

# Trafford Council

## Sufficiency Strategy for Cared for Children

### 2024-27

#### 1 Introduction

The Trafford Council Corporate Plan 2024-27 outlines 5 key priorities

1. The best start for our children and young people
2. Healthy and independent lives for everyone
3. A thriving economy and homes for all
4. Address the climate crisis
5. Culture, sport and heritage for everyone

All these key priorities are best delivered for our cared for children when they live within their local communities and close to the services that know them well. The Corporate Plan makes specific reference to cared for children in relation to priority 1 where it is stated that:

“This ambition must be extended to our Children in Care. We will continue to invest in services across the borough to support Children in Care and Care Experienced young people and adults, ensuring that they are at the forefront of our ambitions as a Local Authority”

This Sufficiency Strategy and associated Action Plan details how we will deliver on this ambition in relation to placements for our “Cared for Children”. It details how we will work collectively to meet our legal duties under Section 22G of the Children’s Act 1989. This “Sufficiency Duty” places an obligation on all local authorities to:

“...secure, as far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the Authority’s area boundaries which meets the needs of children that the local authority is 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”.

At the heart of our strategy is a strong desire to ensure that all children cared for by the council achieve their maximum potential, and that through their lived experience in care they are equipped with the necessary resilience, knowledge, and skills to be successful, healthy adults.

Wherever possible the council will strive to keep children within their birth family setting. For the small number of children where this is not possible, we will always seek to source a suitable option through assessing extended family and friends within the child’s existing network. Only where this is not possible will we seek to use alternative types of substitute care. Wherever possible that substitute care will be within a fostering household, or via adoption.

In circumstances where children need planned substitute care under the provisions of the Children Act, 1989 we will apply the following criteria to assess placement suitability:

- Is it close to the child’s home?
- Is it within the local authority’s area (unless that is not reasonably practicable)?

- Does it enable the child to live with an accommodated sibling where this is the agreed plan for all the siblings?
- Where the child is disabled, is it suitable to meet the needs of that child?
- Does it provide for continuity of their education or training?

We subscribe to the view that to progress through life successfully children need to experience stability, love, and unconditional acceptance. In achieving this aim the quality of the care environment is **the** critical factor. We know that children achieve best when the stability of care placement is matched with an ability to recognise and acknowledge their heritage, background, birth family and sense of belonging. This is best achieved by any substitute care being provided as close to the child's own home area as possible, taking into account individual needs and safeguarding considerations.

This document sets out how Trafford Council intends to fulfil its duties, as a Corporate Parent, and ensure that a dynamic and responsive offer is in place to meet the diverse accommodation needs of our cared for children and young people and those leaving care. This sufficiency strategy sets out how the Council will seek to achieve this through understanding the needs of children and young people in our care and working collaboratively to ensure that there is sufficient, appropriate accommodation within the local authority area to respond to those needs. We will be stringent in our efforts to ensure that all accommodation in scope is well placed to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people.

## **2. What are our Corporate and Children's Services Priorities?**

The councils' corporate priorities are augmented by the specific 8 "Ambitions" that form our action plan for service improvement:

1. We will develop a culture that involves creative approaches to engagement and participation to ensure that children, young people and families influence both their own experience, and operational and strategic developments.
2. Quality of Practice is consistently good across the service so that it makes a difference to our children and families. Leaders and managers at every level understand and influence practice to be consistently good.
3. Children & families receive the right help, at the right time, from the right professional
4. Our children will live safely and permanently with a family, wherever it is safe to do so.
5. To narrow the gap through working collaboratively to reduce the number of children that are living and experiencing neglect.
6. We will work together to strengthen our practice and approach when working with families where domestic abuse and or coercion is a feature and to reduce the harm our children experience.
7. To take action and collectively safeguard our children and young people from all forms of exploitation and going missing
8. To have 'partnerships with purpose' that impact positively upon the lives of children, young people & families.

Our work in relation to placements for cared for children in Trafford will be guided by these principles in the knowledge that there is an inextricable link between achieving placement sufficiency and achieving these ambitions. For example, working with providers of placement services to develop "partnerships with purpose" will be a key delivery vehicle to secure improved local placement sufficiency. Equally, children and families receiving the right help, at the right time from the right professional, and developing consistently good

practice will ensure that only those children who need to be looked after, are looked after. In this way we reserve the limited available provision for those children who need it and will benefit from it.

In addition, the council Corporate Parenting Strategy is set within a framework of key strategic objectives:

1. Participation and Engagement for all
2. Having a stable home
3. Education, opportunity, and high aspirations
4. Being healthy
5. Preparing for Adulthood

These themes will be used to inform this strategy on a number of different levels. In the first instance children's voices need to be more visible in the individual placement commissioning process, and in terms of strategic commissioning and quality assurance of services.

Having a stable home is the key concern of the sufficiency strategy and in this regard ensuring sufficient numbers of foster carers that are able to provide loving homes for our children and young people is an essential consideration. Delivering good educational and health outcomes is best achieved when children are placed close to their own home area, close to their existing network and the professionals who them well. For most care experienced young people they are best supported into adulthood through living close to local services.

### **3. Context**

Demand for children's social care and health services remains high nationally, regionally, and within the Trafford borough, and means there continues to be significant pressure across the whole children's services system both within the council and for key partner agencies. We know that those providing accommodation for children and young people are facing increasing running costs and need to plan for meeting increasing complexity of need. We also know that the limited supply of high-quality provision locally (both across the borough and within the Greater Manchester area), and regionally is contributing to the Council's placement cost pressures. There is a need for the close monitoring of costs, whilst we continue to develop more innovative approaches to meeting our parental responsibilities and collaborate with local authority and health partners to address the system-wide issue of the availability of suitable and sufficient placement provision.

By the end of March 2024 there had been a significant in year increase in the use of residential care for our cared for children, and numbers have continued to rise into the current financial year. Due to an under-supply of children's home provision locally, most of these placements are out of the borough and more than 20 miles from the child's own home area. This increase in numbers using residential accommodation has arisen partly due to a lack of sufficiency in the fostering market. Some children are therefore placed in residential settings because there was not an available foster family for them at the time. Work is ongoing both within the council, and as part of the wider Greater Manchester consortium of local authorities to increase general in-house fostering sufficiency, this provides just one strand of the work in which we need to be involved. In order to enhance the impact of this work we need to work really hard on a local level to ensure we not only recruit more foster carers but that we have the right offer to retain as many as possible.

In addition to challenges in terms of fostering sufficiency we have emerged from the pandemic with what appears to be increased complexity of presenting need for a small but

significant group of children. This is particularly the case in relation to those children requiring a higher level of mental health support, where needs fall short of hospitalisation, but where it is difficult for them to remain living in their own family. Children's home providers experience significant problems in matching these children alongside existing young people in placement. We have also seen similar patterns in relation to sourcing placements for children who have needs relating to risks of exploitation. Again, for these children the under-developed specialist market means placement matching alongside other children makes it difficult to source suitable, local placements. Alongside these features local authorities across England have been required to take ever greater numbers of unaccompanied minors under the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) as part of the dispersal programme from channel port local authorities.

In order to counterbalance some of these challenges we are seeing the development of a stronger desire across the 10 Greater Manchester local authorities alongside the GMCA to collaborate to meet these challenges head on. In recent months we have seen the launch of the Greater Manchester fostering enquiry hub, the ongoing plans to increase specialist residential capacity via Project Skyline, and the plans to bring this all together under the Pathfinder Regional Care Co-operative. These developments will provide additionality to supplement our own in borough sufficiency work.

#### **4. Trafford Overview**

Trafford's has a population of 56,015 residents (mid-2023 latest available data) aged 0-17 years, which is 23.6% of the overall population of the borough. This is similar to Greater Manchester as a whole (24%) and higher than England (22%). We provide school places for 44,960 pupils. With regard to SEND, there are 2237 (4.97%) pupils on roll who have an EHCP and 4949 (11.0%) receive SEN Support (May 2024 school census). In total Trafford supports 3141 young people with EHCPs up to the age of 25.

Latest data (Jan 24) shows the ethnic background of the school population is changing quite quickly. 56.3% are "White British", lower than the national level of 61.7% and down from 63% in January 2020. "White Other" has reduced slightly from 2020 to the current 3.8%, essentially half the proportion seen in England. "Asian" ethnicities equate to 17.3% of the school population, up from 14.7% in 2020 and above the national level at 12.5%. Those with a "Dual / Mixed" background account for 8.9%, up only slightly since 2020 and above the national level of 7%. Similarly, the "Black" population has increased only slightly, to 4.7%, below the national level of 6.5%. 'Other' ethnicities equate to 2.9% of the population, slightly higher than national at 2.4%. The biggest changes have come in the Chinese population in Trafford, increasing from 2% in 2020 to 5.1% in 2024. This is due to the influx of families from Hong Kong which saw Trafford being one of the authorities that became home to the highest numbers of this group.

Trafford has the 95th lowest rate of child poverty out of 298 district areas in England (13.5%, 2023, Relative Poverty). This is the boroughs highest rate of child poverty in the last 10 years and the position shows an increase in deprivation in the borough since 2022. Much of the last decade has been spent around 95th-105th position. This means that on average, Trafford children are, just, in the least relatively deprived 30% of children nationally and this has been a maintained position over the last decade. However, none of this means that there are not pockets of significant deprivation in a number of areas across the borough as there inevitably are.

The table below outlines the year end snapshot key activity in relation to children's social care over the 5 years ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024. This data shows an overall reduction in

social care referrals during this timeframe broadly reflecting a decrease from the pre-pandemic levels of 33%. There has been a similar decrease in children on a CiN Plan (30%) with data showing a steady fall. During this time demand for higher end services (Child Protection and Cared for Children) has fluctuated: the reduced rate of CiN plans has not been mirrored in numbers on child protection plans or in terms of cared for children numbers; equally, we have not seen the significant increases that some local authority areas have experienced. It is important to note that numbers in each of these key intervention categories are small and the impact of 2 or 3 larger siblings groups being added or removed can have a significant impact on and rates. Children subject to CP plans show a 7% increase relative to the level 5 years ago while cared for children are broadly the same. This levelling off of cared for children numbers is also in the context of an increase of around 20 UASC young people being moved to Trafford under the National Transfer Scheme and thus a significant increase in that cohort of children. Numbers of care leavers (18-21) have remained broadly the same over the last 4 years following the large increase in 2019/20.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<b>Total Referrals in Year</b>	2827	2019	2126	1984	1888
<b>CiN Plans Year End</b>	428	399	388	335	299
<b>CP Plans Year End</b>	205	184	200	221	219
<b>C4C Year End</b>	377	389	361	350	380
<b>Care Leavers (up to age 21)</b>	129	163	166	161	171

Children subject to a CiN plan at any point during the year gives a better sense of total annual activity. National data relating to this metric only started to be measured in 2022. In year 1 of this 3 year data cycle Trafford had lower activity rates per 10,000 than all other relevant comparators, with only the England average being lower than Trafford. While in the most recent 2 years activity has reduced, it is in line with the statistical neighbour average. This reduction in activity is in line with the North West average and England as whole but with the Greater Manchester Region showing a significant increase in the last financial year.

#### Overall CiN Plan Activity in Year

	2022	2023	2024
Trafford	263.1	256.3	211.6
Statistical Neighbour	296.06	256.52	211.81
Greater Manchester	319.81	317.78	358.50
North West	292.1	287.2	277.8
England	237.6	228	228.1

The table below shows the rates of children subject to a child protection plan at any point in the year. This shows Trafford with levels of activity significantly below all key comparator groups but most importantly when compared to statistical neighbours where the rate has been largely stable within 6/10,000. Although the gap between Trafford activity and Statistical Neighbours has narrowed, the difference remains 17/10,000 in the last financial year.

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Trafford	76.9	82.6	74	80.1	82.1
Statistical Neighbour	104.12	102.87	102.65	103.7	98.9
Greater Manchester	107.53	112.44	112.73	115.9	113.4
North West	118.5	109.9	106.7	107	105.7
England	100.5	97.7	96.9	96.5	94

## 5. Review of the Sufficiency Strategy 2021-23

The previous sufficiency strategy covered the period 2021-23 and came as the country was emerging from the global pandemic. It is clear that in the relatively short intervening period there have been a number of key changes. These relate to changes in the placement market, most notably the reduction in the number of available foster placements across both the council and independent sectors, locally, regionally, and nationally. In addition, recent changes introducing regulation to 16+ accommodation services while necessary, have created further uncertainty in that sector. As a result, residential care is being used as a default option for a small but significant number of children even at the younger (10-13) end of the age spectrum.

The previous version of this document contained a range of actions under 3 main categories:

1. General Actions
2. Fostering Actions
3. Residential/Supported Accommodation Actions

Key actions are focused mainly on inputs, many of which have been completed but the impact of the work undertaken is unclear, and even less so is whether completion of each action has led to improved placement sufficiency. However, the broad aims remain relevant in this updated iteration of the strategy, most notably the need to increase fostering sufficiency, and the need to deal with local supply of residential accommodation.

While some elements of the previous action plan appear to have been monitored more closely via the sufficiency project subgroups for Fostering, Residential and Supported Lodgings, overall the governance arrangements relating to sufficiency work need strengthening given the challenges and associated risks with this element of the councils work. Terms of Reference have been drafted for a sufficiency monitoring group but the culture of regularly and routinely formally monitoring and evaluating sufficiency work needs to be fully embedded.

### What do we think is working well

- **Strong commissioning team** who know Trafford Children and work proactively with providers
- **Good joint working** between the commissioning team and social work teams
- **Edge of care panel** is now up and running and provides robust oversight
- **Strong commitment to children remaining in their own family networks** evidenced through the high proportion of children living with Connected Carers

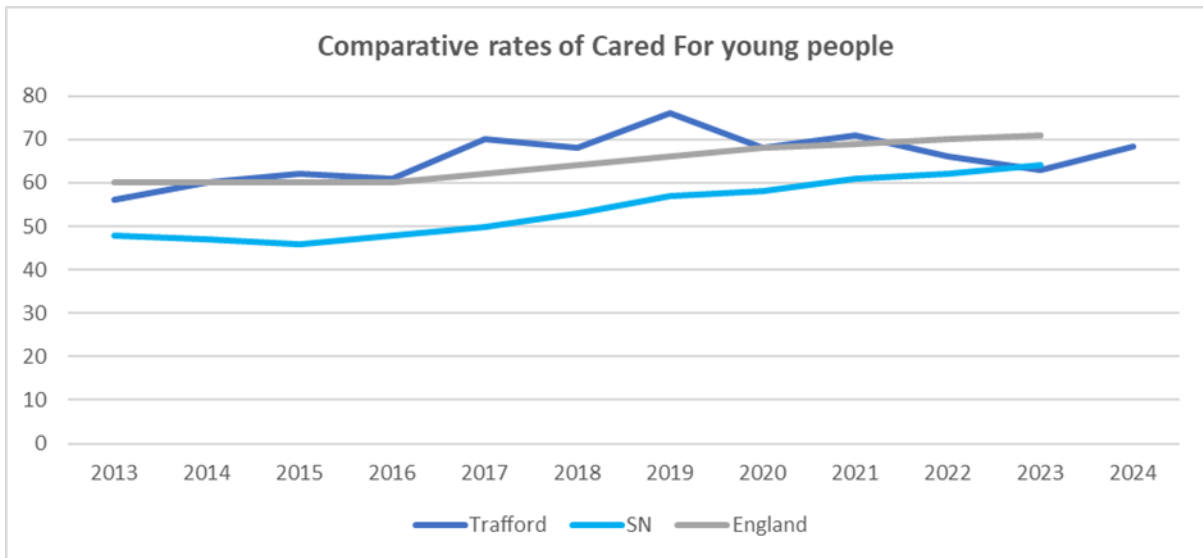
- **Low numbers of children aged 5-10 in residential accommodation** compared to other NW LA's (PNW Census)
- **Improved placement stability**
- We currently have **54% of our cared for children living in our own provision**. While this is a reduction from the end of the last financial year it is significantly above the level for similar local authorities (47%) and the average across England (43%) for the year ending 31st March 2024.
- **Developing GM work** and Trafford playing an active role e.g. through the fostering Recruitment Hub and Project Skyline
- **Good use of internal fostering** resource through high utilisation levels of existing foster carers
- We have good relationships with a growing core group of **“Trusted” providers** where **child centred practice** is at the heart of their work with Trafford children and young people
- Establishment of the **House Project** to enable young people to move into their own accommodation at or close to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday
- **Commissioned supported accommodation** is well established and provides quality support for young people in the borough

#### **What do we think needs to improve**

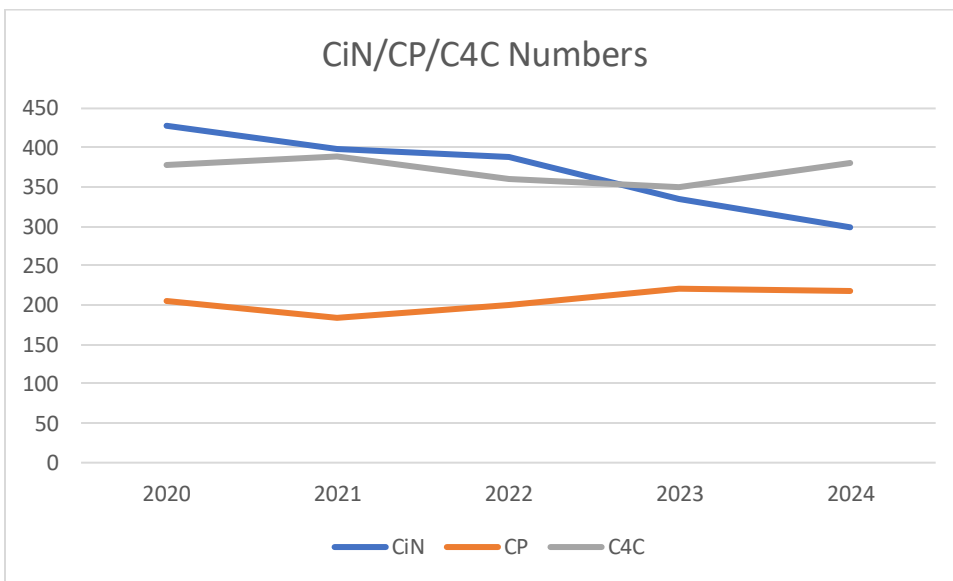
- **Market management** and **Strong engagement** with local providers
- **Increased foster placement sufficiency** to avoid unnecessary escalation to residential care
- Improved **local residential sufficiency**
- **Improved sufficiency for young people aged 16+** and particularly for those aged 18+ within the network of social housing providers
- **Governance and oversight** of placement sufficiency work
- **Improve management oversight** of children coming into care, including those entering care in an unplanned way and through Police Powers of Protection.
- Improved **Assessment & Care Planning**, that enables outcome based commissioning
- **Improve planning** in relation to accommodation for young people post 16 to avoid use of commissioned placements post 18

## **6. Our Cared for Children**

In eight of the last nine years of published data the rate of cared for children in Trafford has been above and, in some cases, significantly above (e.g 2019 76 vs 57) the average for similar local authorities (SN, Statistical Neighbours). The relatively high rate of cared for children historically in the borough goes some way to explain why the more recent significant increase seen by some local authorities has not been replicated in Trafford.



For each of the last 5 years cared for children numbers have remained within the 350 to 400 range (average 372). Over the last 10 years cared for children numbers in the borough have risen as high as 416 (March 2019) and as low as 317 (March 2014). An average for the last 10 years data is 370, with the number changing only marginally if the higher and lower numbers are removed. From the available data it appears that in Trafford there is no direct relationship between the numbers of children on CiN and CP plans.



On this basis, it is reasonable to assume at this juncture that the numbers of cared for children will remain within that same range, and that planning for a cared for population close to 400 should provide enough flexibility to enable positive sufficiency planning. However, this needs to be kept under regular review in order to respond to any emerging issues or trends that develop over time.

### 6.1 Cared for Children Population Age Profile

	Under 1	1-4 years	5-9 years	10-15 years	16/17 years
<b>Trafford 2023/24</b>	2.7%	13.1%	17.2%	39.4%	27.6%
<b>National 2023/24</b>	4%	13%	18%	38%	27%

The national figures of cared for children by age have remained consistent to within + or – 1% across the categories over the last 5 years. While local numbers are relatively small this shows Trafford to be out of step with the national picture:

- 1.3 percentage points less for under 1's, when the national figures are only 4%
- 1.4 percentage points more for 10-15 year olds
- 0.6 percentage points more for 16/17 year olds.

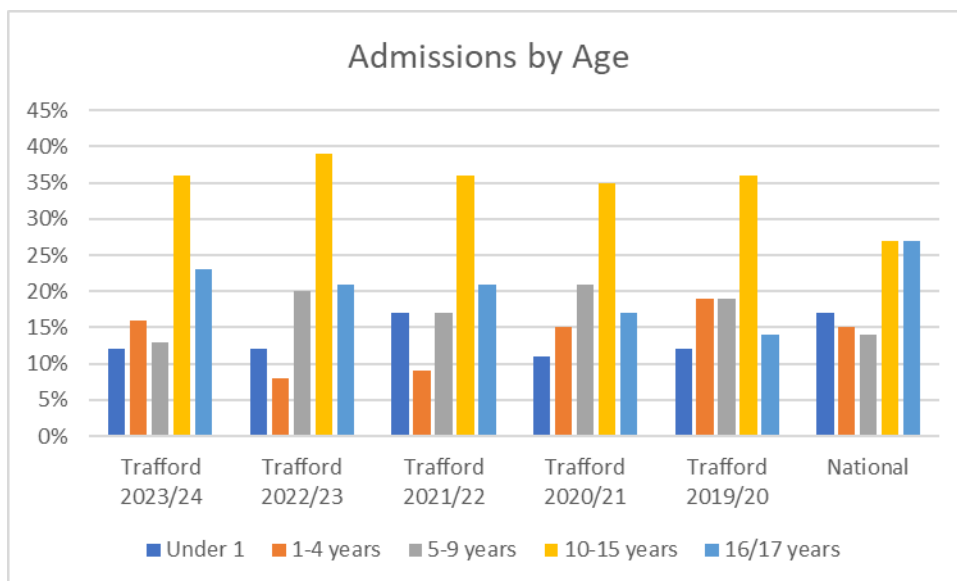
These snapshots when involving small numbers (locally) with much larger numbers (nationally) can be problematic, and questions will arise about statistical relevance. However, the table below shows that Trafford has remained consistently below the national average for children aged under 1. The age profile figures for each of the preceding 4 years (published data) shows significant volatility particularly in the 3 mid age range categories. In addition, over this period, although the 10-15 year old category is now closer to the national figure it has been particularly high for much of the last 4 years, this is now starting to translate into a higher rate of 16/17 year olds at the end of the last financial year and a significant increase.

	<b>Under 1</b>	<b>1-4 years</b>	<b>5-9 years</b>	<b>10-15 years</b>	<b>16/17 years</b>
<b>Trafford 2022/23</b>	3.1% (5%)	10.5% (13%)	17.3% (18%)	45.7% (38%)	23.4% (26%)
<b>Trafford 2021/22</b>	2.5% (5%)	11.4% (13%)	19.2% (18%)	44.5% (39%)	22.4% (25%)
<b>Trafford 2020/21</b>	2.8% (5%)	13.8% (14%)	20.7% (19%)	40.1% (39%)	22.6% (23%)
<b>Trafford 2019/20</b>	2.7% (5%)	15% (14%)	20.6% (18%)	45% (39%)	16.7% (24%)

NB National Figures in brackets

## 6.2 Age on admission to care

	<b>Under 1</b>	<b>1-4 years</b>	<b>5-9 years</b>	<b>10-15 years</b>	<b>16/17 years</b>
<b>Trafford 2023/24</b>	12%	16%	13%	36%	23%
<b>National 2023/24</b>	16%	15%	15%	26%	29%



For children aged 1-4 and 5-9 the age profile of admissions in the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March shows close correlation with the national figures for the same period.(which again have remained stable to within 1 or 2% over the last 5 years) for children. Greater divergence is seen again:

- In the under 1 category where there are 4 percentage points less admissions
- In the 10-15 year olds where the figures are 10 percentage points more admissions
- In the 16/17 year old category where there are 6 percentage points less admissions.

Again, over a five year period admissions in the under 1 category have been consistently below the national average. There has been significant volatility in the 1-4 year age range with variance either side of the national average by -7% and +4%. Until last year the 5-9 year old admissions have remained consistently above the national average. Admissions in the 10-15 year old category have consistently and significantly been above the national average by as much as 12% (2022/23).

	Under 1	1-4 years	5-9 years	10-15 years	16/17 years
<b>Trafford 2022/23</b>	12% (16%)	8% (15%)	20% (14%)	39% (27%)	21% (27%)
<b>Trafford 2021/22</b>	17% (17%)	9% (15%)	17% (15%)	36% (27%)	21% (25%)
<b>Trafford 2020/21</b>	11% (20%)	15% (18%)	21% (17%)	35% (26%)	17% (20%)
<b>Trafford 2019/20</b>	12% (19%)	19% (17%)	19% (16%)	36% (27%)	14% (20%)

### 6.3 Gender

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<b>Female</b>	181 (47.8%)	189 (48.3%)	175 (48.3%)	172 (48.7%)	178 (47.1%)
<b>Male</b>	195 (51.5%)	200 (51.2%)	185 (51.1%)	180 (51%)	199 (52.7%)

The gender split of cared for children in Trafford has changed very little over the course of the last 5 years with a slight majority of males. This contrasts with an established national gender split of the cared for population that shows an even larger male majority of 57%

#### 6.4 Ethnicity

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024 School Census
<b>Asian/Asian British</b>	<b>18 (5%)</b>	<b>22 (6%)</b>	<b>17 (5%)</b>	<b>37 (11%)</b>	<b>42 (11%)</b>	<b>17.3%</b>
<b>Black/Black British</b>	<b>25 (7%)</b>	<b>23 (6%)</b>	<b>25 (7%)</b>	<b>24 (7%)</b>	<b>29 (8%)</b>	<b>4.7%</b>
<b>Mixed/Dual Background</b>	<b>40 (11%)</b>	<b>50 (13%)</b>	<b>49 (14%)</b>	<b>49 (14%)</b>	<b>63 (17%)</b>	<b>8.9%</b>
<b>White British</b>	<b>293 (77%)</b>	<b>292 (75%)</b>	<b>265 (73%)</b>	<b>230 (66%)</b>	<b>238 (63%)</b>	<b>56.3%</b>
<b>Other Ethnic Group</b>	<b>2 (&lt;1%)</b>	<b>4 (1%)</b>	<b>6 (2%)</b>	<b>10 (3%)</b>	<b>8 (2%)</b>	<b>2.9%</b>

The table above shows a significant fall in the proportion of cared for children who are white British but this proportion remains above that of the general school population. The other key shifts have been an increase in children from an Asian background and some of this is accounted for by the increase in unaccompanied minors although the proportion remains substantially below that of the general school population. There has been a significant increase in the proportion of children from dual/mixed heritage background with the increase leaving this group of cared for children significantly above the proportion for the general school population.

This data has important implications for placement sufficiency and placement stability as a knock on effect of placement matching, particularly in view of the fact that the vast majority of foster carers are traditionally white British.

#### 6.5 Legal Status

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	National (%)
<b>ICO</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>75%</b>
<b>FCO</b>						
<b>Placement Order</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>1.5%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Section 20</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>14.4%</b>	<b>17.5%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>19%</b>

Over the course of the last 5 years there has been a gradual realignment of legal status' for Trafford's cared for children with the national averages for care orders and Section 20 arrangements. At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 77% of children were cared for under the auspices of a care order (Interim or full care order). This is broadly in line with the national average. 20%,

again broadly in line with the national average, are looked after under Section 20 voluntary arrangements. A consistently lower proportion than the national average are looked after with a placement order being in place.

## **6.6 Special Education Needs and/or disability**

Of the young people cared for, 96 also have an EHCP: 25.1%. This is around 5.2 times greater than seen in the general school population and perhaps not surprising in terms of the level of need more generally for the overall cohort of cared for children based on their pre-care adverse childhood experiences. In view of this fact, it is imperative that this cohort of children experience high levels of stability in their living situation to provide a good foundation for their educational development.

For children with Special Educational Needs and Disability strong, cohesive, multi-agency collaborative working is essential to achieving better outcomes for each individual child through addressing their holistic needs. As a fundamental principle this is better achieved the closer these children live to their own home area and in regular contact with professionals who know them best. In this regard having a multi-agency focus on Education Health and Care Plans is central to achieving key aims and objectives for individual children and young people.

The Council has a legal duty under the Children Act 1989 to provide services for children in need and their families. This includes children who are disabled. Parents and carers of children and young people with special educational needs and / or disabilities tell us that they often need a short break from their caring role. Children and young people would ordinarily take part in social opportunities outside of their education, providing a break for their parent / carer which is intended to prevent children requiring statutory services or becoming looked after.

We have seen an increased demand for short break assessments over the last 12 months due to our better engagement work with Special Schools and a simpler pathway being develop for requesting short breaks assessments which now go directly to the Short Breaks Team bypassing the Front Door, which was causing a lot of delay. The increased number of assessments has been countered though by a significant number of closures following changes to the short break review process that is now more robust and screen out children where it is evident they should have been accessing targeted or even mainstream activities or clubs rather than higher level short breaks intervention.

Short Breaks Assessment can lead to a personal budget or perhaps agency-based outreach care packages, sometimes we also offer an Activity Agreement which is a small pot of money (around £750) as a one off annual offer for families to use for specialist activities.

Where families qualify for "Continuing Care" assistance, more specialist agencies are jointly commissioned and funded with health partners.

Our commissioned/targeted offer has expanded significantly over the last 12 months and continues to be developed. Prior to the recent work being undertaken, our commissioned offer did not meet needs of disabled children needing 1:1 or personal care but now there is a greater range of providers who can now meet this need. Despite the rise in increased demand for short breaks assessments in the last 12 months, it is anticipated that demand will start to fall as the new arrangements take effect and start to have an impact.

The recent developments have served to enhance our strong DSR and so we can put in place effective support plans. In addition, we have mature collaborative working with the

continuing care health team which means we have solid foundations in place. However, we do need to do more to ensure the availability of more specialist approaches, including the availability of overnight respite care. The council does run a “Home from Home” (respite foster care) scheme, but this is now limited to just one carer. While numbers where overnight respite is a need are small, and arrangements spot purchased, searches can remain ongoing for quite significant time meaning that need can go unmet with the consequent risk of escalation to more permanent care arrangements.

## 6.7 CSE/CCE

16 cared for children are currently open to the Complex Safeguarding Team which equates to 48.5% of the total children open to that team. However, the number equates to less than 5% of the overall cared for population and brings into stark focus the fact that cared for children are massively over-represented in this vulnerable group. This is one of the cohorts of children for whom it frequently proves difficult to source suitable local placements for. While needs might often be best met within a family placement setting foster carers are often cautious about accepting the risk and being left without support. These children therefore often escalate to residential care placements, and often out of borough at high cost to the council, and to life chances for those children.

## 6.8 Out of borough and at a distance

There is strong evidence that across the region local authorities are placing a greater proportion of their cared for children outside their own home area. Where placements are not within the local authority area, or in an adjoining local authority area they are termed “*Placements at a Distance*” and usually more than 20 miles from the child’s own home area. Such placements make it more difficult for social workers to track and monitor progress, they dislocate children from family, friends, and services who know them, having additional negative lifelong consequences for what is already a vulnerable and disadvantaged group of children.

At the end of March 2024 Trafford had a total of 184 children living outside the borough (48.8% of the total C4C population), although the majority of these were placed in neighbouring GM local authority areas. Within this cohort, 66 children were placed more than 20 miles from their own home area. This equates to 17.4% of Trafford’s cared for children, the proportion having more than doubled since March 2022. Of these, some involve placements of unaccompanied asylum seekers (5 children).

The table below demonstrates how this profile has changed over the course of the last 5 years with an escalation of placements over 20 miles away since the Pandemic. Overall numbers have more than doubled in this timeframe with children placed between 50 and 100 miles away having tripled. Notwithstanding the fact that these are small numbers and thus prone to volatility, the trend is one that this sufficiency strategy needs to address as a key priority.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
<b>20 – 50 miles</b>	19	21	20	28	34
<b>50 – 100 miles</b>	3	8	5	4	12
<b>100+ Miles</b>	9	4	5	12	20

<b>Total</b>	31	33	30	44	66
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Whilst some of these children will be placed in positive circumstances and within their own family network (currently 4 of the 66) and achieve positive outcomes, others are more likely to have reduced health, educational and life opportunity outcomes. We should therefore be doing everything that we can to wrap-around appropriate support services that reduce these longitudinal risks. This is easier to achieve the nearer to their own home area that these children live while in our care.

## **6.9 Placement Stability**

Despite some of the more recent challenges in sourcing placements for some children, figures in relation to placement stability have showed some improvement. At the end of March 2020 11.9% of cared for children had 3 or more placements in the preceding 12 months. This had reduced to just 4% by the end of March 2024 and shows strong indications that most children are achieving good levels of stability.

In terms of placement longevity there have also been some significant improvements. In March 2020 only 62.5% of cared for children who had been in care for 2 and a half years or more had been in the same placement for at least 2 years. Again, the steady increase has meant that this figure rose to 74% by March 2024 and represents good performance in this element of work. However, there remain wide disparities in the longevity of different types of placements so for example 67% of children in connected carer placements had been living with those carers for 2 or more years; 53% of children in mainstream foster care had been living in that placement for 2 years or more; 28% of children in residential care had been living in that same placement for 2 years or more. While the latter may be desirable for a number of reasons, not least a desire to focus on family based placement options where possible and avoid use of residential placements as long-term permanence options, this level of long-term instability for this cohort needs close monitoring.

While on the whole placement stability figures show strong performance and are testament to the investment in placement support services, this work needs to continue to ensure that these good outcomes are maintained, and that those most vulnerable to placement instability are closely tracked and monitored.

## **6.10 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)**

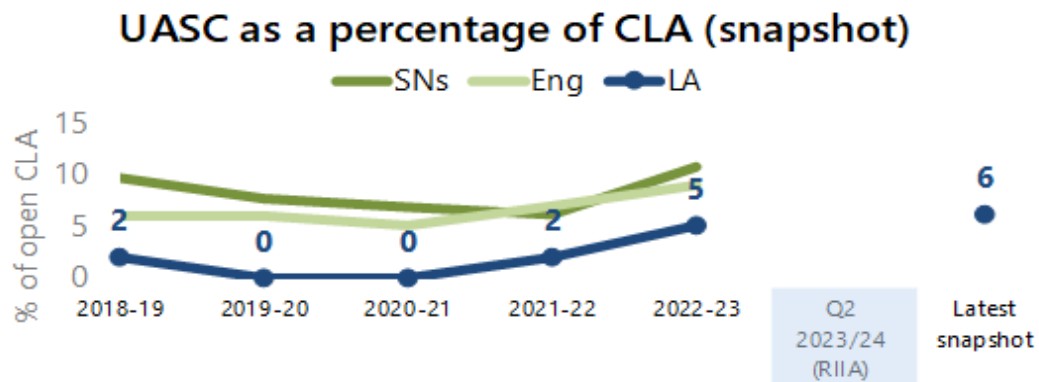
Numbers of unaccompanied Asylum seekers in Trafford remained low for a long period through most of the 2010's period with numbers totalling just 3 at the end of March 2021. However, the advent of the NTS has seen number steadily increase to 6 in March 2022, 17 by March 2023, and 23 by March 2024. This is primarily a result of historically low numbers meaning Trafford was well below its target proportion for UASC and so has taken a significant number of those dispersed from Kent to the North West under the NTS.

During this same period as would be expected we have seen a significant increase of care leavers who as children were UASC. At the end of March 2021 numbers were 17. In each of the subsequent these numbers have increased to 20, 27, and 43. In the last few months this has increased to 47 and will likely grow still further in the next 5 years. The challenges with this group are exacerbated by the fact that the processing of asylum claims has slowed since the Pandemic, and with pressure to reduce net migration more claims are being refused and then challenged. In each instance there is no entitlement to public funds and so

these young people remain dependent on responsible local authorities for funding and accommodation. This adds to budgetary pressures and reduces supply of placements.

The current UASC numbers equates to 5.8% of C4C population and 0.04% of the 0-17 population in the borough. The graph below shows that Trafford remains at a lower level than similar local authorities, and the England average.

## 23 open unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)



The in-house fostering service and IFA's provide accommodation for 7 and 8 of these children respectively with the remaining young people aged 16 or over and in some form of semi-independent living accommodation.

While in the past it has been the case that new accommodation has mostly been needed in response to spontaneous arrivals, this is no longer the case. Where previously need was often difficult to predict and largely small numbers, this is clearly no longer the case. This new environment means a more planned and co-ordinated response is necessary and so it is unlikely that one single solution or service will meet the needs for this group of children and young people. There will need to be a greater emphasis than ever before on collaboration with providers, and other LA's, to secure appropriate provision.

### 7. Key Challenges in sufficiency and cost

In Trafford numbers of cared for children have remained within a more clearly defined range than many other local authorities over the last 5 years. However, we have experienced the same challenges as others in sourcing suitable placements, and placement costs have continued to rise in line with those across the UK. Key factors in these challenges include:

1. Rising numbers of UASC coming into the borough under the national transfer scheme
2. Impact from Covid has been significant and likely to be long lasting with increasing mental health complexity for a small number of children post pandemic
3. Reductions in fostering capacity nationally and locally
4. A challenging Children's Home market with limited local sufficiency
5. Regulatory framework adds disincentives for homes to keep complex children who pose risks.
6. Regulation of post 16 supported accommodation arrangements
7. Lack of availability of move on accommodation for young people post 18

The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, introduced changes that have a direct impact on the current sufficiency of accommodation

for under 16-year-olds. From September 2021, the placement of any under 16-year-old child in an unregulated provision became unlawful. Whilst offering greater protection for vulnerable children, this legislative change creates a need to develop capacity amongst providers and increase the range and volume of in borough of provision that is now registered. In addition to this, ensuring that 16- and 17-year-olds, particularly the most vulnerable, are in accommodation most suitable for their needs is a key priority.

### Costs Pressures

For the financial year ending March 2024, Trafford spent £8.8m on externally commissioned residential placements. This represented an increase on the previous year of £1.3m. Although some health funding was received the net expenditure increased by 21%. Early forecasting for the current financial year suggests a further increased placement cost rising to £9.8m. Again, some costs will be offset by health funding but if there is no change this represents a net expenditure increase of 12.6% compared to 2023/4 and overall 36% compared to 2022/23.

Current placement data shows Trafford’s external residential placements for cared for children costing between £2,541 p/w (£132k p/a) and £15,100 p/w. There are just 2 placements that cost under £3k per week. These are outliers and atypical of the general costs incurred by this cohort of children. These lower end costs are associated with children placed in larger group setting provisions where unit costs are lower; higher end costs are associated with children whose needs are higher level, making them difficult to place alongside other children and leading to solo placement settings. 4 children currently have placements that cost in excess of £10k p/w.

In this regard Trafford is no different to other LA’s across GM and nationally, and is in fact better placed than many. Trafford does not currently for example use any unregistered provision when many other local authorities are, and we have also managed to maintain average placement costs for residential care at a lower level than many other Local Authorities. Despite this the continued rise shows no sign of abating in the short to medium term and so actions that have the potential to change the current market environment in the medium to long-term provide the best means of starting the process of stemming the current trend of cost increases.

### 8. Placements Overview

The most recent published ‘903’ Children Looked After in England data gave a figure of 162 children / young people placed in Trafford by other authorities at the end of March 2023. This is similar to that reported last year. Historically, Trafford has been a ‘net importer’ however, given the current number of placements outside the Borough, this is no longer the case as we had 162 placed out of Borough at that point in time. In recent months we have risen to 184 out of borough placements (48.4% of the total C4C population). While this figure has increased, it is not out of step with similar local authorities.

**The profile of children’s placements over the last 5 years is represented in the table below.**

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	5 year change	National 2024
Total C4C	377	389	361	350	380		

Fostering Connected Carer	107 (28%)	113 (29%)	104 (29%)	91 (26%)	87 (23%)	-20 (-18.7%)	<b>16%</b>
Fostering In-House Foster Carer	103 (27%)	99 (26%)	105 (29%)	105 (30%)	104 (27%)	+1 (>1%)	<b>51%</b>
Fostering, IFA Carers	44 (12%)	44 (11%)	34 (9%)	54 (15%)	60 (16%)	+16 (+36%)	
<b>Total Fostering</b>	<b>254 (67%)</b>	<b>256 (66%)</b>	<b>243 (67%)</b>	<b>250 (71%)</b>	<b>251 (66%)</b>		<b>67%</b>
Children's Homes In-House	8 (2.%)	5 (1%)	8 (2%)	10 (3%)	7 (2%)	-1 (-12.5%)	
Childrens Home - External	21 (6%)	25 (6%)	22 (6%)	18 (5%)	33 (9%)	+12 (57.1%)	
<b>Total Children's Homes</b>	<b>29 (8%)</b>	<b>30 (8%)</b>	<b>30 (8%)</b>	<b>28 (8%)</b>	<b>40 (11%)</b>	<b>11 (38%)</b>	<b>10%</b>
Semi-Independent	15 (4%)	11 (3%)	11 (3%)	10 (3%)	14 (4%)	-1 (7%)	<b>7%</b>
Independent Living	0 (0%)	1 (<1%)	3 (<1%)	3 (<1%)	8 (2%)		
Semi + independent Total	15 (4%)	12 (3%)	14 (4%)	13 (4%)	22 (6%)	7 (50%)	
NHS/Health Trust	0	0	0	0	2		
Other Placements	0	0	0	3	9		
Placed with Parents	73 (19%)	84 (22%)	69 (19%)	53 (15%)	43 (11%)	30 (-41%)	<b>6%</b>
Residential School	1	3	3	2	1		
Secure	0	1	1	0	0		

Historically most of Trafford's cared for children are placed in foster placements (66% on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024); the second highest proportion are placed in Children's Homes and these numbers and proportions are not dissimilar to most other local authorities. A similar proportion of children are placed with their own parents on a care order, a number that has fallen significantly over the 5 year period but where the proportion of those children remains higher than the national average. The fourth highest proportion of children are placed in Semi-Independent and Independent living arrangements levels that are broadly in line with the national average. With cared for children numbers remaining broadly the same, the total number of foster placements remaining at a similar level, and the decrease in children placed with parents means we have seen increases in children's homes, independent/semi-independent, and "Other" placements.

## 8.1 Fostering

Trafford council has an extensive in-house fostering offer, which is utilised for children and young people who cannot live with their families and whose needs are best met in a family environment. 66% of cared for children live in foster placements, broadly the same as it was 5 years ago. 54% of our children live in our own in-house provision. Both the level of usage of foster placements, and the level of usage of in-house foster carers have reduced in the last 12 months (71% and 59% respectively). The figures for similar authorities a year earlier

were 69% and 47% respectively. This means that we have a lower proportion of children in foster placements than the average for similar authorities a year ago when previously we had a greater proportion. While we have less children as a proportion in our own accommodation than a year ago that figure still remains healthily above the average for those similar authorities.

Despite there being little change in overall numbers and proportion of children in foster placements over the 5 year period, there has been some shift across the 3 main categories (Connected Carers, General in-house carers, IFA).

The total number of connected carer placements has fallen by 20 over the last 5 years and now providing 23% of all placements (28% in 2019/20). Despite this fall, the level of connected carer placements in Trafford remains significantly above (x2) the national average. The numbers living with connected carers are 35% of all children in foster placements compared to 23% nationally. These figures show that we have a strong commitment to enabling children to remain living within their own local networks when it is safe and appropriate to do so, and this should continue.

The high numbers of children placed with connected carers tends to mask the fact that provision of mainstream foster placements is lower than might be expected. A local authority fostering service should be considered as the cornerstone of any strategy to increase placements sufficiency for cared for children. This should include a strong focus on foster care recruitment as well as ensuring the level of support required by foster carers to undertake this difficult but rewarding task is readily available and kept under review in order to ensure good levels of retention. Retaining a good quality experienced foster carer workforce is essential as well as cost effective with some research suggesting the cost of replacing one foster carer household being in the region of £15,000. The more foster carers are retained the more any newly recruited foster carers increase placement sufficiency rather than just enabling the service numbers to stand still.

Over the course of the last 5 years the in-house fostering service has had a net loss of 9 fostering households. It is therefore surprising that the number of placements offered has remained broadly the same (+1 placement) in this timeframe and this is likely to be due to 2 factors a) many of those leaving the service had either not been active or were providing respite only placements b) the service currently has a strong household utilisation ratio of 1.5 placements per household. A high utilisation ratio, while ensuring numbers in the in-house service remain steady, it does mean that some households are likely to be over the usual fostering limit of 3, and can create additional pressure for carers who may suddenly feel they can't cope causing placement instability and risks cares exiting the service. Therefore, an increased cohort of carers and slightly lower utilisation at around a ratio 1.25 would be more desirable.

Year	Recruited Carers	De-registrations	Net Growth
2019/20	17	11	+6
2020/21	8	3	+5
2021/22	5	14	-9
2022/23	1	11	-10
2023/24	6	7	-1
Overall	37	46	-9

Significant work has been undertaken and remains ongoing to ensure support to deliver good levels of foster carer retention in Trafford. This includes:

1. Establishment of the Mockingbird Model – the first constellation is due to be up and running by January 2025
2. The service has helped set up a local foster carer association
3. CAMHS worker is due to start imminently to provide support through consultation and Training specifically for foster carers
4. Lead recruitment social worker to ensure higher levels of support in the first year of being a foster carer
5. Regular Newsletters
6. Quarterly meetings with HoS
7. Regular activity events

At the time of writing the local authority has just moved its recruitment front door into the broader GM Recruitment hub that is being hosted by Rochdale council. Rochdale has a strong recent tradition in terms of foster carer recruitment and so this move could be a positive one. It is however, not without its risks and so it will be important to continue to monitor progress and the level of good quality applications that are submitted.

The number and proportion of children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies has fluctuated over the course of the last 5 years but the last year has seen numbers reach an all time high of 60 accounting for 16% of all placements for cared for children and a 5 year increase of 36%. In numerical terms the increase in these placements have almost substituted for the fall in connected carer placements. 6 (10%) of these IFA placements are with foster carers living within the borough. A further 6 children live in IFA placements in neighbouring local authority areas, and a further 10 are placed in other GM local authority areas. This means that almost two third of children in IFA placements live outside the Greater Manchester conurbation.

Data on IFA carers within the borough has proved difficult to obtain with no national data available. In May this year the commissioning team asked IFA's to provide information relating to foster carers who are resident within the borough and how many children they are approved for. Not all providers were forthcoming with this information. 16 providers did respond and on the basis of these returns we were able to establish bed capacity of 26, but this information is likely to be incomplete and a significant underestimate given what we know about the number of children placed in Trafford by other local authorities. Therefore, establishing the extent of IFA sufficiency in the borough has to be seen as an early priority so that work can commence with those providers to secure a larger share of the local market, and to understand the extent of necessary growth. This will involve making stronger attempts at managing the market locally through developing still further the existing relationships.

### **Fostering Sufficiency Requirement**

In view of the number of children living with connected carers under a fostering arrangement, and the availability of IFA foster placements within the borough, Trafford needs to be ambitious in terms of the proportion of its cared for children that live in foster placements. For this reason, the aim should be for 72% of cared for children to be living in some form of approved foster placement. This translates into between 252 and 288 children depending on overall cared for children numbers across the three domains: Connected Carers, In-

House general; and IFA. The key elements in this regard include a) increasing numbers of available in-house foster placements and b) by better utilising existing IFA provision that already exists within the borough for Trafford children.

## **8.2 Children's Homes**

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 there were 40 (11% of all cared for children) children living in children's homes. 7 of these were living in the council's own homes with the 33 remaining children in externally commissioned placements. This represents a significant increase in numbers and proportion of external residential placements with associated cost increases. 10 of the 33 children had some form of additional need and so need more specialist provision. Of the remaining 23 children, 1 was placed in the borough and 3 in the neighbouring boroughs of Salford and Cheshire East although in the latter case this placement was 20 miles away from the home area. A further 10 children are placed in homes that are within the GM council areas.

Trafford has 2 of its own internally provided children's Homes, Old Halls Road and Kindle. In recent years Kindle has been re-purposed to provide a No Wrong Door provision (Residential and outreach support for children on the edge of care) although there have been a number of challenges in terms of recruitment to key posts that have affected its ability to operate in the manner intended. This means that it has been run more as a traditional children's home since the re-purposing in 2021. These 2 homes provide for a maximum capacity of 11 beds although matching considerations mean that this level of occupancy is not able to be attained. A more realistic capacity would be in the region of 8 or 9 beds in terms of utilisation and could often be as low as 6 or 7 across both homes. Both homes are regarded as good in recent Ofsted inspections.

Independent children's provision in the borough remains limited and a key barrier to new entrants remains the cost of property in some parts of the borough. Independent providers operate 15 beds within the borough. Seven of these across two separate providers relate to general EDB placements with two of these beds being utilised by Trafford. The remaining eight beds, again across two different providers, relate to beds for children with additional needs. None of these eight beds is being utilised by Trafford because matching to available places has proved a significant challenge for this group of children. Ten children with additional needs are currently placed in residential provision, two of these by virtue of their age should almost certainly be in appropriately matched foster placements.

Commissioning placements for children with Complex Needs can be problematic. As there is a national shortage of residential placements, providers can be selective about who they offer places to. Children with Complex Needs can be harder to place and there may be limited options available for them. When placement choice is limited, it is harder to find a suitable match and placement breakdown becomes more likely. In addition, at the present time nine children with additional needs are on the waiting list for short breaks residential respite. Due to a lack of provision this need remains unmet and should any of these CYP end up needing full-time residential care, the costs for this will be significant.

While some areas of Greater Manchester have an under-supply of independent children's home places, others have a significant over-supply. In the absence of immediate availability of in-borough beds we should seek to use more of the GM provision, particularly in neighbouring areas as a means of avoiding placements at a distance. The GM sufficiency work on soft block contracting has started to open up opportunities in this regard but further work is needed to enhance the impact.

The current market conditions have pushed us towards spot purchasing of commissioned placements. This arrangement is particularly advantageous to the larger providers and exposes local authorities including Trafford to a high level of financial risk. Despite having an agreed NW purchasing framework in place for residential placements, it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify placements within this framework agreement. At the present time Trafford has 14 (40%) of its 35 looked after children in residential placements under spot purchasing arrangements. The total weekly cost of these arrangements is £116K. This amounts to an average placement cost for spot purchased placements of £8,286pw. The remaining 21 children placed under the NW framework arrangements cost in total £85K per week (Avg. placement cost of £4,048pw).

The current market conditions relating to the independent children's homes sector does not assist smaller local authorities like Trafford who have a limited local supply of placements and options remain quite limited. There are currently some positive developments across the Greater Manchester region in terms of seeking solutions to some of the current challenges. The GMCA is assisting the 10 local authorities in terms of setting up a Regional Care Co-operative (RCC) that has included some DfE funding as a Pathfinder project as part of the reforms flowing from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care published in 2022.

One key component of the RCC this is "Project Skyline". While not in itself the answer to the challenges faced by Trafford and the 9 other local authorities, it is one element of a broader series of steps being taken to address the issues of placement sufficiency for cared for children across the GM region. It is aligned with, and supports, Trafford's own Placement Sufficiency Strategy. It is therefore very much in our interests to fully engage with this regional work. It provides new opportunities and a significant risk of being left behind if we are not involved further exacerbating the placement sufficiency challenges.

### **Residential Sufficiency Needs:**

We have established that the Trafford's cared for children population is likely to remain between 350 and 400. In terms of planning for children, national and local authority data suggests that 10% of our cared for children will need a residential placement. At the upper end this equates to 40 children. This forecasting accords with our current level of presenting need. Ten of the current cohort have additional needs leaving a total of 30 children needing some form of EBD residential bed.

Council owned children's homes have capacity for 11 children although with matching considerations this is likely to only be 9 at most. Alongside this there are 7 independent sector beds with only one of these being utilised at the current time. Improved utilisation of existing independent sector beds when they become available would assist in achieving sufficiency but there will remain a current shortfall within the borough of around 15 EBD beds.

The council has no provision of its own for children with additional needs. We know that there are 8 beds across 2 homes in Trafford that could take some of these children with only two of these being utilised at the current time. But even if all these beds were used for Trafford children there would remain a shortfall for this group. Based on current numbers it would seem that there is a need for at least a further 4 beds for these children. However, as part of its residential strategy the authority needs to consider whether the provision of a stronger offer of overnight short break respite care might reduce the numbers requiring longer term residential beds.

The route to achieving this level of supply needs to be quickly deliberated but a mixed economy model would seem to be the best means of meeting this challenge. In addition, it is hoped that plans to improve fostering sufficiency may reduce the sufficiency requirement for residential provision in the medium to long term.

As a local authority we should seek to make additional residential beds available by:

1. Reinvesting in our own in-house provision
2. Taking steps to increase utilisation of existing independent provision.
3. Working with trusted providers to encourage new entrants into the borough

Formulating a medium term residential strategy will help to define what proportion of beds should fall into each of these categories. Any strategy is unlikely to result in quick realisation of the objectives and so reliance on out of borough provision will remain. In these circumstances we will seek to engage with providers to secure provision in the following order of preference:

1. In geographically neighbouring local authority areas where there is an over-supply
2. Other GM LA areas where there is an over-supply
3. North west LA areas where there is an over-supply
4. Any other LA areas.

### **8.3 Supported Accommodation and Care Leavers**

The majority of accommodation for 16 and 17 year old young people is currently provided via 23 commissioned beds, mainly part of the NW commissioning framework arrangements, with just three placements delivered as spot purchased, non-framework arrangements. Trafford has had a supported lodgings scheme in place for some years but this needs some level of development including Ofsted registration. At the present time no beds within this scheme are being utilised for 16 or 17 year olds.

The authority has 2 block contracts in place that provide 11 beds over 2 sites for young people aged 16-19. At the present time 3 of these beds are being used young people under 18 years of age with the remainder utilised by young people aged 18+ with 2 of the occupants now 20 years old. A further 3<sup>rd</sup> facility provides low level support for care experienced young people aged 18+ with support provided by staff on the care leaving team.

5 (22%) of the 23 placements for 16 and 17 year olds are within the borough, 4 are placed in neighbouring local authority areas, and a further 10 are placed in other GM local authority areas. This means that 19 of the 23 are placed within GM. A number of these providers are still awaiting their ofsted certification following the requirements for registration.

As with the fostering and children's homes provision there is a NW purchasing framework for this type of provision. For those young people aged 16 and 17. 82% of placements are made with framework approved providers although there is a wide variation in individual placement costs linked to assessed needs. The remaining small number of placements are delivered via spot purchasing arrangements.

For at least the past 12 months Trafford has had high numbers of young people remaining in post 16 commissioned accommodation beyond their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Numbers at the end of July 2024 were 35, an increase of 3 since the end of March 2024. While this represents a strong commitment to its support for care leavers, this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest in the north west region for what is one of the smaller cared for children populations and highlights the

difficulty in moving care leavers on to social housing once they turn 18. These numbers now account for 25% of all children in external provision.

While Trafford has a lower average cost for post 16 accommodation it is still £917 per week. Across the 35 young people this amounts to £32,095 per week and an annual cost pressure of £1.7m. Some of this cohort are former UASC children who have not had their asylum claims fully processed in which case options are limited. A further 20 young people are not former UASC children and so use of provision in this way is an urgent issue to be addressed as it enables other agencies to avoid their own statutory responsibilities and undermines placement sufficiency for those under 18. Key to addressing this will be to ensure early and robust pathway planning. In addition, a post 16 panel arrangement is now in place and this should assist in ensuring unnecessary delays in discharge from commissioned provision is kept to a minimum.

34 fostering households currently provide 37 staying put arrangements for care experienced young people. This provides a good level of continuity and support for the young people able to access this provision. In addition, Trafford has utilised the benefits of a Supported Lodgings scheme for a number of years. At the present time this consists of 5 households providing 4 placements for young people over the age of 18. This type of provision can help to bridge the gap for certain young people under 18 and consideration should be given to how the scheme can be expanded in terms of the number of households, and for 16 and 17 year olds subject to the necessary regulatory requirements being met.

Over the course of the last 2 years Trafford has had 2 cohorts progress through the House Project scheme, and scheme that is aimed at ensuring young people leaving care have a property just before, or just after their eighteenth birthday. A programme of training and support is associated with the scheme and properties utilised should be available for as long as they are needed with funding beyond 18 paid by the young person from their earnings and/or through housing benefit. These new ways of working are becoming embedded and while relatively small numbers are involved, they do help in avoiding use of post 16 supported accommodation beyond 18.

### **Supported Accommodation Sufficiency Needs**

Although a high proportion of 16+ young people are placed within the Greater Manchester area there remains a limited supply within the borough. For this reason, work needs to be focused on increasing regulated in borough availability through a combination of market management with known and trusted providers and ensuring that the in-borough provision we do have is used effectively. The aim should be to have in borough availability of 30 places through a combination of the in-house Supported Lodgings, block contract provision and NW framework provision

### **Case Study, Luke**

***Luke is 17 years old and has experienced significant instability throughout his childhood with periods in care and living with his parents. In total he has had 14 separate placements. In his teenage years there have been significant concerns in relation to contextual safeguarding.***

***Luke lives in semi-independent provision. Although he is placed outside the borough, he resides within 20 miles of his home area in another GM borough. Luke is familiar***

***with the area, local amenities and transport links and can travel around greater Manchester to see his family and friends.***

***Because of this close proximity he is able to access resources including professionals who know him well.***

***The placement is staffed 24/7 and Luke has support in place to develop his independence skills and support him to appointments***

***Luke has been in his current placement for just over 12 months, which is the most he has been settled in the past few years. This has enabled him to develop positive relationships with staff and the home manager which have become a stabilising and protective factor for him. A safety plan is in place to ensure safeguarding in relation to any missing episodes and mental health. This has led to a significant reduction in missing episodes, and reduction in involvement in crime/anti-social behaviour.***

***Through this period and using the stability of his living situation Luke has been able to develop a smaller more stable friendship group, which includes his ability to identify that certain extended peers increase his use of alcohol/drugs and anti-social behaviour, which he can now recognise is not helpful to his ambitions and progress. This has also enabled him to enjoy more independence and autonomy around family time with his mum and this has improved relationships between them both.***

***Luke has now been able to open up about the struggles with his mental health. This has increased worries for him in a different way but Luke has been accepting of support which is something that professionals have been trying to get him to engage in for some time.***

***His now close proximity to the borough has also been beneficial because it has enabled him to engage in the local "House Project" so that he can work towards achieving his aim to have his own property.***

## Summary

Numbers of cared for children remaining relatively stable (although usually above the average for similar local authorities) means that planning for sufficiency should be relatively straightforward. However, current market conditions and the change in complexity of need post pandemic means that new innovative ways of working will need to be found given that sourcing local placements to meet needs is clearly challenging.

There appear to be ongoing challenges in terms of sourcing in borough placements across the independent sector and this is evidenced by:

- only 10% of children in IFA placements living in the borough
- only 6% (3 children) living in independent children's home provision,
- Only 22% of young people in Semi-independent living arrangements being placed in the borough.

Use of provision in other GM areas helps keep children close even if not in borough but improved utilisation needs further development.

This document highlights a number of key areas for continued development in terms of placements sufficiency. Trafford has a strong tradition of internally provided placements both within the fostering service, supported lodgings, and the in-house residential provision. Expanding in-house provision in each of these sectors will lead to improved placement sufficiency but it is difficult to see how placement sufficiency can be improved much further without a different kind of relationship with providers that centres on local market management through positive commissioning relationships.

Meeting the challenges of the new environment will mean having an increased focus on preventative services and finding new and innovative ways of working with children to prevent admission to care, and for those in care strong collaborative working and engagement with a range of partners including independent providers to re-shape the market and other GM local authorities to find more innovative solutions. While the regional care co-operative provides some means of achieving the key objectives this will need to be built upon still further to deliver the change needed moving forward. The means to achieving this are set out below in terms of key strategic priorities.

The cornerstone of this strategy relies on growth in the availability of foster placements. As growth occurs there should be a resultant shift from residential to fostering. The extent of this change in balance will need to be subject to regular review to enable changed forecasts in relation to residential accommodation.

### **9. Key Strategic Priorities:**

1. Develop our edge of care offer for children aged 10+ to ensure that only those children who need to be looked after enter care. And when children do enter care they remain looked after only for so long as is commensurate with their needs.
2. Increase sufficiency in the local fostering market with an emphasis on returning our own fostering service to a position of growth with a view to having sufficient capacity to accommodate 70% of all children in some form of fostering arrangement.
3. Ensure that where residential placements are required there is a good supply of high quality local provision in the borough and across GM, that Trafford children can

access to reduce our reliance on placements at a distance, including for those with Special Educational Needs and Disability

4. Work with all partners to ensure good quality, sufficient accommodation is available for all children aged 16/17 (including those who present as homeless), and those aged 18+ to ensure they do not use commissioned placements beyond their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday
5. Commission services to meet the needs of children with disabilities and their families to ensure support is delivered in the right way at the right time and prevent unnecessary escalation of need.
6. Market management and engagement to ensure as many placements as possible are sourced via NW Framework providers, and that we deliver local placements for Trafford children, including engagement with GMCA to ensure sufficiency work is aligned with work on the Regional Care Co-operative, and other relevant initiatives.
7. Ensure strong governance and oversight of placement sufficiency work to monitor progress and impact of the key strategic priorities

### **How we will meet these objectives**

1. Formulation of a robust and comprehensive action plan that is subject to regular monitoring and review and that can be changed to meet emerging challenges
2. Implementation of robust governance structures to oversee and monitor implementation of the action plan, including the establishment of a “Sufficiency Board”
3. Annual refresh of the strategy that includes an update of the previous years activity and its impact
4. Continue to listen to the voice of children and young people to ensure that our cared for children live in homes where they feel safe, supported and can thrive on their journey through childhood.

The Sufficiency Strategy is underpinned by a quarterly review of the associated action plan monitoring progression against the key priorities as set out above. The Sufficiency Action Plan provides a detailed programme of work which will deliver on the vision set out within the strategy. Equality and diversity issues have been a feature of our consideration in developing this strategy. Oversight and governance will be through quarterly presentation at Sufficiency Board, Corporate Parenting Board, and Safeguarding Governance when required. Our processes provide for a regular and thorough review of our cared for children, their specific needs and the availability and type of placements to provide for them. Though the provision of enough of the right kinds of placement for children in care is consistently challenging, in Trafford we are committed to using creative ways to improve and develop our placement services.