

Southend on Sea City Council Placement Sufficiency Strategy for Children in our Care and Care Leavers 2023-2028

Executive summary

What is a sufficiency strategy? As described by our children in care: it is a 'fancy' plan to make sure there are enough, good options of homes for us (children in care) to meet our needs and make things better.

This document sets out the five year strategy to develop the resources required to achieve our sufficiency duty for children in our care and care leavers.

As of end of September 2022 there were 304 children in our care, a rate of 77 per 10,000:

- Most of the children in our care are between the ages of 10 to 15.
- There are more males than females in our care.
- There are 158 care leavers in receipt of care leaver services as of end of September 2022.

The Children in Care Council discussed what makes a good home. In summary, what children in our care want is what most of us want: a loving family, that care about them, will support them, be their champion and provide a comfortable home.

With the Children in Care Council we have developed six priorities to help us make sure there are enough, good options of homes for children in our care:

1. Ensure that the voice of children and young people inform plans and decisions
2. Providing support at the earliest opportunity
3. Strengthen our fostering offer
4. Providing homes that are close to Southend on Sea, when that is right for the child or young person.
5. Preparing for adulthood and independence
6. Stability and permanence

1. Introduction

Southend on Sea City Council's (SCC) vision is that all children experience love, a sense of safety and the opportunity to achieve success. For most children, this will be achieved within their family and communities without any external support, but sometimes additional help may be needed.

We will support families to achieve our vision for children and young people by working together to drive positive change, build relationship to work well together,

earning the trust and respect of people we work with by acting with integrity, behaving responsibly and demonstrating strong leadership. By working restoratively with children, young people and families we will empower families and support them to make positive changes for a Southend-on-Sea where all children achieve success.

The foundation of any support we offer lies in our commitment to ensuring that children and young people remain with their families wherever possible. The importance of prevention and early intervention is critical, we know that by providing help to families early on they are more likely to resolve any difficulties and embed positive changes. However, there are occasions when children and young people are unable to remain in the care of their own families, when this happens, we will provide them with safety and opportunities to achieve success in our care.

The 'Sufficiency Duty' is from Section 22G of the Children's Act 1989. The duty requires local authorities to take steps to secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the authority's area 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.

This document sets out the five year strategy to develop the resources required to achieve our sufficiency duty for children in our care and care leavers.

2. Strategic fit

Our vision for children and young people sits within the context of the wider Southend 2050 ambition for the future. The sufficiency strategy will help deliver on the following outcomes for Southend 2050:

Safe and Well

- Residents feel safe and secure in their homes, neighbourhoods and across the city
- Everyone has a good quality, sustainable home that meet their needs
- We protect and improve the quality of life for everyone in our community, including the vulnerable

Opportunity and Prosperity

- Our children are school and life ready and young people are ready for further education, training or employment

The provision and planning for appropriate placements is a vital part of discharging our duties as corporate parents. This strategy needs to be seen within the overall strategic context of *Southend Corporate Parenting Strategy July 2021 – March 2023* and our plans to continue to improve services to children and their families.

This strategy also compliments the *Southend Special Educational Needs and Disability Partnership Strategy 2022-2025* for children and young people aged 0 to 25, and the *Southend Early Help Partnership Strategy 2021-24*.

This strategy is informed by applicable legislation, national policy and guidance, including the NICE looked after children and young people guidelines,¹ and local management information, including [JSNA](#), performance data and officer insights.

3. Progress of the 2022 Sufficiency Statement

The Sufficiency Strategy will build on the work of the Sufficiency Statement 2022. There have been many developments since the publishing of the 2022 Sufficiency Statement, including:

- A new offer of improved support for Southend on Sea City Council foster carers from April 2023 has been approved by Cabinet.
- Southend on Sea City Council and Essex County Council have jointly commissioned a framework of Independent Fostering Agencies.
- The Children in Care Council and the Small Kids, Big Ideas group (Children in Care Council for younger children in our care) helped develop the tender questions for the Independent Fostering Agencies framework with Essex and developed the priorities of this strategy. The Youth Voice Team have also started a new group for older children in care and care leavers.
- There are two new Ofsted registered children's homes in Southend on Sea.
- A project group has formed and work begun on developing options for housing and support for 16-25 year olds.
- A engagement forum for supported accommodation providers meets quarterly.
- A multi agency panel with children's social care, health and education meets monthly, improving channels of communication and bringing resources together to better meet the needs of children and young people with complex needs.
- The Southend children's mental health partnership, led by Public Health, meets regularly to work together to address local mental health challenges for children, linking in with the Southend, Essex and Thurrock Executive Collaborative Commissioning Forum who commission the Southend, Essex and Thurrock Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (SET CAMHS)

The Southend on Sea *Children Looked After Placement Sufficiency Position Statement 2022* included the aim to keep at least the same rate of children in our care as our statistical neighbours. However, we have not been able to meet this target with number of children in care going up. While we recognise that various factors can cause the number of children requiring our care to change, we will continue to strive to be at least in line with our statistic neighbours during the course of this strategy.

¹ [Overview | Looked-after children and young people | Guidance | NICE](#)

4. Southend on Sea

Southend-on-Sea is the seventh most densely populated area in the UK (excluding London) and is home to approximately 182,773 residents. By 2031 the projected population for Southend-on-Sea will be 195,875. This assumes a growth rate of 5.27% which is higher than the 4.21% projected growth rate for England. There are 39,736 children and young between the age of 0-18 in Southend-on-Sea ([Smart Southend](#)).

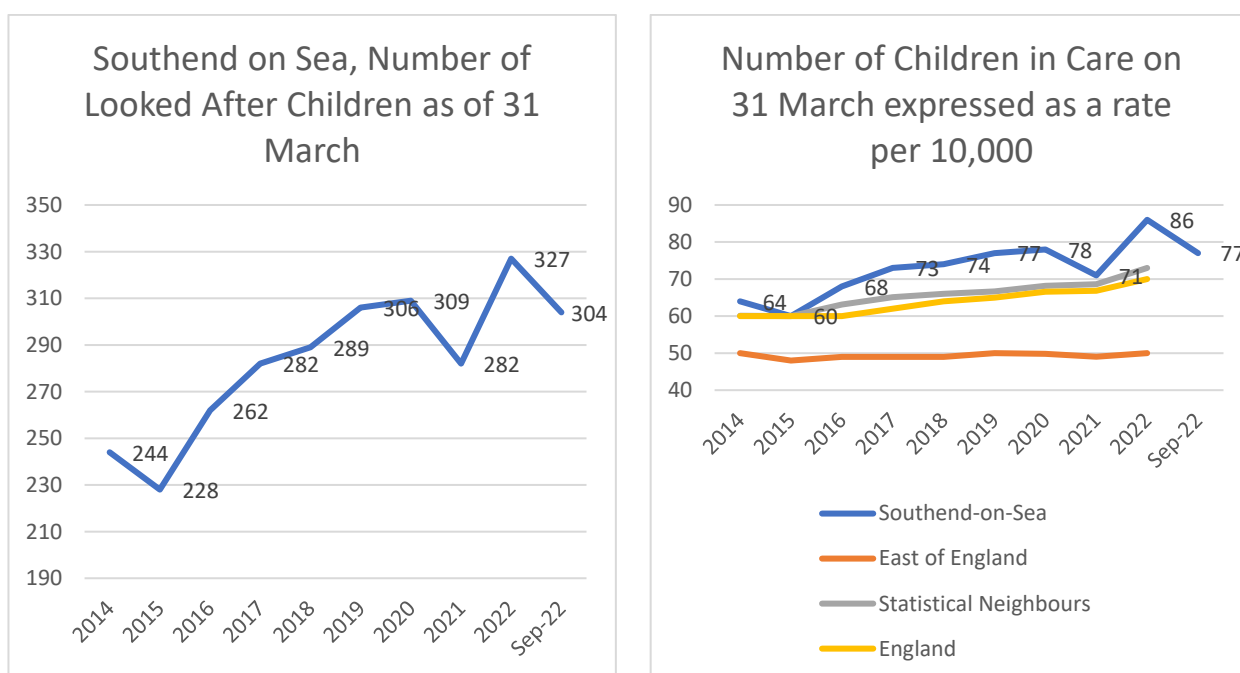
Southend-on-Sea is one of Essex's most deprived areas. Overall 35.2% of Southend-on-Sea residents live in areas which have been classified as being amongst the 30% most deprived areas in the country. However, there is considerable variation over the life course in Southend-on-Sea with around 40% of children and young people living at this level of deprivation, compared to 25% of those aged 65+ ([Smart Southend](#)).

The majority of people in Southend-on-Sea self-reported their ethnicity as White British (87%), with 4.6% white other, 3.6% Asian/Asian British and 2.1% Black/African/Caribbean/Black British. 87 different ethnicity categories are self-reported.

4.1 Southend on Sea Children in Care and Care Leavers

As of 31st March 2022 there were 327 children in Southend on Sea in our care. This is a rate of 86 per 10,000. This is an increase from 2021 and higher than our statistical neighbours. However, there has been a decrease in the number of children in our care to 304 as of the end of September 2022. This is a rate of 77 per 10,000.

Figure 1 Number of Children in Care and Rate of Children in Care per 10,000, as at 31 March

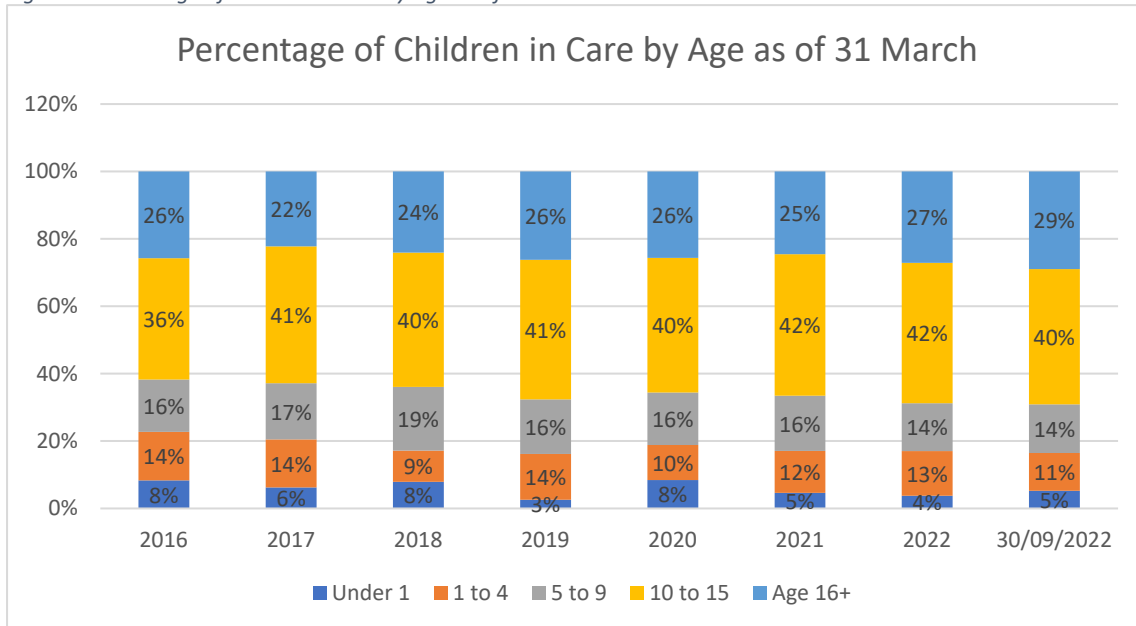


Source: [Local Authority Interactive Tool](#) (LAIT) Updated 28 November 2022 (September 2022 data from SCC LAC As at Report)

Age and Gender

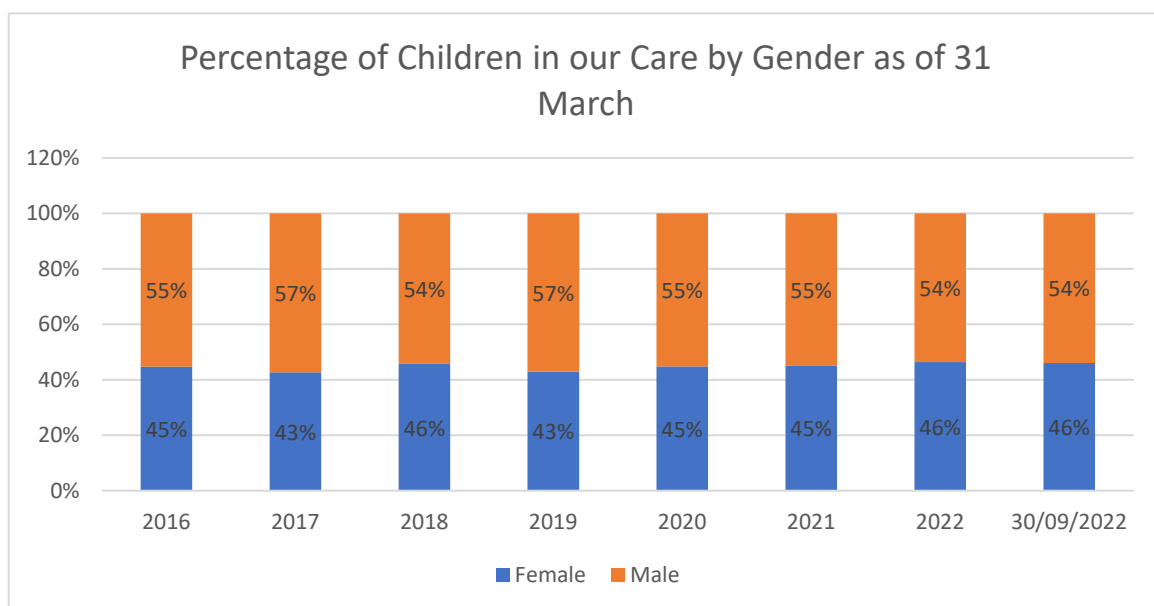
Most of the children in our care are between the ages of 10 to 15 (Figure 2). There are more males than females in care (Figure 3). This has been consistent for the last seven years and likely to remain an ongoing trend that will need to be planned for to ensure appropriate accommodation provision for this older age group.

Figure 2 Percentage of children in care by age as of 31 March



Source: SCC LAC As at Report

Figure 3 Percentage of children in care who are male and female as of 31 March

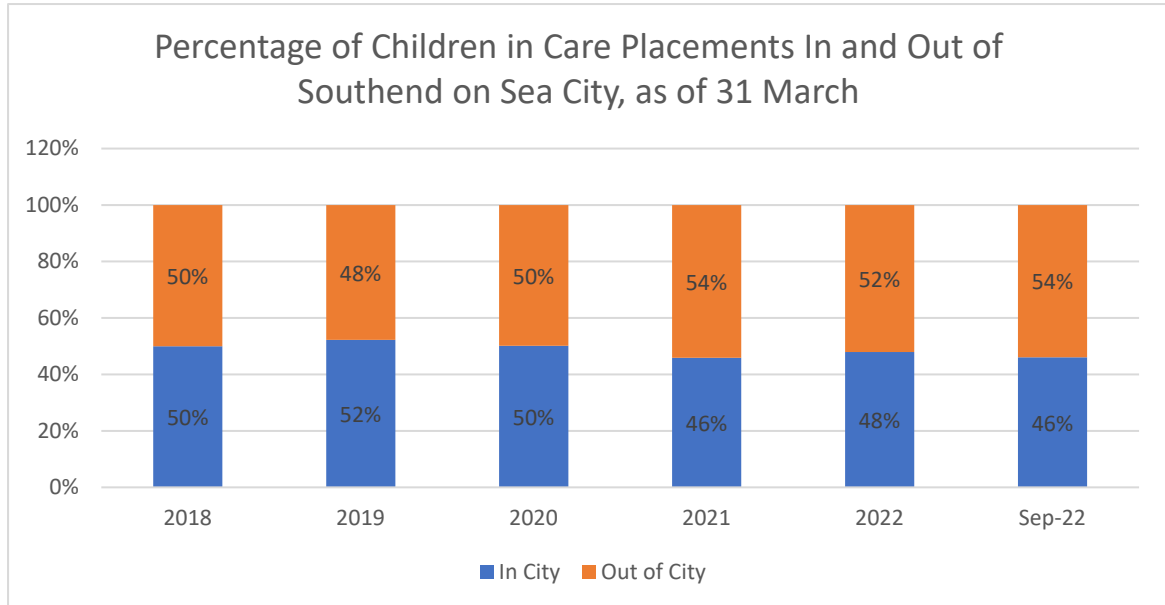


Source: SCC LAC As at Report

Location

It is challenging to place children within the boundaries of Southend on Sea. The majority of children in our care living outside the city (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Placement in and out of the city of Southend

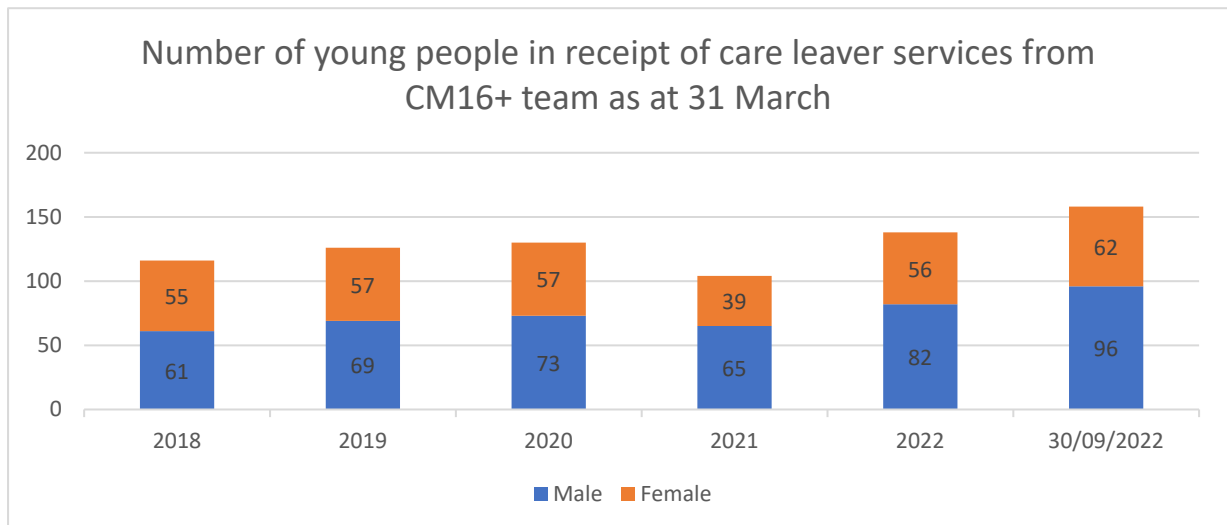


Source: SCC LAC As At Report

Care Leavers

As of 31 March 2022, there were 138 care leavers in receipt of care leaver services in Southend on Sea. This is an increase of the previous four years and is continuing to increase, there was a total of 158 care leavers in receipt of care leaver services as of end of September 2022 (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Number of young people in receipt of care leaver services 31 March



Source: SCC Operational Performance and Intelligence Team

Projections

It is challenging to project the number of children in care. There has been an increase in the number of children in our care as of 31 March 22 in comparison to the same point in 2021. While there has been a decrease in the number of children in our care as of end of September 2022, forecasts by SCC Operation Performance and Intelligence Team anticipate an increase in the number of children in our care.

The number of children in our care is much higher than national and our statistical and regional neighbours (Figure 1), suggesting there is more we can do to reduce the number of children in our care. We will aim for the number of children in our care to align with median of our statistical neighbours. As of 31 March 2022 this was 66 per 10,000.

5 What children in our care tell us

The children in our care have told us that one of, if not the most, important thing is to be loved and part of a family. In response to the question “what makes a good foster carer”, one young person responded with two words: “family” and “love.”

“(What makes a good foster carer?) You need to feel loved and feel like you belong.”

Young person in our care aged 10-15

Having someone who really cares about them, is patient, someone they can speak to, who is on their side and can help them when they need it, is really important. But so is having fun, laughing, being able to play with their friends, going places and going on holiday.

The children and young people in our care also said that it important that the people who care for them get regular training so they can understand them and support them better. In response to a question about what makes a good home: freedom and respect of privacy were certainly on the list, but so were things that many people may take for granted such as: food, a tidy house, hugs.

“Clean, tidy, shiny, sparkly, nice food”

Young person in our care aged 5-9

Other things that children and young people in our care said were important were: a garden, pets, Xbox, phone, their own room. One young person said how they really

liked that their foster carer had their own children; they liked having other children around.

So in summary, what children in our care want is what most of us want: a loving family, that care about them, will support them, be their champion and provide a comfortable home.

The children in care council have been key to developing this sufficiency strategy. They describe a sufficiency strategy as “a ‘fancy’ plan to make sure there are enough, good options of homes for us (children in care) to meet our needs and make things better.”

6 Key Strategic Priorities

The following priorities were developed with the Children in Care Council over the spring/summer of 2022. The priorities were shaped by data and analysis and conversations with various people who work with children and young people, including: social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, private voluntary and independent providers, and foster carers.

1. Ensure that the voice of children and young people inform plans and decisions
2. Providing support at the earliest opportunity
3. Strengthen our fostering offer
4. Providing homes that are close to Southend on Sea, when that is right for the child or young person
5. Preparing for adulthood and independence
6. Stability and permanence

These priorities will help guide our commissioning decisions for the next five years to ensure there is sufficient, high quality accommodation and support for children in our care. None of these priorities can be taken in isolation, they are interdependent.

6.1 Ensure that the voice of children and young people inform plans and decisions

All children in our care must be able to have their views and opinions heard throughout and after their time in care, helping to give them control over their lives. We will make sure children’s voices are heard and prioritised in decisions about what happens to them and able to comment on the care they are receiving. Children and young people should have the means to make appropriate representation when they have concerns and know how to request independent advocacy if they wish.

“You need to know who you are going to stay with, just some basic details before you move would be good”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep”

Ensuring children have their views and opinions heard throughout their time in care, will help to find a carer that's right for them and provide them with the type of home they need. For children, it is things that may be considered relatively minor, such as the family having a dog. This can be really important to the child and can be pivotal to whether it is a positive experience for them. Even if we are unable to find a placement that meets the child or young persons preference, being transparent, speaking to them and letting them know why we could not, is very important. Having agency and feeling valued, even if you cannot get what you want, can make all the difference.

To address this, we will:

- Review and improve all forms we use when finding a placement for young people to ensure the child is at the centre and their voice clearly reflected.
- Ensure children and young people in our care and those leaving our care understand how and are confident to raise concerns, make a complaint and how to contact independent advocacy services.
- Increase involvement of children and young people in our care in commissioning of services.

6.2 Providing support at the earliest opportunity

Southend on Sea City Council aims to support children and young people to remain at home whenever possible. Positive outcomes are more likely when families receive effective support at the earliest opportunity. Working with partners, we aim to support the whole family with the right help, drawing on support from within the family and community to help build resilience, and strengthen family relationships, preventing the long terms need for statutory service intervention.

"It's like in football, if you have an injury it can get worse if you don't treat it early"

Child in our care aged 16+

For families where there is a risk of children entering care, SCC provides edge of care support. The Edge of Care service aim to prevent family breakdown and strengthen rehabilitation plans to ensure greater success of family reunification, so that only children enter our care when it is right and come into care in a planned way.

Not including the young people who come into our care as unaccompanied asylum seeking children, the age group 10-15 are the largest cohort of new entrants into our care. Outcomes for children who enter care at a later age are unlikely to be more

positive than remaining at home. We need to more to prevent this age group entering our care.

To address this, we will:

- Create a more robust Public Law Outline (PLO) process, focusing on supporting families to prevent children coming into care.
- Ensure that parents with mental health issues, who are affected by Domestic Abuse, and/or who have substance abuse issues, some of the most prevalent factors identified at the end of a Social Care Single Assessment, are able to access effective support.
- Build on our edge of care services, focusing particularly on children over the age of 10, to increase the number of reunifications so children are not entering or remaining in our care unnecessarily.

6.3 Strengthen our fostering offer

Our ambition is to find homes for children in our care within a family setting. Within this ambition, there is the desire to increase the proportion of foster care placements with connected carers² and Southend on Sea City Council in-house foster carers. Our carers are more likely to be local, enabling children to stay close to their community and connections. Furthermore, we know our foster carers well and have established relationships with them so can be more confident in matching them with children and young people who are likely to do best in their care.

We need to attract, train and retain a diversity of in house foster carers who can support the diverse cultural needs of the children in our care, support young people of all ages and who have the right skills to meet the varying and complex needs of children.

“A foster carer is funny, creative, fun and jokes.”

Young person in our care aged 10-15

However, this does not mean there is not a continued important role for Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA). Over recent years, IFAs have made an increasingly important contribution to providing homes for our children. While we want to increase our own carers, we know that we will always need IFA carers and we will focus on building relationships with IFA who are best placed to support us meet then needs of our children.

To address this, we will:

- Implement a revised package of fees, allowances and support for in-house carers.

² Family or friend of the child, sometimes known as a kinship carer.

- Recruit foster carers to better reflect the ethnic diversity of the children in care population and to meet the needs of children who are currently less likely to be placed with foster carers including: children over the age of 10, adolescents with challenging behaviours and children with disabilities.
- Improve local engagement with Independent Fostering Agencies, creating more consistent avenues of communication with providers to support improved placement matching and stability.

6.4 Providing homes that are close to Southend on Sea, when that is right for the child or young person.

It is important that when children are taken into our care they are able to stay close to their existing networks, in the same school and maintain their same friends, when this is right for the young person. It can be a challenge to find homes for children in our care within the boundaries of the city. The Ofsted focused visit in March 2022 highlighted that we are placing too many children in our care, too far away, outside the city.

As of September 2022, 54% of all children in our care were placed outside of Southend on Sea. However, this is not the same for all types of placement. Overall, children who are with in-house foster care or supported accommodation providers are more likely to be within Southend-on-Sea, whereas children with Independent Fostering Agencies, in children's home or residential school are more likely to be outside Southend-on-Sea.

“One of the children I look after was very quiet initially but as our home was local to his friends, family and school he soon settled in and has just got four 9s in his GCSEs!! We’re so proud of him and 100% behind his dream to go to Cambridge or Oxford!”

Tina, Foster Carer for 9 years

It is a particular challenge to find placements for children in Southend on Sea who require the support of a children's home or residential school. There are eight children's homes in Southend-on-Sea registered offering 39 placements between them (as of October 2022) but only three of the 20 children in our care who are placed within a children's home are within Southend on Sea. All of our children in residential schools (five children) are outside Southend on Sea.

To address this, we will:

- Improve relationships with providers of children's homes already operating in and near Southend on Sea, working with the market so local children are prioritised for local homes.
- Increase the variety of support available locally, ensuring there is a diverse market of provision available for our young people that is good quality and value, including options for solo provision.

- Work with colleagues in Education to ensure local education support and options for children in our care with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

6.5 Preparing for adulthood and independence

It is important that children in our care build foundation to enable them to move into adulthood and independence well. For many of the older children in our care, supported accommodation can be a good options for them as they prepared to move into independent living, but there are also other options, such as supported lodgings,³ that we do not yet offer for our young people.

For young people who will require continued support from adult social care, we will make sure we work with adult social care and colleagues from Special Education Needs and Disabilities at the right time for the young person so young people feel prepared and ready.⁴ We will strengthened the transition protocol to ensure we are supporting all our young people as they prepare for adulthood.

The vast majority of young people who leave our care are in suitable accommodation. However, some care leavers who, despite being in suitable accommodation, are not in the right type of accommodation. This includes some young people who want to be in independent accommodation but remain in supported accommodation due to lack of suitable independent accommodation. This is a particular challenge for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who turn 18 without their immigration status finalised as their choices for accommodation are even more limited.

To address this, we will:

- In partnership with Adult Social Care and Special Education Need and Disabilities services, review how we prepare and support children in our care who will require adult social care support so planning for children with disabilities and complex needs is done well, at the right time for the young person to ensure good preparation for moving into adulthood.
- Work with young people and providers to commission support and accommodation for older young people in care to ensure young people have the right support as they prepare for adulthood and independence, including helping supported accommodation providers with the introduction of Ofsted regulations.
- Develop a joint plan with housing for the provision of cost effective, safe and good quality housing for care leavers, including young people with no

³ Supported lodgings provide a young person with a room of their own in a private home where they are a member of the household, but are not expected to become a member of the family. The householder, or host, provides a safe and supportive environment, working alongside professional services to help and support the young person in gaining skills for independent adult life.

⁴ Southend SEND Partnership Strategy 2022-2025.

recourse to public funds, supporting young people to develop their independence skills for successful transition into adult life.

6.6 Stability and permanence

We must ensure that every child and young person in our care is found the right placement for them as soon as possible. While a family setting will be right for the majority of our children, we recognise that some children will need different care and support to what is provided in a family setting - such as children's homes or residential school.

There has been improvement of both short term and long term placement stability over the past year. It is very challenging to find placements for some young people, especially teenagers, who have experience of:

- significant challenging behaviours,
- complex emotional needs,
- sexualised behaviour,
- missing from their placement, and
- criminal activity.

Where it is in the interest of children to leave care through adoption or special guardianship, we seek to ensure timely decision making for these children to ensure permanence and stability. There has been an increase in the percentage of Southend on Sea children in care who were adopted in the last year (April 2021 – March 22) compared to the previous year. Southend on Sea continue to perform better than comparators: nationally, regionally and statistical neighbours.

However, not many Special Guardianship Orders (SGO)⁵ are granted in Southend-on-Sea. SGO offer greater security than long term fostering but without the absolute legal severance from the birth family that stems from an adoption order. This is a good options for some children and young people, such as children who are older who may not want to completely break all (legal) ties from their birth family.

To address this, we will

- Ensuring the right information is available from the start of placement searches to help increase stability and continue to learn why placements have come to unplanned endings so that we can improve placement stability in the future.
- Increase the number of children achieving permanence through and Special Guardianship Orders.

⁵ A special guardianship order is an order appointing a person or persons to be a child's special guardian. The child is no longer 'Looked After' by the local authority. The special guardian has parental responsibility for that child and has responsibility for all the day to day decisions about caring for the child or young person and his upbringing. Unlike adoption the order retains the basic legal link with the parents. They remain legally the child's parents, though their ability to exercise their parental responsibility is limited. [Special guardianship guidance - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/special-guardianship)

- Work with the market to increase options of local support for children who are more challenging to place.

7 How will we know we've been successful?

We will know the priorities set out in this strategy have been successful when:

Priority 1	Ensure that the voice of children and young people inform plans and decision
How will we know?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in number of children in our care engaging with opportunities for SCC to listen and engage. • More children and young people report greater happiness in our care.
Priority 2	Providing support at the earliest opportunity
How will we know?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of children in care aligned with average of our statistical neighbours rates
Priority 3	Strengthen our fostering offer
How will we know?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More children in our care are within a family setting • Increase in number of in-house foster carers • Increase in number of children with connected carers
Priority 4	Providing homes that are close to Southend on Sea, when that is right for the child or young person.
How will we know?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More children in our care are in or close (within 20 miles) to Southend on Sea
Priority 5	Preparing for adulthood and independence
How will we know?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children who require support from adult social care receive support in a timely way that is right for the young person • Care leavers are in the right type of accommodation (not just appropriate) to move into independence
Priority 6	Stability and permanence
How will we know?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement in both short term and long term placement stability • Reduction in number of placement breakdowns/change

8 Delivery and action plan

An annual delivery plan for this strategy will set targets for improved outcomes. The plan will clearly identify leads for each of the priorities and it will be reviewed by Children's Directorate Management Team.