

Looked After Children

Sufficiency Strategy

Giving our children the best possible start in life, so that they have every chance to succeed

2025 - 2028



Key information

Summary

- The population of Looked After Children in Bolton has increased by 6.5% over the last 12 months.
- 594 children were looked after at March 31 2025
- 115 Looked After Children were placed in agency placements outside Bolton at March 31 (2025).
- 67% of children were placed in foster households
- 15% of children were in residential settings, secure, or semi-independent living accommodation.
- The population of Looked After Children is expected to increase over the next 3 years.

In Bolton we want to give our children the best possible start in life, so that they have every chance to succeed and be happy. We also want to provide the best opportunities for children in care, leaving care, and children who are vulnerable and identify the key challenges that we face in achieving sufficiency and our strategic approach to overcoming them. Through effective collaboration we will work together involving children and young people in the decisions affecting their lives.

Resources

All commissioned placements are managed through the Placement and Brokerage Team. Please direct any enquiries to: childrenscommissioning@bolton.gov.uk

Independent foster agency placements, residential children's home placements and 16+ semi-independent supported accommodation placements are commissioned through the North-West regionally procured frameworks and purchasing systems. Further information on becoming a provider on these arrangements can be found at www.nwadcs.org.uk/regional-purchasing-systems.

Further information on sufficiency across Greater Manchester can be accessed through the [GM Combined Authority Sufficiency Observatory](#).

Key Challenges

- Despite increasing numbers of children coming into care, there is insufficient availability of foster carers, leading to greater reliance on other types of provision.
- Offering suitable placements in fostering households will be difficult over the next three years whilst we endeavour to build capacity and improve the early help and prevention offer.
- Placing Looked After Children because of socially unacceptable behaviour, abuse, and/or neglect is currently challenging and will remain so over the next three years.
- Providing short breaks and long-term placements for children with special educational needs and disabilities will be increasingly challenging over the next three years.

Difficulties in meeting the demand for placement of Looked After Children

	Currently		Over the next 1-3 years	
	Council	National	Council	National
Meet demand for placements	Red	Amber	Red	Amber
Meet demand for foster care	Red	Red	Red	Red
Meet demand for residential care	Amber	Red	Amber	Red

Notes: Red indicates that we expect to face difficulties meeting demand through existing suppliers and/or needs to produce services at high costs; Amber indicates that we expect to mostly meet demand through existing providers at reasonable costs, but there are cases where that is not true; Green indicates that we expect to meet demand through existing supply at reasonable cost.

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1. Overview

- **The purpose of the Bolton Sufficiency Strategy is to outline our position on the care of Looked After Children, identify future demand for care, and form an action plan for what care services are required in the borough. It is aimed at providing organisations with the most relevant information to inform their business and development plans.**

- **The Sufficiency Strategy has been developed in partnership with service providers. Co-design will be a key feature of how we iterate the information in order to maintain a sustainable and agile children's care sector. We have a legal duty under the Children's and Family Act 2014 to ensure there are a range of placements that meet the needs of all children in care.**

- **When children and young people cannot be safely cared for within their own family, it is important for them to remain close to their local networks and education. It is critical for us to engage with our local providers effectively and work together to ensure we maximise our access to existing care services in the borough, in addition to building new provision and recruiting more foster carers.**

- **The Sufficiency Trend is driven by a growth in demand that has pushed foster care capacity to the very limit, exacerbated by a shrinkage in the market. Subsequently, greater numbers of children risk being placed out of borough due to a lack of availability in Bolton, leading to an increase in the use of residential provision.**

- **Where Bolton has evidenced success is in a partnership approach with organisations who are willing to collaborate and shape their offer in alignment with borough needs. We want to work with providers with a proven track record in children's care, who are willing to invest in Bolton to develop good quality provision in the right locations. We can share market intelligence and share council expertise to help inform business plans and inform the care and support offer.**

- **Although there is good supply of 16+ independent supported accommodation in the borough, there is a growing number of young people requiring services which can cater for more diverse support needs and access to a variety of move-on routes with less reliance on social housing.**

2. Demand for placements

2.1 Population of Looked After Children

The total number of Looked After Children at 31 March in 2025 was 594, putting Bolton above the England average, though below the North-West average.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of Looked After Children from 2017-23 in Bolton, including comparative figures, following a decline during the pandemic. However, through evidence we can see the number is rising again. Availability within the foster care market remains challenging, with insufficient numbers of carers to meet growing demand both locally and nationally. Subsequently there has been an increase in the use of residential children’s homes and semi-independent living settings.

Figure 2 shows the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers Children (UASC) who were looked after in Bolton Council and in England over a similar period, and this figure continues to increase. Whilst there is a good supply of semi-independent accommodation in Bolton, there remains a need for foster placements for younger UASC.

Figure 1: Looked After Children at 31st March 2024 as a share of population of children

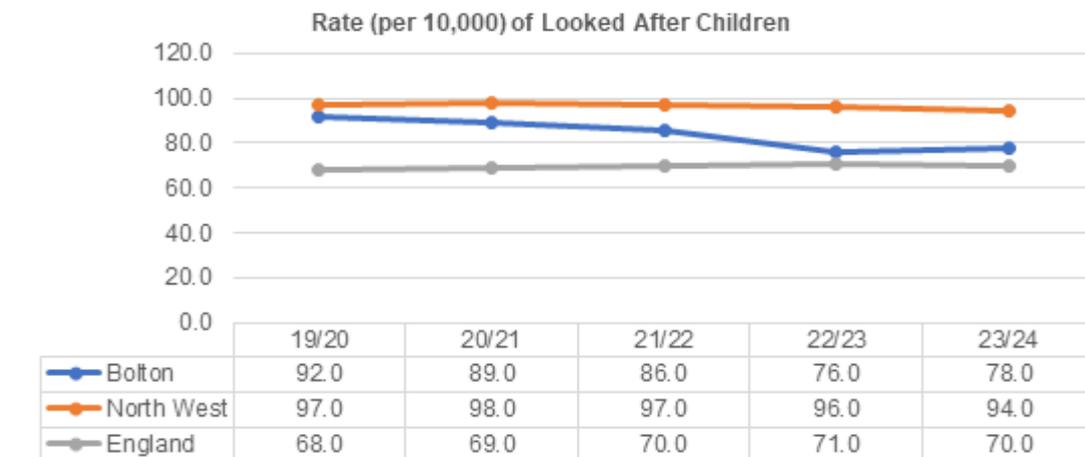
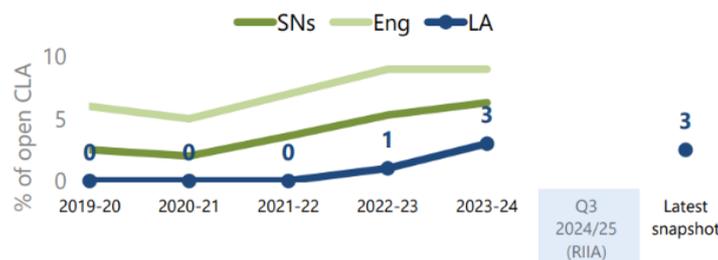


Figure 2: Looked After Children who were unaccompanied asylum seekers

15 open unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UAS)

UAS Children as a percentage of CLA (snapshot)



The percentage of Bolton children aged 10-15 in care is higher than the average across England (See **Figure 3**). Whilst for the majority of these children foster care is deemed the most appropriate plan, there is a limited number of foster carers who are willing to accept this age range due to a variety of factors (i.e., matching alongside younger children).

It is important for us to have a diverse care offer, with access to carers and care settings which cater to all different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. The majority of Looked After Children in Bolton identify as White British ethnicity, with lower than national average numbers for children of Black, African, Caribbean or Black British ethnicity, or children with mixed or multiple ethnic backgrounds (See **Figure 4**).

Figure 3: Looked After Children by age group (%) at 31st March 2024

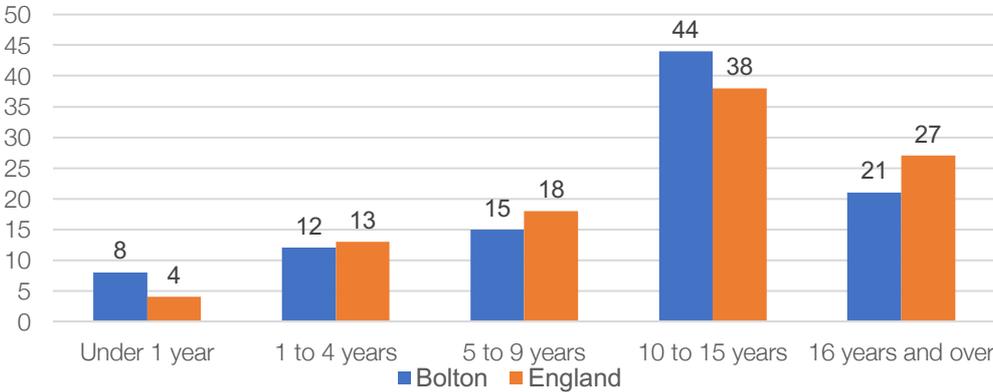
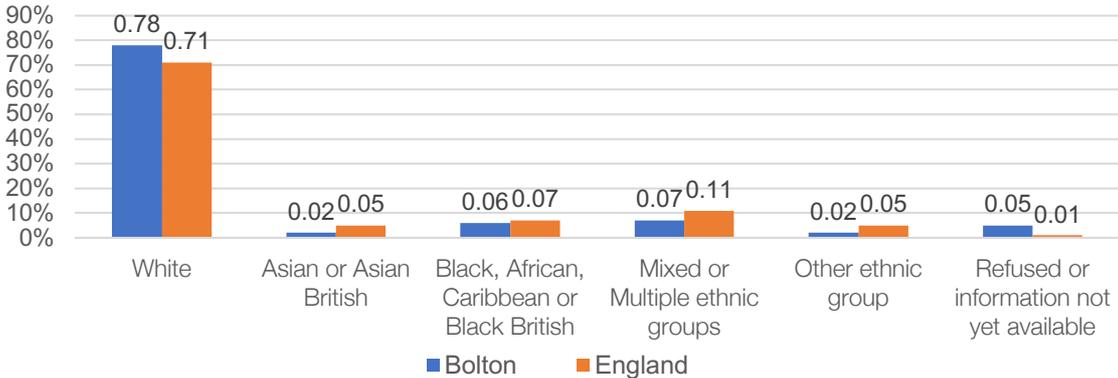


Figure 4: Looked After Children by ethnic background at 31st March 2024



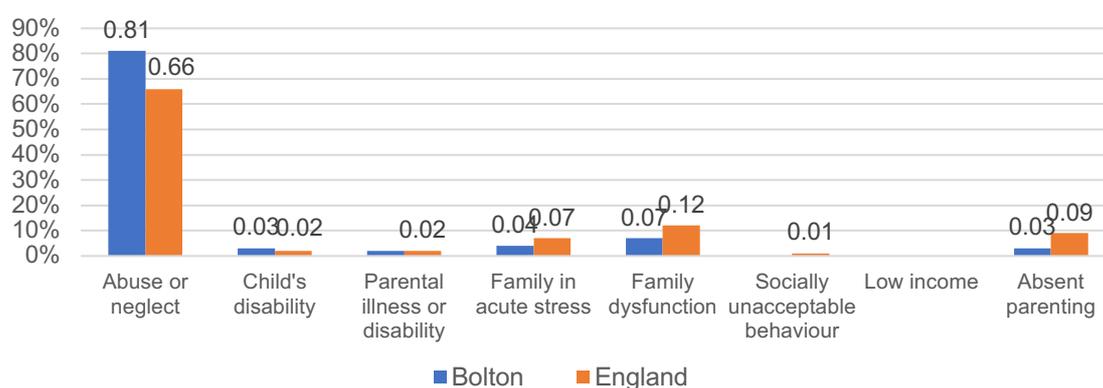
Note: For Bolton those 'Other ethnic group' and 'refused or information not yet available' are noted as being suppressed being applied due to low numbers.

2.2 Needs of Looked After Children

The data below details the primary reasons for children being looked after in Bolton. Reviewing the proportion of children who started to be looked after in March 2023 by primary need category, abuse or neglect shows as higher than the national average (see **Figure 5**). This means that Bolton children are coming into care with higher levels of trauma and more complex needs than average. We require care options from providers with an appropriate training and diverse support offer to reflect this.

Table 1 shows presenting challenges in providing placements for children across primary categories of need. Whilst abuse and neglect and socially unacceptable behaviour are forecast to remain a primary need, additional difficulties are expected around children with disabilities and families in acute stress.

Figure 5: Looked After Children by primary need category at 31st March 2024



Note: For Bolton those 'Parental illness or disability', 'Socially unacceptable behaviour' and 'Low income' are noted as being suppressed being applied due to low numbers.

Table 1 Difficulties in providing placements for children across primary need categories	Currently		Over the next 1-3 years	
	Bolton	National	Bolton	National
Abuse or neglect	Red	Red	Red	Red
Child's disability	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow
Parent's illness or disability	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Family in acute stress	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow
Family dysfunction	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Socially unacceptable behaviour	Red	Red	Red	Red
Low income	Green	Green	Green	Green
Absent parenting	Green	Green	Yellow	Green

Bolton sits in line with the national average in the share of Looked After Children with Special Education Needs (SEN) and disabilities as well as those who are qualified for an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan, as Figure 6 shows. As the number of children with SEN and disabilities continues to rise, so does the requirement for specialist carers and care provision, alongside sufficient education provision outside of mainstream settings to avoid children having to access provision out of area.

Figure 7 shows the share of Looked After Children who completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) by the results they obtained. The average scores obtained by children looked after by the council is in alignment with the national average.

Figure 6: Looked After Children with special needs and disabilities

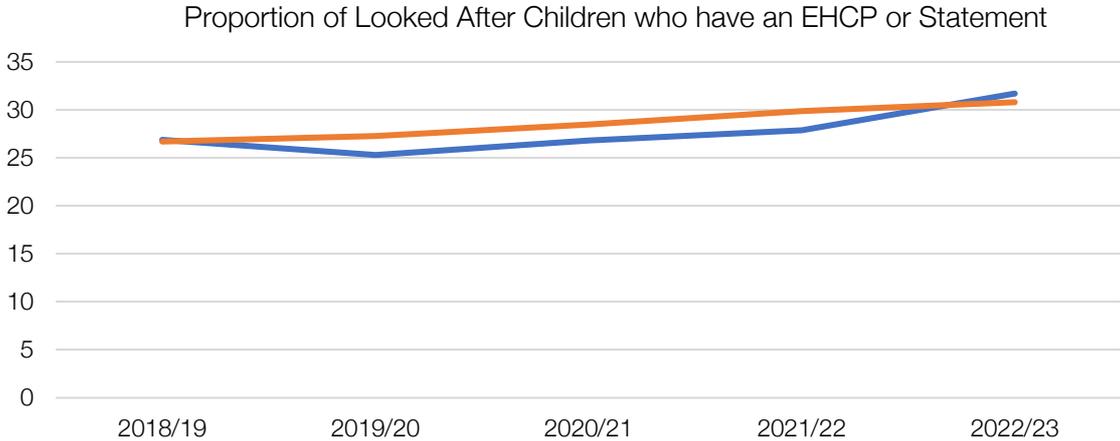
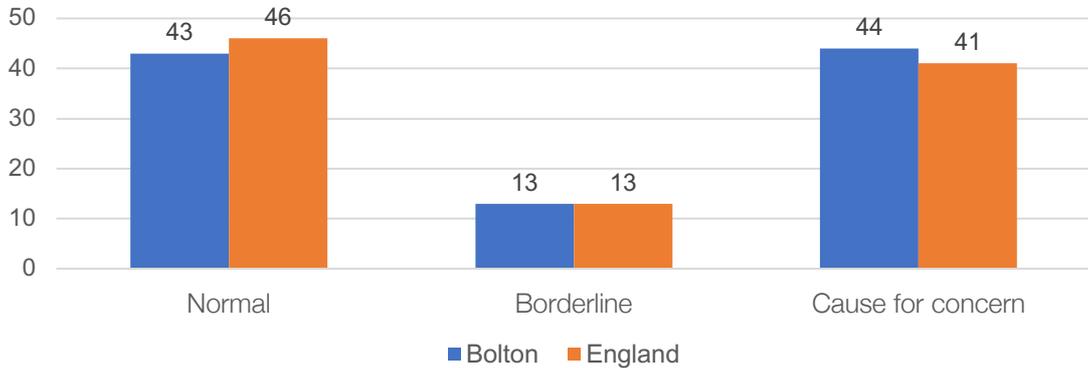


Figure 7: Proportion of Looked After Children by SDQ score (Ages 5 to 16 years with SDQ score)



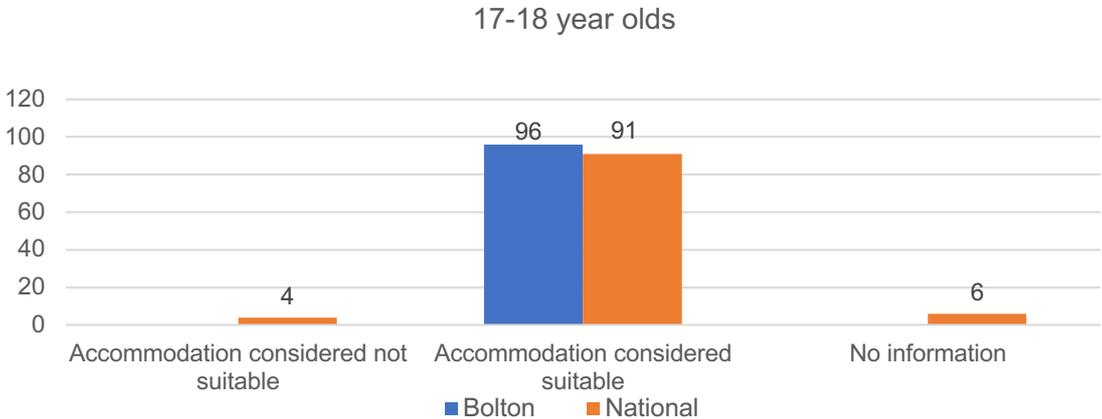
2.3 Care Leavers

As Bolton is seeing higher numbers of older children entering the care system, the need for an agile semi-independent supported accommodation offer remains vital. Whilst in Bolton there has been good supply of provision for 16-25 year-olds with our local independent and VCSE providers, we still require a diverse offer of support to care leavers in order to achieve a successful transition to independent living. In particular, we require provision that can cater for young people with higher level needs, including those with disabilities and mental health issues.

Figure 8 details the total number of care leavers aged 17-18 and 19-21 at March 31 in 2023 and the suitability of accommodation. It is evident from these figures that Bolton has a strong existing offer, exceeding the national average for young people who consider their accommodation suitable.

As Figure 9 shows, whilst 2/3rds of care leavers aged 17-18 are in employment, education or training, this figure drops to just over half for those aged 19 to 21, which is below the national average.

Figure 8: Care leavers by suitability of accommodation (%)



Note: For Bolton those 'Accommodation considered not suitable' and 'No information' are noted as being suppressed being applied due to low numbers.

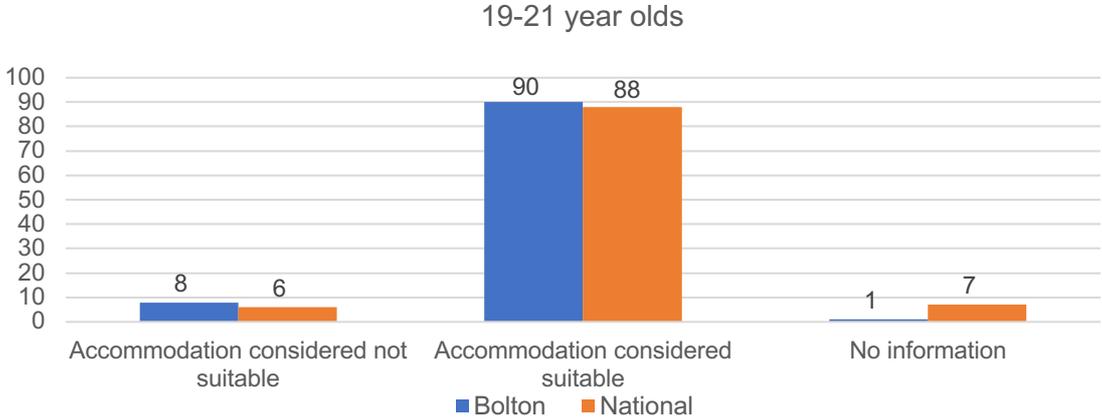
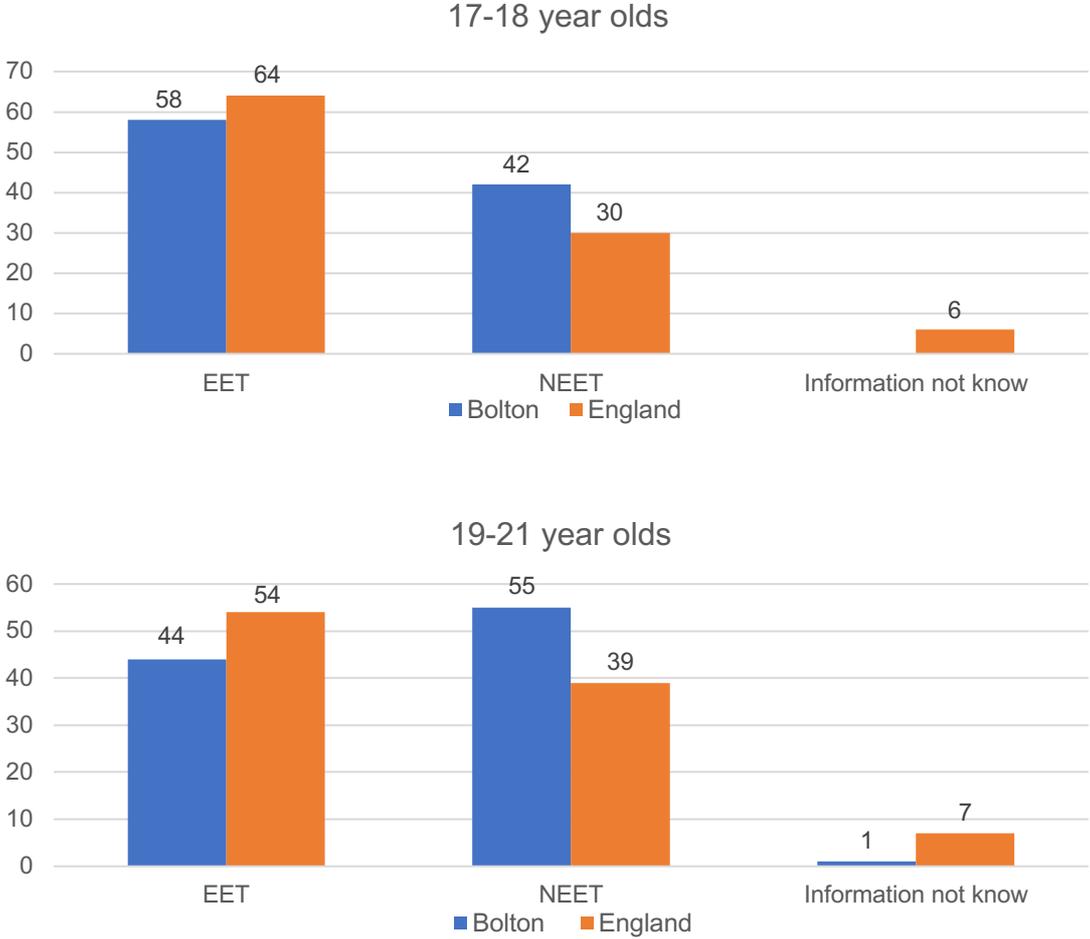


Figure 9: Care leavers by type of activity (%)



3. Supply of placements

3.1 Provision of placements

Bolton has a large number of established children’s homes rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted and is within the top 7 NW authorities for the number of foster carers in the borough, however access to our local provision is challenging in a competitive placements market. Only 28% of all fostering, residential, or semi-independent living placements on the private market are made in-borough, with the rest being utilised by other local authorities.

Figure 10 shows the percentage share of Looked After Children (under 16) within Bolton at March 31st 2024 by the type of placement. Figure 11 details the share of Looked After Children in Bolton residential and foster placements by type of provider.

Figure 10: Looked After Children by type of placement (in-borough)

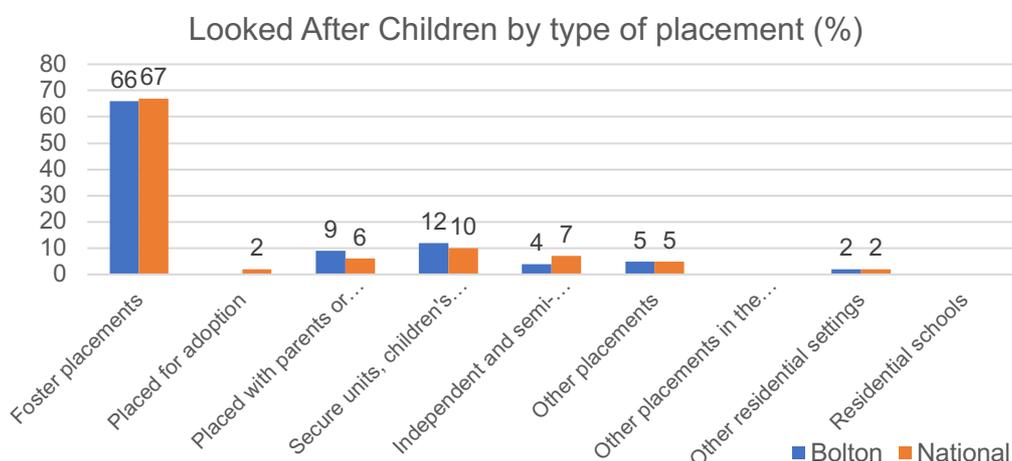


Figure 11: Looked After Children by placement provider (in-borough)

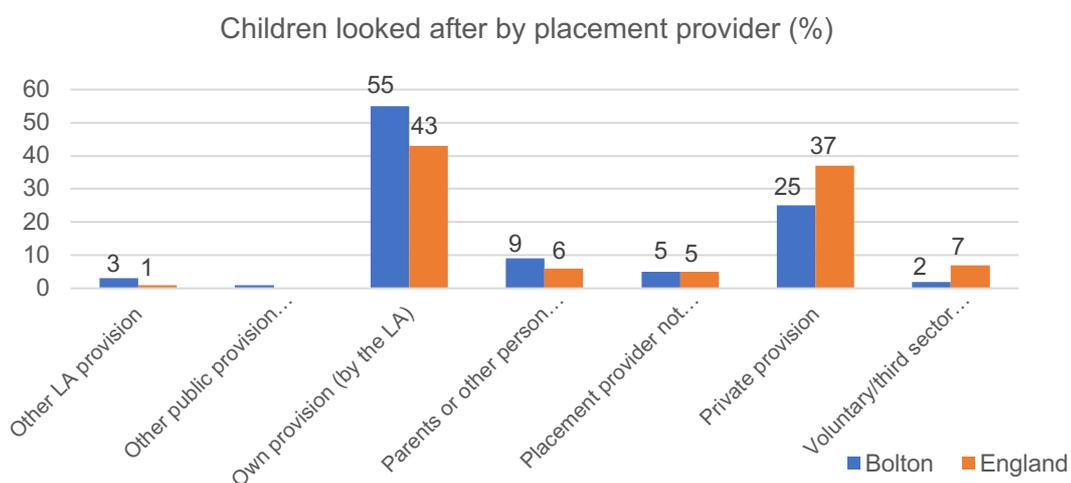


Figure 12 shows Bolton children who are looked after for at least 12 months as a share of the total population of Looked After Children, and the share of these children with three or more placements from 2020-23. The table highlights that, whilst still below the national average, there is an increase in the number of children experiencing multiple placements and subsequently less stability in care.

Figure 12: Stability of placements for Bolton Looked After Children

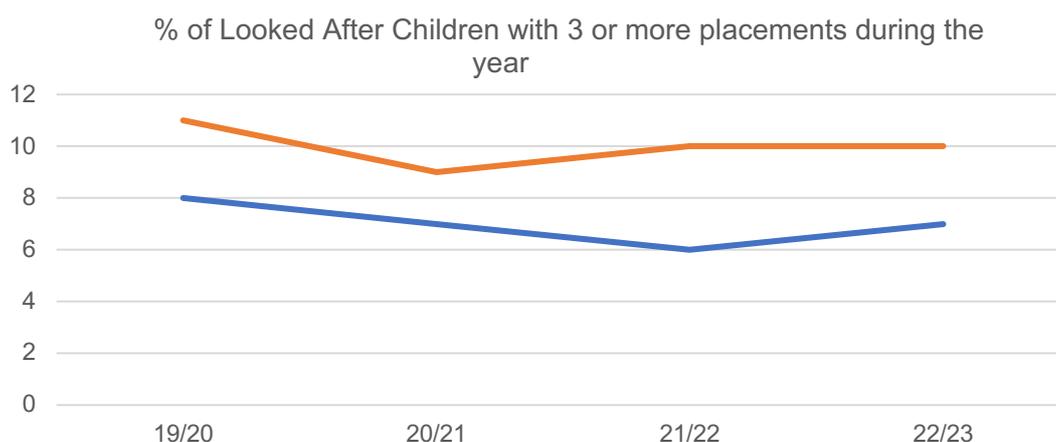


Table 2 details Ofsted inspection outcomes for Independent Fostering Agencies and children’s home in 2023/24. Overall quality of private, voluntary and independent (PVI) fostering and adoption agencies remain good or outstanding, and the majority of Bolton children’s homes are in line with Ofsted requirements.

Bolton have a dedicated children’s Quality Assurance team who schedule visits for LAC in residential accommodation rated below good and/or unregistered and education settings throughout the year to ensure good outcomes for children and young people. The function of the QA team is to provide support around identified issues and work constructively with providers to help them achieve and maintain high standards.

Table 2: Quality of placements based on Ofsted inspections

Ofsted Inspected Provision for Children and Young People:	Settings included in Broad Category:	Number of Registered Settings:	% of Settings Judged Good or Outstanding Snapshot (2023/24):
Fostering and Adoption	PVI F&A Agencies	3	100.0%
Children's Homes	LA Children's Homes	5	80.0%
	PVI Children's Homes	22	76.2%

Our partnership approach with residential providers over the past 2 years has proven successful in securing placements for Bolton Looked After Children in new homes opened in 2024 (see Table 3). We are committed to working with established residential providers in the borough to prioritise Bolton children in Bolton homes and ensure the care offer is aligned with our needs.

Table 3: Bolton residential childrens homes occupancy rates

No. of residential childrens homes*	No. of beds	No. of Bolton LAC in placement	Bolton occupancy rate (%)
Established provision (standard)			
9	27	7	26%
Newly opened provision for 2024 (standard)			
5	15	12	80%
Established provision (SEND & MH)			
8	31	3	9.5%

**Figures as of January 2025*

3.2 Location of placements

Our sufficiency ambition is to ensure that fostering, residential and semi-independent accommodation options are available as close to home as possible if a child needs to be accommodated by us. We are committed to identifying high quality placements which meet the needs of all children and young people, and ensure they are kept safe.

Figure 13 shows the majority of Bolton Looked After Children are placed within 20 miles of their home, putting us ahead of the national average. There are still some children placed beyond 20 miles, and work is continually ongoing to ensure that where possible Bolton Looked After Children are placed within borough or brought back into the host authority area whenever viable, as this is paramount to ensuring good outcomes and keeping children connected with their families, friendships and education.

Figure 14 shows Looked After Children placed within and outside the LA boundary as a share of the total population of Looked After Children.

Figure 13: Looked After Children by the distance between the placement and home (%)

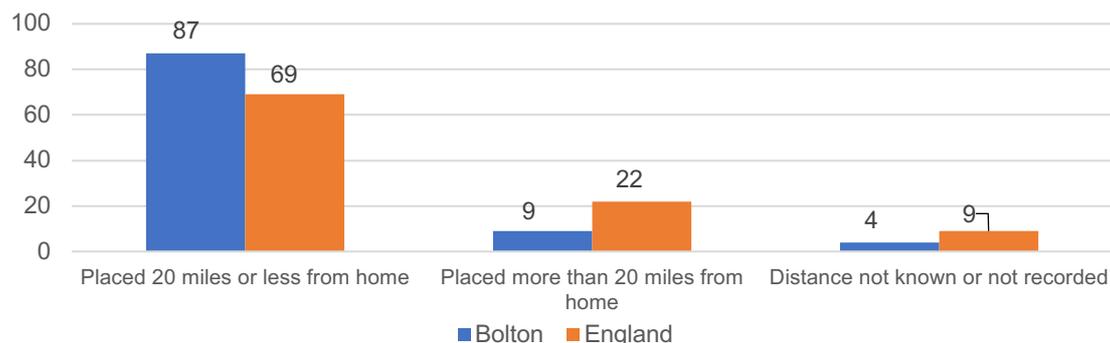
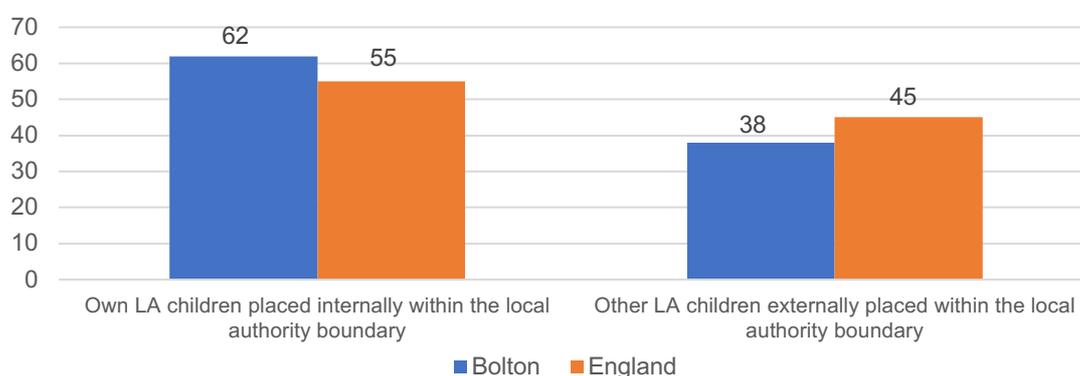


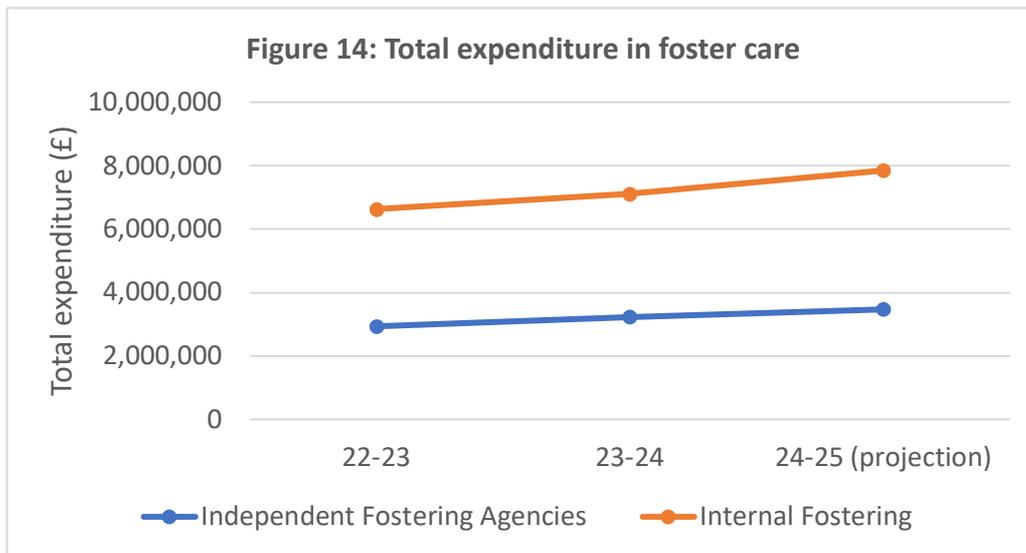
Figure 14: Looked After Children placed within the LA boundary (%)



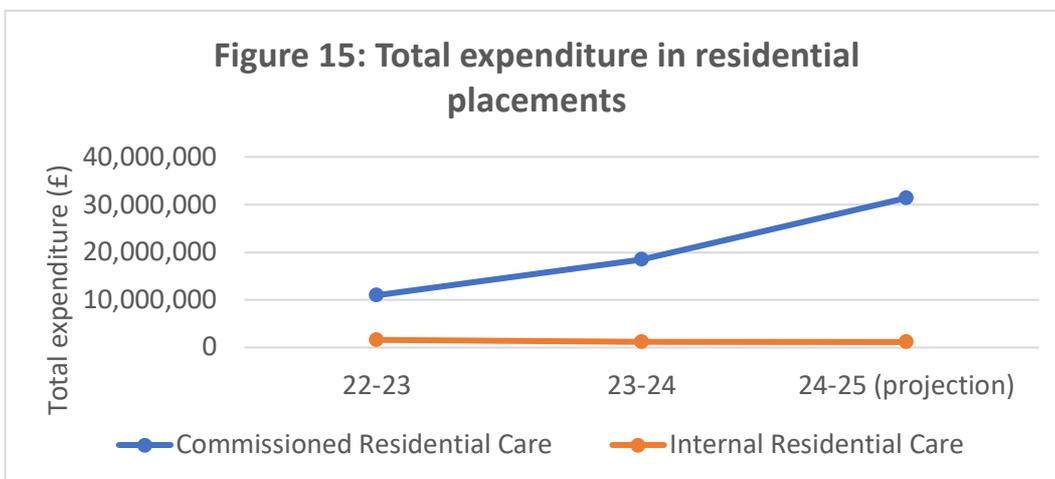
3.3 Cost of placements

The following figures show the total council annual expenditure on fostering and residential placements.

- **Figure 14** details the Council annual spend on Independent Fostering Agencies as opposed to inhouse foster carers; it can be seen from these figures that Bolton invests considerably more into our internal offer, which represents good value for money and highlights our commitment to prioritising in-borough foster care placements for our children and young people.
- The marked increase in residential costs shown in **Figure 15** depicts the cumulative impact of increasing individual placement costs, growing numbers of Looked After Children with higher level needs, coupled with the lack of foster carer availability leading to a greater reliance on the external residential market.

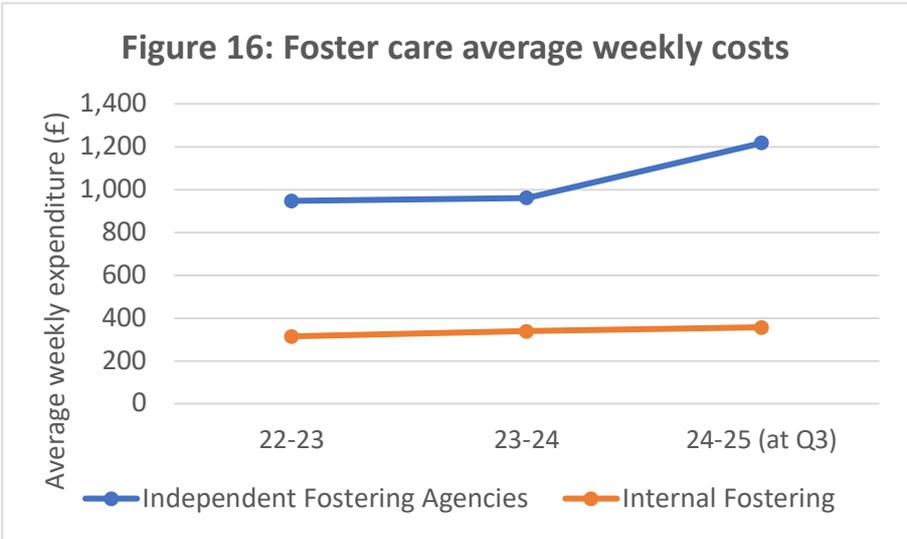


Note. Council figures do not include management & other internal costs while expenditure on commissioned services includes overhead costs.

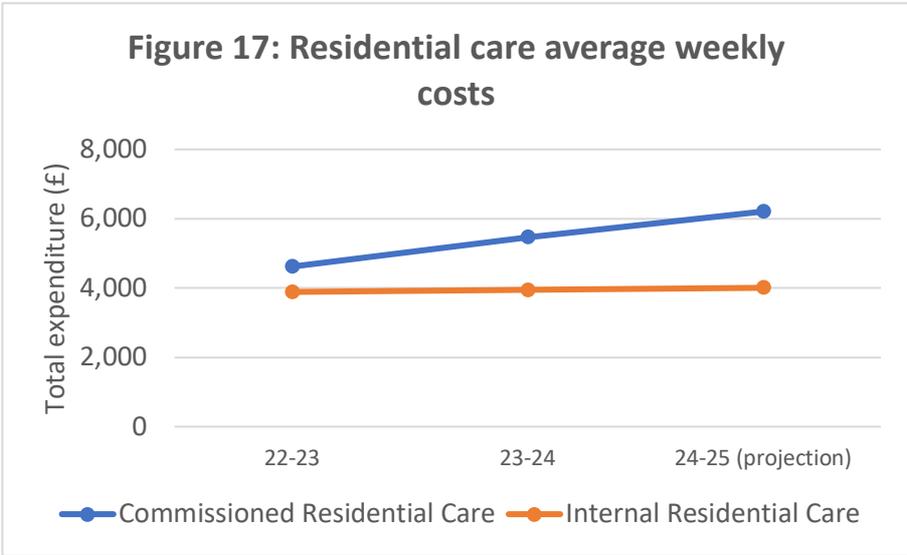


Note. The figure only includes expenditure in residential placements (management & other internal costs are not taken under consideration).

In contrast to above, the below figures detail the average weekly costs of foster care and residential care, highlighting a year-on-year increase which is reflective of more children coming into care with higher level needs (and/or older) in addition to yearly uplifts in the private market.



Note. Council figures do not include management & other internal costs while expenditure on commissioned services includes overhead costs.



3.4 Challenges in providing placements and related services

Bolton faces continued pressure in sourcing appropriate and high quality placements for our Looked After Children. **Table 3** shows the current and future challenges in meeting demand for placements for Looked After Children in Bolton and comparisons with challenges in key areas faced by the average council at the national level.

We plan to mitigate these challenges over coming years with a range of transformative programmes and service level improvements and efficiencies. These will include:

- A continued focus on foster carer recruitment and retention. This includes participation in one of the first Fostering Recruitment Hubs as part of the Department for Education’s Regional Care Co-operative. “Fostering Unfiltered” provides a centralised recruitment offer at the point of initial contact with a seamless transition to the Local Authority to complete the assessment process. The hub is underpinned by targeted media campaigns to promote fostering across Greater Manchester.
- Support foster carer retention and placement stability by launching the Mockingbird model. This nationally recognised and evidence-based approach will provide peer support to carers, children and young people, building effective relationships to prevent placement breakdowns. During 2025 Bolton will launch its first constellation.
- Review the internal Edge of Care and residential offer to strengthen the family support offer and prevent family breakdown wherever possible. Bolton has a strong internal residential offer, this will be reviewed to ensure placements are utilised to provide short, medium term care to those children most in need.
- To further strengthen commissioning approaches to ensure effective engagement of the private market. This includes the continuation of provider forums to establish trusting relationships, to support market shaping based on current and emerging need and to support market stimulation.

Difficulties in meeting the demand for placement of Looked After Children	Currently		Over the next 1-3 years	
	Bolton	National	Bolton	National
Meet demand for placements	Red	Amber	Red	Amber
Meet demand for foster care	Red	Red	Red	Red
Meet demand for residential care	Amber	Red	Amber	Red

Notes: Red indicates that we expect to face difficulties meeting demand through existing suppliers and/or needs to produce services at high costs; Amber indicates that we expect to mostly meet demand through existing providers at reasonable costs, but there are cases where that is not true; Green indicates that we expect to meet demand through existing supply at reasonable cost.

Table 4 details presenting current and future challenges in meeting demand for key services for Looked After Children and comparisons with challenges faced by the average council at the national level.

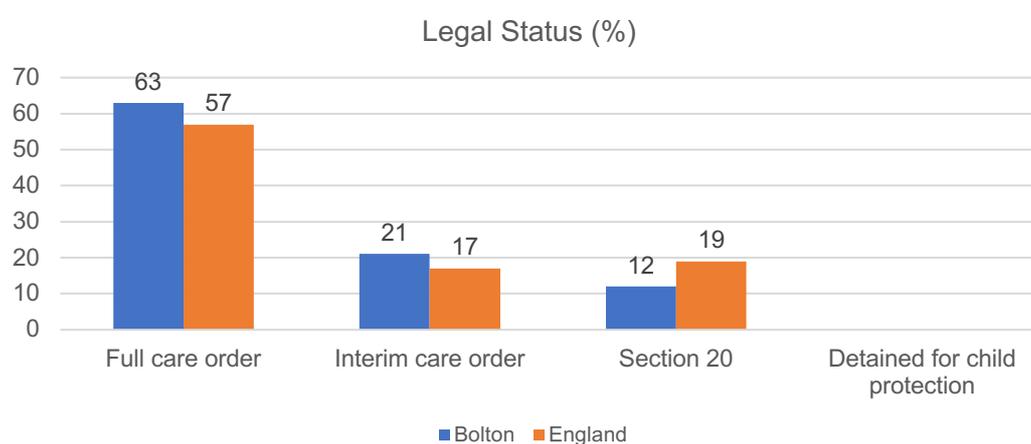
Table 4 Difficulties in meeting demand for key services	Currently		Over the next 1-3 years	
	Bolton	National	Bolton	National
Healthcare services	Amber	Amber	Red	Red
Development assessments	Green	Green	Amber	Amber
Interventions for substance misuse	Red	Amber	Red	Amber
Support for children with emotional and behavioural needs/mental health problems	Red	Amber	Red	Amber
Specialist provision for children with CSE/HSB	Green	Green	Green	Green
Sibling groups who require a fostering placement together	Green	Amber	Green	Amber

Notes: Red indicates that we expect to face difficulties meeting demand through existing suppliers and/or needs to produce services at high costs; Amber indicates that we expect to mostly meet demand through existing providers at reasonable costs, but there are cases where that is not true; Green indicates that we expect to meet demand through

Appendix 1: Population of Looked After Children in Bolton

	2022	2023	2024
Looked After Children at 31 st March each year	544	562	571
Children starting to be looked after each year	157	193	210
Children ceasing to be looked after each year	232	181	202

Appendix 1a: Legal Status at 31st March 2024



Appendix 1b: Children placed outside the council boundary

