



Chapter 6: Increasing access to foster and residential care placements

Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide, as far as reasonably possible, sufficient and suitable accommodation for children under their responsibility – enough accommodation of a type that will meet the needs of children within its care. A key challenge for the sector, reflected in the fieldwork, is ensuring this sufficiency duty is met. This chapter explores how LAs are currently working to increase capacity in both in-house and external foster and residential care provision.

6.1 Establishing new residential provision

The number of children's homes is steadily increasing each year. As of March 2024, there was a 12% rise in the number of children's homes and a 7% increase in available places compared to the previous year.⁷⁶ However, the distribution of these children's homes across the country is not always congruent with local or regional demand.⁷⁷ For most authorities, increasing in-house provision is crucial for expanding their placement options and meeting local needs. This is partly due to the rising costs associated with private residential provider placements and a desire to keep children within their local area.

6.1.1 Current practice

Over the last few decades, there has been a reduction in the number of children's homes operated by LAs and a growth in those run by independent providers. However, more recently an increasing number of authorities have returned to building new homes, partly prompted by Government capital funding.

Officers from LAs that are building new homes reported they are doing so to secure more suitable local provision that meet their requirements. Most authorities building new homes need to increase in-house provision to diversify their placement options and better meet needs. It also overtly signals to the market that LAs are willing to invest in new capacity to change the dynamics of the market and the behaviours of those within it.

Over half of the authorities surveyed have built between one and three homes in recent years, with some expanding their internal provision more significantly. For instance, Coventry has constructed five new homes and plans to open more, addressing a range of needs including therapeutic provision and disabilities, and Leicester City is considering plans to build one home each year for the next four to five years.

Most commonly LAs are developing smaller homes, such as solo and two-bed units. Primarily, this is to address sufficiency challenges for children with complex needs and reduce the practice of 'blocking out' multiple beds in larger homes. A few authorities are opening larger homes; for example, Leicester City has recently opened a five-bed unit, and another six-bedded unit is under construction.

As part of the research, we have also heard that LAs are developing homes to meet the needs of a specific young person and provide the necessary care services. For example, one LA has created a residential placement for a child with complex needs, as they were unable to find a suitable external placement. This LA developed a tailored solution, using a former children's home and a skilled team from an independent company to ensure the child receives the necessary care. The placement is designed to be the child's 'forever home' and will support the transition to adult social care as the child approaches adulthood.

Similarly, another LA has developed two bespoke homes for children with highly complex needs, designed to provide tailored care and support, with the intention that they may transition into adult social care settings as the children age. This model aims to ensure continuity of care and placement stability.

There are several reasons that LAs are developing their in-house residential provision. LA stakeholders report that they face challenges with private providers, including high costs and poor quality, and some LAs reported that complaints from residents about poorly run private facilities have increased over recent years. By expanding their in-house provision, authorities aim to reduce reliance on private sector placements as part of their medium to long-term business plans.

A number of considerations are made by LAs before deciding to develop internal provision or commission out the care service. These include the cohort of children being served, the model of care for the home, the necessary staffing complement, and assumptions on level of occupancy, as each has an impact on associated costs. Generally, authorities have found it straightforward to make a business case for in-house residential care because the alternative in the external market is often very expensive, although business cases are rarely externally scrutinised and there has been some concern that they may not be comparing like for like..

In 2021, the DfE allocated £259 million in capital grant funding to support the expansion of in-house residential provision with the goal of reducing reliance on unregulated placements. This increase in funding from the DfE has created opportunities for new in-house residential homes and enabled authorities to pursue their sufficiency goals. A new grant for children's homes for complex needs opened in November 2024. The grant will provide match funding to create additional beds for children with complex needs.⁷⁸

6.1.2 Challenges and considerations

Challenges and consideration for developing in-house provision:

- **High initial investment:** The startup costs for a children's home are significant. This includes the cost of purchasing or leasing a property, renovations to meet regulatory standards, and the purchase of necessary equipment and furnishings. The cost of purchasing properties in areas like London and the South East are particularly expensive, meaning it can be cheaper to use external placements instead of developing internal provision.
- **Revenue delays:** Before opening, children's homes must demonstrate to Ofsted that they have sufficient and experienced staff, and a registered manager must be in place as part of the registration process. This can result in substantial pre-revenue expenses.
- **Renovation expenses:** Buildings are often purchased with significant wear and tear, requiring significant renovation. Additionally, home layouts may need to be changed to facilitate better care.

- **Workforce challenges:** One of the key challenges facing authorities when staffing their own homes is finding enough registered managers and skilled staff to meet the Ofsted requirements for registration. The cost of staffing, including the need for a full-time manager, deputy manager, and support workers, is another significant financial burden. In part because there is competition between LAs and providers, as well as between neighbouring authorities. This competition for qualified staff can strain the resources of local authorities, making it harder to maintain a stable and experienced workforce. The challenge of staffing homes raises debate over whether authorities should staff their own homes or lease them to private providers, as providers were seen as having more flexible options in targeted recruitment campaigns and care staff salaries.
- **Regulation 28:** Regulation 28 was also cited as a barrier to staffing homes, as it requires senior children's home staff to have two years within the sector. Those with applicable experience in the police force or a healthcare role are unable to take up similarly senior positions in children's care.
- **Unused provision:** Just as unused and void beds are a concern with block contracts, LAs must also consider the possibility of creating a surplus of residential beds. If authorities build an excess of residential beds and these beds go unused, then the investment in building in-house provision will not be worth it. This is of particular concern for smaller authorities who do not have many children in residential care and there are concerns that it could lead to children going into inappropriate placements to fill the beds. There were examples of LA placement protocols preferring the use of in-house capacity before considering other providers. There is a need to ensure undue pressure is not placed on LA homes to accept inappropriately matched children.
- **Intellectual property and experience:** Over the past few decades, many LAs have disinvested in in-house provision, resulting in external providers holding most of the expertise and experience in running homes successfully. This knowledge is not easily accessible to LAs unless they operate the homes themselves.
- **LAs also reported challenges related to planning permissions and regulation:** These themes are discussed in more detail in Section 6.2.

6.1.3 What works and opportunities

As mentioned, a large proportion of LAs have already invested in new residential provision. This research identified a number of behaviours and principles that have supported this activity:

- **Think innovatively about ways of accessing property:** Renovating or repurposing existing council properties reduces the initial investment as LAs do not have to purchase or build a new property. Several LAs have repurposed council property into residential homes and renovated existing properties, to make them more functional or increase local capacity.



- **Develop local and/or regional workforce plans, and related training and development opportunities:** Some larger authorities have implemented workforce strategies to upskill their staff and ensure they have the expertise required. Authorities that have operated or are developing a large number of in-house homes have an existing workforce with the necessary skills or are developing workforce strategies to ensure they are able to meet the required staffing levels. The workforce plan should consider both in-house and external care staff.



“We've got a very stable workforce compared to the private sector, very well trained workforce. We've been around a long time. A lot of our staff have been in the service for 10, 20, 30 years and actually even though we have larger numbers of young people in the homes, that is because of the calibre of our staff and managers - they can manage larger groups.”

LA stakeholder

- **Consider alternative funding for residential care:** Options include a social investment fund purchasing the property and leasing it back, or providing grants or loans to set up a care home.

Evidence of impact

In terms of evidence of impact, we have heard from LA stakeholders that there were various benefits to expanding internal provision. These included keeping more children local, reducing the exposure to the increase in costs associated with private residential provider placements and ensuring that homes provided care for the more complex and less well-served children.

Some stakeholders reported that in-house provision allows for better cost control and some report that it has been more cost-effective compared to private placements. However, LAs often compare the costs of in-house residential care with spot purchased unregulated placements, which are significantly more expensive than other types of placements. When considering building in-house residential provision, authorities should also compare the costs of commissioning residential places through frameworks and block contracts, which can provide better value for money.

Many LAs have successfully increased their current in-house residential provision. Most authorities who took part in the research have opened at least one new home, often many more than this. In doing so they have been at least somewhat successful in reducing their reliance on the private market and increasing sufficiency.

Nevertheless, although local business cases and LA stakeholders indicate that in-house provision can achieve these outcomes, there is a lack of robust research and evaluation. Some LAs have experienced challenges opening and operating their own homes, leading to closures and transitions to private providers.

6.2 Encouraging new residential provision

Many authorities report being dissatisfied with the private residential market, seeing providers as making high profits from increased complex needs. However, some authorities have good relationships with trusted providers, forming the basis of their sufficiency plans. The children's care sector shows mixed results in encouraging providers to open new residential provisions; while new homes are opening, they seem linked more to house prices than actual need.

6.2.1 Current practice

The research has identified two primary challenges that LAs and providers encounter in developing new residential provision. These obstacles include obtaining planning permissions and meeting regulatory requirements, which many LAs are actively seeking ways to address.

Planning permission

Acquiring planning permission presents challenges for both authorities and providers. Whether a residential home requires planning permission depends on various factors, including the property's current use classification and the nature of its intended use. Residential developments need planning permission if there is a significant change from its previously approved purpose. Consequently, authorities repurposing existing children's homes would not require a change of use planning permission. However, authorities or providers purchasing former residential properties to establish new children's homes may be subject to differing planning regulations. This determination hinges on whether the change is considered "material," which encompasses factors such as noise levels, increased parking demands, and the number of residents. Specifically, if a property transitions from a typical family home (Class C3) to a residential institution (Class C2), planning permission is required. Additionally, new children's homes are often challenged at the planning stage by residents who do not want the perceived disruption that may come with a multi-bed children's home.

The planning process can be expensive and time-consuming with no guarantee of approval. Currently, change of use planning is a long and expensive process. Depending on their use classification, residential dwellings and children's homes may require different levels of regulatory compliance. Stricter regulations for children's homes can impose material changes to ensure homes conform to the correct regulation. For example, new fire regulations can cause authorities and providers to incur large costs to make sure the building is compliant with fire safety standards.

The planning process represents a big risk for providers, especially for smaller and VCSE providers. It is important authorities support providers through the process with planning knowledge and expertise. This support is invaluable to smaller and new market entrants. LAs report providing support in a variety of forms, including one-on-one bespoke support, information sharing sessions and workshops, and sharing toolkits around managing the planning process. Some LA planning departments will share information and gather perspectives from children's services where relevant changes of property use have been applied for. Most often this is to enable LAs to develop relationships with providers as they develop provision.

In a smaller number of cases, LAs have developed innovative approaches to managing children's residential care homes through close collaboration with planning departments. One Council has established a system where they receive notifications of new home applications and can provide input on sufficiency, need, and saturation levels. A planning clause has been developed with two district councils and legally validated, requiring new homes to specifically serve local children. This strategic use of planning powers has fundamentally changed the dynamic with providers, as new homes must commit to prioritising local children to receive planning permission. This planning approach has dramatically shifted the market dynamics and negotiating power with providers. Rather than providers being able to sell beds to the highest bidder across multiple local authorities, the planning clause creates a single-customer relationship where the Council is the only client. This has enabled more transparent cost discussions, where providers are encouraged to make reasonable profit levels. While this clause cannot be applied retrospectively to existing homes, it has already proven effective with two new registered homes operating under these conditions. This approach has made the Council a more attractive market for providers who are willing to work collaboratively while ensuring better value for money and improved outcomes for local children.

Durham Council has taken a different approach to preferential placements, focusing on collaboration instead of preconditions. Lots of other LAs place children in Durham due to its low house prices. To ensure local sufficiency, the Council engages regularly with providers to monitor vacancies and influence service development to meet local needs. If proposed homes do not align with these needs, the Council challenges them early through statutory planning, guided by Planning Policy Guidance. Where the Council identifies a definitive need for a service being developed, it seeks to establish a 'Durham First Approach' with the provider, prioritising local placements to keep children close to family and support networks.⁷⁹ While this approach does not prevent providers from opening if they do not give preference to Durham children, it does encourage more providers to prioritise local placements.⁸⁰

Ofsted registration

If an LA or provider wants to run a children's home, they must register with Ofsted before opening. To become registered several legal requirements must be satisfied. Ofsted's registration work is not fully cost-recovered, leading to resource constraints that can slow down the registration process. Some of the providers who participated in the research reported that Ofsted can act as a barrier to entry into the registered market. The time it takes to achieve registered status was noted as a concern. Ofsted states that a decision is usually made within 47 days of receiving an application.⁸¹ However, both authorities and providers noted it can take over a year to receive Ofsted registration for homes. It is not clear if this was due to certain requirements not being met. Ofsted reported that the process for registering new homes can be delayed due to the need for registered managers, obtaining planning permissions, and completing forms correctly.

Some LAs report working collaboratively with Ofsted, and instead of seeing them as a barrier to opening homes are sharing information on planned developments and progress. Involving Ofsted in the early process of opening a home was highlighted as a particular enabler, as it can ensure that the home has everything in place before requesting to be registered and enables Ofsted to move quickly when registration is requested.

Strong relationships with Ofsted were typically built through proactive engagement. One authority, for example, has taken steps to engage with Ofsted concerning their residential provision. Ofsted were invited to participate in their market engagement events to address issues like the backlog in registration and provide advice and guidance to help providers register more efficiently. Similarly, stakeholders from another authority reported engaging in an open dialogue with Ofsted to proactively build their relationship. Other authorities adopting similar approaches report receiving Ofsted's support and advice on opening residential homes for complex needs. These approaches aim to ensure that providers are well-informed and supported in meeting regulatory requirements.

6.2.2 Challenges and considerations

There are a number of ongoing considerations related to the above themes:

- **The children's residential sector is experiencing recruitment and retention challenges:** Care staff leave for higher paid positions, sometimes in aligned services, such as family support and youth-offending teams which were reported to offer a better work-life balance. This has significant implications on sufficiency for both the quantity and the type of placements available. This challenge is a particular inhibitor to growing capacity and investment for smaller providers.
- **Authorities placing outside of area:** Over the last decade, there has been a growth of larger framework contracts and digital brokerage systems that have widened the number of providers that LAs can contact for referrals both in number and geographical locations. This has resulted in local provision being utilised by distant authorities. Some stakeholders reported that there are few examples of authorities incentivising local providers to give priority or preference to local placements.⁸²
- **Ongoing regulatory challenges:** Inspection criteria were cited as an area of concern, with providers reporting an inconsistent approach, which varied geographically and by inspector. There was a narrative across LAs that Ofsted regulation can act as a barrier for providers to accept children with complex needs, as it may result in a poor Ofsted rating and impact their commercial viability.



"It is not a consistent approach to inspection criteria and more on experience of local homes and local context"

Provider organisation

6.2.3 What works and opportunities

This research found that approaches to encouraging new residential provision work effectively when underpinned by the principles of relational commissioning. In particular, there is a benefit to having strong relationships with providers so that strategic conversations can take place about whether local children are being placed in local homes.

Additionally, there are a range of other principles that help LAs to encourage new residential provision in their area:

- **Understanding and assessing need:** Adequately understanding need within a locality is essential for opening the right sort of provision. Some LAs reported that they are hesitant to build more homes as if they do, they will use them, even if they don't provide the ideal placement for the specific child. Therefore, it is important that LAs have a sense of the most suitable portfolio of internal and external provision. This relates to the findings in Chapter 3.
- **Provide advice for commissioners on planning regulations:** Understanding these is crucial, as planning permission is often unnecessary for developing children's homes if the use remains within Class C3 or does not materially change to Class C2. Additionally, a lawful development certificate from the LA can confirm legality, negating the need for a planning application.

- **Work with Ofsted to expediate home registration:** LA stakeholders highlighted the benefit of working closely with Ofsted when planning to increase their in-house provision and when supporting providers to develop. Key to this was being clear and transparent with the regulator about likely timelines and providing regular updates on challenges. There may also be benefit in discussions with Ofsted nationally about how to improve the process for registering new homes.

Evidence of impact

There is very limited evidence about what is effective in supporting providers through the planning process and with Ofsted registration. Qualitatively we have heard that providing support around these two areas helps address issues at an earlier point and can speed up processes.

Linking planning permission to preferential placement has seen mixed results. In one authority, some children were successfully placed with new providers prioritising local children. Whereas, in another LA, this policy led providers to stop opening homes there. Critics argue that this method is not needs based and may harm children by preventing suitable placements.

6.3 Strategic partnerships

Many authorities have recognised the need for building productive relationships with trusted providers as a way of meeting their sufficiency targets. These arrangements offer local authorities the opportunity to work closely with providers who bring skills, experience and expertise that may be lacking in-house, as well as greater flexibility of approach. The trust within the relationship, the length of the relationship and the increased understanding of each party result in a more cost-effective way of providing for complex needs. There is no strict definition of a strategic partnership, but it denotes a stronger relationship that goes alongside the formal contract(s) where a provider works towards the wider needs of the authority. As part of this research, we have developed a definition for strategic partnerships below.



Definitions

Strategic partnerships are a business arrangement where two or more companies collaborate to achieve shared goals. Typically, the goal is to create or achieve something greater than the companies could achieve on their own. It is commonplace to share resources, technology, finances, risk allocation and reward. However, not all are essential for a strategic partnership to succeed.

6.3.1 Current practice

Multiple LAs highlighted the relationships they have developed with providers over recent years. These take a variety of different forms, some of which are described below.

Preferential placement agreements

There are a variety of forms of preferential placement agreements, but at their core they are an agreement between a LA and a provider, that the LA gets first refusal on a placement before the placement is offered to a different authority.

Some authorities have preferential placement agreements as a contractual requirement of leasing a property to a provider – explored further below. In other cases, preferential agreements are informal and based on long-standing relationships. These can be held directly with a placement worker or team, as a result of a member of the provider's team previously working in the LA and maintaining contact or developing a trusting relationship by sharing information and addressing challenges.

Leasing homes to providers

Authorities opening homes and seeking the optimal approach to managing them often consider various staffing and operational strategies. Some authorities are training their staff to manage these homes, while others, particularly smaller ones, find it more practical to lease homes to providers. This method allows them to leverage the expertise and experience of private sector partners, which may not be present within the authority. Another significant factor in the decision to lease residential homes is the financial oversight and constraints faced by authorities. Given the current financial situation of local government there is a heightened level of scrutiny over spending decisions, making it more challenging to commit significant sums of money to develop and run children's homes internally. While larger authorities can develop business cases for establishing and running homes internally due to economies of scale, smaller LAs and unitary authorities are unable to replicate the same cost savings through scale.

One authority engaged in this research opted to lease residential homes to providers primarily due to their lack of recent experience running children's homes, combined with the need to respond swiftly to emergency situations. Without the existing expertise, developing in-house capabilities would take considerable time and delay their ability to address urgent need. There is also the reputational risk posed by operating children's homes without the accompanying required skill set. By leveraging private sector providers, the Council has been able to rapidly establish the required facilities and ensure that immediate care needs are met without unnecessary delays.

A (50/50) joint venture between Stockton on Tees Borough Council and Spark of Genius (a CareTech organisation) has been highlighted as a successful model. This partnership involves the council providing housing and the provider operating the services, with profits shared equally. It has been in place for 12-15 years and is considered very successful due to its alignment of goals, trust, and effective communication. Through the partnership, two children's homes are in operation in the North East and a small, independent specialist school.

Wider system partnerships

A small number of authorities have developed provision collaboratively with providers to address local sufficiency challenges. One such example is the Homes and Horizons programme, which is a partnership between Somerset Council, the Somerset NHS Foundation Trust, and Homes2Inspire, part of the Shaw Trust. Established in June 2021, the initiative addresses the needs of children with complex requirements by providing holistic support that includes education and health services. The primary goal of the programme is to create a wrap-around service that ensures children receive comprehensive care. This includes the development of residential homes for high needs, foster care, and educational support.

The Shaw Trust was awarded the tender and currently staffs and runs the homes. Somerset Council held the initial financial risk by purchasing properties and providing a £1 million mobilisation fund, incentivising providers to participate. The contract model allows the relationship to develop and increase in capacity over its 10-year length (designed for a long-term partnership with a 10-year agreement and the option to extend). Integrated governance structures, including weekly referral meetings and bimonthly operational delivery groups, ensure joint responsibility and shared decision-making. The contract operates on a cost-plus model, providing financial transparency and security. This contracted price covers the provider's costs with a reasonable surplus which is taken as profit and can be reinvested into the charity.

Another example is Leicestershire County Council and Barnardo's. The authority faced a shortage of residential places for children in care and an additional £14.7 million was needed over three years for the expected increase in looked-after children, while there was a need to find savings of £3.7 million in children's social care. The solution was envisaged as a partnership between the LA and an expert in designing and delivering innovative solutions for children and families. Over a year, the council worked towards procuring a partnership rather than a service and had to develop a contractual model that both complied with procurement regulations and was flexible enough to respond to the challenging environment. This was achieved by the creative use of new freedoms in the 2015 Public Contracts Regulations which led to a two-tier contractual framework. A Children's Innovation Partnership was tendered, with Barnardo's winning the bid for a 10-year contract starting on 1 December 2018. The financial value was based on the total spend of services commissioned in the council's Care Placement Strategy, amounting to £700 million over 10 years. A powerful characteristic of this project was the centrality of the voice of the children in care and the breadth of engagement with other stakeholders.

6.3.2 Challenges and considerations

A number of factors were raised in relation to forming and maintaining strategic partnerships.

- **Assessing need:** Assessing and describing need is underdeveloped across the market. Many of the authorities who participated in the research found forecasting need difficult or were using basic techniques and data sets to do so. Without an adequate understanding and description of need, finding a provider to partner with to meet this need is also very difficult. Because of this, high value private providers are often in high demand with authorities looking for solutions to their most complex needs. For more on assessing need see Chapter 3.
- **Balancing the needs of children in care with the commercial needs of the providers can be very complex:** For instance, preferential placement agreements on homes leased to providers are difficult to negotiate. Providers have no obligation to take local children because the council owns the building, often doing so can harm their financial stability if they wait extended periods of time for beds to be filled. This is where sensible governance arrangements and incentives are important.
- **Misalignment of goals and short-term focus:** When the goals and objectives of the partners are not aligned, it can lead to conflicts and misunderstandings. Both parties need to have a clear and shared vision for the partnership. A focus on short-term gains rather than long-term objectives can undermine the partnership. Strategic partnerships require a long-term perspective and investment.
- **Risk appetite:** Partnerships must be approved by multiple decision-makers in LAs, including finance officers and procurement teams, each with their own level of risk appetite. This can slow down the process of developing partnerships and may prevent LAs from considering them completely.

- **Financial disagreements:** Disputes over funding and financial arrangements can quickly derail a partnership. Clear agreements on financial responsibilities and profit-sharing are crucial. Rigid financial terms in contracts, such as fixed fees for long periods, and inflexible price adjustments frequently cause disagreements.
- **Lack of commitment and resistance to change:** If there is no long-term commitment from key individuals within the organisations, the partnership may falter. Changes in personnel can disrupt the continuity and alignment of the partnership. If either party is resistant to new models or approaches, it can hinder the partnership's ability to adapt and evolve.
- **High cost:** Strategic partnerships to solve complex needs often incur high costs because of the complex nature of the issue authorities are looking to solve. For instance, as discussed above, Somerset provided an initial mobilisation pot of £1 million, in addition to the purchase of the properties. This financial outlay may be beyond some authorities due to the financial constraints across local government.
- **Limited potential strategic partners:** Some LAs report a small pool of preferred partners, making it challenging to generate high interest in partnership tenders.

6.3.3 What works and opportunities

Stakeholders highlighted key principles and behaviours that were important for the creation and maintenance of strategic partnership. Many of these overlap with the behaviours outlined earlier in the report, in particular relational commissioning, effective commissioning, and joint commissioning with statutory organisations.

Other important principles included:

- **Motivated individuals and supportive leadership:** Successful strategic partnerships often rely on motivated individuals within both the provider organisation and the local authority who are committed to making the partnership work. Establishing and maintaining long-term relationships is crucial. These relationships should be built on trust and a shared vision for the partnership. Having champions at senior levels within both organisations can drive the partnership forward and ensure it receives the necessary support and resources.
- **Co-design and alignment of goals:** Both parties must align their goals and understand the partnership's aims. Clarity on the business model and desired outcomes is essential, and collaboration during development helps identify and ensure needs are addressed effectively through the service offer.
- **Governance arrangements:** For strategic partnerships to be successful it's important to get the partnership structure right. There is a need to identify who the decision makers are, how teams will be made up and organised, and who is responsible for necessary actions such as quality assurance and creating appropriate lines of communication. Robust governance arrangements streamline decision making and reduce blockages during the contract.

- **Funding arrangements:** Similar to governance arrangements, it is key to a successful strategic partnership to get the funding arrangements right from the beginning. This is particularly important when involving another statutory body, such as health, education or housing. Pooled funding can provide a challenge as different bodies operate under different legal and regulatory frameworks, complicating the integration of budgets. This extends to accountability and reporting, which needs to be consistent internally and externally.
- **Contract flexibility:** It is also important to build in flexibility throughout the length of the contract to allow the programme to adapt to external forces. The Covid-19 pandemic provides a good example where some authorities struggled due to an inability to adapt their contracts to respond to the changing nature of the demand and of the market.
- **Shared risk and benefits:** Successful partnerships often involve sharing both the risks and benefits. This can include financial arrangements, operational responsibilities, and accountability for outcomes. Stakeholders have reported that it can be beneficial for LAs and providers to share risk when entering into a partnership, particularly since start-up costs can be prohibitive for small and VCSE sector providers. Authorities can buy property and provide mobilisation funds. This sets parties off on a positive footing to collaborate throughout agreements and ensures that providers feel involved and committed to the projects' success.
- **Effective communication and support for providers:** Regular and open communication between the provider and authority helps to address issues promptly and maintain alignment. By having a clearer shared understanding with providers at the initial contracting stage authorities can support providers through challenges which arise, rather than terminating the contract. This has beneficial results both for the authority, provider and most importantly the children being looked after. See Section 4.2 for more information on supporting provider organisations.

Evidence of impact

The evidence highlights a range of positive impacts as a result of strategic partnerships. The outcomes of different strategic partnerships are discussed below.

Preferential placements: LA stakeholders have reported that preferential placements can improve local sufficiency and improve their ability to place children in their local area.

Leasing homes to providers: This approach can be more cost-effective and helps ensure that the homes are managed by experienced professionals. The leasing model has shown some success. For example, one provider operating under this model has achieved positive ratings from Ofsted inspection, indicating that the homes are meeting the required standards of care. This success suggests that the partnership approach, where the council provides the properties and the provider manages the care, can be effective in delivering quality residential care for children. However, the Council acknowledges that the costs associated with this model are still high, and there is an ongoing effort to explore more sustainable and cost-effective solutions. By leasing properties to providers, authorities can utilise existing resources more efficiently, such as using void costs from housing to renovate buildings for use as children's homes. This method has enabled authorities to provide necessary care without the substantial upfront investment required to establish and manage these facilities independently.

Wider system partnerships: The qualitative evidence has been overwhelmingly positive in relation to strategic partnerships. Both LAs and provider stakeholders have reported that they can be effective at developing new provision, providing quality support, and result in cost savings over the long term. For example, Homes and Horizons has resulted in six homes becoming operational, with another two in the process of being opened. This has provided additional residential capacity and there have been no placement refusals in the past four years. Stakeholders also reported that the partnership has provided good outcomes for children, including improved placement stability, better access to mainstream education, and a reduction in self-harming behaviours.

We are only aware of one of the strategic partnerships having an independent evaluation: This was the Leicestershire County Council and Barnardo's partnership which was evaluated in 2020 by the University of Bedford.⁸³ The evaluation highlighted improved outcomes for children, enhanced placement stability, and long-term cost savings. However, it also identifies challenges, including the complexity of developing strategic partnerships, the difficulty in partnering with specialist providers, and the high fees associated with opening complex placements.

6.4 Foster carer recruitment and retention

Most LAs described a long-term shortage of foster households as one of their main challenges, often resulting in displacement from fostering into residential care at a much greater cost. On average, LAs reported that a foster care placement would be more appropriate for between 25-30% of children currently in residential care placements.

Many LAs report that foster care is generally preferred over residential care and research highlights that children in foster care had consistently better experiences and fewer problems compared to children in residential care.⁸⁴ Inadequate numbers of foster placements poses a significant risk to authorities' ongoing sufficiency of children care placements.

6.4.1 Current practice

Over the last five years, there has been a downward trend in the number of foster carer applications, coupled with a striking gap between those expressing interest and those going on to foster. To improve foster care sufficiency, there are both regional and local initiatives aimed at improving foster care recruitment and retention.

In February 2023, one of the commitments in the previous government strategy 'Stable Homes Built on Love' was a £27 million investment into a Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme (FFRP) to deliver end-to-end improvements across the foster carer recruitment journey. There are three main strands of the programme: 1) the creation of Fostering Recruitment Support Hubs; 2) the design and delivery of a regional fostering communications campaign; and 3) the expansion of the retention-focused Mockingbird model.

Nine self-selected, geographically linked 'clusters' successfully bid to deliver the programme from October 2023, alongside Foster with North East, the pathfinder for the project. All ten Fostering Recruitment Support Hubs have redesigned the experience for prospective foster carers in their region, focussing on improving the recruitment journey from initial enquiry through to application. This includes providing support and emotional guidance to prospective foster carers from both a dedicated recruitment team and experienced foster carers, sharing best practice, and introducing regional training programmes. Additionally, efforts are made to standardise data collection by embedding regional customer relationship management systems, sharing key performance indicators, and running regional communications campaigns.

As part of the 2024 budget, the DfE has now committed an additional £15 million to increase the number of foster carers, which includes expanding the Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme to ensure that every local authority can access a regional fostering recruitment support hub.

The Mockingbird programme operates across the UK with over 120 constellations.⁸⁵ It aims to provide stability and support for foster families by creating a network of carers that mimics an extended family. The programme addresses challenges like disrupted care journeys and poor outcomes by building a sense of community among carers. It establishes a 'home hub' of trained carers offering respite care, peer support, and joint planning to 6-10 foster and kinship families.



Case study: Foster4 – Cheshire and Merseyside Fostering Recruitment Support Hub

Foster4 is the regional foster carer recruitment service led by Warrington Borough Council, recruiting foster carers on behalf of eight Cheshire and Merseyside LAs. By pooling resources, Foster4 aims to recruit more foster carers, provide greater support to existing foster carers, and keep more local children with local foster carers.

The recruitment support hub provides prospective foster carers with ongoing emotional and practice advice. Via a single front door, prospective foster carers across the region can enquire and receive the same information about becoming a foster carer. Foster4 has also set up a regional system to collect foster carer recruitment data, established a regional training portal for all foster carers to access pre-approval training, developed a therapeutic support offer, and run regular pop-up events and coffee mornings to provide an informal way for people to find out more about fostering.

Other initiatives to improve fostering recruitment and retention include:

- **Salaried foster care:** Some LAs were particularly interested in employing professionals from across health, social care, the police and education with transferable skills as foster carers to look at a subset of children with particular needs. Authorities have suggested a pay bracket between £35,000-£65,000, depending on a number of factors including the finances of the authority, the complexity of the child's need and skills and experience of the carer. This is a significant increase on the current allowance.
- **Intensive fostering:** Some LAs are introducing intensive foster care models, that provide additional support to foster carers. For example, Hertfordshire is currently implementing an intensive fostering programme to provide long-term stability for children with complex needs, who would otherwise need residential care. This approach aims to reduce reliance on residential care, keeping children in foster care, saving approximately £239,557 per child annually. Intensive carers receive a higher allowance of around £52,000 per annum per child and are recruited from industries with transferable skills such as healthcare and the police. Carers receive support from therapeutic practitioners and outreach workers. Carers get regular training and access to therapeutic services to manage children's complex needs effectively.
- **Fosterlink:** This initiative is funded by the DfE and offers in-depth diagnostic support focused on recruitment and approval practices, with the aim of providing bespoke recommendations for improvement, alongside building a strong evidence base to share good practice nationally.
- **Advice for foster carers:** Initiatives such as Fosterline offer prospective and current foster carers free and confidential information on foster care. Funded by the DfE and delivered by the Fostering Network, Fosterline provides free, independent confidential and impartial advice.

- **Fostering friendly employers:** Nearly 40% of foster carers work alongside their fostering commitments.⁸⁵ This is made easier by employers who either offer specific schemes for foster carers or are understanding of their foster care commitments. This can be agreeing to leave at short notice for an emergency placement or medical appointment, offering flexible working hours or working from home to make time for fostering. The Fostering Network runs a scheme called Fostering Friendly, which provides employers advice and support to put in place a fostering friendly HR policy.
- **Pre-approval training:** Other than being able to read and write in English foster carers don't need any prior training or qualifications. Pre-approval training teaches foster carers about looked after children and the skills required to support them before a child is placed in their care. Evidence shows foster carers who have a better understanding of what to expect and are better prepared when entering fostering are more likely to remain foster carers in the long term.
- **Foster carer buddies:** A number of LAs and IFAs provide a buddy system for new and prospective foster carers. Foster care buddies are experienced carers with knowledge of the assessment process and challenges that come with being a new foster carer who support new foster carers through the process.
- **Extending and augmenting properties:** Some LAs have taken steps to extend the homes of foster carers as part of their efforts to increase capacity. This initiative includes extensions to properties to add extra bedrooms and paying carers to purchase larger private accommodation to accommodate more children and larger sibling groups, as well as making adaptations to homes to support carers in keeping children with complex needs long-term. In one LA, this approach is reserved for carers with whom the LA has a long-term relationship, and they enter into a five-year 'claw back' agreement to ensure commitment.
- **Moving council tenant foster carers into larger accommodation:** This approach aims to enable existing foster carers to take in more children, thereby increasing the overall capacity for foster care within the authority. However, the initiative has faced challenges due to the high demand and limited availability of larger properties, which has limited its success.
- **Reviewing foster carer fees and allowances:** Some local authorities are being proactive in reviewing both fees and support given to foster carers. Essex for example, regularly review their fee structure and the support structures around their foster carers. This approach has helped them reduce the loss of foster carers. LAs have also altered their fee structures from skills based to needs based. Carers are rewarded for supporting more complex children, rather than fees being based on length of service.
- **Respite care and support care:** Respite care offers various forms of support to foster care households, including planned breaks, day care, and temporary homes. This type of care is often provided through initiatives like Mockingbird and provides support for regular foster carers, helping maintain placements during challenging situations.
- **Foster Plus Programme:** This programme provides foster carers with a 'full network of ongoing support'.⁸⁶ Foster carers are supported by a dedicated social worker and local team, regular support groups, an out of hours helpline and online resources. By connecting foster carers to a range of support, it can help improve confidence and enable carers to feel empowered, both of which have been connected with improved retention.

6.4.2 Challenges and considerations

There are a number of challenges and considerations for foster care recruitment and retention:

- **Foster carer allowance and benefits:** The minimum allowance for foster carers varies by local authority and depends on the age and needs of the child in care. As of the publication date, the minimum weekly allowance is £165 per week for a child aged 0 to 2, outside of London and the South East.⁸⁷ Local authority stakeholders noted that allowance rates might deter some individuals from applying to be foster carers and may not correspond to the responsibilities associated with the role. Equally, there are challenges with competition for carers when fees vary across neighbouring LAs and between LAs and IFAs.
- **Rising age of foster carers:** A common challenge across all localities is the increasing age of the foster carers. Authorities have reported an ageing population of carers and a falling average length of service.⁸⁸ Ofsted (2024) data on foster care retention shows between 2023 and 2024, there was a net decrease in fostering households.⁸⁹ The majority of newly approved carers during this period were in their 40s and 50s, and among those who deregistered, 64% were aged 50 or over. These proportions are consistent with previous years. People are entering the market later in life and the length of time they are remaining as carers is dropping.
- **Unclear use of the private market:** There is not always a clear strategy for placing children in-house or externally, and within some LAs there is a preference for using in-house first if it is available. Stakeholders reported that this has resulted in cases where children are placed with specialist foster carers when they do not need this support, which can lead to other children being placed in residential care instead of a more appropriate specialist foster care placement.
- **Challenging nature of the role:** Foster carer retention can be challenging due to the demands of fostering. Carers often face emotional strain due to the complex needs of children in care. Foster carers need more training and support to ensure they are in a position to best care for children with the most challenging behaviours and complex needs.
- **Housing market:** Another challenge that emerged during the fieldwork was the price of housing in some areas. Particularly in London and the South East, there is a lack of appropriate housing which impacts people's ability to foster older children and sibling groups.



“Ofsted reports found that the number of foster care applicants are decreasing year on year, which has a big impact in how the care system functions. The number of applications in 2022-23 was 18% lower than that of 2018-19. Moreover, the number of deregistration’s are on the rise. In 2022 out of 8010 applications to foster, 42% withdrew.

The implications of this creates an imbalance between the number of children in care and the amount of foster homes available, as the children who are in need of a safe homes increases, but the possibility decreases. Social services are forced to resort to long-distance placements where the child is moved to an area, they are unaware of and isolated.”

Lamar, Care Leaver (Become, 2024)

6.4.3 What works and evidence of impact

This research and previous studies have found a number of principles that support the recruitment of foster carers. These are:

- **Standardised and streamlined recruitment:** Evidence has shown that there are a number of weak points across the foster carer recruitment journey and that there is variation in the recruitment journey dependent on where you are enquiring to become a foster carer. The regional fostering recruitment support hubs are improving the journey from initial enquiry through to application by standardising and streamlining the recruitment process, as well as providing consistent and ongoing emotional and practical support.

Evidence of impact

This research has found that the recruitment and retention of foster carers remains a significant challenge for LAs and regional hubs, and although some have been able to increase or maintain their numbers in recent years, there continues to be a national decline. Stakeholders reported that there is a need to continue exploring a range of options to support recruitment and retention, however, there is no silver bullet and challenges continue to persist.

There have been evaluations of programmes designed to improve retention of foster care and outcomes, such as Mockingbird. These generally showed a positive impact in relation to retention.⁹⁰

- **Target different communities in recruitment campaigns:** Effective recruitment requires reaching people from diverse backgrounds to meet the varied needs of children in care. Messages should resonate with different communities, including ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. Building trust with diverse communities and demonstrating inclusivity in marketing and support is essential. Agencies that actively work with community leaders, provide cultural competency training, and prioritise inclusivity are more successful in attracting carers from various backgrounds.
- **Use existing foster carers in recruitment:** One of the most effective recruitment methods for foster carers is word of mouth. There are a range of ways that LAs can utilise existing foster carers in their recruitment processes, these include holding events where current foster carers answer questions and provide information, utilising lived experience in their marketing campaigns, and setting up buddy or ambassador schemes to provide prospective foster carers with ongoing support
- **Flexibility for foster carers:** Some people are unable to commit to full-time fostering but would consider short-term or respite care. Ensuring these options are available, as well as promoting them nationally and regionally may encourage people who might otherwise assume fostering would not fit their lifestyle.
- **Offer high-quality preparation and training:** A well-prepared carer is more likely to succeed and stay committed. Carers need thorough training on trauma-informed care, mental health, cultural competency, managing behavioural challenges, and understanding the complex needs of children in care. LAs that provide ongoing support, such as mental health resources, peer support groups, and 24/7 assistance are better able to retain carers. Structured development paths, with skills advancement courses and qualifications, improve retention by making carers feel valued and professionally invested.

- **Share clear financial and practical information:** Financial support, allowances, and practical resources are critical considerations for prospective foster carers. Transparent communication regarding compensation, competitive allowances, and associated costs is essential to address common concerns and enhance transparency. Recruitment efforts should clearly articulate the financial implications and available resources, thus making the process less daunting for potential carers who may have concerns about the expenses of fostering.
- **Provide comprehensive and ongoing emotional and practical support:** Foster carer retention can be difficult due to the demands of fostering. Carers often face emotional strain from the complex needs of children in care. Regular counselling, peer support groups, and dedicated support workers can help manage stress effectively. LAs see better retention when fostering a supportive community where carers can share experiences and advice. Consistent supervision, virtual networks, and dedicated social workers who understand carers' needs significantly enhance retention. Access to mentorship programs and specialised support groups builds a sense of community and addresses unique concerns. Timely respite care is crucial in preventing burnout, especially for those caring for children with intense needs.
- **Ensure foster carers have contact with social workers:** The Foster Network found that foster carers want to feel as if they work in partnership with social workers, to collaboratively find solutions to issues and to be respected for their knowledge and experience. Evidence suggests that while this is happening, it is not happening as systematically as it should be or functioning as effectively as needed when it is.



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Chapter 3: Improving the use of data and forecasting

30. This has important implications for how a data model for describing 'need' should be created if it is to be used in sufficiency analysis. A definition of needs is useful for sufficiency analysis to the extent that it captures 'whether and at what price a provider will offer an available placement, all other things being equal.'
31. Most social work datasets describe either events and their dates, or 'states' (e.g. a legal status) and their start and end dates. Journey analysis typically requires transforming these to create a view of events and statuses which are linked by being part of a single 'journey' through services. This is relatively straightforward for data engineering teams once the conceptual issues are resolved (e.g. when should one journey be counted as two journeys) but requires tools and skills which are not usually available to the commissioners doing this work.
32. PATCH is the 'Python Analysis Toolkit for Children's Services,' an application developed by the Data to Insight Project at East Sussex County Council. It is accessible at <https://patch.datatoinsight.org/>
33. ContrOCC is tool for managing contracts, invoicing, and payments for in-house and commissioned care. It is mainly used in combination with the Liquid Logic Case management system (c. 55% market share in English children's social care) and is owned by the same company.
34. Mosaic for Finance is a module of the Mosaic case management system (c. 35% market share in English children's social care).
35. In the interests of transparency we should acknowledge that most of the creation of that tool was done under contract by Social Finance who also conducted this part of the research. However, the intellectual property is owned by East Sussex County Council, the single-LA version of the tool is free for any LA to use, and the code for both the single-LA and regional tools is published openly and licenced open source so that others can re-use and modify them without needing to pay either Social Finance or East Sussex.
36. We are aware of a similar tool, provided by Mastodon C, but none of the LAs interviewed mentioned using it.
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