

Research Briefing / August 2026



Children's Pathways Into and Out of Care in England, 2021–2025: A Descriptive Research Briefing

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Introduction

This briefing has been produced by the Centre for Care¹ in response to a series of questions posed by colleagues at Family Rights Group (FRG). It provides a descriptive analysis of published Department for Education statistics and related evidence. It has been prepared to inform discussion about priorities for policy, practice and further research.

The Centre for Care brings together researchers from five universities, three national charities and the Office for National Statistics to produce new evidence to improve how care is understood, organised and funded across the life course. It focuses on care as the support people need for wellbeing, life chances and inclusion, working closely with people who draw on care, unpaid carers, care workers and sector organisations. Within the Centre, the Children and Families theme focuses on the care and support needs and experiences of children and young people involved with children's social care, and related systems, and on how these systems can better support family networks and reduce avoidable separation.

The report is structured around the topics and questions posed by FRG, namely:

- How many children are entering care
- The profile of care arrangements
- How long children are staying in care
- Routes to leaving care
- Regional and local authority differences

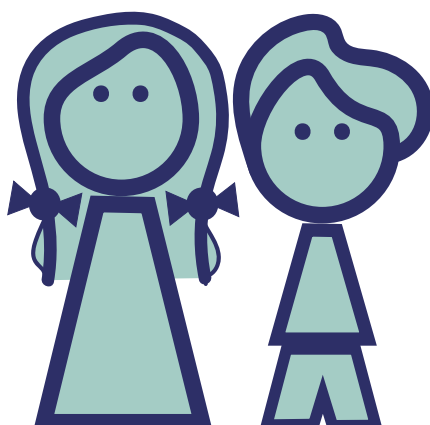
Short "next steps" suggestions are noted, where further analysis of administrative data or additional literature review would be most valuable. The Centre for Care is willing to commit further resource to support this programme of work.

Data and methods

This briefing draws on the Department for Education's (DfE) annual statistical release Children looked after in England including adoptions for 2024–25², and the equivalent releases for 2020–21 to 2023–24. All figures are taken from the published tables in the Explore Education Statistics platform; no access has been made to the underlying [SSDA903 child-level data](#).

Unless otherwise stated, "children" refers to those aged under 18. National figures relate to England as a whole; regional and local authority figures use DfE's standard geography for the relevant year, including the 2023 local government reorganisation. Rates are those published by DfE, calculated as the number of children looked after divided by the Office for National Statistics mid-year population estimate for children in the area, multiplied by 10,000. Where we discuss "distinct children" starting or ceasing to be looked after, we follow DfE's own adjustment: subtracting children whose only 'start' or 'cease' is a transfer between local authorities from the gross number of episodes.

Descriptive analysis of trends (for example, the distribution of local authority rates or changes between 2021 and 2025) is based on these published aggregates. Averages over local authorities are unweighted (each authority counts once, regardless of size). All counts and rates are as published by DfE; small differences of one child or one day between years reflect standard rounding in the official tables and commentaries.



Summary

1. Who is entering care?

- In 2024–25, 32,270 entries into care; after adjusting for transfers between authorities, this is around 29,630 distinct children.
- Compared with 2021, the age profile has shifted: under-5s have fallen from around 38% to 30% of new entrants, while those aged 16+ have risen from 20% to 28%; more than half of children entering care are now aged 10 or over.
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) account for about 22% of entries into care and around 15% of distinct entrants. They are predominantly older teenage boys (94% male; 90% aged 16+).
- For non-UASC children, the dominant primary need at entry remains “abuse or neglect”, accounting for around 57% of starters, with family dysfunction and family stress also significant.

2. How long do children stay in care?

- Among children ceasing to be looked after in 2024–25, around 28% had been in care for less than six months; this proportion has stayed close to 25% in recent years.
- The mean duration of the latest period of care for leavers in 2024–25 was about 893 days (just under 2½ years). Since 2020–21, the mean has stayed within a narrow band of roughly 863–907 days, indicating no sharp change in typical spell length.
- Many exits at younger ages are from care episodes that lead to reunification, kinship care, Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) or adoption, while a large group leave on their 18th birthday.

3. Routes out of care

- In 2024–25, after excluding transfers, around 31,810 distinct children ceased to be looked after. The main reasons for ceasing are:
 - Returning home to live with parents as part of the care plan.
 - Leaving at 18 (or shortly after), often remaining with former foster carers or moving into supported/independent accommodation.
 - Legal permanence via adoption and SGOs.
- Adoption is heavily concentrated in early childhood, with an average age at adoption of just over three years; SGOs are also chiefly in childhood but with a slightly older average age. Both routes are strongly associated with children whose primary need at entry was recorded as abuse/neglect or family dysfunction and are rare for UASC, who typically leave as older teenagers.

4. Patterns in care arrangements

- Between 2021 and 2025, the share in foster care fell from 71% to 67%, while the number of children in residential and supported/semi-independent accommodation increased by around 50% (from 11,360 to 17,000), rising from 14% to 21% of all children in care.
- Kinship foster arrangements have remained substantial and slightly increased in relative importance: in 2025, about 13,360 children were in kinship foster placements, around 16% of all children in care and roughly a quarter of all fostered children.

5. Regional and local variation

6. In 2025, local authority rates of children looked after (CLA) ranged from around 27 to 184 per 10,000 children, a difference of roughly seven-fold. The middle half of authorities lay between about 53 and 90 per 10,000.
7. A group of around 15–20 authorities, mainly in the North East, North West and some coastal areas, have had rates above 100 per 10,000 throughout 2021–2025, while a group of about 25 authorities, largely in London and the South East, have remained below 50 per 10,000.
8. At regional level, the North East has the highest rates (around 111 per 10,000 in 2025) and has consistently been well above other regions. London, the East of England and the South East have the lowest regional rates (roughly 48–55 per 10,000).

- UASC are geographically concentrated, contributing significantly to the age and ethnicity profile of looked-after populations in some areas (for example, making up close to a quarter of children in care in some port and dispersal authorities).

6. Data limits and next steps

The published statistics allow description of broad patterns but not detailed comparisons of pathways and risks across groups. To understand more fully how entries, durations and routes out of care vary by age, ethnicity, disability, reason for entry, legal status, UASC status and local context, further analysis of the SSDA903 child-level data in a secure environment would be required, alongside targeted evidence reviews. This would help identify where and for whom it may be possible to safely reduce the use of care, and what forms of support are most effective in doing so.



1. How many children are entering care?

In the year ending 31 March 2025, 32,270 children started to be looked after in England. Because children whose care is transferred between local authorities are counted as a “start” in each authority, this over-counts the true number of distinct children. Using DfE’s own adjustment – subtracting the 2,640 children whose care ‘ceased’ because it was transferred to another local authority – gives an estimated 29,630 distinct children who newly became looked after in 2024–25.

Set against the wider population of children in care, this underlines how dynamic the system is. On 31 March 2025, 81,770 children were looked after in England, equivalent to around 67 per 10,000 children. The adjusted estimate of 29,630 distinct entrants in a single year is therefore equivalent to just over a third of the number of children in care at any one time. These are not directly comparable measures – one is a flow over the year and the other a snapshot on a single day – but they give a sense of the scale of annual movement through the care system.

Over recent years the number of children entering care has risen from 28,470 in 2020–2021 to just over 33,000 in 2023–24 and then fallen slightly in 2025. Table 1 summarises the reported number of children starting to be looked after over the past five years, and how many of these are recorded as UASC.

Table 1. Reported number of children starting to be looked after, England 2021–2025

Year (to 31 March)	All entries	Approximate distinct entries	Of whom UASC	UASC share (reported)
2021	28,470	~27,900	2,790	10%
2022	31,100	~30,200	5,400	17%
2023	33,090	~31,900	7,220	22%
2024	33,130	30,980	7,330	22%
2025	32,270	29,630	6,950	22%

(“All starters” and “not UASC” from the 2025 methodology table; UASC derived as the difference.)

Who are they?

Among children starting to be looked after in 2024–25, 60% are boys (19,500) and 40% girls (12,770). Entry to care is concentrated at two points: early childhood and adolescence. Around 5,140 babies under one year old (16%) and 4,430 children aged 1–4 (14%) started care, so roughly 30% of entrants are under five. At the other end of the age range, 8,660 young people aged 10–15 (27%) and 9,110 aged 16 and over (28%) started care – more than half of all starters are 10 or older.

As Table 2 shows, this age profile has shifted over the past five years. In 2021, around 38% of those entering care were under five (20% under 1 and 18% aged 1–4), compared with about 30% in 2025. Over the same period, the proportion aged 16 and over has risen from 20% to around 28%, and by 2025 more than half of all entrants (around 55%) are aged 10 or above. This reinforces the picture of a system in which new entries are increasingly concentrated among older children and young people, particularly in late adolescence.

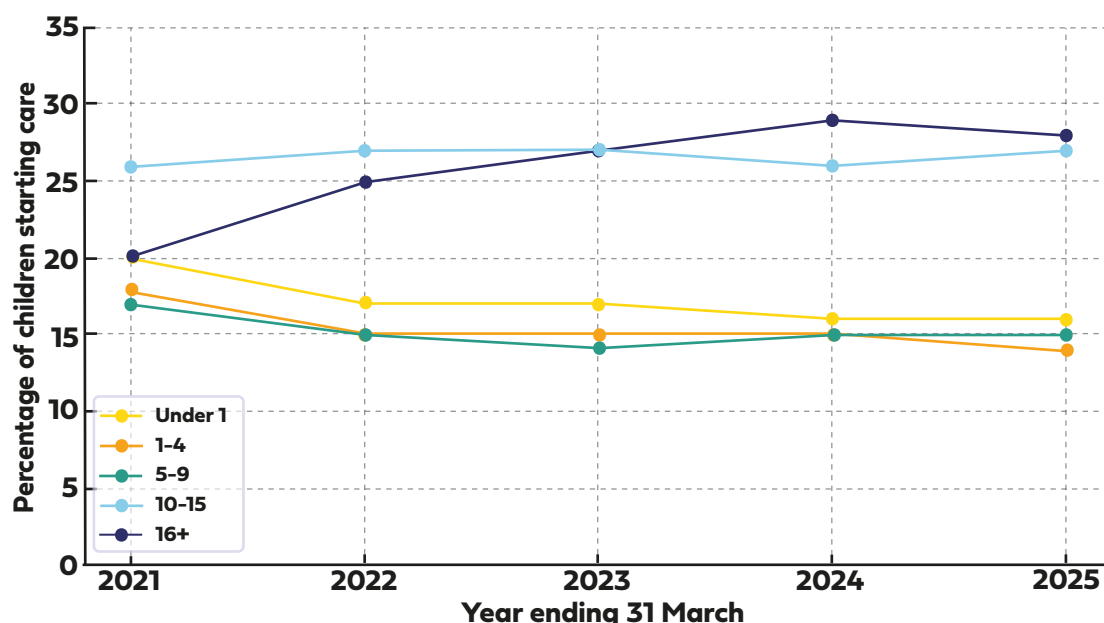
Table 2. Children starting to be looked after during the year, by age on starting, England 2021–2025. Number (percentage of all starters in that year)

Age on entering care	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Under 1	5,610 (20%)	5,400 (17%)	5,450 (17%)	5,200 (16%)	5,150 (16%)
1–4 years	5,110 (18%)	4,760 (15%)	4,840 (15%)	4,830 (15%)	4,430 (14%)
5–9 years	4,750 (17%)	4,710 (15%)	4,730 (14%)	4,890 (15%)	4,920 (15%)
10–15 years	7,260 (26%)	8,240 (27%)	8,910 (27%)	8,690 (26%)	8,660 (27%)
16 years and over	5,710 (20%)	7,900 (25%)	9,070 (27%)	9,440 (29%)	9,110 (28%)
Total children	28,440	31,010	33,000	33,050	32,270

(NB. These totals are fractionally below the headline totals because DfE’s age-breakdown tables exclude children looked after solely under a series of short-term arrangements.)

These trends are presented more effectively in a line graph (see next page).

Figure 1. Age profile of children starting to be looked after, England 2021–2025. Note: percentages are of all children starting to be looked after in each year; figures rounded to whole percentages



In the period to March 2025, 57% of entrants are White (18,330, including 16,660 White British, 52%), 9% are said to be of mixed ethnicity, 7% Asian, 14% Black, and 11% “Other” ethnic group, with ethnicity unknown / not yet recorded for about 2%. This pattern reflects both long-standing over-representation of some minoritised groups in care and the growing cohort of UASC.

UASC and non-UASC tell two quite different stories

Of the 32,270 ‘starters’, 6,950 (22%) are recorded as UASC. However, rates of transfer are high in this group; once we adjust for transfers, about 4,480 of the 29,630 distinct ‘starters’ are UASC – around 15%. Over time, UASC have come to make up a larger share of entrants: DfE estimate that, once transfers are accounted for, UASC represented about 11% of starters in 2020, 19% in 2023, 17% in 2024 and around 15% in 2025. UASC are overwhelmingly older teenage boys (94% male; 90% aged 16+), and 89% of UASC have their primary need recorded as “absent parenting” – reflecting that they have arrived in England without a parent or carer.

Why are children entering care? (primary need)

DfE note that the distribution of ‘primary need’ for children in care has been broadly stable over the last five years. In 2024–25, the dominant recorded reason for entering care is abuse or neglect, with 18,310 children (57%) having primary need ‘N1’. A further 3,050 (9%) are recorded under family dysfunction, and 2,370 (7%) under family in acute stress. It is important to note that ‘abuse or neglect’ (N1) is a single, broad primary-need category in the CLA data, rather than a distinction between specific forms of abuse and neglect. Within that headline figure there will be considerable variation in children’s experiences and in social workers’ thresholds and judgements, particularly around neglect, which is conceptually and practically challenging to assess and evidence. Understanding how different types of maltreatment are represented within N1, and how this relates to routes into and through care, would require analysis of the underlying SSDA903 data alongside more detailed child protection information.

For small numbers, the primary need is recorded as child’s disability (2%), parental illness or disability (2%), socially unacceptable behaviour (2%) or low income (<0.5%). In addition, 6,740 children (21%) have ‘absent parenting’ recorded as their primary need – a figure which very closely matches the number of UASC starters (6,950). This implies that around 70% of children entering care who are not UASC do so because of abuse or neglect.

How do they come into care? (legal route)

In 2024–25, 18,240 children (57%) entered under a voluntary agreement (section 20 Children Act 1989), and 10,220 (32%) entered under a care order. A further 3,290 (10%) entered care because they were detained for child protection reasons, and about 510 (2%) were initially looked after under a youth justice legal status. While these figures describe the entry route, legal status often changes during the child’s period in care.

2. In what kind of arrangements are children living?

The DfE statistics provide a snapshot of the care arrangements in which children are living on 31 March 2025. When viewed alongside data from the last five years, this shows a significant structural shift in the balance of provision: overall numbers of children in care have changed little, but the system is placing a smaller share with foster families and a growing share in residential and supported accommodation.

A five-year trend (2021–2025)

Comparing the latest 2025 data with the position in 2021 shows that while the overall number of looked-after children has remained relatively similar (+1% over five years, from 80,850 to 81,770), the profile of provision has changed.

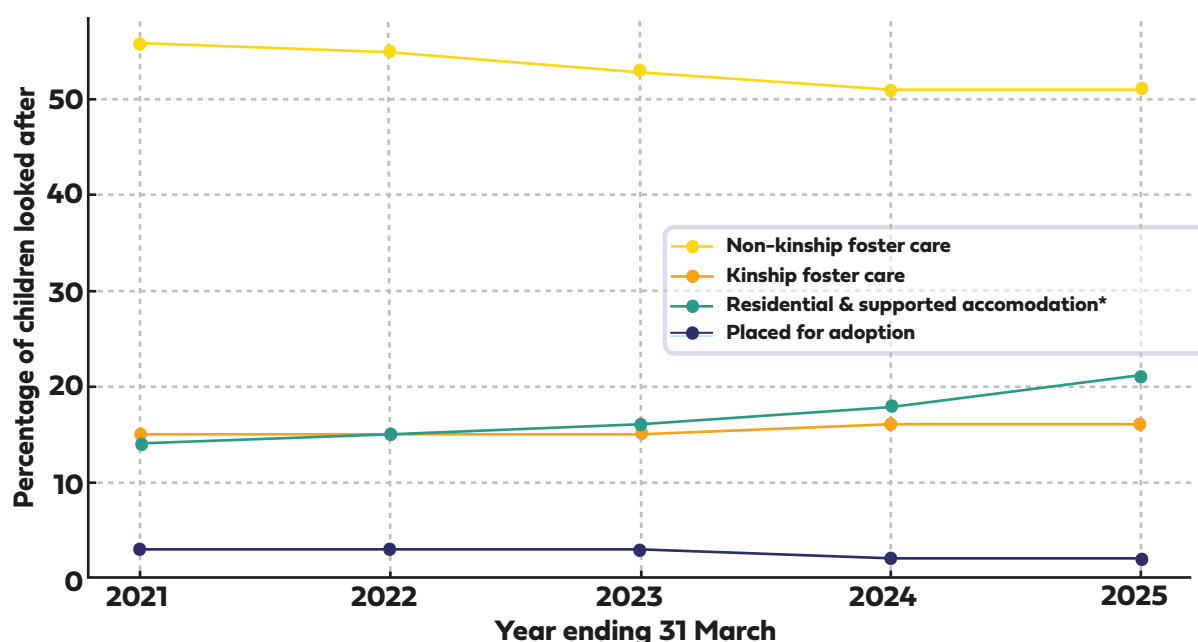
- **Decline in foster care.** In 2021, 71% of all looked-after children lived in foster care; by 2025 this had fallen to 67%. In absolute terms, there are now 2,190 fewer children in foster arrangements than five years ago (57,010 down to 54,820).
- **Rise in residential and supported accommodation.** Over the same period, the number of children in children's homes, secure units, other residential settings and supported or semi-independent accommodation has increased from 11,360 to 17,000 – a rise of just under 50%. Their share of all looked-after children has grown from 14% to 21%.
- **Increasing financial burden and a need for granularity.** The decline in foster care and the increase in demand for residential and supported accommodation indicates an increasing cost burden on local authorities and the introduction of additional strain as a result of the requirement to meet this additional demand with already scarce resources. Moreover, residential and supported accommodation encompasses multiple types of care arrangement. Greater granularity regarding the proportion of looked after children administered by these alternative arrangements is recommended to aid in understanding where diverted demand is being absorbed.

Figure 2 below plots the proportion of children in non-kinship foster care, kinship foster care, residential and supported accommodation, and placements for adoption between 2021 and 2025. It shows a modest decline in non-kinship foster care, a slight increase in kinship fostering, a sharp rise in residential and supported settings, and a small fall in the share of children placed for adoption.

The year-on-year data suggest this was not a sudden step change but a gradual shift in the balance of care arrangements. In absolute terms, the number of children in foster care rose slightly between 2021 and 2022, peaking at 57,540, before falling each year thereafter. It is plausible that a number of children are entering into informal kinship care arrangements, but information and reporting of such arrangements is not accurately captured in the underlying data used in this report. However, as Figure 2 shows on the next page, the share of children in non-kinship foster care was already beginning to decline by 2022, as the overall population in care grew and kinship, residential and supported arrangements took up a larger share.



Figure 2. Type of care arrangement for children looked after on 31 March, England 2021–2025. Note: percentages are of all children looked after on 31 March in each year. “Non-kinship foster care” is total foster care minus children in kinship foster arrangements.



[Note: * includes residential children's homes, secure units, residential schools, other residential settings and supported or semi-independent accommodation.]

Within these broader trends, two specific types of care arrangement warrant closer attention in the 2025 data:

Kinship foster care

While non-kinship fostering has declined, kinship foster care remains a substantial and slightly growing component of the system. On 31 March 2025, 13,360 children were living in foster arrangements with a relative or friend. Kinship foster care now accounts for around 16% of all children in care (up from about 15% in 2021) and roughly a quarter of all foster arrangements.

Published SGO and kinship data suggest significant variation by ethnicity and age. SGOs continue to be predominantly granted to White children (82%), with children from Black (4%) and Asian (1%) backgrounds under-represented relative to their presence in the care population³. This suggests that while kinship routes are well-established for some communities, structural or practice barriers may be preventing wider family networks from being utilised equitably across all ethnic groups.

Residential care and geography

The rise in residential and supported accommodation is not uniform. It is heavily skewed towards older adolescents and those with more complex needs, and it is geographically uneven. Ofsted⁴ report a continued concentration of new children's homes in the North West and some other lower-cost areas, often at some distance from children's home local authorities, suggesting a supply-led expansion shaped by property and labour markets as well as by demand.

Data note on intersectional analysis

The published DfE tables provide national totals for arrangement types and for child characteristics such as age, ethnicity and primary need, and some simple cross-tabulations (for example, arrangement by age group). However, they do not readily support more detailed intersectional analysis – for example, examining how the characteristics of children in residential care differ by ethnicity, age at entry, primary need or local authority. To understand the demographic and contextual drivers of the shift towards residential and supported accommodation, further analysis of the SSDA903 child-level microdata would be required. This is a specific strand of work the Centre for Care could prioritise in the next phase of analysis.

3. How long are children staying in care?

DfE answer this question by looking at children who ceased to be looked after during the year and measuring the length of their latest period of care – that is, the spell of being looked after that has just ended. These figures do not show a child's total time in care across their life, but they are the best published indicator of how long a typical spell in care lasts.

For the year ending 31 March 2025, 28% of children and young people leaving care had been looked after for under six months, the same proportion as in the previous year. The remaining 72% had been looked after for six months or longer. The average (mean) duration of the last period of care for those ceasing to be looked after was 893 days, which is just under two years and six months. This mean is calculated across all leavers, including the substantial group who cease to be looked after on or shortly after their 18th birthday.

Over time the mean duration of the latest period of care has fluctuated within a relatively narrow band. It rose to 907 days in 2020–21, which DfE link to delays and slower progression of care plans during the COVID-19 pandemic, then fell back to around two years four months, before rising again to 893 days in 2024–25. Across 2021–2025 the mean ranges from 863 to 907 days – a difference of around five per cent – and is best understood as modest year-to-year variation around a broadly stable average length of time in care, rather than a step change in how long children typically remain looked after.

These figures mask two rather different patterns. A large share of exits each year are older teenagers leaving because they have reached adulthood: recent DfE commentaries indicate that around two-fifths of all those ceasing have done so on their 18th birthday. This includes many unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who almost all enter as older teenagers and whose status as “looked after” children must end by age 18 in line with children's legislation and the care leaver framework. While the published statistics do not provide a full breakdown of reasons for ceasing specifically for UASC, the combination of their age profile and the high proportion of exits around age 18 suggests that most UASC leave care primarily because they are ageing out of the children's system, rather than through reunification or adoption.

If those ageing out at 18 are set aside conceptually, the remaining exits show a different pattern. Among children who leave before 18 there is a noticeable concentration in early childhood. In 2021–22, children aged 1–4 made up 21% of all those leaving care, even though they accounted for only 14% of children in care overall. Put differently, once the large group leaving at 18 is removed, around one third of exits before adulthood were 1–4-year-olds. This suggests that very young children are relatively likely to leave care, often through reunification, kinship care, special guardianship or adoption. By contrast, children in middle childhood and early adolescence are more likely to remain looked after from one year to the next, and are therefore under-represented among leavers compared with their share of those in care. These patterns are closely linked to the routes by which children leave care – returning home, achieving legal permanence, or moving into adulthood – which are discussed in the next section.

Taken together, the 2024–25 data and recent trends support a cautious summary. For children and young people who left care in that year, around 28% had been looked after for less than six months, while the average spell lasted about two and a half years. Many older teenagers leave because they are reaching the age at which children's legislation no longer applies, and a significant group of very young children leave through reunification or early permanence. Children in the middle years of childhood and early adolescence are less prominent among leavers and therefore more likely, on average, to remain looked after from one year to the next.

The published tables show clearly that there is a wide range of experiences: some children leave care very quickly, others remain for several years, and many older teenagers leave because they are ageing out of the children's system rather than because their underlying need has ended. However, the open data do not provide more detailed distributional information (such as medians or quartiles) or subgroup estimates of duration by age at entry, primary need, UASC status or ethnicity, nor do they provide exit rates by ethnicity. To examine systematically whether time in care or likelihood of leaving varies by these characteristics would require analysis of the underlying SSDA903 child-level microdata in a secure research environment, or bespoke tabulations produced by DfE.

4. What are the routes to leaving care?

DfE record a detailed “reason episode ceased” whenever a period of being looked after ends. These codes are grouped in the statistics into recognisable routes out of care. For 2024–25, 34,450 children and young people ceased to be looked after in England. This includes 2,640 whose care was taken over by another local authority; adjusting for these transfers, DfE estimate about 31,810 distinct children and young people actually left care during the year. As with entries, this annual flow is large relative to the number of children looked after at any one time: it is equivalent to just under two-fifths of the 81,770 children looked after on 31 March 2025.

The 2025 commentary is clear that, as in recent years, the most common reasons for leaving care were that children and young people returned home to live with parents as part of the care planning process, that they reached age 18, or that they left as the subject of an adoption or SGO. In 2023 and 2024 DfE gave more detail, showing that these routes, together with moves to supported independent living, account for the majority of exits:

- 17% of leavers in both 2023 and 2024 returned home to live with parents as part of the care plan;
- 15–16% left aged 18 and remained with their current carers (“staying put” or similar arrangements);
- 12–13% moved into independent living with support;
- 11–12% ceased to be looked after through an SGO;
- 9% were adopted.

For 2025, the release confirms that 3,040 children left care through adoption and 4,110 left under an SGO. Together these 7,150 children represent just over one in five exits (around 21% of all those ceasing to be in care). The proportion leaving through these legal permanence routes has therefore remained broadly stable over the last three years.

Taken together, these figures suggest three main pathways:

- Returning home to family – around one in six children leaving care in recent years returned to live with parents (or other person with parental responsibility) as part of the care plan. This route is particularly important for younger children leaving before 18, and sits alongside a small group of less planned returns (for example where parents remove a child from voluntary accommodation outside the agreed plan).
- Legal permanence outside birth parents – in 2025, about 4,110 children left care as the subject of an SGO and 3,040 were adopted. Most SGOs (around 90%) are to relatives or friends, and most adoption and SGO exits relate to children who entered care because of abuse or neglect or family dysfunction. These routes are concentrated among younger children: the average age at adoption is just over 3 years, and at SGO just over 6 years.
- Transition to adulthood and semi-independence – a large share of exits are older teenagers leaving around their 18th birthday. Many of those leaving at 18 remain with their carers (“staying put”), while others move into semi-independent or supported accommodation. Recent DfE commentary indicates that around two-fifths of all exits occur on the young person’s 18th birthday.

Other, less common routes include transfer to another local authority (about 8% of ceasing episodes in 2025, heavily influenced by the UASC National Transfer Scheme), moves into custody, emigration or “other” reasons, and the small number of children who die while looked after.

These patterns are closely linked to age and needs. Very young children who leave care often do so either through reunification with parents or through adoption/SGO. Older teenagers, including many unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, are more likely to leave because they have reached 18, moving into “staying put” arrangements or supported accommodation rather than into new family-based care. Children in middle childhood and early adolescence are less prominent among leavers and are therefore more likely, on average, to remain looked after from one year to the next.

Subgroup patterns and data gaps

There is richer information available for some routes out of care than others, particularly for adoption and SGOs. In addition to the main Children looked after in England including adoptions release, DfE and partner organisations publish dedicated outputs that break down adoption and SGOs by age, ethnicity and primary need. The government's Ethnicity facts and figures site draws directly on SSDA903 to compare the ethnic profile of children in care and those adopted⁵, and Coram / CoramBAAF collate further statistics on adoption and SGOs from the same underlying data⁶. These kinds of detailed breakdowns are not routinely available for routes such as "returned home to parents", "left aged 18 and remained with carers" or "moved to supported independent living".

Taken together, these additional sources show that adoption and SGOs are strongly patterned by age and ethnicity. Children leaving through adoption are almost all in early childhood: recent data indicate an average age at adoption of just over three years, with only a small minority adopted aged five or over⁷. SGOs are also concentrated in childhood but skew slightly older, with average ages around six years. Both routes are heavily concentrated among children whose primary need at entry was recorded as abuse or neglect or family dysfunction, and they are very rare for children whose primary need is recorded as absent parenting (almost all UASC), who typically leave care as older teenagers on or after their 18th birthday.

By ethnicity, the adoption data show marked differences in the likelihood that children leave care through this route. For example, in 2023, White children made up roughly 70% of looked-after children but more than 80% of those adopted. Within-group rates suggest that around one in eight White children in care left because they were adopted, compared with about one in ten Mixed-ethnicity children and only around one in fifty Black or Asian children. CoramBAAF's summary of SGO statistics for England shows a similar skew, with White children comprising more than four-fifths of those leaving on an SGO. Taken together, these figures suggest that White and some Mixed-ethnicity children are more likely to leave care through legal permanence routes such as adoption and SGOs than children from Black, Asian and "Other" ethnic groups, even once their share of the looked-after population is taken into account.

For other routes out of care – returning home, ageing out at 18, moving to supported accommodation – the national tables provide counts by age, ethnicity, primary need, legal status and UASC status, but they do not provide exit rates by group or cross-tabulate these characteristics in a way that allows robust subgroup comparisons. We cannot, for example, say from the published tables whether Black children are more or less likely than White children to return home, or whether children entering because of family stress are more or less likely to leave through SGOs rather than reunification. The government's Looked-after children data strategy explicitly recognises this as a gap and commits to improving the quality and availability of ethnicity data and evidence about children's routes out of care⁸.

To move beyond descriptive patterns and understand systematically how routes out of care vary by age, ethnicity, reason for entering care, legal status and UASC status would require working directly with the underlying SSDA903 child-level data in a secure research environment, or commissioning bespoke tabulations from DfE. That kind of analysis would allow calculation of route-specific exit rates for different groups and test whether, after accounting for age and other factors, some children are more or less likely to return home, achieve legal permanence or age out of care than others.



5. Are there noticeable regional and local differences?

As already noted, on 31 March 2025 there were 81,770 children looked after in England, equivalent to around 67 children per 10,000 children. Behind this national figure there are very large geographical differences.

At local authority level in 2025, rates range from 27 to 184 per 10,000 children, a difference of around seven-fold. At the top end, Blackpool has 184 children looked after per 10,000 children, followed by Stoke-on-Trent (170), Hartlepool (157), Liverpool (145), Redcar and Cleveland (144) and Middlesbrough (138). At the bottom end, a group of mainly outer-London and South-East authorities have rates below 40 per 10,000, with Richmond upon Thames lowest at 27 per 10,000.

Table 3. Highest and lowest local authority rates, children looked after per 10,000 children, 31 March 2025

Local authority (highest 10)	Rate per 10,000	Local authority (lowest 10)	Rate per 10,000
Blackpool	184	Richmond upon Thames	27
Stoke-on-Trent	170	Harrow	29
Hartlepool	157	Kingston upon Thames	30
Liverpool	145	Merton	31
Redcar and Cleveland	144	Ealing	33
Middlesbrough	138	South Gloucestershire	33
Halton	132	Wokingham	34
North East Lincolnshire	131	Surrey	35
Stockton-on-Tees	125	Essex	35
Gateshead	124	Hertfordshire	36

Across all authorities with data, the median rate in 2025 is 67 per 10,000. The middle 50% of authorities – from the lower to upper quartile – have between 53 and 90 children per 10,000. A relatively small group sit outside this band: around 15–20 authorities, mainly in the North East, North West and some coastal areas, have rates above 100 per 10,000 in every year from 2021 to 2025, while around 25 authorities, largely in London and the South East, have consistently had rates below 50 per 10,000.

Over 2021–2025, most local authorities have seen modest changes in their rates of children in care, with a small national rise up to 2022–23 followed by a fall. However, there is a persistent group of high-rate authorities where rates have remained elevated throughout, and a persistent group of low-rate authorities. Between 2021 and 2025, rates have fallen sharply in some of the very highest-rate authorities – for example North East Lincolnshire (from 179 to 131 per 10,000), Kingston upon Hull (160 to 119), Middlesbrough (172 to 138) and Blackpool (215 to 184) – but these areas still sit towards the top of the distribution. At the same time, areas such as Shropshire (86 to 119), County Durham (96 to 118), North Tyneside (69 to 91), Halton (111 to 132), Bournemouth–Christchurch–Poole (59 to 75), North Somerset (50 to 63), Bristol (68 to 81) and Birmingham (66 to 79) have seen noticeable increases.

At regional level the pattern is equally stark. Using the combined London figure (rather than inner and outer separately) gives a simple nine-region comparison.

Table 4. Rates of children looked after per 10,000 children, by region, 2021–2025

Region	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
North East	110	109	112	113	111
North West	98	97	96	94	90
West Midlands	86	88	90	89	86
Yorkshire and The Humber	80	81	81	79	77
East Midlands	65	65	66	64	62
South West	58	60	63	63	62
South East	54	56	57	56	55
East of England	50	50	52	50	49
London	50	52	51	50	48

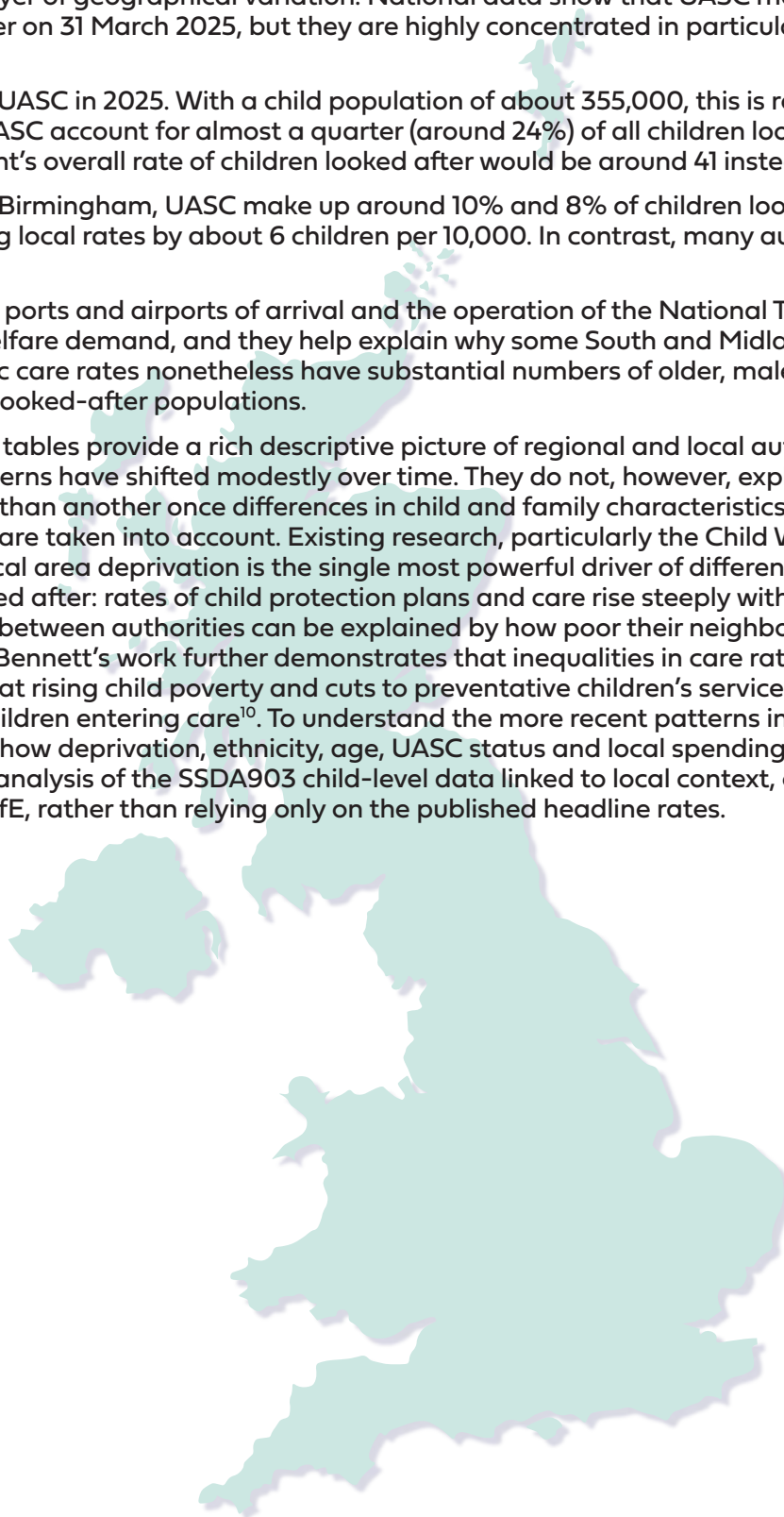
In 2025, children in the North East are looked after at a rate of 111 per 10,000, compared with 90 in the North West, 86 in the West Midlands and 77 in Yorkshire and the Humber. At the other end, London and the East of England have rates around 48–49 per 10,000, with the South East also below the national figure. The North East has been persistently and markedly higher than any other region throughout 2021–2025; the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber are also consistently above the national average, though both show a gentle downward trend over the period. Regions in the South and East of England have lower and relatively stable rates, with London as a whole remaining at around 50 per 10,000 or below. Within London, outer boroughs are particularly low (around the low-40s per 10,000), while inner London boroughs are closer to the England average.

UASC add a further layer of geographical variation. National data show that UASC made up about 8% of all children looked after on 31 March 2025, but they are highly concentrated in particular local authorities. For example:

- Kent cared for 451 UASC in 2025. With a child population of about 355,000, this is roughly 13 UASC per 10,000 children; UASC account for almost a quarter (around 24%) of all children looked after in Kent. Without UASC, Kent's overall rate of children looked after would be around 41 instead of 53 per 10,000.
- In Hampshire and Birmingham, UASC make up around 10% and 8% of children looked after respectively, raising local rates by about 6 children per 10,000. In contrast, many authorities have very few or no UASC.

These patterns reflect ports and airports of arrival and the operation of the National Transfer Scheme as much as local child welfare demand, and they help explain why some South and Midlands authorities with relatively low domestic care rates nonetheless have substantial numbers of older, male, ethnically diverse young people in their looked-after populations.

Overall, the published tables provide a rich descriptive picture of regional and local authority variation, and of how these patterns have shifted modestly over time. They do not, however, explain why one area's rate is higher or lower than another once differences in child and family characteristics, deprivation and the local mix of UASC are taken into account. Existing research, particularly the Child Welfare Inequalities Project, shows that local area deprivation is the single most powerful driver of differences in children's chances of being looked after: rates of child protection plans and care rise steeply with deprivation, and much of the variation between authorities can be explained by how poor their neighbourhoods and families are⁹. Davara Bennett's work further demonstrates that inequalities in care rates widened between 2004 and 2019 and that rising child poverty and cuts to preventative children's services are associated with higher rates of children entering care¹⁰. To understand the more recent patterns in the 2021–2025 data, and to examine how deprivation, ethnicity, age, UASC status and local spending interact in different places, would require analysis of the SSDA903 child-level data linked to local context, or bespoke analysis commissioned from DfE, rather than relying only on the published headline rates.



6. Next steps: further analysis

This briefing is an initial, descriptive reading of the published DfE statistics and some key contextual literature. It points to a set of questions that cannot be answered from the open tables alone, particularly around how age, ethnicity, poverty, UASC status, legal routes and local context interact to shape children's chances of entering, remaining in and leaving care in different places.

Addressing these questions would require either working directly with the SSDA903 child-level data in a secure environment, or commissioning bespoke analysis from DfE, for example to examine pathways and durations by age at entry, ethnicity and primary need, patterns of re-entry, or the extent to which variation between local authorities is associated with deprivation, service context and UASC concentrations. Alongside this, targeted evidence reviews could help identify where there is already good evidence on prevention, kinship care, reunification and relational support, and where the main gaps remain. Together, these strands would provide a useful next step in moving from descriptive patterns towards a clearer understanding of where change might be possible, for whom, and under what safeguards.



Endnotes

- ¹ www.centreforcare.org.uk
- ² The most recent DfE output covering the year up to 31 March 2025 is available here: [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2024 to 2025 - GOV.UK](#)
- ³ CoramBAAF (2025) Adoption and Special Guardianship Quarterly Data Collection: Q4 2024–2025 Headline Measures. London: CoramBAAF. Available at: <https://www.coram.org.uk/stats/asg-q4-2025> [Accessed 5 December 2025].
- ⁴ Ofsted (2025) The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2024/25. London: The Stationery Office. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202425-education-childrens-services-and-skills> [Accessed 5 December 2025].
- ⁵ Cabinet Office Race Disparity Unit (2024) Adopted and looked-after children – Ethnicity facts and figures. Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/health/social-care/adopted-and-looked-after-children/latest>
- ⁶ CoramBAAF (2025) Statistics: England; Coram (2025) Adoption and Special Guardianship Data – Headline Measures. Available at: <https://corambaaf.org.uk/resources/statistics/statistics-england> and <https://www.coram.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ASG-Q4-2024-2025-Headline-Measures-3.pdf>
- ⁷ Adoption England (n.d.) Ending racial disparity in adoption. Available at: <https://www.adoptionengland.co.uk/equality-and-diversity/ending-racial-disparity-adoption>
- ⁸ Department for Education and Race Disparity Unit (2023) Looked-after children data strategy. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/looked-after-children-data-strategy>
- ⁹ Bywaters, P. et al. (2020) The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report. University of Huddersfield / Nuffield Foundation. Available at: <https://pure.hud.ac.uk/en/publications/the-child-welfare-inequalities-project-final-report>
- ¹⁰ Bennett DL, Mason KE, Schlüter DK, Wickham S, Lai ET, Alexiou A, Barr B, Taylor-Robinson D. (2020) Trends in inequalities in Children Looked After in England between 2004 and 2019: a local area ecological analysis. *BMJ Open*. 10(11):e041774. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2020-041774



About the Centre for Care

The Centre for Care is a collaboration between the universities of Sheffield, Birmingham, Kent and Oxford, the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, the Office for National Statistics, Carers UK, the National Children's Bureau and the Social Care Institute for Excellence. Working with care sector partners and leading international teams, it addresses the urgent need for new, accessible evidence on care. Led by Centre Director Kate Hamblin and Deputy Director Nathan Hughes, its research aims to make a positive difference in how care is experienced and provided in the UK and internationally.

Children and Families

The Centre for Care's Children and Families theme examines how inequalities and social harms become 'care' and 'protection' concerns for children, and how support can be redesigned across early help, child protection, kinship care and out-of-home care to strengthen families and improve outcomes. Grounded in a social model of child protection, the theme emphasises prevention, early help and relational, rights-respecting support rather than deficit-focused or punitive responses.

About Family Rights Group

Family Rights Group is the leading national charity working to ensure that the child welfare and family justice system supports children to live safely and thrive within their family, while strengthening the family and community ties of those children who cannot live at home. The charity is unique in bringing together legal and social work expertise with the direct voice and insights of young people and families.

- The charity's free specialist advice service supports parents and kinship carers in England, helping them to understand their rights and options.
- They pioneer innovative child welfare practices including family group conferences and Lifelong Links.
- For over 50 years, the charity's legal, policy and campaigning work has influenced developments in the child welfare system. For example, they have recently secured a change in the law so children in care will have a right to reasonable contact with their brothers and sisters. They service the All Party Parliamentary Group on Kinship Care.

www.frg.org.uk

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