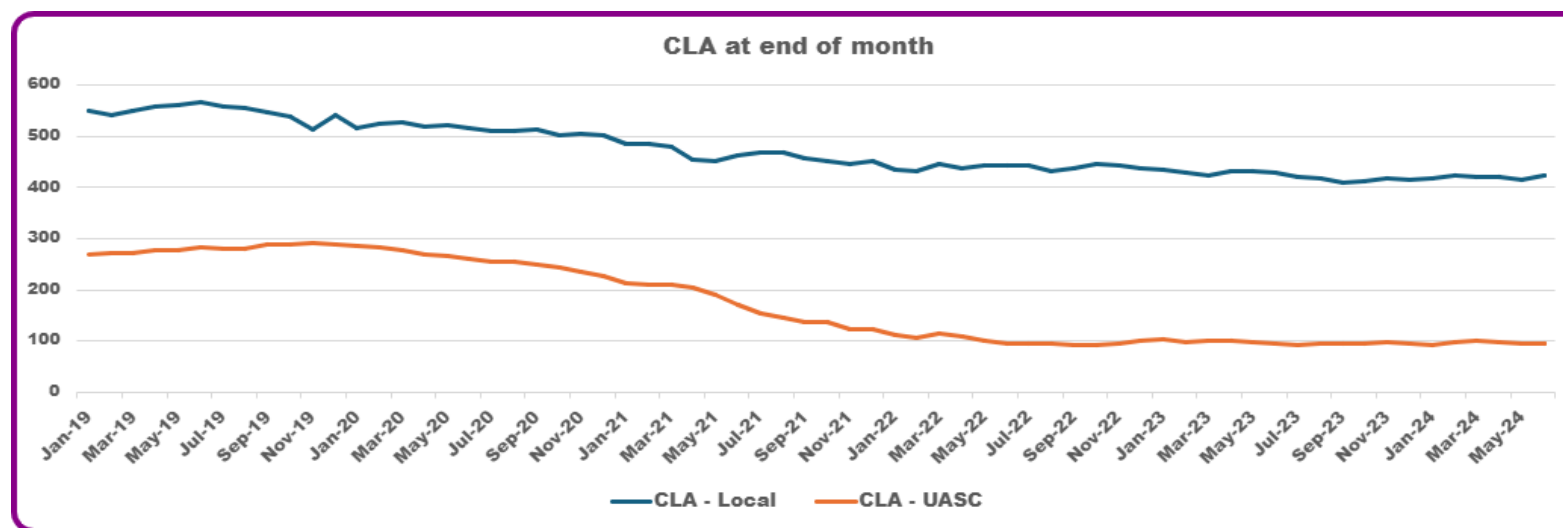


Chart 1

The local market of homes for children will have been affected by the reduced numbers of unaccompanied children. Some independent fostering agencies (IFAs) in the borough specialise in providing homes for these children. The reduction provides the opportunity to increase the supply of local homes for children in family-based settings by accessing this capacity for Croydon children.

2. Rate of children in care

Croydon has one of the largest child populations in London, so it follows that our numbers of children in care and care experienced adults will also be high. To compare ourselves against other Local Authorities the rate of children in care per 10,000 of the child population as of 31st March is the national

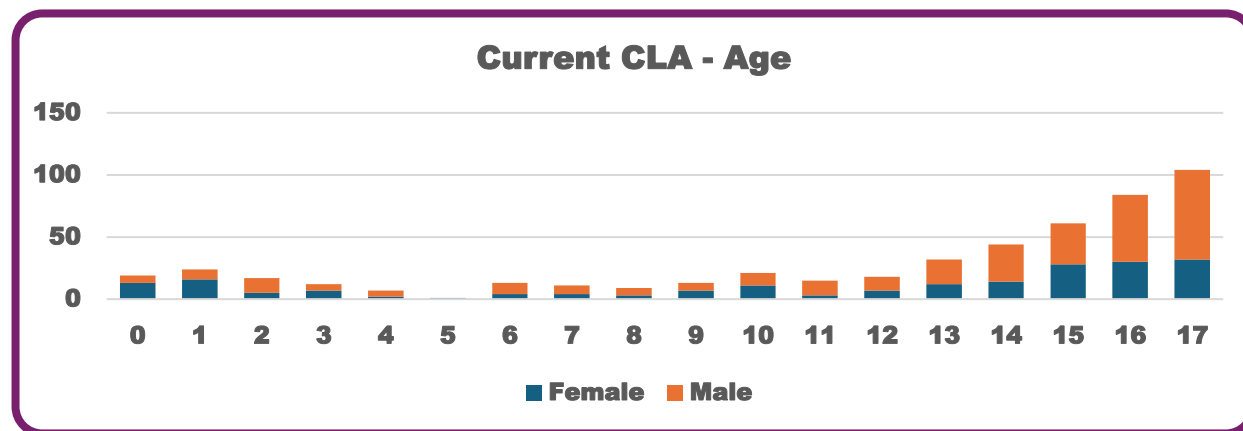
comparative measure and this needs to be read alongside the numbers of children in our care. We need to be assured as a local system that we have the right children in our care compared to regional and national rates and for similar local authorities, our statistical neighbours. The table below is the annual data published by the DFE for all children, including unaccompanied and separated children seeking asylum.

LA/area	Rate per 10,000 child population					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Croydon	81	89	86	75	60	59
London	49	52	52	50	52	51
England	64	65	67	67	70	71
Statistical neighbours	55	55	54	54	57	57

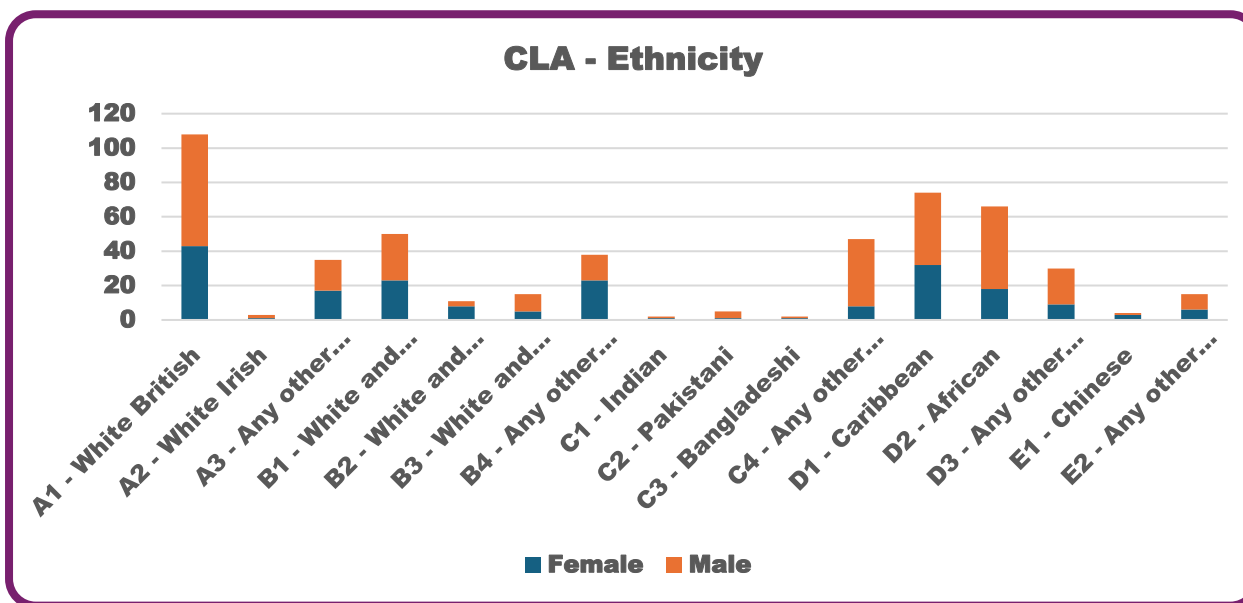
Table 1

The impact of our whole-system work to enable more children to live safely at home with their families can be seen from the comparisons above, where rates across London, England and our statistical neighbours have increased in the same period. A significant contributory factor nationally is the increase in unaccompanied children in care, however data indicates that this is not the case across London, where not all Local Authorities care for the same proportion of unaccompanied children as Croydon.

3. Age, gender and ethnicity



There are more older children in our care, and overall, more boys than girls (61%) particularly in the older age range which reflects the gender split of unaccompanied children who are predominantly boys. Pan-London arrangements mean that Croydon accepts children aged 14 and above who arrive at Lunar House which has a disproportionate impact. The gender representation for local children is more evenly balanced.



For most children and young people in our care the ethnicity breakdown reflects our wider population. Those from Caribbean backgrounds are disproportionately represented in our Looked After population; a 7.5%pt higher proportion than of our population overall. Young people from 'Other Asian' backgrounds are also disproportionately represented. This particularly reflects older young people. 39 of the 55 children and young people from 'Other Asian' backgrounds Looked After by

Charts 2 and 3

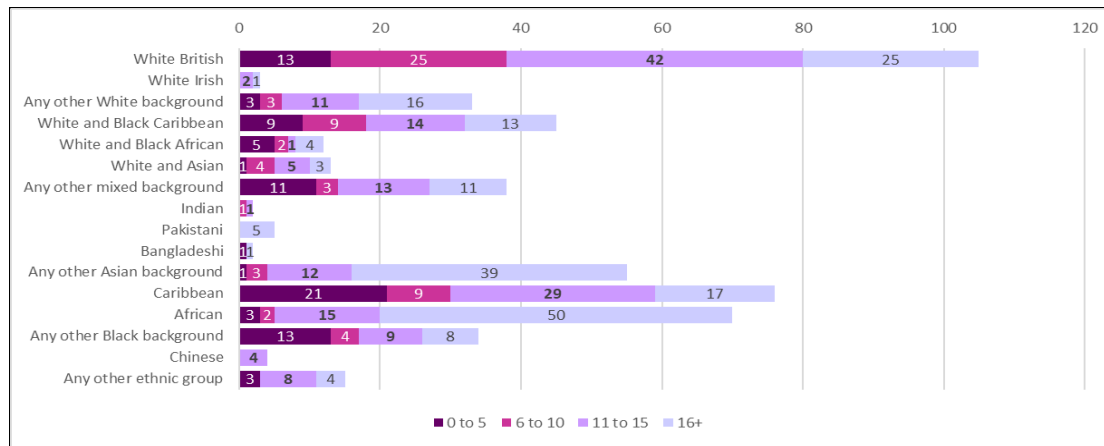


Chart 4: Ethnicity Profile of Children Looked After by Croydon, by Age Band

(Source: Croydon Council local data, June 2024)

Where do our children live?

1. Types of homes

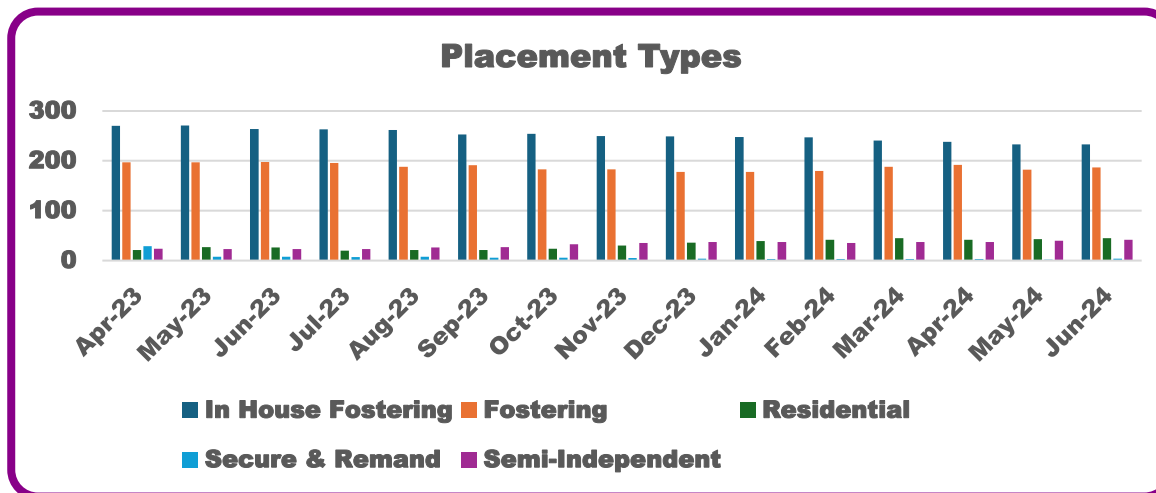
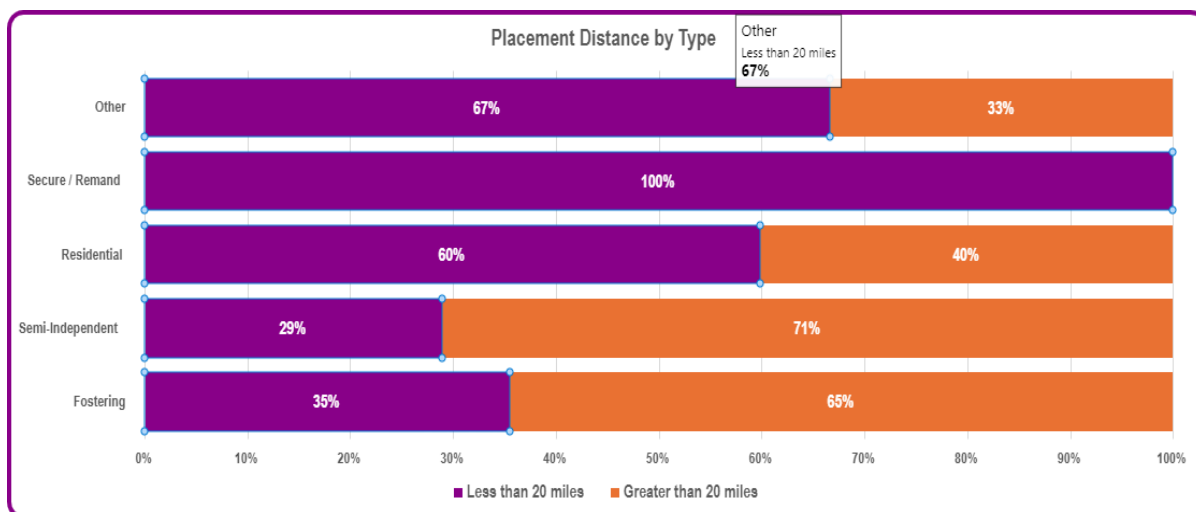


Chart 5

In the period since the last Sufficiency Strategy the placements market has changed causing movement in the homes Croydon children live in. The chart above shows the range of homes Croydon finds for its children and how this has changed over the past year. Croydon remain above both statistical neighbours and all of England for children living in foster care however the overall proportion has reduced from 84% to 78% in June 2024 reflecting a decline in the number of Croydon approved carers. This needs to be set alongside a national reduction estimated by Fostering Network to be around 1000 fostering families per year. The aim of our sufficiency strategy must be to reverse this decline so that more children are able to live in family homes where this is the right outcome for them.

Our use of residential homes, both registered children's homes and semi-independent or supported homes which may be in the process of registering with the regulator, Ofsted, has slowly but steadily increased over the past year. For example, in June 2023 23 children lived in semi-independent accommodation and 26 in residential children's homes. In June 2024 these had risen to 42 and 45 children respectively. The potential impacts are for children are an increased likelihood of loving further away from their family, friends, school and community. For the local authority the financial impact has been substantial, with the cost of the 10% of the care population in these types of homes accounting for almost 75% of the budget for placements.

2. Distance from home



In July 2024 79% of children were living within 20 miles of their home, a slight reduction on 82% in July 2023. We want children in our care to be able to maintain strong links with their families, friends and communities, to attend the same schools and safely return home with the support of their local networks. Drilling down into how distance varies by the type of home, more in-borough registered and regulated supported living arrangements are needed. It is also interesting to note percentage of foster carers living more than 20 miles from the borough, which also needs attention. Working with providers to establish more good quality homes closer to the borough will be an area to explore and develop when implementing this strategy

Care experienced adults

1. Strategic framework

One of the recommendations of the Inspecting Local Authorities' Children's Services (ILACS) inspection in 2020 was to improve services for care leavers, particularly the range of suitable accommodation, responses to emotional health needs and preparation for independence. Croydon needed to step up in its role as the corporate parent and grandparent for care experienced young people.

A Croydon Care Experienced Young People Strategy 2023-25 was published alongside the Corporate Parenting Strategy in October 2023, followed by a joint Children's Social Care and Housing Protocol for Care Experienced Young People in June 2024. Informed by our own self-assessment and by feedback from children and young people about the services and approach they want to support their needs and to realise their ambitions, the Care Experienced Young People Strategy identifies where young people live as a priority focus area for the next three years:

Priority Focus Area:

Creating diverse and quality homes for Care Experienced young people. Providing a range of support to develop life skills, promote wellbeing and support the integration of young people into communities. Driving a sense of belonging and stability for young people

The protocol between CSC and Housing services covers arrangements for care experienced young people in the transition to independent living and sets out how the services will work together to assess housing options and support care experienced young people into appropriate accommodation. It also seeks to proactively identify young people at risk of homelessness, act to prevent this and where young people do become homeless make a swift, safe and integrated response.

2. Care experienced adults' accommodation

In parallel to the strategy development there has been a strong focus on expanding the affordable accommodation options for our Care Experienced Adults. Working jointly with our colleagues in Croydon Housing and a range of other partners, several initiatives are in place. In the voluntary sector we have refreshed our contract with providers such as CAYSH to make rented accommodation available. Collaborative work across CSC and Housing has led to an improved Housing Panel process for Care Experienced Adults to access longer term rented accommodation.

Young people successfully pitched to elected members and senior council officers for Croydon to join [The House Project](#) which was co-designed with young people from the start and works on cooperative principles through which adults and young people in and leaving care work together to create their first homes, build a long-term community of support and develop pathways into education, employment and training.

Persistent collaboration across Directorates is keeping the council's corporate parenting responsibilities high on the agenda. Membership of the Housing Regeneration Board for example is identifying medium to long term opportunities to create good quality homes for young people as part of Croydon's regeneration plans.

This is ongoing work that is at the heart of Croydon's CSC corporate parenting transformation journey. From June 2024 our strategic delivery partner is bringing expert capacity across a range of disciplines to this work.

Children living in the borough placed by other local authorities

Significant numbers of children in the care of other local authorities live in Croydon, as can be seen from the chart below:

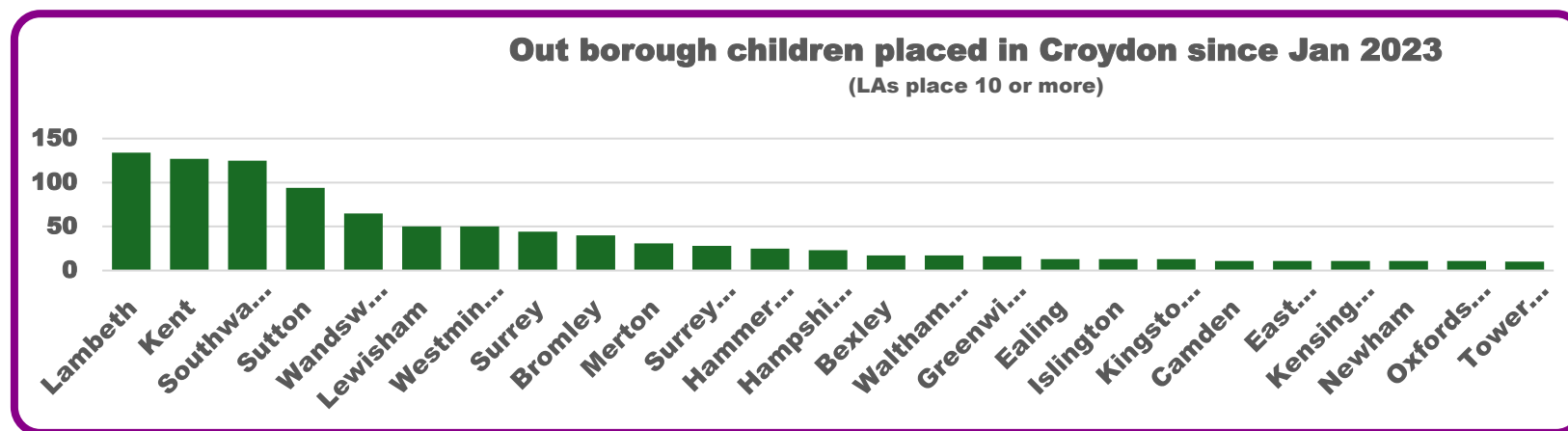


Chart 6

There are a number of factors that contribute to this:

- Croydon's size as a borough which means there are more providers of homes located in the borough compared to smaller councils.
- More available housing at lower cost compared to both inner London and councils further to the South-East and South-West of Croydon.
- Good transport links by rail and road.
- A long-established provider market, particularly in the independent fostering sector. Many of these specialised in providing care and support for unaccompanied and separated children.

Our analysis shows that the numbers of children placed each month over the past year by other local authorities far exceeds that placed by Croydon, leading to more out-borough children living in in-borough homes. On average 63 children from other boroughs were placed each month compared to 21 for Croydon's children.

The numbers of children from other local authorities placed in Croydon impacts directly on our ambition for children in our care to live close to their family, friends and communities and retain strong consistent links to these. It also puts a strain on services for children in Croydon, for example our health partners report that 75% of the children in care waiting for child and adolescent mental health services are from other boroughs. Our schools have over 1000 children in care from other boroughs on roll. For all of the same reasons we do not wish Croydon children to be placed far away, we know that the experience for children placed in Croydon by other Local Authorities will be that they are more vulnerable to exploitation, unhappy not to be close to friends and family, and

likely to have had to change school or college when they moved here. They may go missing more frequently or become involved in activities which do not support their positive development.

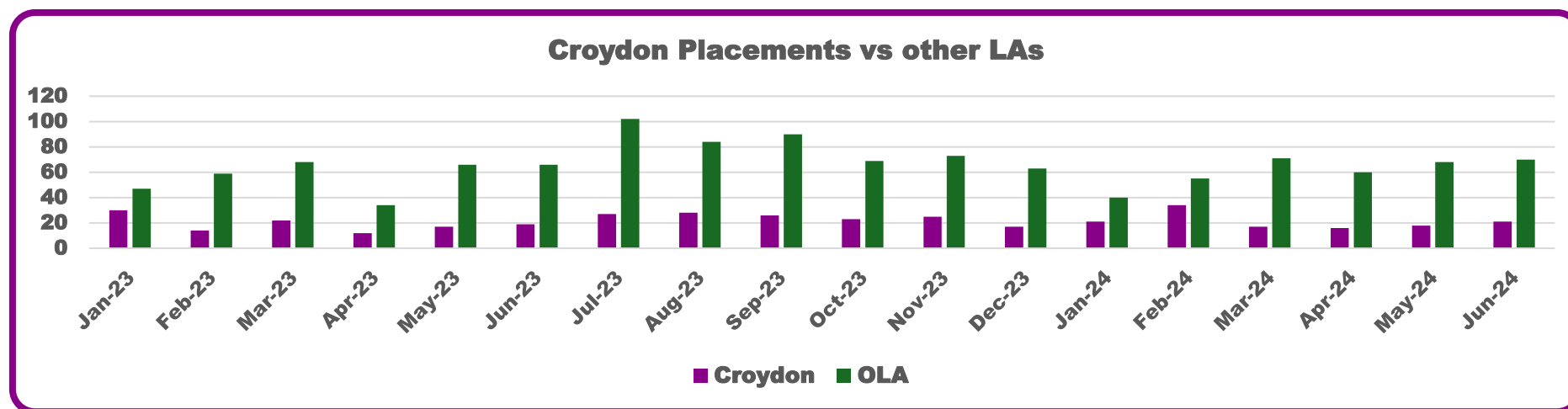


Chart 7

Whilst we have little control over other boroughs' decisions, we do have influence through professional communities of practice including the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), the London ADCS group and across councils at Chief Executive and elected Leaders levels. This challenge for Croydon isn't just for homes for children in care, it also affects the availability of temporary and emergency accommodation and access to care bed spaces for adults for example. With a new focus on ensuring that all children in our borough are safe we will improve our communication with placing Authorities to ensure that they understand the safeguarding concerns that may impact on their children. We will ensure that a whole-council approach to addressing these challenges prioritises children's homes, as corporate parents.

What have our children and young people told us?

Our Care Experienced Young People they told us what they want from a home:

- A good clean space
- A home that is safe
- A safe neighbourhood
- Stress free and peaceful
- Knowing my bills are paid.
- Being able to talk to someone directly about housing and not through the housing association.
- Smoothness when moving out of foster care
- A plan in place that I know about at least 6 months in advance before I move.

- Conversations with me about expectations from about 15/16

They also told us that they have concerns that they don't:

- Get to choose where we live
- We haven't got white goods when we move in.
- Sometimes where we move to is far from our families, work or school and college.
- Travelling is sometimes difficult and costs a lot

This is important feedback that will shape our sufficiency workstreams. As our participation and engagement work develops, we will ensure there are regular, authentic opportunities for younger children as well as those who are older with care experience to tell us about their experiences of the homes we provide for them

Our placement sufficiency strategy ambitions

Taking all the information, data, and feedback into account, we have eight ambitions to meet our sufficiency duty for the children and care experienced young adults in Croydon.

Prevention

Keep more children and young people safely at home with their families and avoid the need to come into or stay in care unnecessarily.

Homes for Care Experienced Adults

Develop a continuum of suitable local supported and independent housing options for care experienced adults to meet a broad range of needs. Ensuring timely transitions and securing tenancies that offer long term stability.

Family & Friends Care

When children and young people cannot remain safely living at home support more of them to be able to live within their own extended network of family and friends.

Placement planning & stability

Improve placement matching, to provide children in care with the best placement options to meet their needs, keep them safe, and provide them with stability and opportunities to reach their potential.

Foster Carers

Increase the pool and diversity of in-house local foster carers, so more children and young people in care can live in stable family-based homes that help keep them connected to families, friends and communities.

Systems & Data

Develop efficient systems & processes to:

- Understand the drivers for our care population, identifying and challenging disproportionality
- streamline processes and procedures
- develop and report reliable activity and performance data to inform a dynamic approach to sufficiency planning
- underpin strong financial management.

Permanence Planning

Early and timely permanence planning, so that children and young people only remain in care for as long as they need to and have the security of knowing where they will live and who will be looking after them

Commissioning homes for children

Commission a broad range of regulated placements which are of good quality, are closer to children's families, friends and communities and offer value for money to Croydon by expanding the use of our abundance of local providers

1. Commissioning homes for children

Our ambition

We will commission a broad range of regulated placements which are of good quality, are closer to children’s families, friends and communities and offer value for money to Croydon by expanding the use of our abundance of local providers

Where we are now: Croydon commissions independent fostering agency homes, residential and semi-independent care from an approved provider framework (APPA) or a Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS). Both of these frameworks are due for refresh in 2025 which provides an ideal opportunity to improve the range and quality of local providers commissioned under framework agreements. Market engagement activities that build relationships with local providers of care and reaches out to new ones, establishes shared priorities and ways of working that supports providers who share our commitment to achieving the best outcomes for children will all be explored to make Croydon the commissioner of choice for the plentiful supply of local provision. We will develop a ‘Croydon First’ approach to make the benefits of committing to Croydon open and transparent for providers, for the Council, and most importantly for children and young people.



18 in residential care children placed nationwide. Average age 14yrs 9m.



Independent residential homes in-borough within Croydon children placed

The borough is overrepresented with children’s homes. With 4.5 times as many beds as Children’s Social Care require.

In addition, the availability, location, specification and quality of these homes makes them difficult to place our children with, so we only have 3 young people placed in these homes at present.



Independent residential homes in borough

Croydon currently has no in-house residential provision and is entirely reliant on the private sector. There is a lot of local provision as can be seen in the maps above, and as set out above we want to develop a Croydon First approach with some of these in-borough providers.

Following a successful bid for DFE capital we are opening a small children’s home in the borough with a commissioned provider which will be operational by May 2025. As well as adding local, expert care our modelling shows that in 3-4 years the investment made in setting up the service will be repaid, and the

overall costs of care will begin to fall. We want to explore further opportunities to create new homes in Croydon for children in our care and for care experienced adults, weighing up the options to get the best value as well as the best outcomes for our children and young people.

Key challenges

As a result of the supply challenge our high-cost provision is spot purchased, often unregistered and so unregulated and at some distance from the borough. We want to commission regulated provision and are working with local providers to support applications to register with Ofsted whilst also quality assuring unregulated settings. Honest commissioning conversations will be needed to build trust and relationships across our borough and incentives devised to encourage registration.

There is increasing competition for limited places and market forces are driving up the costs. We are finding it increasingly challenging to find providers who are willing to accept and work to reduce the risks that some of our children are living with. This is leading to increasing numbers of children temporarily placed in unregistered homes the costs of which can be extraordinarily high. Budget pressures are further compounded by an absence of effective mechanisms to agree joint funding of complex placements across Children's Social Care, Education and Health services.

Homefinding officers have not routinely challenged the support and care provided to children to ensure that services commissioned are being received by children. Staff are being trained in the use of Care Cubed, a secure online care costing tool that supports open and transparent negotiation of cost of care placements. This aims to improve Homefinders' negotiating skills to better hold providers to account. We have introduced a Best Value Panel that reviews all children in unregulated and high-cost homes every week. Taken together these are driving down costs by only paying for the support children receive and keeping the focus on registered and regulated provision for all children.

Measures of success

- Evidence of robust negotiation with providers of homes for our children to get better value for the Croydon pound
- Measurable reduction in placement spends
- More children live in homes in Croydon or within 20 miles of the borough
- Fewer children living in unregistered and unregulated settings
- Children's Needs are expressed better using Valuing Care approach

2. Prevention

Our ambition

Keep more children and young people safely at home with their families and avoid the need to come into or stay in care unnecessarily.

Where are we now

Our Children's Social Care Practice Framework has a founding principle that for most children and young people the best place for them to thrive, develop and meet their potential is with their family. Our Families Together team works systemically with families of children in the edge of care to make this a reality and the overall trend of fewer numbers of children coming into our care can be clearly seen from the chart below. Our quality assurance framework systematically tests our decisions on thresholds to provide assurance that we take action at the right time to prevent children living in harmful situations and bring the right children into our care.

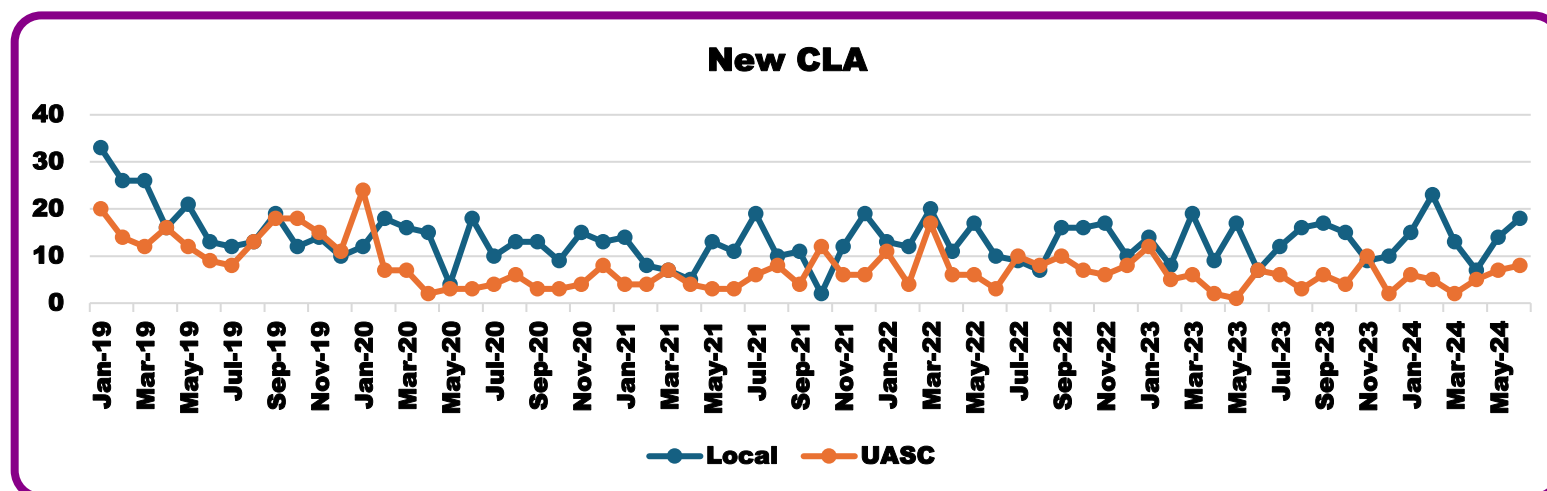


Chart 8

Key challenges

In Croydon, as in other local authorities, we are seeing a combination of issues putting pressure on families including the longitudinal impact of the pandemic and the rising cost of living. We have seen a rise in contacts and referrals for support for children's social care and an increase in children supported on child in need and child protection plans. Whilst we will work with families to reduce risks and keep children safely at home inevitably some will come into Croydon's care where this is the right outcome for them.

To tackle the challenges of extra-familial harm we work closely across voluntary, community and faith sector partners, the community safety team and the Youth Justice Service to identify and work with young people at risk of exploitation and to disrupt exploitative networks that harm our children. Learning such as the 2023 Croydon Safeguarding Children Partnership's thematic review into serious youth violence sets out the scale of the challenge but also identifies

practical ways in which we can work more closely across the safeguarding partnership to intervene earlier and prevent children and young people experiencing extra-familial harm.

Measures of success

- Sustain the reduction in the number of children coming into our care at levels commensurate with regional and statistical neighbours
- Quality assurance activity including case audits and dip sampling show that children are safeguarded and thresholds to care are appropriately applied

3. Foster carers

Our ambition

We will reverse the decline in the number of Croydon fostering households and increase the pool and diversity of in-house local foster carers, so more children and young people in care can live in stable family-based homes that help keep them connected to families, friends and communities.

Where are we now

Transforming fostering recruitment and retention and upskilling our foster carers to work as systemic partners will support more Croydon children to live locally in stable, happy homes. This is one of the priority areas for our Strategic Delivery Partner, Impower, who are working with the Children, Young People and Education Directorate over 2024-27 to add capacity and pace to our corporate parenting transformation programme.

Key challenges

As of June 2024, only 46% of children in foster care were living with Croydon 'in house' carers, compared to statistical neighbours at 54%, and lower than the UK average of 76%. Of that 46%, 73% were placed with mainstream Council registered foster carers, 26% are kinship care arrangements and therefore only approved to care for a particular child/ren. Currently Croydon is too heavily reliant on the independent fostering agency (IFA) sector. IFA placements are more expensive, placing some increased pressures on Council budgets, more significantly there is a higher likelihood of children being placed at a distance, IFA placements can tend to be less connected to Local Authority care planning and offer less flexibility than our own in-house carers.

The Croydon foster carer age demographic is typical of the national picture, with a considerable number of households in the older age category. The need to introduce new households to replace families when they choose to retire from fostering is needed as the fostering community ages.

Ensuring all suitable fostering enquiries convert to households who can care for children. The current average UK conversion rate for Local Authority carers averages at 7% and Croydon reports similar averages. Our internal systems and fostering service seek to improve recruitment, approvals, and retention of quality carers, maximize existing carers availability and capacity to care for children and young people with more complex needs and oversee strong void management. The transformation workstream is developing systemic models and is delivering support from our inhouse clinical support team.

Measures of success:

- At least 80% of children and young people in care live in a family including a foster home.
- 70% of CYP placed with Croydon foster carers.

- Increase the net number of in-house Croydon carers.
- Reduced time between referral to approval and lower attrition rate.
- 90% Carer Annual Reviews held on time & with outcome achieved.
- No unapproved voids on in-house fostering

4. Family and Friends Care (Kinship)

Our ambition

When children and young people cannot remain safely living at home support more of them to be able to live within their own extended network of family and friends

Where we are now: After introducing the Permanence planning and tracking, we have been developing our practice to identify and engage extended family in safety and care planning at an earlier stage, with the aim of enabling more children to be in kinship care arrangements if they cannot remain safely at home. Through the Transformation process, we reviewed the way we monitor our temporary Regulation 24 & 251 connected care arrangements. Our Special Guardianship Team have a focus to increasing support for kinship carers and special guardians (SG). SGs are now assisted by a financial policy and an SG support plan delivered through a dedicated team, (in accordance with SG Regulations 2015). The number of children living with Kinship Carers (whether under Regulation 24 or as approved Connected Persons Foster Carers) is lower than we would like, and our improving permanence tracking is intended to develop this number.

Key challenges: By providing the right amount and type of help families need, more children could remain in, or be cared for in their own kinship friends and family networks, on a long term preferably permanent basis. We don't always engage with wider family networks at the earliest point, for example through family group conferences to improve our kinship care planning with children and their families. We also need to review the support for family and friends care holistically, including the financial, emotional and peer support as well as from professionals. Our policies, procedures and oversight need refreshing and strengthening to underpin our ambition.

Measures of success:

- Increased number of children and young people placed with family/friends in Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Order arrangements.
- Fewer children living in unregistered and unregulated settings.

5. Placement Planning and Stability

Our ambition

Improve placement matching, to provide children and young people in care the best placement options to meet their needs, keep them safe, and provide them with stability and opportunities to reach their potential This will be best achieved by the provision of more local placements including better use of the independent provision that already exists in Croydon

Where we are now

The children's placements team find homes for Croydon's children and young people, prioritising families as the preferred placement option and using a Croydon First approach. All referrals will be considered for an in house foster care placement before searching in the independent sector. Delays are avoided, and for many children, parallel searches are often undertaken. Too many placement searches are requested with short time scales, which can limit the opportunities to find the best matched home. Despite these challenges, most children are found a placement at the point of need. We have seen a slight improvement in short term placement stability (3+ moves per year) but a slight decline in the percentage of children under 16 in care for more than 2.5 years in the same placement for 2+ years.

Our Strategic Delivery Partner will lead the implementation of IMPOWER's Valuing Care programme which aims to improve the life chances of children in care by strengthening the links between children's needs, the outcomes being pursued, and the resources available. By better capturing and reviewing the needs of looked after children, councils can make better decisions on support, placements and commissioning.

Key challenges

Due to the limited availability of placements nationally, children are not always in best matched homes and are frequently placed where there is availability. This is especially the experience for older children with complex needs and groups of sisters and brothers. As we are more successful in enabling families to safely care for children at home those that do need to come into our care often have more complex needs. It is becoming harder to find the right placement, at the right time to meet children's assessed needs. In exceptional circumstances, arrangements to procure a bespoke unregulated placement are necessary, most often when children enter or move placements in an unplanned way following a crisis at home or a placement breakdown. These situations are not always predictable, but we can do more to minimise placement breakdown, by planning collaboratively with carers/providers at the early stage of placement, improving communication and identifying placement fragility sooner and mobilising a multi-agency intervention of the team around the child. There is also more that we can do to better match children to placements which would be assisted by better development of foster carers and children's homes profiles.

Measures of success:

- Good placement stability performance compared to regional and statistical neighbours.
- Increased % of planned placement moves.
- Improved quality of Placement Profiles to support better matching.
- 90% of placement planning meetings held on time and increase number of stability meetings where required.
- Reduced IRO alerts associated with placement plans.

6. Permanence Planning

In Croydon we are passionate about achieving permanence for children and young people. We have prioritised permanence for all children and young people we support and care for. Permanence development is one of our four Corporate Parenting objectives. We will secure children's futures and where they cannot live with their parents, we will ensure the best plan of permanence is progressed for them as early as possible. We cannot do this alone. Permanence planning starts with parents and children, extended families and in communities. We know that the best place for children to live and grow up are with the people that know them, love them, and want the best for them. There are times when this is difficult, when those times occur, we want to ensure the best support at the right time will create opportunities to help children and families stay together.

Please refer to the Permanence Strategy for more detailed information on how we will take this ambition forward.

7. Systems, processes and data

Our ambition

Develop efficient systems & processes to:

- Understand the drivers for our care population, identifying and challenging disproportionality
 - streamline processes and procedures
 - develop and report reliable activity and performance data to inform a dynamic approach to sufficiency planning
- underpin strong financial management

Where we are now

A key part of the CSC improvement programme has been to improve the infrastructure, streamlining systems and processes to be more efficient, provide the necessary tools for robust management, inform service planning and better support practice. A series of projects to review and re-design case recording (CRS & ContrOCC), performance data, financial and administrative systems have been underway, under the umbrella of this strategy we are addressing these issues with a specific focus on children's care and placements.

Key challenges

Information and intelligence on the homes our children live in, the costs of care, trends and forecasts is currently fragmented with no single version of the truth. We need to understand the drivers for our children in care population. Croydon is a richly diverse borough, but we know that racism impacts on our communities' daily lives and so need to investigate and understand any disproportionality to target and tackle this with confidence. A Power BI dashboard is being developed that will bring financial and activity indicators together in user-friendly formats. Whilst this is being developed a suite of agreed metrics needs to be developed and accurately maintained.

More consistent and timely compliance is needed across the placement pathway, from authorisation to search for a home through to recording costs on the case recording system (CRS), and all points in between. Expertise to refresh the placements pathway on CRS has been commissioned. Training and support for staff will be developed to support implementation of these changes.

Measures of success

- Efficient systems & processes to support best practice, minimise bureaucracy, provide reliable performance data and support strong financial management.
- Accurate and detailed costs for all types of homes for different cohorts of children enable accurate financial planning and forecasting.
- Performance frameworks and accessible, reliable performance reporting demonstrates improved management grip on key processes
- Recording and payments systems (ContrOCC/ CRS) are aligned and there are no payment delays to carers and providers.

8. Homes for Care Experienced Adults

Our ambition

We set out our ambitions in the [Croydon Care Experienced Young People Strategy 2023-25](#).

In summary our ambitions are:

- to develop a continuum of suitable local supported and independent housing options for care experienced adults to meet a broad range of needs
- Ensure timely transitions

We are committed to helping our young people to realise their goals and potential. We will develop opportunities within the Croydon area and reach out to other councils in the UK where our young people may choose to reside and wish to 'stay close' to their families and communities, ensuring that they are able to access stable quality homes, education, employment and training and good access to mental and physical health services.

Please refer to the Care Experienced Young People Strategy for more detailed information on how we will take this ambition forward.

Implementation

Three-year implementation plans will be developed for the ambitions set out in this Children Looked After and Care Experienced Adults Sufficiency Strategy. These plans will outline what is needed, by when and who is responsible. Plans will be monitored monthly and updated annually based on progress, changing need and financial and budgetary implications.

In monitoring the implementation of this strategy, we will ask children and young people how well we are doing and act on what they tell us.

