



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot  
Neath Port Talbot Council

# **Neath Port Talbot Council Children and Young People Services**

## **Placement Commissioning Strategy**

**2024 - 2027**

## Executive Summary

Neath Port Talbot Council (NPTC) recognises that for most children, the right place is to be at home with their families. NPTC continues to deliver and commission a range of early intervention and prevention-based services to support families which can also prevent the need for children to become looked after.

For those children who become looked after, NPTC recognises and takes seriously its responsibility as their Corporate Parent. NPTC seeks to ensure that care experienced children and young people are placed in the most appropriate type of placement and to maximise the most appropriate permanence options. For most care experienced children and young people this is within a family setting. The availability of high-quality support in local, stable placements is integral to supporting our care-experienced population to achieve good outcomes.

The voice of the children and young people that we support is of utmost importance to NPTC and is enshrined within NPTC's strengths-based, outcome focused model across Children and Young People Services. NPTC is on a coproduction journey that is gaining momentum and aims to effectively embed coproduction in service planning and design.

The NPTC care experienced population has been steadily decreasing and is projected to continue decreasing over the next few years. Whilst our demand for placements is decreasing, this picture is not replicated across Wales. Other placing Local Authorities have reported increasing numbers of care experienced children and young people and due to placement sufficiency issues in their areas, high numbers of independent foster care and residential placements within Neath Port Talbot are occupied by children from outside of Neath Port Talbot (NPT). This has created a sufficiency dilemma and presents placement challenges for us.

Welsh Government has committed to move away from for-profit provision in children's social care. Due to our reliance on private residential care provision to provide us with placement capacity, NPTC is carefully considering how it can support this commitment.

This strategy provides an overview of our current placement options, our challenges and an analysis of our future placement need. This strategy concludes with an action plan to achieve our priorities for development, which are to:

- **Increase** provision of local foster care placements
- **Achieve** sufficiency of local residential care placements
- **Improve** access and capability for local services to care for complex support needs
- **Strengthen** the young person's housing pathway and accommodation options for young people aged 16+
- **Maximise** commissioning processes to assist in achieving best value for money

## Contents

### **Section 1: Background and Context**

Introduction  
Placement Overview  
Strategy Purpose  
National Legislation and Policy Context  
National Placement Market  
Local Population and Policy Context  
Corporate Policies  
NPTC Key Approaches  
Existing Strategic Placement Commissioning Partnerships  
Key Challenges

### **Section 2: Data, Facts and Feedback**

NPTC Care Experienced Children and Young People Data Trends  
Foster Care Provision  
Residential Care Provision  
Supported Accommodation Provision  
Stakeholder Engagement  
Placement Costs

### **Section 3: Analysis and Options**

Future Service Needs  
Future Consideration of Local Placement Market  
Projection of our Future Needs

### **Section 4: Decisions, Planning and Strategy**

Placement Commissioning Intentions  
Action Plan

## **Corporate Links**

This strategy should be read in conjunction with relevant strategies and policies, including the following key documents:

- West Glamorgan Regional Partnership Area Plan 2023-2027
- West Glamorgan Regional Partnership Population Needs Assessment 2022-2027
- West Glamorgan Regional Partnership Social Care Market Stability Report 2022
- NPTC Corporate Plan 2024-2027
- NPTC Children & Young People Social Care Strategic Plan 2023-2026
- NPTC Adult and Children's Social Care Market Stability Report 2022
- NPTC Public Participation Strategy 2023-2027
- Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) Cymru, Eliminating Profit from the Care of Children who are looked after. Contribution to the Regulatory Impact Assessment March 2024

 [Eliminating Profit RIA Final .docx](#)

## **Section 1: Background and Context**

### **Introduction**

NPTC recognises that for most children, the right place is to be at home with their families. Some families may need support and we will continue with our strategic approach to innovatively deploy a range of Early Intervention and Prevention (EIP) support services which can prevent the need for children to become looked after. These EIP based services provide specific and targeted support to families facing a range of challenges.

NPTC recognises children's welfare and safety are paramount and we will ensure the best safeguards and support continue to be in place. For those children who become looked after, NPTC takes seriously its responsibility as their Corporate Parent. Ensuring that children are placed in the most appropriate setting is a key part of this responsibility to maximise their potential and to best support them to achieve their personal outcomes.

The effectiveness of any commissioning approach to our care experienced children and young people is influenced and impacted by a number of factors including:

- Effectiveness of universal, targeted and specialist support services across the whole system;
- Quality of care planning;
- Involvement of children and families by informing, coproducing and evaluating services;
- Availability, sufficiency and quality of services provided by the local social care market;
- National Policy initiatives e.g. 'Eliminate' private profit from children's care agenda.

### **Placement Overview**

A 'placement' refers to an arrangement by which NPTC places a child or young person in a suitable home environment in order to safeguard and promote their wellbeing.

Our guiding principles when making placements are:

- Stay at home or with family when possible
- If in care, to be in the best suitable placement
- If in care, to stay local when safe to do so
- To exit care when safe and timely to do so

NPTC accesses a range of different placement types, as follows:

<b>Family and Friends Arrangements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Placement With Parents</li> <li>• Special Guardianship Order (SGO)</li> <li>• Child Arrangement Orders</li> <li>• Connected Carers</li> </ul>
<b>Adoption</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long Term Permanence via National Adoption Service and Western Bay Adoption Service</li> </ul>
<b>Foster Care</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emergency</li> <li>• Short Breaks</li> <li>• Short Term</li> <li>• Long Term</li> </ul>
<b>Residential</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short Term Assessment</li> <li>• Medium Term Transition</li> <li>• Long Term Permanence</li> </ul>
<b>Other Arrangements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported Accommodation</li> <li>• Supported Lodgings</li> <li>• Independent Living</li> <li>• When I'm Ready (WIR)</li> <li>• Shared Lives</li> </ul>
<b>Secure Accommodation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Court Order (Permissive Order Short Term Only)</li> </ul>

The factors we consider when making placements in the best interest of a child includes if the placement:

- a) Can meet the needs of the child as set out in their Care and Support Plan or Pathway Plan;
- b) Supports continuity in the child's education or training (section 78(2) duty to promote educational achievement);
- c) Enables the child to live together with any siblings who are also being looked after by NPTC;
- d) Supports the views, wishes and feelings of the child (in accordance with the child's age and understanding);

- e) Supports the child's religious persuasion, racial origin, cultural and linguistic background;
- f) Supports the child's sexuality and gender identity;
- g) Can meet any additional needs or sensory impairment, including any emotional, behavioural and mental health needs;
- h) Supports positive contact arrangements with family and known support network;
- i) Supports arrangements to spend time with friends and maintain sporting, social and leisure pursuits.

## **Strategy Purpose**

The agreed approach to the strategic commissioning of placements by Children and Young People Services in NPTC is to:

- Shape our internal services to maximise the benefits of public sector provision in terms of quality and value for money;
- Shape our externally commissioned service market to maximise the benefits of commissioned provision in terms of quality and value for money;
- Work in collaboration with public sector partners across the Regional footprint where this offers identifiable benefits;
- Increase placement choice supplemental to our sufficiency duty to enable good matching;
- Co-produce outcome focussed services acknowledging that there are a range of different methods for strategic commissioning with multiple partners who may be co-operatives, charities or commercial partners.

The purpose of this strategy is to pull together in one document the identified strands of placement commissioning, ensure there is a clear vision, which underpins our approach to commissioning, and ensure this vision aligns with our corporate planning.

This strategy will inform:

- The shaping of our internal placement services;
- Our partnership working approach to placement commissioning with stakeholders, and a range of public and private sector partners;
- Our Market Position Statement

The desired outcomes of this strategy is to support the achievement of:

- Improving outcomes for our care experienced children and young people;
- Achieving best delivery of our Corporate Parenting functions;
- Ensuring children placed in high quality and value for money local placements

which safeguard and promote their wellbeing, build resilience and support positive relationships;

- Developing a more robust local market, which can respond to future changing demands.

## **National Legislation and Policy Context**

NPTC will ensure that there is sufficient accommodation for all children who are looked after under Section 76 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 ('The Act').

NPTC has a duty to ensure placements are made within NPTC (Section 81(9) of the Act) unless it is not reasonably practical to do so or there are overriding reasons for placing a child out of area, the primary overriding reason being safeguarding.

In keeping with the duty and aim of promoting the upbringing of a child by their family, there is a clear emphasis in the Act that, unless it is not consistent with the child's wellbeing, arrangements must be made for the child who needs accommodation to live with a parent or a person with parental responsibility. Where this is not possible, preference should be given to a placement with a relative, friend or other person connected to the child or young person. If these options are not possible, a range of sufficient alternative provision should be available including foster carers, residential children's care homes, supported accommodation, supported lodgings etc. It is this 'sufficient alternative accommodation' which is the focus of this Strategy.

Placement sufficiency has a national focus as the population of foster carers continues to decline and the sufficiency of placement types across the spectrum is impacted. The Ministerial Advisory Group on Improving Outcomes for care experienced children and young people has two key projects considering placement sufficiency, quality and outcome delivery: the National Fostering Framework (NFF) and the Task & Finish Group on Residential Care. We will continue to factor the learning from these projects into our local strategies, planning and implementation.

The Welsh Parliament (Senedd) has recently introduced the Health and Social Care (Wales) Bill which seeks to remove profit from Children's Social Care. This initiative is likely to reduce the number of providers operating in particular residential care in Wales and so is likely to impact on the sufficiency of placements for all authorities. NPTC is carefully considering how we support this initiative.

## National Placement Market

The number of children looked after within Wales has been on an upward trend in recent years and peaked at 7,241 in 2021. Following a decrease in 2022, the number increased to 7,208 in 2023 (a 2% increase from the previous year). The rate per 10,000 children aged under 18 was 116.3 in 2023, higher than the rate in 2022 (114.4) and the second highest rate ever<sup>1</sup>.

In 2022, the Competition & Markets Authority (CMA) reported across England, Scotland and Wales that placement needs were shifting with a greater number of placements sought for older children, UASC and those with more complex needs. The CMA also reported an increasing gap between the number of placements available and the number of care experienced children and young people requiring placements.

The MCA reported significant problems with the Welsh placement market due to:

- A lack of placements of the right kind, in the right places, means that children are not consistently getting access to care and accommodation that meets their needs;
- The largest private providers of placements are making materially higher profits and charging materially higher prices than they would expect if this market were functioning effectively;
- Some of the largest private providers are carrying very high levels of debt, creating a risk that disorderly failure of highly leveraged firms could disrupt the placements of children in care;
- The impact of the enactment of Health & Social Care Bill is also likely to have an impact on the national placement market, reducing the number of available placements within a relatively short timescale.

---

<sup>1</sup> Taken from Children looked after by local authorities: April 2022 to March 2023 | GOV.WALES



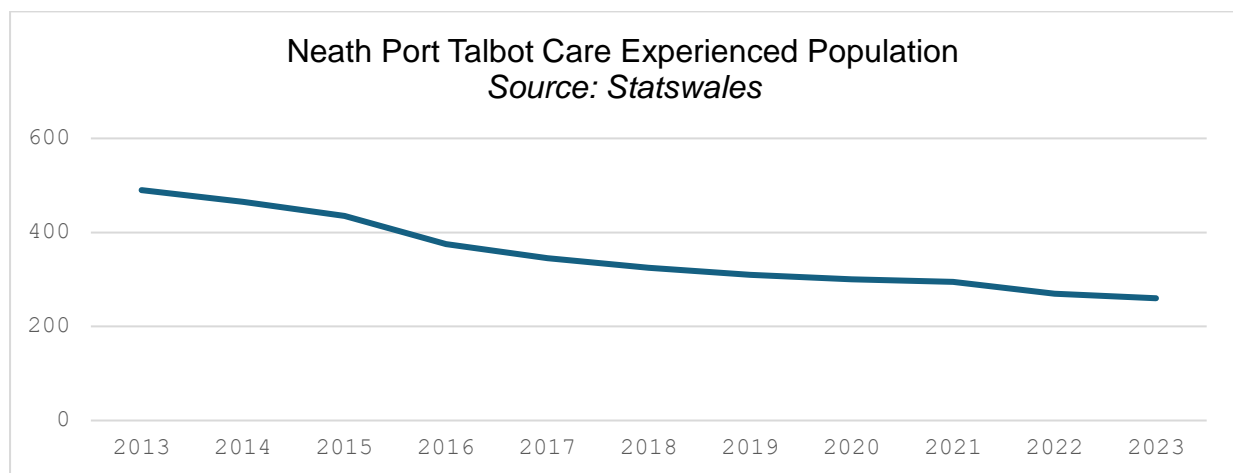
## Local Population and Policy Context

### General Population Summary

NPTC is the 9<sup>th</sup> largest Local Authority in Wales with a total population of 142,300<sup>2</sup>. Between 2011 and 2021, the population of children aged under 15 years increased by 2.5%<sup>3</sup>.

### NPTC Care Experienced Children and Young People Population Summary

The NPTC care experienced children and young people population has steadily decreased over the past 10 years.



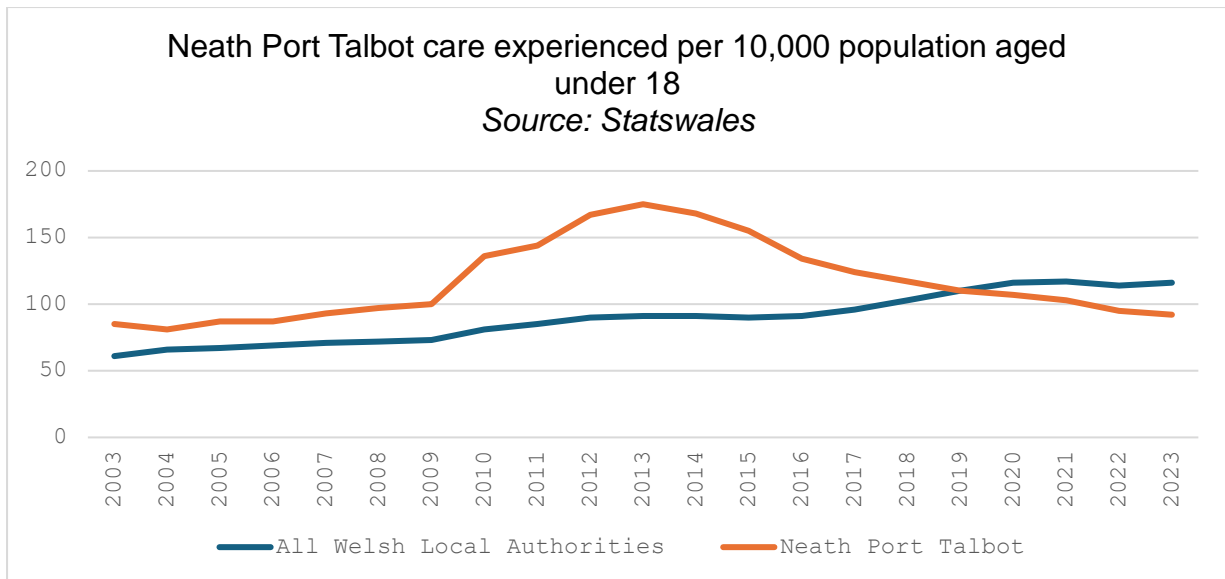
Research suggests the rates of care experienced children and young people across Local Authorities are influenced by the demographic and socioeconomic profile of each Local Authority as well as factors which are within the control of the Local Authority, including the way in which services are designed and delivered to support the most vulnerable in the community.

The rate of the NPTC care experienced children and young people per 10,000 population aged under 18 has seen a rise and fall pattern which has remained lower than the Welsh rate since 2019.

---

<sup>2</sup> 2021 ONS Census

<sup>3</sup> 2011 and 2021 ONS Census Comparison



## Corporate Priorities

One of the NPTC Corporate Plan’s key objectives is *‘to ensure all children get the best start in life’*.

The NPTC’s Children & Young People Social Care Strategic Plan sets out the key service priorities to contribute to the corporate objective, which are:

### *Placement Sufficiency:*

We are committed to an approach that puts children and their families first. We will work with families to help them stay together, but we will also ensure there are enough foster placements available for those who need a safe and suitable environment.

### *Recruit, retain and develop a highly skilled workforce:*

When social workers have the tools and time to do their job well, it makes a huge difference to children’s and families’ lives. We want a valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child and family who needs one.

### *Demand and complexity:*

For the majority of children, the best place for them to be is at home with their family, but some families need support to do this. We will provide specific and targeted support to families facing a range of challenges.

This strategy specifically supports the delivery of the priority to achieve ‘placement sufficiency’.

## **NPTC Key Approaches**

The following summarises NPTC's key approaches in order to support the key objectives and priorities from the Corporate Plan and Children and Young People Services Strategic Plan:

### Early Intervention & Prevention

Helping families stay together is a key focus of NPTC Children's Services. The continued investment in early intervention and prevention services aims to support children to live at home wherever possible and reduce the number of children and young people reaching the threshold for care and needing to become care experienced.

The portfolio of services commissioned by NPTC has increased over the previous few years which now includes the provision of Family Group Conferencing, parent peer advocacy services for parents experiencing care processes and a range of family focused wellbeing programmes.

### Embedded Outcomes Based Approach

NPTC has embedded a strengths-based outcomes focussed model across Children and Young People's Services. Social work practice is focused on a personal outcomes approach, which informs service design and delivery to contribute positively to children's lives, maximising children's potential and to promote long term child and family stability.

### Supporting Good Placement Outcomes

Where children and young people cannot live with their birth parents, preference is given to a placement with a relative, friend or other person connected to the child or young person. When this approach is not possible, NPTC strives to ensure the selected placement is stable, supportive and is well matched to maximise positive childhood experiences.

Placements are robustly monitored and by working closely with partner organisations, NPTC aims to ensure the right support services are available to care experienced children to ensure the placement meets their needs, the ability to achieve personal outcomes is maximised and to prevent unnecessary placement breakdown. For example, the NPTC therapeutic support team is a multi-disciplinary team that aims to help children with complex needs to remain in stable placements by providing specialist placement support.

Whilst the vast majority of care experienced children and young people experience

stable placements which contribute to the achievement of positive outcomes, limitations within the local placement market are presenting challenges for NPTC to effectively secure local placement choice and sufficiency. These key challenges and identified mitigating actions are discussed further within this Strategy.

The progression and achievement of personal outcomes is recorded within NPTC's electronic software system. NPTC is developing a new software system; the design of which will create more service wide data collection on the progression and achievement of outcomes. The new software will enable us to gain a greater understanding of detailed outcome progression for a range of factors including specific placement types. This will increase our ability to ensure each child is placed in the most appropriate placement to meet their needs

### Positive Exits from Care

NPTC aims to plan effectively for care experienced children and young people to ensure that all stakeholders are working together with the child or young person to meet their needs, ensuring they do not remain in care longer than is necessary and to support positive exits from care at all age points.

We adopt clear placement planning processes, robust placement scrutiny and promote reunification with families when safe to do so. For young people who are progressing towards adulthood, we provide supported accommodation options to help them to develop their independent skills in order to promote a positive transition into adulthood when safe and suitable to do so.

### **Existing Strategic Placement Commissioning Partnerships**

NPTC work closely with internal and external partners on an individual and strategic level. NPTC plays an active role in the **West Glamorgan Regional Partnership** which has a number of transformational work streams which drives local and regional strategy, planning and implementation.

NPTC is a member of the **Western Bay Regional Adoption Service** in collaboration with Swansea City Council and Bridgend County Borough Council. This regional arrangement delivers all functions related to placements for permanence through the use of Adoption endorsed by the Courts.

NPTC is also a member of **Foster Wales** which is a national network of 22 Local Authority fostering services. NPTC works closely with neighbouring Swansea City Council to develop a regional approach to the recruitment and assessment of foster carers.

NPTC is a member of the **Children's Commissioning Consortium Cymru** (4C's) which is a strategic commissioning alliance between Welsh South & Mid Local Authorities to support placement commissioning needs in respect to Fostering and Residential placement types. These may be short term placements or placements for permanence and cover a range of models of care that are outcomes focused specific to individual Children's Care & Support Plans.

NPTC utilises the All Wales Local Authority Framework for the Provision of Foster Care Services for Children & Young People and the All Wales Local Authority Framework for the Provision of Residential Care Services for Children & Young People. These frameworks deliver strategic level commissioning partnerships with independent sector providers in fostering and residential services to meet NPTC's Sufficiency Duty which necessitates external individual placement commissioning. The All Wales Frameworks are managed by the 4Cs.

NPTC commissions a number of services to deliver daytime and overnight short breaks to children who have disabilities and families. These commissioning arrangements have been designed in conjunction with children and their families and have been procured through competitive tender exercises.

NPTC commissions a number of supported housing services for young people preparing to leave care. These commissioning arrangements have been procured through competitive tender exercises. Since 2023, a number of new supported housing service models have been introduced which are in pilot stage and are subject to review. This approach has sought to introduce innovative models into the young person's housing pathway in order to provide the best types of placement to meet placement needs.

## **Key Challenges**

NPTC continues to face challenges in achieving local placement sufficiency.

We have an ageing population of foster carers. In line with Local Authorities across Wales and the UK, the number of foster carers is reducing. We have a key challenge of recruiting and retaining enough foster carers to provide sufficient placements for all children who need foster care.

The vast majority of residential placements located in NPT are occupied by children from neighbouring Local Authorities, resulting in the lack of placement choice and availability of local placements for local children. This is a key challenge because despite being numerically oversupplied, the local placement market is not providing us with placement sufficiency.

The housing market within NPT has received investment to grow but there is a lack of

local affordable housing to enable young people including care leavers to move into independent accommodation when they are ready. This is creating blockages within our supported accommodation services where young people are experiencing delayed move on to more appropriate housing. This is a key challenge and one which is being collaboratively addressed with the NPTC housing department.

NPT is located close to the Swansea city area and is adjoined to a number of neighbouring Local Authorities. This has contributed to a continued pattern of organisations developing services and placements in the area to serve the wider south Wales area and are not designed to meet local placement need and demand. This is a challenge which is contributing to our placement sufficiency dilemma and new placements are not meeting local placement needs.

The buying power of NPTC is small as compared to Local Authority areas across South Wales. This is making our efforts to positively shape the local placement market to meet local needs harder. This is a challenge which we will work closely within our regional structure to address.

## Section 2: Data, Facts and Feedback

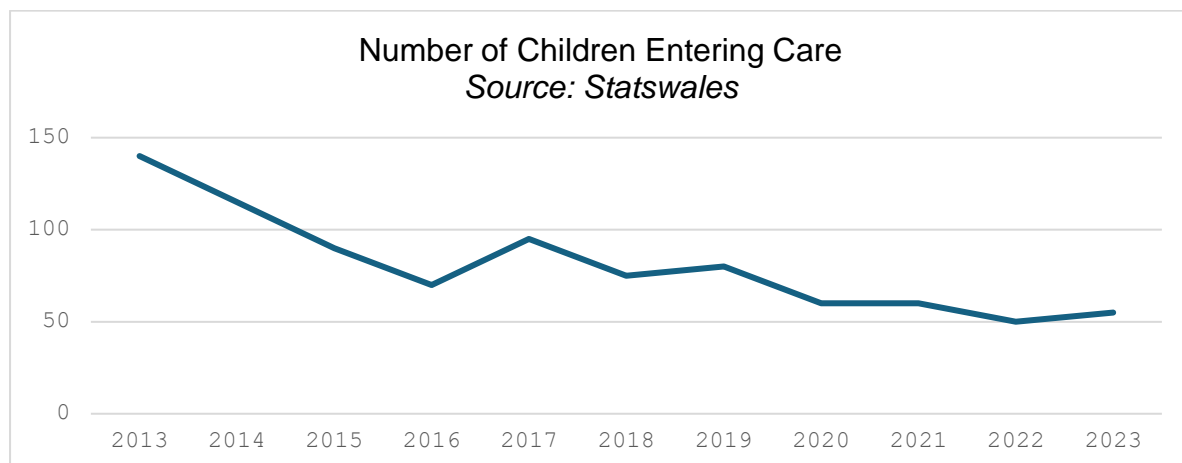
### Neath Port Talbot Care Experienced Data Trends

#### Entry into Care

The most prevalent reasons why children enter care in Neath Port Talbot continues to be<sup>4</sup>:

- Abuse or neglect
- Family dysfunction
- Absent parenting (including placing a child for adoption)

The following chart demonstrates a continued reduction in the number of children entering care in Neath Port Talbot:



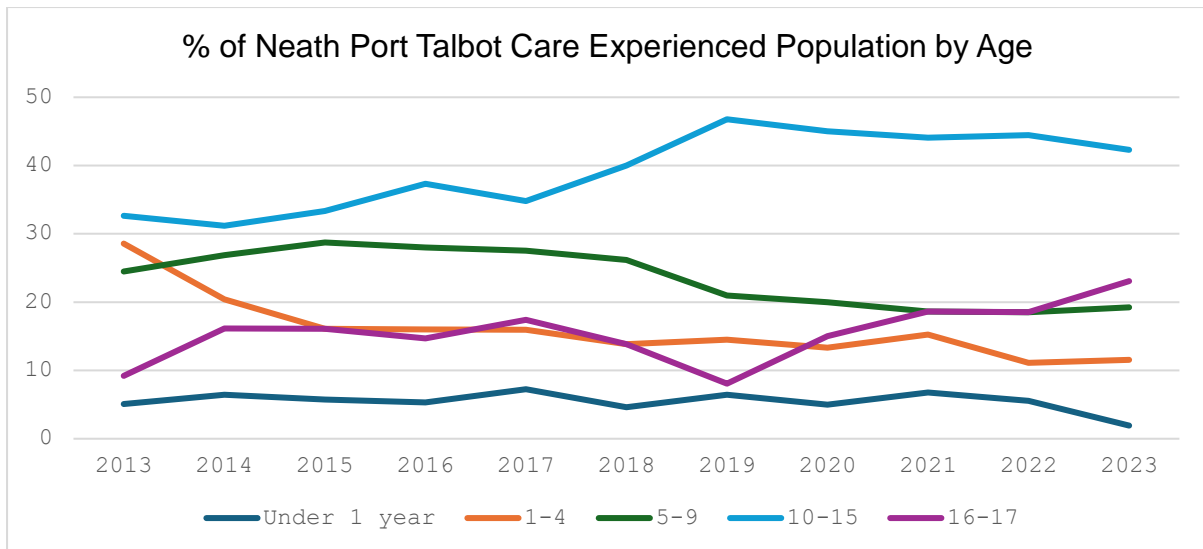
The continued reduction in the number of children entering care can be attributable to a range of measures which includes the effective deployment of NPTC's key approaches to support families to stay together to prevent entry into care. This is having an impact upon the age of children when entering care; children are staying with their families for longer and therefore the age of entry into care is more prevalent for children aged 10+.

#### Care Experienced Population: Age

The following chart demonstrates trends of change associated with the age of children within the Neath Port Talbot Care Experienced population:

---

<sup>4</sup> definitions as per Statswales

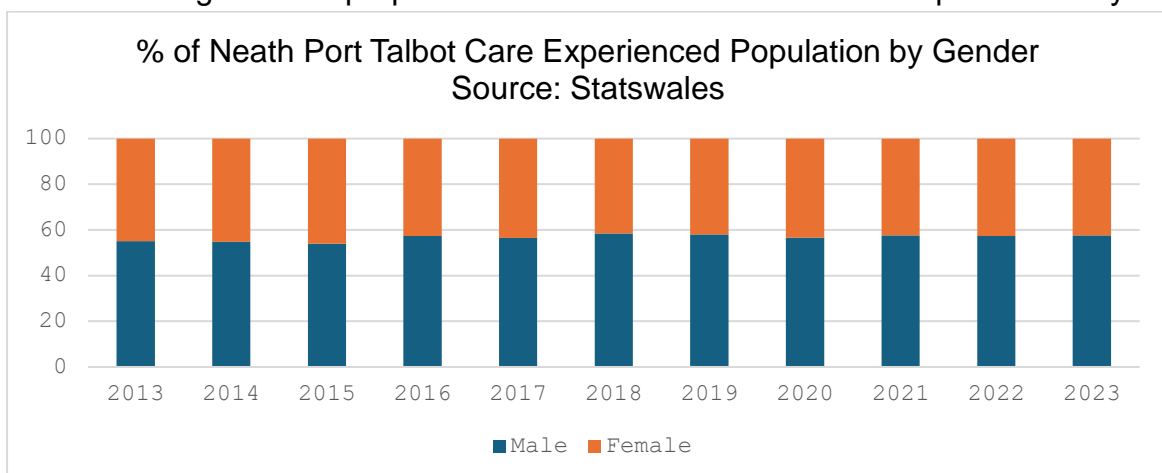


The chart above demonstrates the following age associated trends over a 10 year period (2013-2023):

- The highest demand for placements continues to be the 10-15 age category which is a challenge due to the shortage of local placements for this cohort;
- The 16-17 age category is presenting recent growth which has included a growth in arrivals of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The growth for this age category has led to NPTC piloting new models of supported accommodation in order to provide suitable placements for this cohort;
- Demand for placements for the 0-9 age category has continued to steadily decrease which has a correlation with the decreasing rate of entry into care for this cohort.

### Care Experienced Population: Gender

Males continue to be overrepresented in the Neath Port Talbot care experienced population, with males representing 57%. The trend line in the below graph shows minimal changes to the proportion of males and females over the previous 10 years.





## Placement Types

The table below shows a breakdown of the types of placements occupied by care experienced children and young people as on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.

	<b>As on 31.03.2024</b> <i>(rounded to nearest 5)</i>	<b>% of Total</b>
Placed with Parent	40	16%
Family/ Friend Carers	50	20%
Pre-Adoption	5	2%
Mainstream Fostering	90	36%
Independent Fostering	20	8%
Secure Residential	0	0
Residential/ Educational	20	8%
Supported Accommodation	20	8%
Independent Living	0	0
Other	5	2%

To compare against the placement types occupied by care experienced children and young people in 2021 (comparing a period of 3 years), of significance are the following trends:

- An increased use of residential placements (from 10 to 20);
- A decreased use of independent fostering agency placements (from 40 to 20).

Of the above trends, the increased use of residential care is a concern due to budgetary impact this has due to the cost of residential placements.

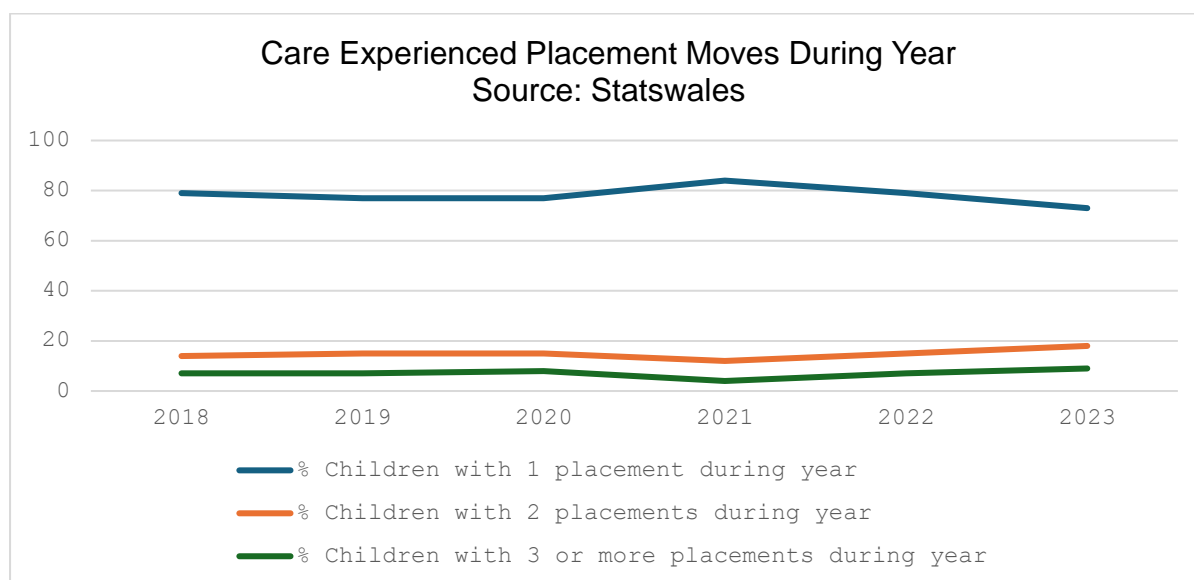
## Care Experienced Population: Placement Moves

The rate of which care experienced children and young people move between placements during a year can provide an indication of how effective NPTC is when selecting and matching young people to the most appropriate placement to meet their needs.

Between 2018 and 2023 (a 5 year period), on average, NPTC's rates of placement moves were lower than compared to the Welsh average. To illustrate:

	5 Year Average (2018-2023)	
	NPTC	Wales
% Children with 1 placement during year	78%	76%
% Children with 2 placements during year	15%	18%
% Children with 3 or more placements during year	7%	9%

The following chart shows the trend of care experienced children and young people who experienced a placement move during each year for the previous 5 years.

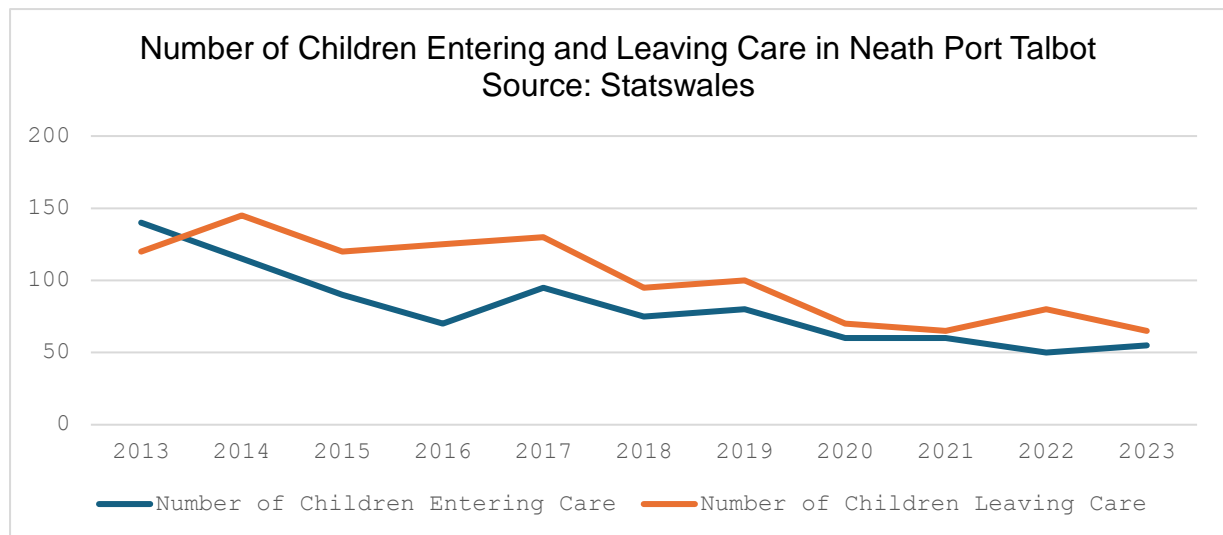


The chart above demonstrates that the percentage of care experienced children and young people who have 1 placement during the year is reducing and the percentage of care experienced children and young people who are experiencing multiple placement moves during a year is increasing.

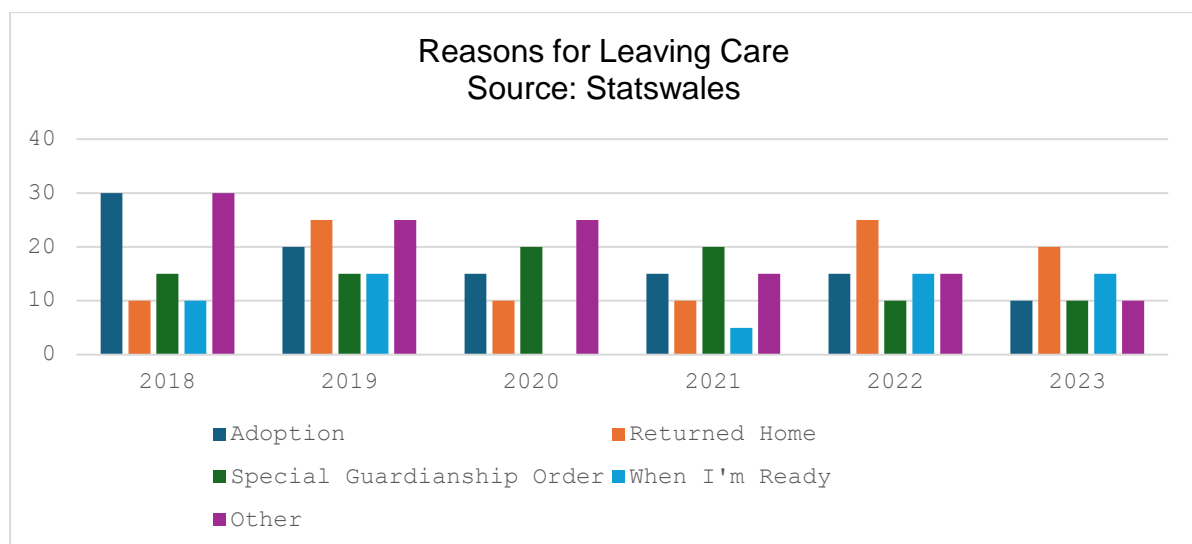
A contributing factor to these trends is the lack of local placement sufficiency which is resulting in care experienced children and young people being placed out of county and then experiencing a placement move to return to Neath Port Talbot. Further examination of case files will be explored to analyse the causes and potential solutions to these trends.

## Exits From Care

The number of children exiting care is on a reducing trajectory. When compared to the rate of entry into care, the overall impact is contributing to reducing the number of care experienced children and young people in Neath Port Talbot.



The following chart shows the most prevalent reasons why children exited the care of NPTC over the 5 year period between 2018 - 2023:



The chart above demonstrates the following exit trends over the previous 5 years:

- The rate of exits into adoption is reducing, however this is in line with Best Practice Guidance and a reduction in children who are made subject to Placement Orders as a permanency plan.
- The rate of children returning home to live with parents, relatives or other persons with parental responsibility is fluctuating which is due to the individual

- circumstances of each family;
- When I'm Ready placements are increasing on average which contributes to positive outcomes for young people but it can reduce the availability of foster carers which is a challenge that NPTC is exploring;
  - The 'other' category includes young people who exit care due to turning 18.

## **Foster Care Provision**

In recent years, the number of children and young people placed in foster care provision has steadily reduced (attributable to a reducing local care experienced children and young people population).

The local foster care market consists of Foster Wales NPT (operated and managed by NPTC) and the use of IFAs, which are procured through the 4C's All Wales Fostering Framework. As on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, 110 children were placed in mainstream fostering, of which 82% were placed with in-house Foster Wales NPT carers and 18% were placed with IFA based foster carers.

In line with the individual child's assessed needs, foster care placements are initially sought from within the NPTC boundary when safe to do so. Local placements for local children provide continuity of family time with family and friends and continuity of local community connections.

The vast majority of foster carers registered with the Foster Wales NPT are located within the NPTC boundary. While IFA placements are present within NPTC, due to their limited placement availability, suitable IFA placements tend to be located within other Local Authority areas. It is unclear what impact the Eliminate Profit agenda will have on fostering provision within Wales as foster carers are self-employed and can move between agencies relatively easily.

The NPT foster care market presents a sufficiency challenge to NPTC. Based on numerical placement numbers, there are more local IFA placements than we need but many IFA placements located in Neath Port Talbot are occupied by Local Authorities from across Wales.

Our local market gaps relate to local fostering placements for:

- Children aged 11+
- Children with complex support needs
- Children with disabilities and or/ behaviours which challenge
- Parent and child placements
- Short breaks
- Sibling groups

The Foster Wales NPT service has a declining and ageing pool of foster carers. Additionally, whilst the use of 'When I'm ready' and SGO placements are positive for the permanence and stability for the child, the use of these placements has had an impact upon the availability and size of the local foster carer pool.

All 22 local authorities, collectively as Foster Wales, have been taking steps towards recruiting more local authority foster carers and retaining the current local authority fostering population. Going forward Foster Wales will need to accelerate this work to significantly grow the numbers of foster carers fostering for their local authority and to realise their collective ambition of placing more fostered children in local authority placements within their home area while reducing dependence on more costly options.

The long-term sustainability of Welsh Government grant funding for Foster Wales remains imperative to ensure that local authorities can build on this progress, continue the work already underway and achieve their aim to grow in house fostering provision.

In 2024, NPTC launched Foster Plus Step Down to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers for children who have complex support needs, to address this market gap and to support effective step-down from residential care.

Our key challenge is to address the gaps in the availability and capability of the local foster care market in order to provide suitable placements for all children who need foster care.

## **Residential Care Provision**

NPTC operates Hillside Secure Children's Home (the only children's secure residential provision in Wales). This home takes placements from across England and Wales. NPTC does not currently own or operate any children's general residential care provision, therefore NPTC is currently reliant upon the external market for residential care placements. NPTC has recently carried out an options appraisal to support its ongoing sufficiency needs based on the likely impact of the Eliminate Profit agenda.

Between 2017 – 2021 the number of children NPTC placed in residential care placements remained at a consistent level, however since 2021 the number of children in residential care has risen significantly. This is due to the lack of suitable foster placements for a small number of children.

Whilst the population of care experienced children and young people has reduced, this has not resulted in an overall decline in demand for residential care provision. The use of residential provision is determined by the assessed needs of the child and although the overall care experienced population is declining, there is a continued need for residential provision for a small number of children and young people on both a long term and interim basis.

	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March of each year (2018-2024)</b> (rounded to the nearest 5)						
Number of placements in residential care	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>
	10	10	10	10	15	25	20

The NPTC residential care market has grown by over 20% over the previous 5 years and currently consists of 8 service providers who operate 13 residential care settings, which collectively provide 56 bed spaces.

Based on local demand, the NPTC residential care market continues to be numerically over-supplied as the local market has more than enough local provision than we have needed although this is likely to change with the Eliminate profit agenda.

Occupancy data relating to residential settings located within NPTC demonstrated limited placement availability due to the majority of bed spaces being occupied by placements from neighbouring Local Authorities and from across south Wales. Placements have also been made within NPTC from around Wales and England. This has led to NPTC having to place children in residential care placements which are outside of the local and regional footprint due to the lack of local placements being available for local children. As on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, 70% of children in residential care were placed within the Neath Port Talbot or Swansea regional area. If local residential care provision was available, 100% of this cohort would be placed locally. NPTC strives to increase this number to support children to maintain their local support connections.

The local NPTC residential care market has also been unable to effectively meet local demand for placements for children who present complex support needs. The impact of this has resulted in local children again moving outside of the local and regional footprint in order to receive a suitable residential placement. NPTC wants to reduce and avoid this situation due to the negative impact this has upon the child's outcomes and the disruption they will experience to accessing their local support connections. Regional service planning has commenced to explore opportunities to address the sufficiency of residential placements for children who present complex support needs.

Due to our sufficiency dilemma and gaps in local provision, our key challenges are addressing the lack of availability and capability of local residential care provision in order to provide suitable local placements for all children who need residential care.

## **Supported Accommodation Provision**

NPTC supports and commissions a range of supported transitional placements which are available to care experienced children and young people (when assessed as safe and appropriate) and care leavers.

Supported transition placement types include 'When I'm Ready' placements with foster carers, supported lodgings, shared supported accommodation, targeted supported accommodation targeted for those with complex support needs and crisis based accommodation.

NPTC support young people with additional needs to transition into shared lives placements when appropriate.

To suit a range of support needs, the portfolio of supported transition placements provides variable support provision ranging from 24 hour waking staff to the lower end of the support spectrum of floating support.

The demand for local based supported accommodation has increased over the past 2 years due to the increasing population of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) who are assessed as suitable for supported accommodation. It is unclear what impact the Government's immigration policies will have on UASC arrivals over the coming years but based on previous UASC arrival data, UASC based demand for supported accommodation is projected to steadily increase over the coming years.

An analysis of the overall demand for supported accommodation has concluded; demand for low level support needs has been decreasing, while demand for placements catering for more complex support needs has been increasing.

A recent review of the Neath Port Talbot housing pathway identified various blockages which have affected the move-on flow from within the housing pathway into independent accommodation. The lack of local, affordable independent accommodation is compounding this challenge. This has resulted in some supported accommodation services operating at capacity and young people are unable to move to a more appropriate placement when ready to do so.

Over the previous 5 years, our commissioned crisis bed provision has increasingly been used for longer term placements which is not an appropriate use of a dedicated temporary, crisis-based service. NPTC will undertake a review of the crisis bed service in 2025 to inform the future design of this service.

NPTC has developed a new youth accommodation strategy. This has led to a number of new pilot supported accommodation models being tested for young people aged 16+ and which are reporting a positive impact for young people.

NPTC is currently undertaking a strategic youth housing pathway review which will involve the review and evaluation of many commissioned supported accommodation services. Consultations with young people are ongoing in order to effectively co-design and co-produce supported accommodation services. The findings from the youth housing pathway review will inform NPTC's future commissioning intentions within this market.

Our key challenges are to address the availability of independent accommodation to support an effective mode on flow from supported accommodation and to ensure our portfolio of supported accommodation services can provide suitable local placements for all young people who need supported accommodation services.

## **Stakeholder Engagement**

NPTC regularly engages with children, young people, parents, carers, foster carers, internal staff, service providers, partner organisations and the wider community. Various consultations are led by NPTC Children and Young People Services teams including Social Work teams, the Commissioning team and the Engagement & Participation team. We also have a number of active child focused engagement groups which provides a platform for them to have a voice in decisions that affect them. These groups include YoVo (Your Voice Matters), Junior YoVo for younger children and a Junior Safeguarding Board.

Stakeholder engagement has been used to inform social work practices, service design, pathway planning and service performance evaluations. In line with NPTC's coproduction approach, NPTC is on a coproduction journey which is gaining momentum and aims to continue effectively embedding coproduction in service planning and design.

NPTC also works with partner organisations and stakeholders to support and contribute to regional and national consultations with care experienced children and young people and stakeholders. The findings are again used to inform our plans.

The key messages we obtained during 2023 and 2024 from children and families were:

- Children and families and foster carers were positive about the services and the quality of services they receive;
- Children and families want to access local based services and travel/ transport can be a barrier for them;
- Parents of children who have disabilities want to access more support services such as short breaks to help them to continue to meet their caring responsibilities;



- The terminology in which NPTC requires change to more child friendly terminology;
- Children and families want to be involved in designing services they receive.

NPTC has fully embraced the above feedback which had led to the creation of a 'language tool' for professionals and the idea to develop the role of 'children's champions' where children and young people are more involved in commissioning processes is being explored.

During 2023 and 2024, NPTC focused consultations produced the following key findings:

*Children's Residential Home Co-Design Workshops:*

These workshops provided us with an overview of what local children want from residential homes. This included being close to their school, close to sports facilities, having a home which does not stand out in the community. This feedback has been used to inform the service design plans for future residential care provision.

*Young People's Supported Accommodation 'What Matters' Workshops:*

These workshops provided us with an overview of what local young people want from supported accommodation. This included the need to feel safe with responsible adults present to support with any conflicts between young people, being located close to town centres and community facilities and their preference to have private washing facilities e.g. en-suite rooms. Feedback with this group is continuing to ensure services are co-designed with young people.

*Residential Provider Market Engagement Event:*

This event provided us with an overview of how local residential care providers are business planning in relation to the eliminating profit agenda. This provided us with a mixed picture of the local market with some intending to diversify their business models but a small number reported consideration of leaving the market.

This event also provided us with provider feedback regarding potential options on how we can commission or potentially collaboratively develop local residential care provision in the future.

*Foster Carer consultation event:*

This event supported us to learn about the areas of our service which are highly valued, along with the areas that carers suggested improvements for. They day focused around topics chosen by foster carers. These topics were; finance, placement stability, our retention offer and the support to children and young people's health and education.

Further engagement events will be held (and we will explore holding regional based

market engagement events) to continue conversations with the residential care market which will inform our future commissioning plans.

## Placement Costs

The required financial commitment to support our care experienced population is rising which is due to the increased use of residential care provision and rising placement costs across the placement market.

For example, in response to the increased use of residential care provision, the NPTC budget has in turn increased:

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Annual budget for residential care provision	£1,091,580	£2,043,610	£4,152,610	£3,614,240

A crude calculation of the cost of placements both currently and as compared to April 2022 can be summarised as:

Placement Provider	Average cost per placement per year (April 2022)	Average cost per placement per year (April 2024)	Difference between 2022-2024 (2 year period)
NPT Foster Wales (operated by NPTC)	£20,265	£22,447	+ 11% Difference
Independent Fostering Agency	£46,217	£58,170	+ 26% Difference
Residential Placement	£196,383	£303,026	+ 54% Difference

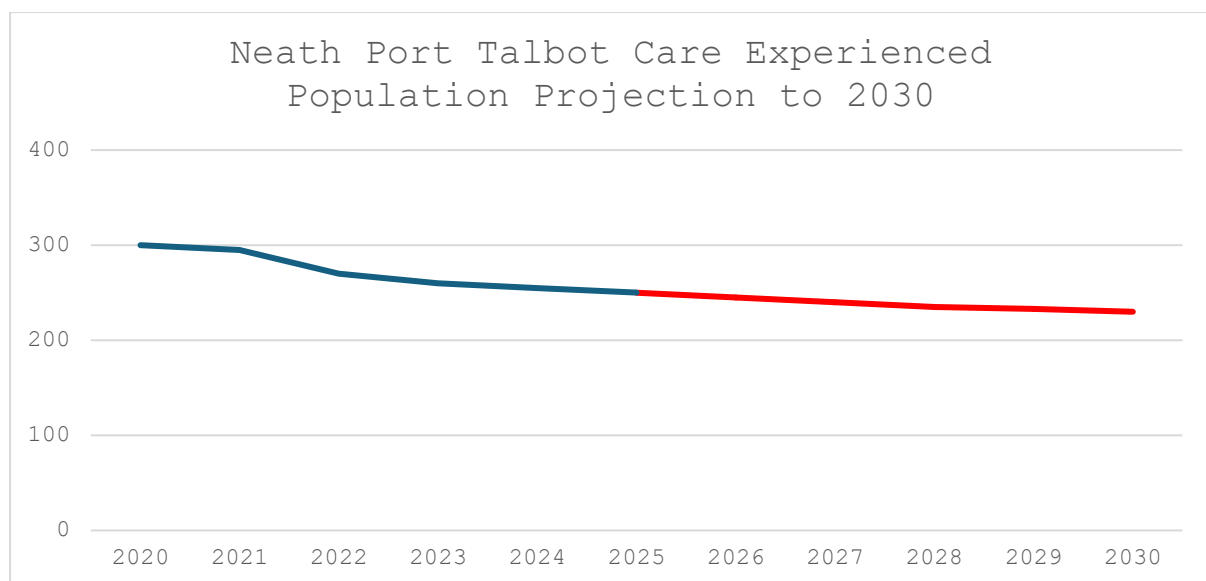
There are clear financial advantages in ensuring we maximise the potential of using our in-house fostering service, avoid unnecessary use of residential care placements and support prompt step-down from residential care when safe and appropriate.

## Section 3: Analysis and Options

### Future Service Needs

NPTC is experiencing continued pressures to achieve placement sufficiency, improve services and reduce costs.

An analysis of past and emerging data sets (including for example NPTC care experienced population data, NPTC general population data and entry/ exits from care trends) projects the NPTC care experienced population to continue reducing albeit at a slower rate of reduction as previously seen within NPTC.



From analysing the placement trends and needs profiles of the current care experienced children and young people population, if we achieve placement sufficiency, our placement demand will result in:

- A decreased need for residential care provision
- An increased need in step-down foster plus carers
- An increased need for foster care (which is projected to include an increased demand on the Foster Wales NPT Service and a consistent level of demand for IFA placements)
- A reduced level of demand for transitional supported accommodation services for young people aged 16+
- An increased need to work regionally to better influence market shaping across the local and regional footprint.

### We Need:

- A fostering service which can provide placement choice, good placement options and skilled foster carers to support complex needs and older children;
- Access to suitable local residential placements which can support children with complex needs which are available when we need them;
- Access to a range of suitable supported accommodation options to best support 16+ and care leavers to prepare for independent living;
- To ensure ongoing access to care placements during and subsequent to the enactment of the eliminate profit agenda

### Our Weaknesses:

- Competition between IFAs and Foster Wales NPT for local foster care recruitment is not supporting local placement availability. We need to find ways to work in partnership with the sector to improve local accessibility and reclaim in-area availability;
- The Eliminate agenda is likely to reduce the number of providers operating within Wales and therefore impact negatively on the sufficiency of placements, we do not have a complete picture yet of how our local providers will react to the Eliminate agenda. We need to increase communication with local providers to better understand how the local market will react to the Eliminate agenda;
- NPTC has weak buying power within the residential care market and we are competing with other Local Authorities for a limited number of available local residential placements. We know encouraging the development of more local residential placements is not the answer to our placement challenges because other Local Authorities will continue to use available placements within NPTC. We need to find ways to better work in partnership with the sector to improve local accessibility and reclaim in-area availability.

### **Future Considerations of Local Placement Market**

From our initial market engagement event with local residential care providers and the changes to foster care provision already taking place in 2024, we envisage the Eliminate agenda as resulting in:

- Less volume of placements as private providers leave and voluntary sector providers slowly begin to deliver. Based on market engagement, we believe

the voluntary sector will not replace the current private sector provisions within the local and regional area;

- There will be a reduction in the volume of local placements for spot purchasing as the market shrinks and as larger Local Authorities enter block arrangements.

There are options which we are currently exploring to better secure local provision and to achieve placement sufficiency, which includes:

- Investing in our own internal estate to develop local residential care homes;
- Collaboratively working with a strategic partner from the voluntary sector for the development of new residential care homes;
- Reviewing how attractive our offering is to current and potential foster carers which can potentially lead to foster carers transferring from IFA's to Foster Wales NPT;
- Exploring opportunities for capital development with our internal estates and local registered social landlords to develop new supported and independent housing opportunities for young people and care leavers.

## **Section 4: Decisions, Planning and Strategy**

### **Placement Commissioning Intentions**

Our intentions are to:

- Increase provision of Foster Wales NPT local foster care placements, including placements which are able to support children and young people who have complex support needs;
- Increase availability of local residential care placements, including placements which are available to local children and young people who have complex support needs;
- Strengthen the young persons housing pathway and accommodation options for young people aged 16+ and care leavers;
- Explore new service models and new commissioning approaches to ensure sufficient local placements are available to local children and young people which provide value for money;
- Increase and strengthen our discussions with the provider market to improve communication, understanding and collaborative working where possible;
- Increase and strengthen our market shaping approach in conjunction with regional partners;
- To improve our internal software system to improve our data collection on the progression and achievement of outcomes;
- To improve the quality and scope of information we share with providers and stakeholders which will underpin our efforts to strengthen our market shaping approach.

## Action Plan

The following action plan will be reviewed and progress noted on a 6 monthly basis.

Key Theme	Desired Outcomes	Action
Increase provision of local foster care placements, including placements to meet complex needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide placement choice</li> <li>• Achieve good matches</li> <li>• Able to place locally</li> <li>• Support placement stability</li> <li>• Prevent unnecessary use of residential care</li> <li>• Able to support step down from residential care when appropriate to do so</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue regular reviews of our foster care marketing, recruitment and retention approach</li> <li>• Monitor and evaluate our new Foster Plus Scheme</li> <li>• Review and update our Foster Wales NPT Recruitment &amp; Retention Plan on a Page</li> <li>• Continue to work with regional partners to implement regional recruitment campaigns and regional initiatives</li> <li>• Increase dialogue and further develop relationships with local IFAs</li> <li>• Regular Carer consultation events</li> </ul>
Increase local residential placement availability, including placements to meet complex needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide placement choice</li> <li>• Achieve good matches</li> <li>• Access suitable models of support</li> <li>• Able to place locally</li> <li>• Support placement stability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conclude service planning work which is currently exploring options such as developing internal residential care homes and/or collaboratively developing residential care homes with the local voluntary sector for example</li> <li>• Develop a market shaping plan</li> <li>• Continue to work with regional partners to develop feasible regional initiatives</li> <li>• Increase dialogue and further develop relationships with local providers</li> </ul>

<p>Strengthen the young persons' housing pathway and accommodation options</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access suitable models of accommodation &amp; support</li> <li>• Prevent delayed move-on</li> <li>• Achieve a clear accommodation pathway to meet need</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate the effectiveness of pilot supported accommodation projects</li> <li>• Strategically review youth housing pathway</li> <li>• Review and evaluate current commissioned services within youth housing pathway</li> <li>• Develop service model options for consideration and development</li> </ul>
<p>Explore new service models and new commissioning approaches to achieve placement sufficiency and best value for money</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced demand on placement budget</li> <li>• Access suitable models of accommodation &amp; support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allocate sufficient resources to project research and design</li> <li>• Work with regional partners to improve regional placement landscape</li> <li>• Undertake market and stakeholder engagement activities to co-design services in line with what children and families need and want</li> </ul>
<p>Improve our communication with the provider market</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve our understanding of the local market</li> <li>• Improve the market's understanding of NPTC intentions</li> <li>• Create opportunities to develop new or remodelled services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a market and stakeholder engagement plan</li> </ul>
<p>Improve our market shaping approach in</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide placement choice</li> <li>• Access suitable models of support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to develop regional market shaping activities with regional partners (which will inform the local market shaping plan)</li> </ul>



conjunction with regional partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to place locally</li> </ul>	
To improve our internal software system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve range of data collection</li> <li>• Improve quality of data collection</li> <li>• Improve analysis of data to inform strategic plans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conclude the development of our new internal software system</li> </ul>
To improve the information we share with providers and stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve our understanding of the local market</li> <li>• Improve the market's understanding of NPTC intentions</li> <li>• Create opportunities for collaborative working</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review the current material released via our media channels</li> <li>• Develop a market and stakeholder engagement plan</li> </ul>

This action plan is a live document and will be updated on a 6 monthly basis or whenever there are key changes which materially changes the scope of the actions listed.