



Fostering and adoption statistics 2019/20 to 2023/24

A statistical bulletin

Published September 2024

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Key points

Foster care in Scotland

- **The number of foster care households in Scotland continued to decrease.**
 - At 31 December 2023, there were 2,998 approved foster care households down 8.0% from 3,261 in 2022.
 - The proportion of households approved for all placement types (64%) was higher than the four preceding years.
 - There were fewer new households approved (178) than in any of the four preceding years.
 - In 2023, 405 foster care households deregistered, a similar number to the previous two years.

- **The number of children and young people living in foster families continued to decrease.**
 - At 31 December 2023, there were 3,918 children and young people living in foster families, down from 4,162 the previous year.
 - The number of children and young people living in foster families has decreased each year over the last four years.
 - As with previous years, there were more children placed in interim placements (1,730) compared to permanent (1,117) or long-term (1,028).
 - 256 children experienced an unplanned ending of their placement in 2023.
 - Fostering services reported that 139 children seeking asylum and refuge began using their services during 2023, and on 31 December 2023 there were still 92 children seeking asylum and refuge using a fostering service.

- **Not all family groups of children are placed together.**
 - In 2023, similar to each of the previous four years, 21% of the family groups placed in foster care households were placed separately (some following assessment, others due to emergency situations and lack of resources).
 - 79% of services said they had difficulties in 2023 recruiting households that will take family groups of children, the highest proportion recorded to date.

- **In 2023, 48 fostering services said they have a continuing care service.**
 - In 2023, there were in total 448 approved continuing care households up 4.7% from 428 in 2022 and higher than the four preceding years.
In 2023, 448 young people were accommodated in a continuing care placement up 3.2% from 434 in 2022 and higher than the four preceding years.

Adoption in Scotland

- **The number of children and young people approved for adoption has continued the general downward trend.**
 - In 2023, there were 198 children approved for adoption, 17.5% fewer than the previous year.
 - 174 children were placed with their new adoptive families (3.9% fewer than the previous year) and 178 children were legally adopted (7.8% fewer than the previous year).
- **The age profile of children approved for adoption continues to be stable.**
 - In 2023, 43% of children approved for adoption were in the two to five age bracket and 50% were infants, consistent with the previous year.
- **A small number of adoptions broke down in 2023, and this number continues to be variable from year to year.**
 - In 2023, 22 adoptions broke down, higher than the 12 in 2022, but lower than the 37 reported in 2021.
- **The number of adoptive households approved continued the downward trend.**
 - There were 199 new adoptive households approved in 2023, 37 less than in 2022.
 - The proportion of new households approved to adopt children aged six years or older remained at 25%, consistent with last year, and higher than prior to 2022 (11-13%).
- **The number of households waiting for a child to be placed decreased, returning to 2020 levels.**
 - In 2023, 189 households were waiting for a child to be placed.
 - At the same time, there were 130 children approved for adoption and waiting to be matched to an adoptive household (the lowest number recorded over the past five years).

Introduction

All children need strong supports and steady, caring relationships to thrive. Fostering and adoption are two vital parts of the flexible scaffold of support that can help children build happy and healthy lives. This report provides insight into the operation of fostering, adoption and continuing care services in Scotland over the past five years. At 31 December 2023, there were just over 11,000 care services registered with the Care Inspectorate, including 38 adoption and 58 fostering services provided by the local authority and the voluntary/not-for-profit sectors.

All of us have a role in helping children in Scotland thrive. We hope that the insights in this report can play a part in improving and strengthening the supports which are in place for children and young people through adoption, fostering and continuing care services. We would especially like to thank the providers of these services who invest significant time in providing information to us each year. By working together, we can stand up for children and strengthen communities across Scotland.

Background

Foster care and adoption services are vital for assessing, approving and supporting foster carers and prospective adoptive parents to care for children at a crucial point in their lives. All children need high-quality care that addresses their emotional and wellbeing needs. Matching children to families who can provide high-quality care is essential to help children thrive. Ongoing assessment and planning are crucial to make sure children are being looked after in families, either their own or in alternative family settings, that address their best interests throughout childhood. Where permanency is required, planning for a placement should not be delayed. This is so that children have the best opportunity to make new attachments within their foster or adoptive family where they can start to feel secure and cared for.

Local authorities have a legal responsibility for ensuring that children in need of foster care and adoption are safe, loved and part of a family that can meet their needs and nurture them to thrive. Local authorities in Scotland are legally required to provide fostering and adoption services within their authority areas. They can also work with voluntary/not-for-profit fostering and adoption services to place children with carers where that is in the child's interest.

This report is based on data collected by us from service providers in their annual returns over the last five years from 2019 to 2023. The most recent annual return data covers the period 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023. This report also includes our evaluations of service quality, correct at 31 March 2024.

Over the summer of 2015, we worked with colleagues in the Scottish Government, service providers and their representative bodies to review the content of our annual returns. This work has enabled us to collate a meaningful summary of adoption and fostering statistics across Scotland. This is the seventh in the series of adoption and fostering statistical bulletins; all of which can be accessed [here](#).

We added some questions to the 2018 fostering annual return about continuing care for young people aged 16 to 21 years following the enactment of part 11 of the Children

and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, Continuing Care.¹ We have continued to provide a summary of this continuing care data in this publication.

In last year's bulletin we applied a Promise lens and worked with the Each and Every Child initiative to help us to align our language and help keep the Promise, and we have continued to use that approach this year. For ease of writing, throughout this bulletin 'children and young people' is often shortened to 'children'.

For the purposes of this publication, family group has the same definition as sibling in that it encompasses children who are brother and sister or have a brother- or sister-like relationship with each other.

Please consider answering our [short feedback survey](#) on how you found this publication.

Notes on the data used in this report

Data quality

Most of the data in this report was provided directly by service providers in their annual returns to the Care Inspectorate. As data is self-reported by services, there may be small discrepancies in the data provided. In this publication, to accurately reflect trends over time and to allow year-on-year comparisons to be made, where a service has not completed an annual return, we impute data from information provided by the service from their last submitted return. We also investigate outliers in the data and validate or modify them as appropriate.

All of the 38 registered adoption services and all bar one of the 58 registered fostering services submitted their 2023 annual return.

We expect that the Covid-19 pandemic will have had an impact on trends in this data from 2020 to 2022. We have not attempted to quantify the extent to which the pandemic may have disrupted the trends in this report although we have footnoted the tables and charts that may have been affected.

We have excluded one adoption service and two fostering services from the statistics that follow (except from our quality evaluations). This is because they are not involved in the approval of households or children for adoption or fostering and therefore many of the aspects we present in this report do not apply to them.

Grading

During 2021, we introduced some changes to how we evaluate services that will have an impact on the grading data in this report.

¹ Continuing care is the continued provision of accommodation and other assistance that is being provided immediately before a young person ceases to be looked after until their 21st birthday. Only children who cease to be looked after aged 16 years or over and were looked after away from home are eligible for continuing care.

In May 2021, we introduced a new quality framework details of which can be found in the document [A quality framework for fostering, adoption and adult placement services](#).

The quality framework is framed around key questions and is used by inspectors in place of the older approach of inspecting against quality themes and statements. Up until May 2021, we evaluated fostering and adoption services across three quality themes – care and support, staffing, and management and leadership. Information on these evaluation criteria can be found in the document [How we inspect](#). Where a service has not yet been inspected under the new quality framework the corresponding grade from the previous quality theme methodology will be used instead.

Other related sources of statistics

The data published in this report is consistent with figures published in the Scottish Government's [Children's Social Work Statistics 2022-23](#). The slight differences in numbers are due to different reporting periods, and differences in how the data is gathered and cleaned.

This bulletin does not report any complaint statistics as these are included in our annual complaints statistics bulletin 'Complaints about care services in Scotland', which can be found on the Care Inspectorate [statistics webpage](#).

Section 1: Foster care

Fostering services

At 31 December 2023, there were 58 fostering services in Scotland registered with the Care Inspectorate, made up of 32 local authority services and 26 voluntary/not-for-profit organisations (referred to as independent services in the statistics that follow). There were no new fostering services registered in 2023, and no fostering services that cancelled.

All fostering services bar one submitted a 2023 annual return.

We have excluded two fostering services from the statistics that follow (except from our quality evaluations). This is because they are not involved in the approval of households or children for fostering and therefore many of the aspects we present in this report do not apply to them.

The 2023 data presented in this report is therefore based on the data reported by 55 fostering services in their annual returns along with imputed data for the service that did not submit a 2023 annual return, together with evaluation data as at 31 March 2023 for 57 fostering services (one independent fostering service cancelled in February 2024).

This report covers five different aspects of fostering services:

- foster care households
- children and young people with care experience
- fostering service capacity
- continuing care
- fostering service evaluation.

Foster care households

At 31 December 2023, the 56 fostering services in Scotland had a combined total of 2,998 approved foster care households² (Figure 1.1). Similar to previous years, 66% of approved households were registered with local authority services and 34% were with independent services.

Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2 show that overall and in each sector the number of approved foster care households is decreasing over time, more so in the local authority sector.

At the service level, 10 services had more foster care households in 2023 compared to the previous year, however 31 services had fewer households, resulting in the overall decrease of 263 households (8.1%) since 2022.

² This may be subject to some double counting. Regulations allow a foster carer to be 'registered' with more than one agency, however this is intended as an enabling provision in certain circumstances not one which should be regularly used ([Guidance on the Looked After Children \(Scotland\) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children \(Scotland\) Act 2007 – Chapter 11 The Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers](#)).

Figure 1.1 Number of approved foster care households¹ at 31 December, with sector split.

	Independent	Local authority	Total
2023	1,010	1,988	2,998
2022	1,080	2,181	3,261
2021	1,094	2,332	3,426 ²
2020	1,105	2,435	3,540
2019	1,147	2,470	3,617

¹Excludes those approved exclusively for short breaks.

Figure 1.2 Total number of approved foster care households at 31 December, with sector split.

Overall and in each sector the number of approved foster care households is decreasing over time, more so in the local authority sector.

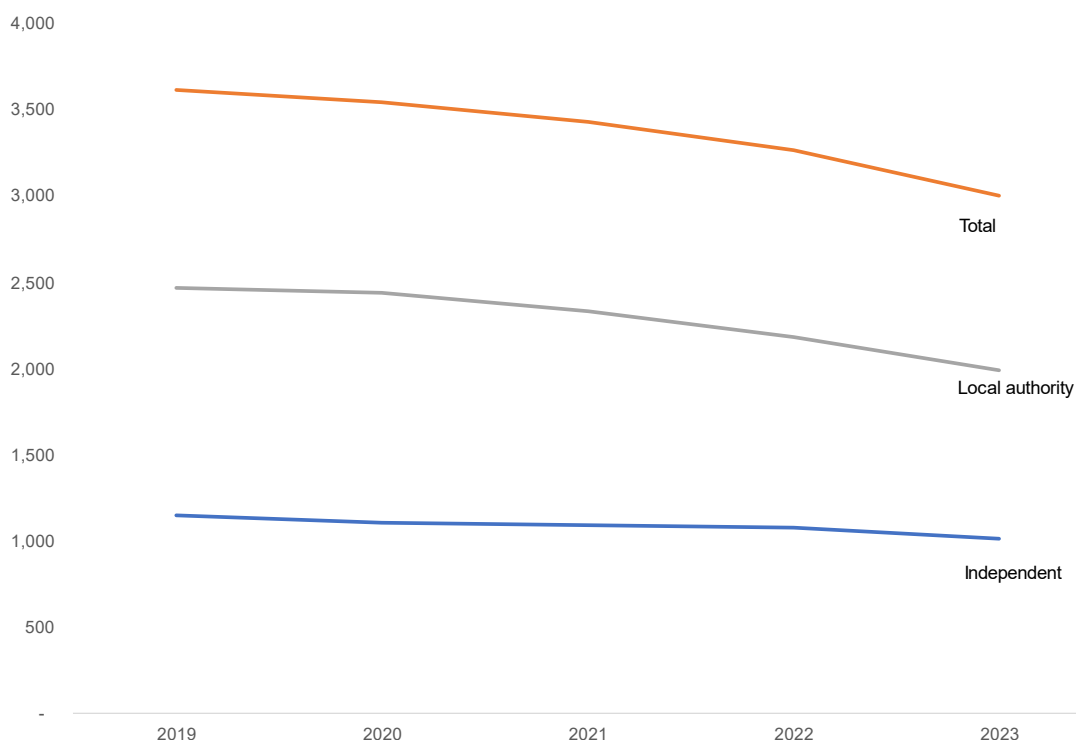


Figure 1.3 and Figure 1.4 present the number of approved households split by their approval type, over time. Across all services the most common placement approval continues to be 'all types of placements' (64%). In local authority services the most common placement approval continues to be for all types of placements.

In independent services, in each of the years 2019-2023, the majority (at least 69%) of households were approved to provide all types of placements.

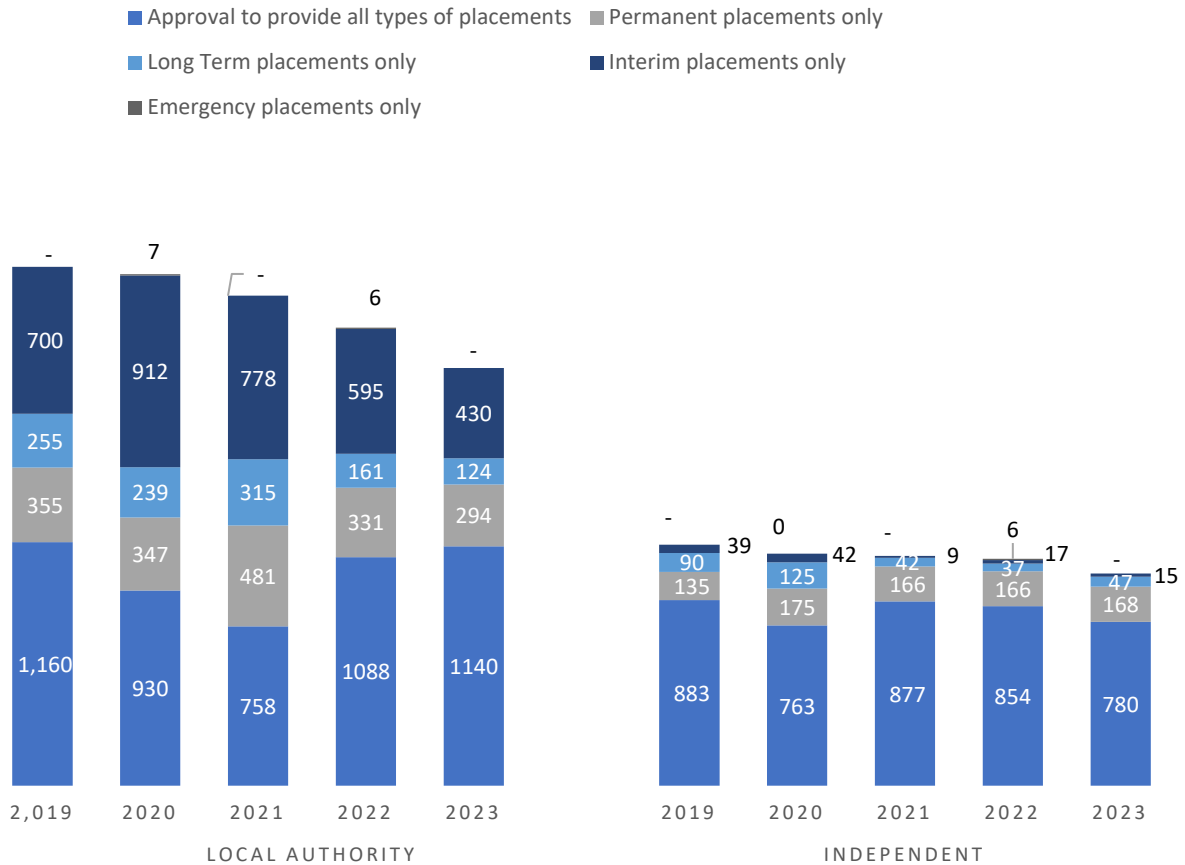
Figure 1.3 Number of approved foster care households¹ at 31 December, split by sector and placement type.

All services:										
	Approval to provide all types of placements		Permanent placements only		Long-term placements only		Interim placements only		Emergency placements only	
	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
2023	1,920	64%	462	15%	171	6%	445	15%	0	0%
2022	1,942	60%	497	15%	198	6%	612	19%	12	0%
2021	1,635	48%	647	19%	357	10%	787	23%	0	0%
2020	1,693	48%	522	15%	364	10%	954	27%	7	0%
2019	2,043	56%	490	14%	345	10%	739	20%	0	0%
Local authority:										
	Approval to provide all types of placements		Permanent placements only		Long-term placements only		Interim placements only		Emergency placements only	
	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
2023	1,140	57%	294	15%	124	6%	430	22%	1	0%
2022	1,088	50%	331	15%	161	7%	595	27%	6	0%
2021	758	33%	481	21%	315	14%	778	33%	0	0%
2020	930	38%	347	14%	239	10%	912	37%	7	0%
2019	1,160	47%	355	14%	255	10%	700	28%	0	0%
Independent:										
	Approval to provide all types of placements		Permanent placements only		Long-term placements only		Interim placements only		Emergency placements only	
	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
2023	780	77%	168	17%	47	5%	15	1%	2	0%
2022	854	79%	166	15%	37	3%	17	2%	6	1%
2021	877	80%	166	15%	42	4%	9	1%	0	0%
2020	763	69%	175	16%	125	11%	42	4%	0	0%
2019	883	77%	135	12%	90	8%	39	3%	0	0%

¹Excludes those approved exclusively for short breaks.

Figure 1.4 Distribution of approved foster care households¹ at 31 December, split by sector and placement type.

The most common placement approval across both sectors continues to be ‘approval to provide all types of placements’ while interim placements is also common for local authority approved households.



¹Excludes those approved exclusively for short breaks.

At 31 December 2023 (Figure 1.5), there were 385 households approved to provide short breaks only, a drop of 81 (17%) over the five-year period, with a smaller drop of 13 (3%) from 398 in 2022.

Figure 1.5 Number of foster care households approved to provide only short breaks at 31 December, split by sector.

	Number of households approved for short breaks only			Number of services that have approved short break households		
	Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total
2023	298	87	385	31	19	50
2022	282	116	398	28	20	48
2021	295	139	434	28	20	48
2020	325	163	488	29	21	50
2019	320	146	466	26	21	47

Of the 2,998 approved households (Figure 1.1), 593 (20%) had approval to care for children of any age (Figure 1.6). This is a similar number to the 589 in 2022. Over the five-year period, the number of households with approval for any age range has fallen by 115 (16%) although the percentage of all households has remained broadly consistent.

Figure 1.6 Number of households that have approval for any age range of child or young person at 31 December, split by sector.

	Number			% of all households		
	Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total
2023	253	340	593	13%	34%	20%
2022	217	372	589	10%	34%	18%
2021	339	368	707	15%	34%	21%
2020	249	370	619	10%	33%	17%
2019	269	439	708	11%	38%	20%

Private fostering

Private fostering is an arrangement where a parent makes an agreement with someone who is not a close relative of the child to care for that child for more than 28 days. These arrangements are not facilitated by the local authority or a registered service. It is very possible that private foster carers will not be aware of their responsibility to notify the local authority of these arrangements or that local authorities do not recognise these

arrangements as private fostering. Therefore, it is likely that there are more private fostering arrangements taking place than we and local authorities are being notified of.

There were 15 notifications of private fostering in 2023, 13 in 2022, 11 in 2021, five in 2020 and six in 2019.

Recruitment and de-registration

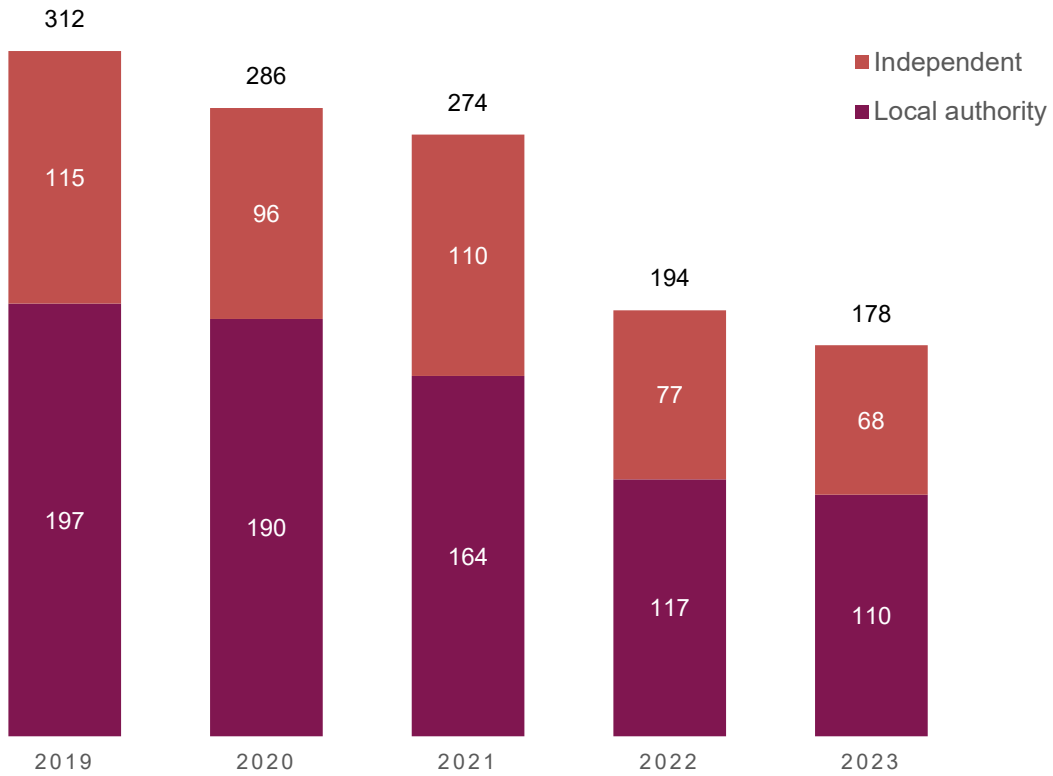
Over the course of 2023, there were 178 new foster care households approved (see Figure 1.7 and Figure 1.8). There has been a downward trend in the number of new foster carers approved over the past five years.

Just over 60% of the new households were approved by local authority services and just under 40% approved by independent services, with both sectors showing an overall downward trend over time.

The level of recruitment varied between services: the number of new households ranged from 1 to 13 at the service level. Twelve fostering services did not approve any new households in 2023.

Figure 1.7 New foster care households approved between 1 January and 31 December, with sector split.

The number of new foster carers approved each year has fallen in each of the last four years. New foster care households approved between 1 January and 31 December, with sector split.



[Guidance on the Looked After Children \(Scotland\) Regulations 2009 and the Adoption and Children \(Scotland\) Act 2007](#) states that authorities should normally aim to complete an assessment within six months of receiving an application. Therefore, the length of the assessment should be measured as the time between when the application was received and approval by the agency decision maker. This was first defined in the 2023 annual return therefore there may be an inconsistency across services in how assessment time was calculated prior to this.

In 2023, 46% of the overall number of new foster carer assessments were completed within six months, which is 13 percentage points lower than the previous year (see Figure 1.8). Just over a third (37%) were completed between six months and a year, up 11 percentage points on 2022. The remaining 17% took a year or more to complete which is greater than the previous years.

Over the past five years, there was a drop in the total number of new foster care households approved, together with an increase in both the percentage and number of assessments taking 12 months or more to complete.

Figure 1.8 Number of new foster care households¹ approved between 1 January and 31 December, split by sector and length of assessment completion².

All services:							
	Total new carer households	assessment completion time					
		Up to six months		Between six and 12 months		12 months or more	
		count	percentage of total approved	count	percentage of total approved	count	percentage of total approved
2023	178	81	46%	66	37%	31	17%
2022	194	114	59%	50	26%	30	15%
2021	274	177	65%	73	27%	24	9%
2020	286	185	65%	76	27%	25	9%
2019	312	163	52%	130	42%	19	6%
Local authority:							
	Total new carer households	assessment completion time					
		Up to six months		Between six and 12 months		12 months or more	
		count	percentage of total approved	count	percentage of total approved	count	percentage of total approved
2023	110	40	36%	50	45%	20	18%
2022	117	58	50%	34	29%	25	21%
2021	164	89	54%	53	32%	22	13%
2020	190	116	61%	61	32%	13	7%
2019	197	85	43%	93	47%	19	10%
Independent:							
	Total new carer households	assessment completion time					
		Up to six months		Between six and 12 months		12 months or more	
		count	percentage of total approved	count	percentage of total approved	count	percentage of total approved
2023	68	41	60%	16	24%	11	16%
2022	77	56	73%	16	21%	5	6%
2021	110	88	80%	20	18%	2	2%
2020	96	69	72%	15	16%	12	13%
2019	115	78	68%	37	32%	0	0%

¹The number of new households that are approved may include a small amount of double counting at the national level, owing to the rare situation where households are registered with more than one fostering service.

²The measure of assessment completion time does not include households that were not approved.

Recruiting households that would foster family groups (Figure 1.9) was a challenge for 44 fostering services (79% of all services) in 2023. This is higher than the previous year and has been increasing in the last five years, particularly for independent providers.

As in previous years, the main reason for this was accommodation constraints (services told us this was due to factors such as housing size, deprivation and local demographics). Difficulty recruiting households in a restricted market and the increased demand on placements arising from continuing care were also cited as reasons.

Figure 1.9 Number of services that have difficulties recruiting households that will take family groups of children, split by sector.

	Number			% of all services		
	Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total
2023	28	16	44	88%	67%	79%
2022	25	14	39	78%	58%	70%
2021	26	14	40	81%	56%	70%
2020	25	9	34	78%	36%	60%
2019	25	9	34	78%	36%	60%

Over the course of 2023, 405 foster care households deregistered from their fostering service (Figure 1.10), a similar amount to the previous year. Since 2019, the number of households de-registering from local authority fostering services has fluctuated each year, but has increased overall, while in independent services the number has decreased overall.

Comparing the number of households that deregistered with the number of new households gives a net change for each year. Figure 1.10 shows the percentage of services that experienced a net loss of households each year³. At an individual service level, we estimate that 44 fostering services (79% of all services that recruit and approve foster carers) experienced a net loss in foster care households in 2023 – this is an increase on our estimate of 64% the previous year.

³ The calculation of net change doesn't always match the year-on-year (YoY) change in households from previous years data as they are derived from independent measures that are self-reported by services. Net change is derived from subtracting the number of deregistered households from the number of new approved households. The YoY change is derived by subtracting the number of approved households in the current year from the number of approved households in the previous year.

Figure 1.10 Number of foster care households that deregistered¹ between 1 January and 31 December, and the number/percentage of services that experienced a net loss of foster care households, split by sector.

	Number of households that deregistered			Percentage of services that experienced a net loss in foster carer households		
	Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total
2023	275	130	405	84%	71%	79%
2022	282	120	402	72%	54%	64%
2021	250	155	405	69%	56%	63%
2020	226	123	349	56%	60%	58%
2019	265	169	434	53%	56%	54%

¹The number of households that de-register may include a small amount of double counting at the national level, owing to the rare situation where households are registered with more than one fostering service.

In 2023, up to 30 June, fostering services across Scotland received approximately 4,550 enquiries from potential foster carers (Figure 1.11). Of these, 4% led to applications, 27% of which were approved by the 31 December that year.

Over the five-year period, the number of enquiries has generally decreased and the numbers of applications and approvals have fallen. Correspondingly, the percentage of enquiries that progress to applications and the percentage of applications that result in approvals have both fallen since 2019.

Figure 1.11 Recruitment of foster care households: approximate number of enquiries received between 1 January and 30 June, and the number leading to applications and approved households, split by sector.

	Enquiries			Applications (as a percentage of enquiries)			Approvals (as a percentage of applications)		
	Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total
2023	598	3,952	4,550	100 (17%)	95 (2%)	195 (4%)	27 (27%)	25 (26%)	52 (27%)
2022	705	4,351	5,056	101 (14%)	95 (2%)	196 (4%)	38 (38%)	34 (36%)	72 (37%)
2021	988	4,722	5,710	143 (14%)	132 (3%)	275 (5%)	62 (43%)	39 (30%)	101 (37%)
2020	1,028	5,230	6,258	184 (18%)	174 (3%)	358 (6%)	85 (46%)	52 (30%)	137 (38%)
2019	954	4,238	5,192	170 (18%)	110 (3%)	280 (5%)	64 (38%)	49 (45%)	113 (40%)

Children and young people with care experience

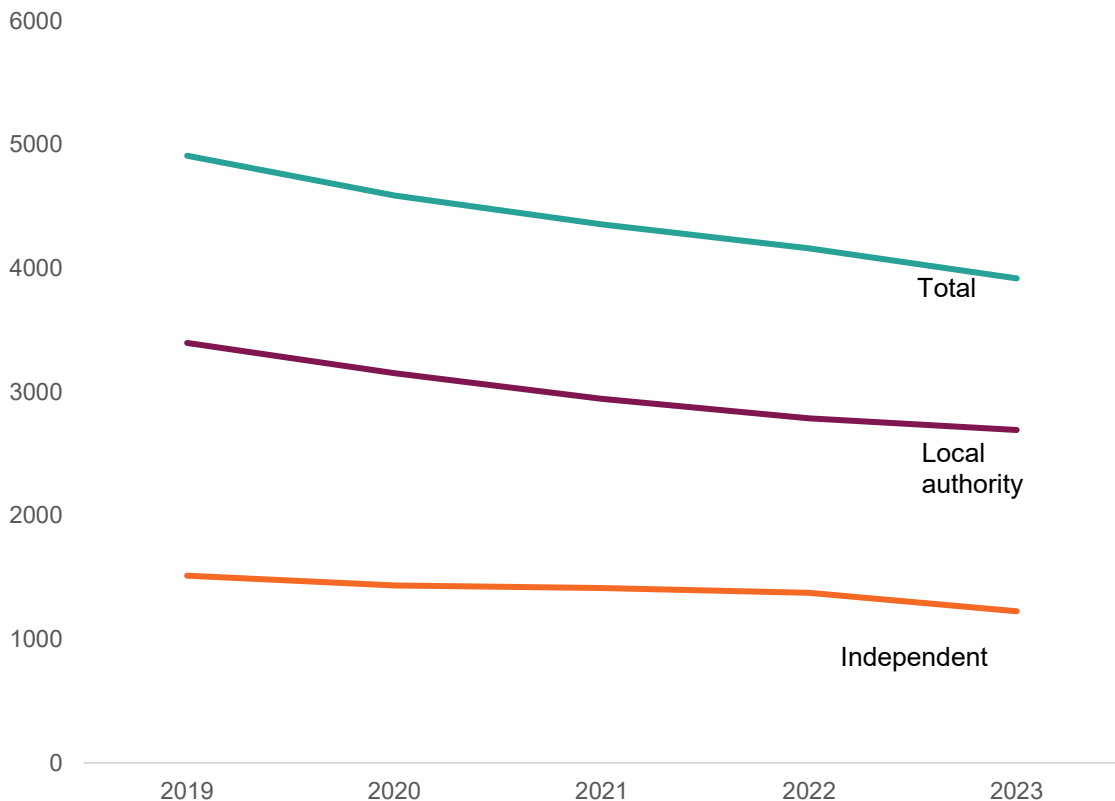
The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 places a duty on local authorities to provide fostering and adoption services. They are responsible for assessing and planning for children who, as an outcome of this assessment, require alternative care either through voluntary arrangements or compulsory measures of care. Local authorities, through service level agreements with independent fostering and adoption services, may place children with carers through these services. Independent fostering and adoption services also recruit, assess, and provide training and support to carers to ensure that they are providing a high-quality service to children and young people. When children are placed with an independent agency, it remains the responsibility of the local authority to support the child and to review the arrangement to ensure that it continues to meet the child’s needs. Where permanency is required, this may be provided through a permanent foster placement or through adoption.

Placements

In 2023, there were 3,918 children and young people living in foster families (Figure 1.12 and Figure 1.13).

Figure 1.12 Total number of children and young people living in foster families at 31 December, with sector split.

A decreasing five-year trend overall¹ in the number of children living in foster families².



¹The decreasing trend may have been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic.

²'living in foster families' means children who were placed by services into one of their approved foster care households. The data is gathered in a way that reduces double counting

Of the 3,918 children living in foster families, 69% (2,692) were in local authority-approved households and 31% (1,226) were in households approved by independent services.

The number of children living in foster families in 2023 was 244 fewer than the previous year, continuing the overall downward trend. Prior to 2023, the downward trend was mainly due to the number of children in foster care provided by the local authority decreasing each year, with the number of children in independent foster care households decreasing to a lesser extent; however in 2023 it was the independent sector that presented the largest decrease in the number of children living in foster families, both compared to the local authority sector and to previous years (see Figure 1.12 and Figure 1.13)

The overall trend is consistent with figures published in the [Scottish Government's Children's Social Work Statistics 2022-23](#), which also show a decrease over time in the number of children in a foster care setting.

Figure 1.13 Total number of children and young people living in foster families¹ at 31 December, split by sector.

	Local authority	Independent	Total
2023	2,692	1,226	3,918
2022	2,786	1,376	4,162
2021	2,943	1,413	4,356
2020	3,151	1,436	4,587
2019	3,396	1,514	4,910

¹'living in foster families' means children who were placed by services into one of their approved foster care households. The data is gathered in a way that reduces double counting.

Figures 1.14 and 1.15 show that the proportion of children in local authority permanent placements has generally decreased over the time period (26% in 2023), in parallel to an overall increase in interim placements (53% in 2023) and, to a lesser degree, long-term placements (20% in 2023).

The number of children placed by independent services has a different pattern where overall permanent placements have been similar over the five-year period (33% in 2023), while long term placements have been increasing (39% in 2023) and interim placements have been decreasing (25% in 2023). Like 2022, long term placements were the most common type for independent services in 2023.

Figure 1.14 Children and young people living in foster families¹ at 31 December, split by sector and placement type².

Local Authority:

	Permanent placement		Long-term placement		Interim placement		Emergency placement	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
2023	711	26%	547	20%	1,422	53%	12	0%
2022	761	27%	581	21%	1,427	51%	17	1%
2021	826	28%	596	20%	1,491	51%	30	1%
2020	804	26%	588	19%	1,737	55%	22	1%
2019	1242	37%	562	17%	1,467	43%	125	4%

Independent:

	Permanent placement		Long-term placement		Interim placement		Emergency placement	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
2023	406	33%	481	39%	308	25%	31	3%
2022	417	30%	534	39%	418	30%	7	1%
2021	441	31%	527	37%	428	30%	17	1%
2020	432	30%	487	34%	508	35%	9	1%
2019	471	31%	431	28%	590	39%	22	1%

Total:

	Permanent placement		Long-term placement		Interim placement		Emergency placement	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
2023	1,117	29%	1,028	26%	1,730	44%	43	1%
2022	1,178	28%	1,115	27%	1,845	44%	24	1%
2021	1,267	29%	1,123	26%	1,919	44%	47	1%
2020	1,236	27%	1,075	23%	2,245	49%	31	1%
2019	1,713	35%	993	20%	2,057	42%	147	3%

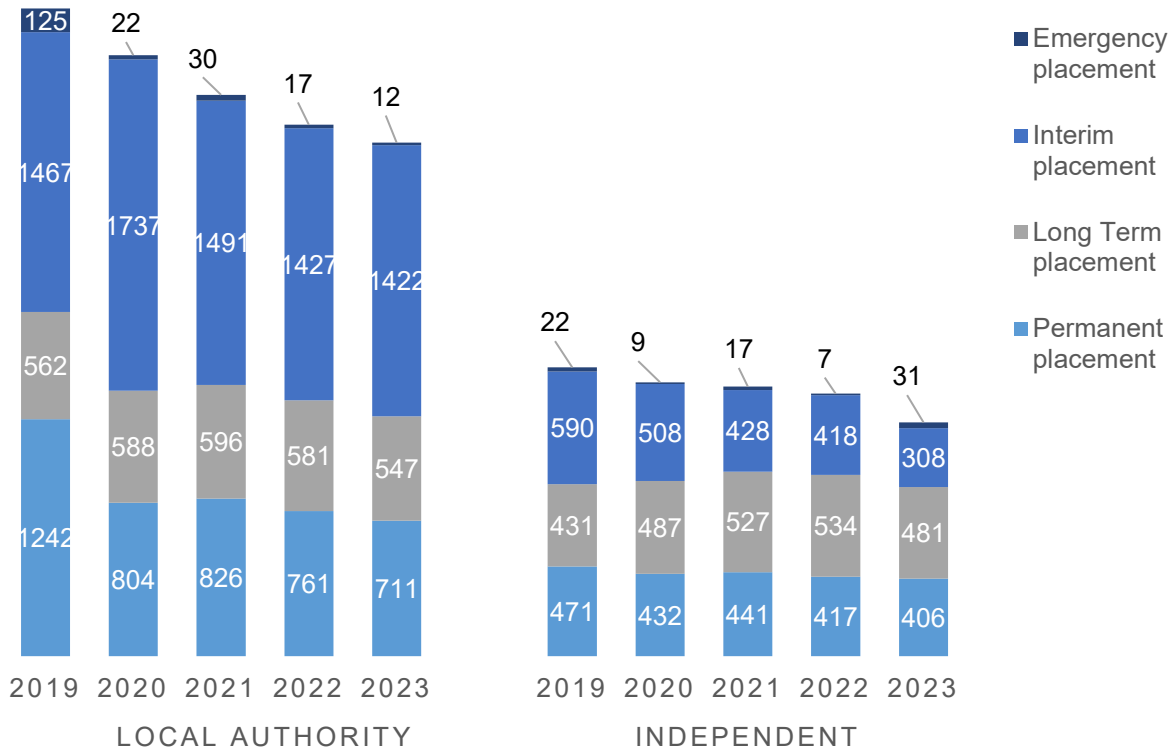
¹living in foster families' means children who were placed by services into one of their approved foster care households. The data is gathered in such a way as to eliminate double counting.

²Placements are categorised based on the National Placement Descriptors.

³Trends, particularly associated with interim placements, may have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1.15 Children and young people living in foster families¹ at 31 December, split by sector and placement type².

Overall, interim placement continues to be the most common type of placement for local authority services.



¹‘living in foster families’ means children who were placed by services into one of their approved foster care households. The data is gathered in such a way as to eliminate double counting.

²Placements are categorised based on the National Placement Descriptors.

³Trends, particularly associated with interim placements, may have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Children and young people awaiting permanent placement

At 31 December 2023, there were 123 children and young people identified as needing a permanent placement who were not already in or moving towards such a placement (Figure 1.16).

While the number fluctuates from year to year, relatively speaking the overall proportion of children living in foster families and not in a permanent placement is similar each year, ranging from 4% to 7%.

At the same time, there were 13 children, across eight local authority services who were living at home or with kinship carers and waiting on a foster care placement to become available.

Figure 1.16 Number of children and young people living in foster families approved by the local authority fostering at 31 December needing a permanent placement and the number that were waiting for a foster care placement to become available.

	Children not in or moving towards permanent placement		Waiting for placement to become available ²	
	Number and percentage of children ¹	Number of services	Number of children	Number of services
2023	123 (4%)	17	13	8
2022	158 (5%)	21	20	6
2021	207 (7%)	21	15	5
2020	203 (6%)	20	17	5
2019	188 (6%)	20	17	7

¹As a percentage of the children living in foster families and not in a permanent placement.

²Only includes children and young people where a decision has been made to place them in foster care.

Placements ending on an unplanned basis

Figure 1.17 shows that 321 placements involving 256 children and young people ended on an unplanned⁴ basis throughout 2023. This is lower than the previous year. Of the placements that ended, 57 (18%) were permanent placements – again, similar to the previous year.

There is a downward trend in the number of placements in households approved by local authorities ending on an unplanned basis.

⁴ Unplanned is defined as ‘where a decision is made by the service that the current placement can no longer meet the needs of the child and as a result the child moves from the placement.’

Figure 1.17 Number of foster placements that ended on an unplanned basis, between 1 January and 31 December, split by sector.

		Total local authority placements	Household provided by placing authority	Household approved by another local authority, purchased by placing authority	Independent placements	Total
Number of placements ended	2023	158	143	15	163	321
	2022	203	165	38	144	347
	2021	218	185	33	127	345
	2020	213	190	23	135	348
	2019	248	206	42	147	395
Number of perm placements ended	2023	31	24	7	26	57
	2022	39	29	10	20	59
	2021	40	34	6	23	63
	2020	44	39	5	21	65
	2019	52	43	9	24	76
Number of services where placements ended	2023	27	27	6	20	47
	2022	28	27	7	17	45
	2021	25	24	7	18	43
	2020	30	29	5	19	49
	2019	28	27	10	15	43
Number of children that experienced a placement end	2023	113	99	14	143	256
	2022	189	156	33	145	334
	2021	202	169	33	117	319
	2020	203	180	23	133	336
	2019	211	174	37	144	355

Local authority-commissioned placements

In 2023, 392 children were placed in a foster care placement purchased by a local authority (Figure 1.18) and this number has decreased by 19% over the last five years

from 483 in 2019. Most of the places (80%) were purchased through the national contract; 9% were exclusively short breaks.

Figure 1.18 Number of children and young people placed by a local authority into a foster care household approved by another service, between 1 January and 31 December.

	Number of children and young people placed ¹	Number of placements purchased through the national contract (and percentage of placed)	Number of placements that were exclusively short breaks
2023	392	312 (80%)	35 (9%)
2022	370	312 (84%)	56 (15%)
2021	284	227 (80%)	15 (5%)
2020 ²	330	261 (79%)	7 (2%)
2019	483	379 (78%)	16 (3%)

¹Includes placements that were exclusively short break situations, as well as temporary placements, permanent placements, and any other type of placement.

²2020 decrease may have been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Children seeking asylum and refuge

There are children and young people placed in care services who have come to Scotland without the support of an adult and have the status of being children seeking asylum and refuge.

A new question was introduced in 2023 that asked services to report the number of children and young people seeking asylum and refuge who started to use fostering services between 1 January and 31 December. In 2023, there were 139 children and young people seeking asylum and refuge who started to use fostering services, of which 106 were using local authority services and 33 were using independent services.

There were still 92 children seeking asylum and refuge living in foster families at 31 December 2023 (Figure 1.19).

Figure 1.19 Number of children and young people seeking asylum and refuge living in foster families at 31 December, split by sector.

	Local authority	Independent	total
2023	63	29	92
2022	78	21	99
2021	38	8	46
2020	14	5	19
2019	23	<5 ¹	23

¹Values with fewer than five observations have been removed and replaced with '<5'. These revised values have been excluded from totals and subtotals.

Fostering service capacity

In 2023, the number of children coming into foster care exceeded the number of new foster care households in 30 of the 32 local authority services (Figure 1.20).

Figure 1.20 Number of local authority services where the number of children and young people coming into foster care between 1 January and 31 December exceeded the number of new foster care households.

	Total number of services where number of children exceeded new households	Percentage of services
2023	30	94%
2022	29	91%
2021	29	91%
2020	31	97%
2019	31	97%

In situations where the number of children exceeds the number of available foster care households, local authority services may commission places with other fostering services. Where this is not feasible or possible, the local authority services may approve placements with their own foster care households that result in the household exceeding their approval range.

Figure 1.21 shows that throughout 2023, households exceeded their approval range on 606 occasions across 31 local authority fostering services and 15 independent fostering services.

As with previous years, where foster care households exceeded their approval range, it was for a variety of reasons, mainly to keep children from the same family together and to facilitate respite placements. Other common reasons included: to enable the child or young person to remain close to their home community and school; to enable existing placements to continue beyond age approval; to make the most appropriate match between the child or young person and their foster carer.

We expect that the lower numbers in 2020 and 2021 reflect the Covid-19-related easing of restrictions on the approval range. This ties in with there being fewer commissioned places in 2020 and 2021 (Figure 1.18).

Figure 1.21 Number of occasions and number of services where children and young people placed in foster care households resulted in the household going outwith their approval range¹, split by sector.

	Number of occasions			Number of services		
	Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total
2023	531	75	606	31	15	46
2022	619	74	693	31	11	42
2021	487	68	555	31	13	44
2020	458	86	544	30	13	43
2019	595	116	711	32	14	46

¹Approval range can be age, gender, numbers or other.

²Trend may have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Scottish Government laid in Parliament an amendment to The Looked after Children (Scotland) Regulations to introduce a maximum foster care placement limit of three unrelated children, with exemptions for family groups and emergency placements. The amended Regulations came into force on 29 December 2014. Services are asked to record all exemptions in the annual return.

In 2023, across 15 fostering services there were 54 placements above the maximum limit of three unrelated children, the lowest number recorded over the past five years.

Figure 1.22 Number of placements made above the maximum limit of three unrelated children, and the number of services where this occurred.

	Number of services	Number of placements above max limit	Decision made by the Panel	Happened on an emergency basis
2023	15	54	25	45
2022	19	81	41	55
2021	20	57	15	42
2020	16	55	19	52
2019	16	59	21	52

¹Trend may have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

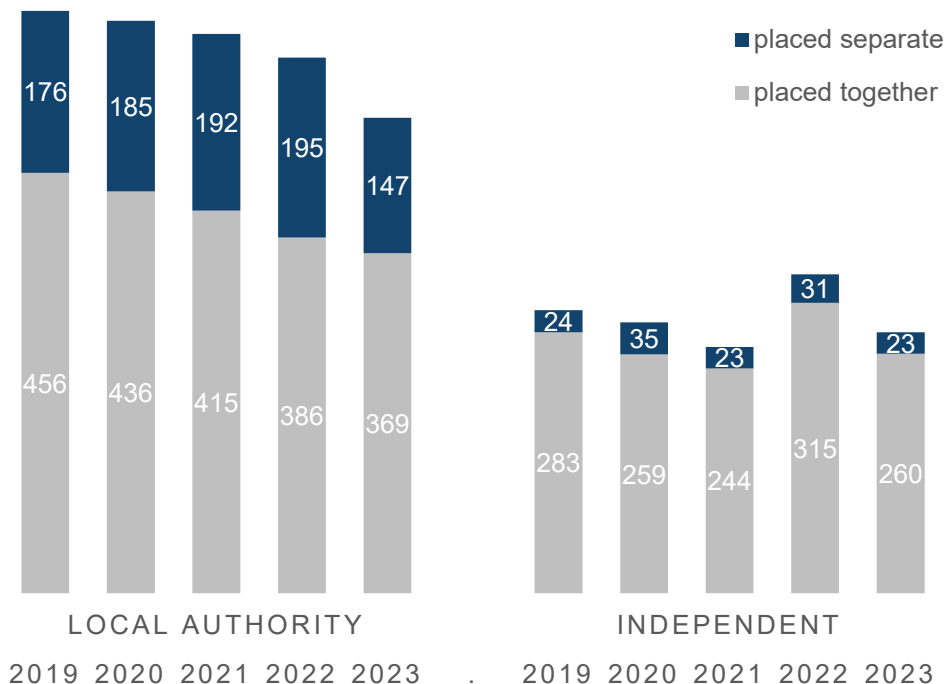
Family groups

At 31 December 2023, there were 799 family groups of children living in foster families (down 14% from 927 in 2022) (Figure 1.24).

When placed in foster care households in 2023, 170 of the family groups (21%) were placed separately and 629 (79% of all family groups) were placed together (Figure 1.23).

Figure 1.23 The number of family groups living in foster families at 31 December and if they were placed together or separately, by sector.

The number of family groups¹ living in foster families has decreased in local authority services since 2019, while in independent services the trend is more variable.



¹A family group includes more than one child or young person and is counted as an entity

²Trend may have been disrupted/compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1.24 Number of family groups¹ of children living in foster families at 31 December, and the number and percentage that were placed separately.

	Local authority		Independent		Total	
	Number of family groups	Number (and %) of family groups placed separately	Number of family groups	Number (and %) of family groups placed separately	Number of family groups	Number (and %) of family groups placed separately
2023	516	147 (28%)	283	23 (8%)	799	170 (21%)
2022	581	195 (34%)	346	31 (9%)	927	226 (24%)
2021	607	192 (32%)	267	23 (9%)	874	215 (25%)
2020	621	185 (30%)	294	35 (12%)	915	220 (24%)
2019	632	176 (28%)	307	24 (8%)	939	200 (21%)

¹A family group includes more than one child or young person and is counted as an entity

²Trend may have been disrupted/compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1.25 Reason cited¹ by services for placing children separately.

	Local authority				Independent			
	Following assessment	Lack of resource	Emergency situation	Other	Following assessment	Lack of resource	Emergency situation	Other
2023	19	20	17	7	6	<5	<5	<5
2022	17	20	13	6	6	6	<5	<5
2021	15	22	10	6	8	<5	<5	5
2020	15	23	12	5	8	<5	<5	<5
2019	19	22	10	8	8	<5	<5	<5

¹Services were able to select as many reasons as were applicable.

Fostering service evaluation (grading)

Based on Care Inspectorate evaluations, the overall quality of fostering services on 31 March 2024 was positive. As Figure 1.26 presents, 78% of fostering services had evaluations of 'good' or better across all key questions (see Grading notes in Background section of document for further detail on inspection framework).

Figure 1.26 Overview of fostering service grades at 31 March 2024, split by sector.

	Local authority		Independent		Total	
	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services
Very good and excellent for all assessed key questions	5	16%	10	38%	15	26%
Good or better for all assessed key questions	25	78%	20	77%	45	78%
Adequate or better for all assessed key questions	29	91%	25	96%	54	93%
Less than adequate for at least one key question	3	9%	0	0%	3	5%

Continuing Care

Since 2018, we have been collecting data about continuing care for young people over 15 years and under 26 years following the enactment of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, Part 11 Continuing Care.

In the 2023 annual return 48 fostering services said they had a continuing care service linked to them (Figure 1.28).

Figure 1.27 Number of fostering services with a linked continuing care service.

	Local authority	Independent	Total
2023	21	27	48
2022	22	27	49
2021	21	25	46
2020	21	25	46
2019	18	23	41

At 31 December 2023, there were 448 approved continuing care households across 46 services, this is more than in the preceding four years (Figure 1.28). There were two services that said they had a continuing care service linked to them, however they also said they did not have any approved continuing care households.

Figure 1.28 Approved continuing care households (number and percentage of all approved households) at 31 December.

	Local authority		Independent		Total	
	approved households	number of services	approved households	number of services	approved households	number of services
2023	244 (54%)	26	204 (46%)	20	448 (100%)	46
2022	236 (55%)	25	192 (45%)	21	428 (100%)	46
2021	241 (62%)	25	148 (38%)	17	389 (100%)	42
2020	243 (63%)	24	143 (37%)	17	386 (100%)	41
2019	198 (69%)	22	87 (31%)	15	285 (100%)	37

At 31 December 2023, 448 young people were using continuing care and most of them were aged 18 and over (Figure 1.29). More young people were using continuing care in 2023 than in the preceding four years.

Figure 1.29 Number of young people using¹ continuing care, and their age breakdown, at 31 December.

	total number of young people	no. of young people age 16	no. of young people age 17	no. of young people age 18	no. of young people age 19	no. of young people age 20+
2023	448	9 (2%)	17 (4%)	140 (31%)	137 (31%)	145 (32%)
2022	434	8 (2%)	20 (5%)	130 (30%)	113 (26%)	163 (38%)
2021	395	10 (3%)	18 (5%)	122 (31%)	110 (28%)	135 (34%)
2020	384	13 (3%)	18 (5%)	133 (35%)	111 (29%)	109 (28%)
2019	311	11 (4%)	20 (6%)	135 (43%)	79 (25%)	66 (21%)

¹'Using' means being supported to remain in the same family placement with continuing care status.

In 2023, 145 young people left continuing care as part of a planned ending. The highest proportion of young people leaving (43%) went to live independently in their own accommodation (Figure 1.30).

Figure 1.30 Number of young people who left continuing care (as part of a planned ending) between 1 January and 31 December, and their destination.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of young people that left continuing care	43	86	140	216	145
Destination:					
Birth family or friend	11 (26%)	9 (10%)	18 (13%)	38 (18%)	15 (10%)
Remained with carer family	<5 (<1%)	19 (22%)	23 (16%)	24 (11%)	19 (13%)
Independent in own accommodation	24 (56%)	38 (44%)	36 (26%)	63 (29%)	62 (43%)
Supported accommodation	<5 (<1%)	14 (16%)	16 (11%)	24 (11%)	17 (12%)
Supported by criminal justice services	<5 (<1%)	0 (%)	<5 (<1%)	0 (%)	0 (%)
Homeless accommodation or became homeless	<5 (<1%)	<5 (<1%)	<5 (<1%)	<5 (<1%)	5 (3%)
Joined the armed forces	<5 (<1%)	<5 (<1%)	<5 (<1%)	<5 (<1%)	0 (0%)
Other	8 (19%)	6 (7%)	47 (34%)	67 (31%)	27 (19%)

Of the young people who left continuing care in 2023, 72% were in education, training or employment (Figure 1.31).

Figure 1.31 Proportion of young people who left continuing care between 1 January and 31 December, by their employment status.

	in education, training or employment	not in education, training or employment	not known
2023	72%	12%	15%
2022	83%	7%	10%
2021	64%	14%	22%
2020	80%	16%	3%
2019	58%	25%	17%

Twenty-two young people experienced an unplanned ending of their continuing care placement in 2023, higher than the preceding four years (Figure 1.32).

Figure 1.32 Number of continuing care placements that ended on an unplanned basis between 1 January and 31 December.

	number of placements that ended	number of young people who experienced an unplanned ending
2023	22	22
2022	14	14
2021	15	15
2020	19	19
2019	12	11

Fostering summary

Each year, there has been a decrease in the number of approved foster care households in Scotland. Coupled with this is a decrease in the number of households approved for short breaks. Between 2019 and 2023 the number of approved foster care households dropped by 619, from 3,617 to 2,998. This is because each year, more households deregistered than were approved. For example, in 2023, 405 households deregistered from a fostering service and less than half that number of new foster care households were approved (178). Of the new households that were approved, 46% were assessed and approved within six months, while 17% of cases took over a year to complete – the highest in the five year period. Longer approval times correspond to lower numbers of new approved households and may contribute to the decrease in foster carer numbers.

Of those households that are approved to provide foster care, there was an increase in the proportion approved for all placement types this year. This approval model might help to widen the pool of appropriate placement types. Matching children to the right foster carer household is important to ensure safe situations for children, positive outcomes and reduced risk of unplanned endings.

In 2023, 321 foster care placements ended on an unplanned basis down on the previous years, although relatively speaking the rate of unplanned endings, as a proportion of all foster care placements hasn't changed over the past few years. Unplanned endings can mean multiple placement moves for children and disrupted relationships, which is known to have a considerable negative impact on children's attachments and development.

In 2023, 3,918 children were in a foster care placement in Scotland, down from the previous year and continuing the decreasing trend. Overall, the most common placement type in 2023 was interim placement. This has been the case for the past few years particularly in local authority placements, however the pattern has changed slightly for independent placements. In 2019, 39% of all independent placements were interim. Since then, the number of interim placements used by independent services has fallen (to 25%) coupled with an increase in the number of long-term placements (from 28% in 2019 to 39% in 2023). Long-term placements are ones that can be in place for longer than 24 months and not secured by a permanence order, and they should be used only in exceptional situations.

Services should aim to move children into permanent placements without delay once it has been identified that is what is in the best interest of the child. Services reported that in 2023, 123 children (4% of children in non-permanent foster care placements) were not in or moving towards permanent placement despite it being in their care plan. Delay in achieving legal permanence compromises children's opportunities to experience stable, loving families throughout their childhood.

Children are more likely to settle and progress well if they are kept with their brothers and sisters, and of the 799 family groups of children placed in foster care in 2023, 79% were placed together. Part of The Promise 2021-2024 plan is to stop the practice of separating brothers and sisters, unless for reasons of safety. However, each year from 2019 to 2023, consistently between one-fifth and a quarter of family groups were placed separately and the main reason reported by services is lack of resource. Seventy-nine per cent of services had difficulties in 2023 recruiting households that will take family groups of children and existing households exceeded their approval range throughout 2023 to keep children from the same family together. More independent services have reported difficulties in recent years: the proportion of independent services reporting difficulties has increased from 36% of services in 2019 to 67% in 2023.

This is the third year we have reported on continuing care and the data shows that in 2023, more young people were using continuing care (448 young people) and more households were registered as continuing care households (448) than in each of the three years previous. It also shows that of the young people leaving continuing care as part of a planned ending, almost half (43%) went on to live independently in their own accommodation and 72% were in education, training or employment. This proportion tends to fluctuate year to year. All children and young people have the right to

education and should receive all they need to thrive at school ([The Promise, Plan 2021-2024](#)).

Despite the challenges faced by fostering services, particularly around staff shortages (see [Staff vacancies in care services 2022](#) report) they continue to achieve positive evaluations from us during inspection. This bulletin reports on the published inspection evaluations on 31 March 2024 with 78% of services achieving 'good' or better across all assessed key questions. Published inspection reports can be found on the Care Inspectorate website.

Section 2: Adoption

Adoption services

At 31 December 2023, there were 38 registered adoption services in Scotland; 32 were local authority services and six were voluntary/not-for-profit organisations (referred to as independent services in this report).

Two adoption services did not submit their 2023 annual return. For these and other services that did not submit historic annual returns, we have imputed data from their most recent annual return.

We have excluded one adoption service from the statistics that follow (except from our quality evaluations). This is because they are not involved in the approval of households or children for adoption and therefore many of the aspects we present in this report do not apply to them.

The 2023 data in this report is therefore based on the data reported by 37 adoption services in their annual return together with evaluation data as at 31 March 2024 for all 38 adoption services. It is expected that the Covid-19 pandemic will have had an impact on trends in this data from 2020 to 2022.

This report covers four different aspects of adoption services:

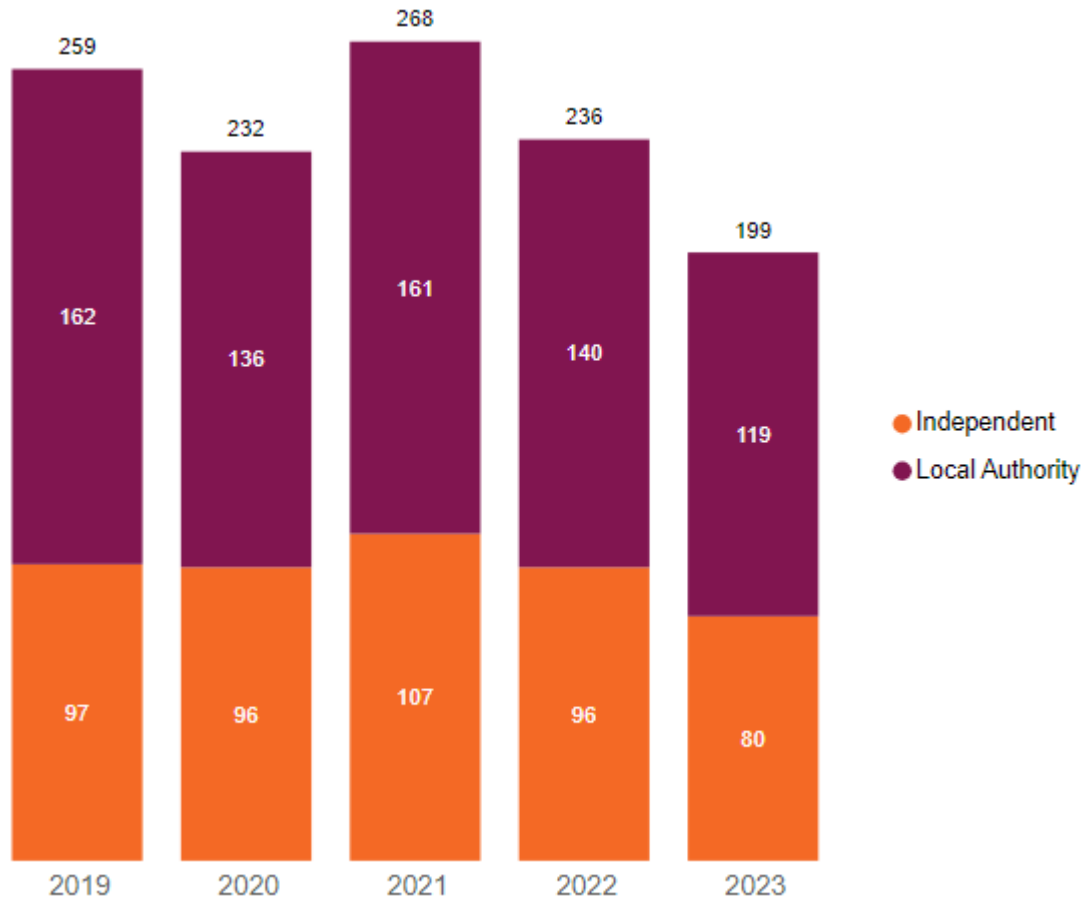
- new approved households
- children and young people
- other services
- adoption service evaluation.

New approved households

While there have been year on year fluctuations in the number of new households being approved for adoption, with 2021 being the highest level across the five-year period at 268 (across 37 adoption services), in general the trend is downward. In 2023, there were 199 new adoptive households approved across 37 adoption services, the lowest number over the last five years (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 The number of new households approved between 1 January and 31 December, by sector.

The number of new households being approved for adoption has fluctuated in recent years and demonstrates a downward trend.



Timescales to approval

The time taken to approve a new household has increased each year since 2020 with 23% of cases taking less than six months to complete in 2023, compared to 24% in 2022, 34% in 2021 and 43% in 2020. (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Proportion of new adoptive households by length of approval completion time, between 1 January and 31 December¹.

		completed within six months	over six months but less than a year	completed in a year or more
2023	Local authority	33%	40%	27%
	Independent	8%	71%	21%
	Total	23%	53%	25%
2022	Local authority	31%	41%	27%
	Independent	13%	79%	8%
	Total	24%	57%	19%
2021	Local authority	43%	41%	16%
	Independent	20%	69%	11%
	Total	34%	52%	14%
2020	Local authority	45%	42%	13%
	Independent	41%	51%	5%
	Total	43%	46%	10%

¹This data was not collected prior to 2020.

Age group approval

In 2023, just under three-quarters of the new households (72%) were approved to adopt children aged two to five years old; 51% were approved to adopt infants under two years old and 25% were approved to adopt children aged six plus (Figure 2.3). These proportions are higher than the previous year except for those approved to adopt over six years old.

Figure 2.3 Number and proportion¹ of new approved households approved between 1 January and 31 December, split by age range approval.

	number of new households	Approved to adopt children in the age range:					
		less than two years old	51%	two years old or more but less than six	72%	Six years old or more	25%
2023	199	102	51%	144	72%	49	25%
2022	236	92	39%	141	60%	58	25%
2021	268	131	49%	189	71%	36	13%
2020	232	66	28%	161	69%	27	12%
2019	259	104	40%	189	73%	28	11%

¹The sum of the individual age categories does not match the total because some adoptive households will have approval across more than one category.

Family group approval

In 2023, 30% of the new households that were approved were approved for family groups of two children, slightly lower than the previous year. There were fewer than five households approved for family groups of three or more children, similar to the previous year.

Figure 2.4 Number and proportion¹ of new approved households between 1 January and 31 December, split by family group approval.

		Approved for family groups		Family group of two children		Family group of three or more children	
		No.	% of new households	No.	% of new households	No.	% of new households
2023	Local authority	35	29%	35	29%	<5	<1%
	Independent	25	31%	25	31%	<5	<1%
	Total	60	30%	60	30%	<5	<1%
2022	Local authority	48	34%	48	34%	<5	<1%
	Independent	39	41%	39	41%	<5	<1%
	Total	87	37%	87	37%	<5	<1%
2021	Local authority	56	35%	56	35%	<5	<1%
	Independent	39	36%	39	36%	<5	<1%
	Total	95	35%	95	35%	<5	<1%
2020	Local authority	45	33%	45	33%	<5	<1%
	Independent	38	40%	38	40%	0	0%
	Total	83	36%	83	36%	<5	<1%
2019	Local authority	48	30%	48	30%	<5	<1%
	Independent	27	28%	27	28%	<5	<1%
	Total	75	29%	75	29%	<5	<1%

¹Values with fewer than five observations have been removed and replaced with '<5' and '<1%' and have been removed from the total number and percentage.

Households waiting

At 31 December 2023, 189 approved households across 27 of the 32 local authority services and in all five of the independent services were waiting for children to be placed. This is lower than the previous two years and back to 2020 levels.

Figure 2.5 Number of approved households at 31 December that were waiting for children or young people to be placed¹, split by sector.

	Number of households			Number of services		
	Local authority	Independent	total	Local authority	Independent	total
2023	108	81	189	27	5	32
2022	126	110	236	29	5	34
2021	118	87	205	26	5	31
2020	108	78	186	27	5	32
2019	111	70	181	27	5	32

¹Excludes those approved exclusively for inter-country adoptions.

Recruitment

In 2023, an estimated 1,109 enquiries from potential adopters were received across all adoption services between 1 January and 30 June (Figure 2.6). Of these, 17% progressed to applications, of which 8% were approved by 31 December 2023. Note that some of the enquiries and applications may have been progressed after 31 December and will not be included in these figures. Overall, a higher volume of enquiries and applications were received this year compared with previous years. For the first time over the five-year period, the number of applications to independent services exceeded those to local authority services while also being the highest number received in either sector to date. The number and proportion of approvals (as a percentage of applications) has been declining over the five-year period but particularly since 2022 and for independent services. The proportion of approvals in independent services was 4% in 2023 compared to 25% in 2022.

Figure 2.6 Recruitment of adopters: approximate number of enquiries received between 1 January and 30 June, and the number leading to applications and approved households by 31 December that year, split by sector.

	Enquiries			Applications by 31 Dec (as a percentage of enquiries)			Approvals by 31 Dec (as a percentage of applications)		
	Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total	Local authority	Independent	Total
2023	463	646	1109	37 (8%)	156 (24%)	193 (17%)	8 (22%)	7 (4%)	15 (8%)
2022	445	644	1089	70 (16%)	32 (5%)	102 (9%)	9 (13%)	8 (25%)	17 (17%)
2021	525	436	961	105 (20%)	72 (17%)	177 (18%)	33 (31%)	15 (21%)	48 (27%)
2020	458	480	938	92 (20%)	81 (17%)	173 (18%)	30 (33%)	36 (44%)	66 (38%)
2019	388	431	819	95 (24%)	70 (16%)	165 (20%)	28 (29%)	48 (69%)	76 (46%)

Children and young people

Children and young people approved for adoption

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 places a duty on local authorities to provide an adoption service. They are responsible for assessing and planning for children who require alternative permanent care. Local authorities may, after following robust legal and matching processes, place children with adopters approved by them or by independent adoption services. Local authorities and independent adoption services recruit, assess and provide training and support to prospective adopters to ensure that they can meet needs and provide high-quality care to children.

In 2023, there were 198 children approved for adoption (across 26 local authority adoption services), down from 240 in 2022, and a decrease of 27% over the five-year period (Figure 2.7). The higher number in 2022 is likely due to the impact Covid-19 had on fostering and adoption whereby more children were placed in interim fostering placements in 2020 but were needing a permanent placement.

The downward trend from 2019 to 2020 presented in Figure 2.7 is a consequence of decreases in the number of children and young people approved for adoption across many individual adoption services. As reported last year, the changes in 2021 and 2022 were mainly driven by a small number of large adoption services. In 2023, the decrease was across many individual adoption services.

Figure 2.7 Children and young people approved for adoption by local authority services between 1 January and 31 December.

The number of children and young people approved for adoption has continued the general downward trend over the preceding four years.

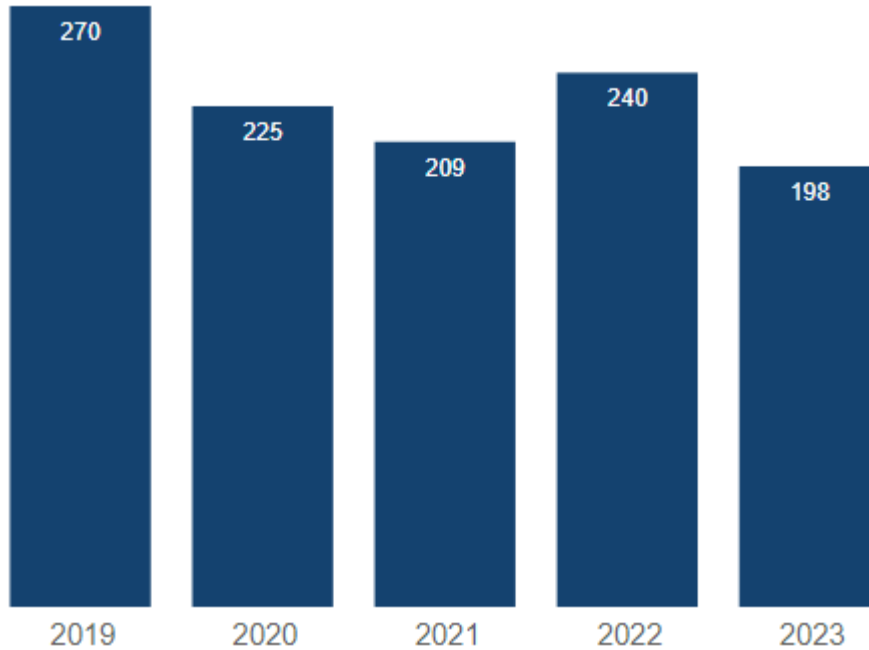


Figure 2.8 shows that in 2023, 43% of the children approved for adoption were aged two to five years old and 50% were younger than two years old (infants). This is consistent with the previous year. Comparing these proportions to the proportion of new approved households, 51% were approved to adopt children younger than two years old (infants), 72% approved for children aged two to five and 25% approved for children aged six or over (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.8 Number of children and young people approved for adoption¹ by local authority services between 1 January and 31 December broken down by the age of the child at the time of approval.

	Total number of children approved for adoption	Age less than two years old		Age two years old or more but less than six		Age six years old or more	
		number	% of total	number	% of total	number	% of total
2023	198	99	50%	86	43%	13	7%
2022	240	117	49%	107	45%	16	7%
2021	209	94	45%	102	49%	13	6%
2020	225	113	50%	98	44%	14	6%
2019	270	136	50%	119	44%	15	6%

¹ 'Approved for adoption' means that the child has an approved plan for permanence, which recommends adoption. This includes all such children whether placed or not placed within the year.

Timescales to approval

Research has found that it is the early stages of care and permanence planning following a child being accommodated that take the longest time in the overall process⁵.

Once it has been identified that a child should be permanently placed away from home, the adoption and permanence panel decides whether to formally recommend adoption. In the annual return, we ask local authority adoption services about their assessment completion time. This time period begins at the point of the looked after child review agreeing the need for permanence and ends at the point of approval at the adoption panel.

Figure 2.9 below presents the variation in assessment completion time. The numbers represent the number of services. One service completed all assessments within three months (same as the previous year) and eight services took six months or longer to complete all assessments (same as the previous year).

Figure 2.9 Number of services¹ by minimum and maximum assessment completion time, 2023.

		Maximum time to assess		
		Within 3 months	3 to 5 months	6 months or over
Minimum time to assess	Within 3 months	1	3	8
	3 to 5 months		2	4
	6 months or over			8

¹Not all services provided data, and some services match children at the time of registration, therefore the sum of the values does not match the total number of services.

⁵ Permanence Planning and Decision Making for Looked After Children in Scotland: Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, published by the Children's Reporter and Scottish Government, 3 December 2015.

Children and young people approved and placed with families

In 2023, 174 children were placed with their new adoptive families across 26 local authorities (Figure 2.10). This includes children approved for adoption in 2023 and in previous years.

The number of children placed continues to decrease year on year. Not all services report decreases every year, although most of the larger adoption services display a downward trend over the years 2019-2023.

In 2023, 63% of the children placed with prospective adoptive families were placed in households approved by independent agencies – a proportion similar to that observed in 2021.

Figure 2.10 Number of children placed with prospective adoptive families between 1 January and 31 December.

	Total number of children placed	% placed in households approved by another local authority	% placed in households approved by independent agencies
2023	174	24%	63%
2022	181	19%	46%
2021	199	14%	61%
2020	207	24%	47%
2019	242	21%	45%

Timescales to match

Adoption and permanence panels find a match for the child in terms of who their long-term carer should be. In the annual return, we ask local authority adoption services about the time it took to match children with adoptive families, from the point of registration at a panel to matching at a panel.

Figure 2.11 presents the variation in matching time. The numbers represent the number of services and exclude services that carry out registration and matching at the same time. It shows that in one service, it took one year or more to match any children with adoptive families, while in three services all matching took less than three months. This does not factor in the quantity of matches, which will vary by service.

Figure 2.11 Number of services¹ by minimum and maximum time to match children with adoptive families, 2023.

		Maximum time to match			
		Within 3 months	3 to 5 months	6 to 11 months	12 months or over
Minimum time to match	Within 3 months	3	0	3	7
	3 to 5 months		1	2	2
	6 to 11 months			1	3
	12 months or over				1

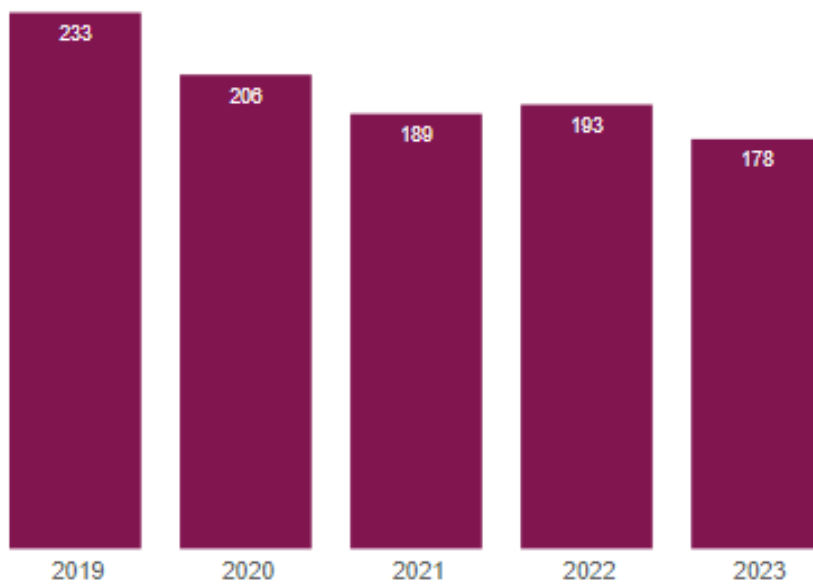
¹Not all services provided data, and some services match children at the time of registration, therefore the sum of the values does not match the total number of services.

Children and young people adopted

In 2023, 178 children and young people were legally adopted. This is down 7.8% from 193 in 2022, and down 23.6% from 233 in 2019 (Figure 2.12).

Figure 2.12 Children and young people adopted (by court order) between 1 January and 31 December.

The number of children and young people adopted (by court order) each year continues to follow a downward trend.



Timescales to adopt

In the annual return, we ask local authority adoption services about the time it took to grant full adoption orders after placing a child with their adoptive family. Figure 2.13 presents the variation in the time taken to grant full adoption. The numbers represent the number of services. It shows that in four services, all cases took a year or more to grant the full adoption order. Zero services granted all orders within six months.

Compared with last year there is a slight shift towards more services taking longer to grant full adoption orders.

Figure 2.13 Number of services¹ by minimum and maximum time to grant full adoption order, 2023.

		Maximum time to grant adoption order		
		Within 6 months	6 to 11 months	12 months or over
Minimum time to grant adoption order	Within 6 months	0	1	4
	6 to 11 months		2	14
	12 months or over			4

¹Not all services provided data therefore the sum of the values does not match the total number of services.

Children and young people awaiting placement

At 31 December 2023, there were 130 children and young people who had been approved for adoption across 22 local authority services and were waiting to be matched with approved adopters (Figure 2.14). This is in line with the overall downward trend in the number of children approved for adoption.

Of the children waiting to be matched in 2023:

- 41 (32%) were part of a family group that services were trying to keep together (17 family groups in total)
- 36% had been waiting for over one year, up from 21% the previous year.

Figure 2.14 Number of children and young people approved¹ for adoption waiting to be matched² with approved adopters at 31 December, the number who were part of a family group, and the number who had been waiting for over one year³.

	Total number of children approved and waiting	Waiting and are part of a family group		Total number of family groups waiting	Waiting for over one year	
		number	%		number	%
2023	130	41	32%	17	47	36%
2022	135	56	41%	28	28	21%
2021	134	57	43%	29	51	38%
2020	148	70	47%	33	45	30%
2019	153	47	31%	24	39	25%

¹ 'Approved' means that the child has an approved plan for permanence which recommends adoption.

² 'Matched' refers to the making of a recommendation by the adoption panel.

³Services were instructed to count children individually, for example, two children who are part of a family group were counted as two.

We asked local authority services about the ages of the children and young people who were waiting to be matched.

Figure 2.15 shows that as in previous years, at 31 December 2023, there were children of all ages waiting to be matched with approved adopters, although few services had children aged eleven and over waiting to be matched. There was an increase in the number of services with children aged between six and eleven in 2023 compared to previous years – the age group that each year has the lowest recruitment of new approved adoptive households.

Figure 2.15 Number and percentage¹ of local authority services with children and young people waiting to be matched¹ with approved adopters at 31 December, split by the age category of the children.

	Less than two years old		Two or over but under six years old		Six or over but under 11 years old		Eleven years old or over	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
2023	14	64%	18	82%	11	50%	<5	<1%
2022	13	52%	24	96%	<5	<1%	<5	<1%
2021	16	73%	18	82%	6	27%	<5	<1%
2020	15	71%	19	90%	<5	<1%	<5	<1%
2019	17	74%	20	87%	8	35%	0	0%

¹ 'Matched' refers to the making of a recommendation by the adoption panel.

²Values less than 5 are shown as <5 for disclosure control purposes.

Adoptions that break down

In 2023, 22 adoptions broke down (disrupted). This is up from 12 in 2022, although there is variation in this number from year to year with no clear trend over the last five years.

Of these breakdowns, the majority (15) happened before the adoption order was granted, with seven occurring after the adoption order was granted. Most of the breakdowns took place in households approved by the local authority that placed the child.

The terms 'broke down' and 'disrupted' are not defined in the annual return and are therefore open to interpretation by the adoption service, which means that what one service counts as a disruption or breakdown may differ from what another service counts.

Figure 2.16 Adoption breakdowns between 1 January and 31 December, by timing of placement and type of placement¹.

	Before adoption order was granted	After the adoption order was granted	Total
2023	15	7	22
2022	12	<5	12
2021	29	8	37
2020	18	<5	18
2019	21	14	35

¹Values less than 5 are shown as <5 and excluded from totals for disclosure control purposes.

Unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum

In 2023, we introduced a new question into the annual return to count the number of unaccompanied children and young people seeking asylum and refuge that started using an adoption service between 1 January and 31 December. In 2023, this number was less than five.

Other services

Post-adoption support

Local authorities have a duty to provide post-adoption support to families who adopt and to children who are adopted. They also have a duty to provide support and guidance to adult adoptees who wish to obtain their birth records.

All local authority adoption services provided post-adoption support to adoptive households in 2023, ranging from supporting fewer than five to supporting 428 households. In total, 2,202 households received post-adoption support from local authority adoption services, and 711 received post-adoption support from independent services, similar to 2022.

Services outside Scotland

In 2023, there were 47 children and young people placed in adoptive households in Scotland from elsewhere in the UK, and nine were placed elsewhere in the UK by Scottish local authorities (Figure 2.17). The numbers are low and tend to fluctuate from year to year.

Figure 2.17 Number of children and young people placed to and from elsewhere in the UK, between 1 January and 31 December.

	Placed in Scotland from elsewhere in the UK	Placed elsewhere in the UK by Scottish local authorities
2023	47	9
2022	39	11
2021	46	<5
2020	42	13
2019	46	<5

Adoption service evaluation

Based on Care Inspectorate evaluations, the overall quality of adoption services on 31 March 2024 was positive. As Figure 2.18 presents, 74% of adoption services had evaluations of 'good' or better across all key questions.

Figure 2.18 Overview of adoption service grades at 31 March 2024, split by sector.

	Local authority		Independent		Total	
	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services	number of services	% of all graded services
Very good and excellent for all assessed key questions	10	31%	4	67%	14	37%
Good or better for all assessed key questions	24	75%	4	67%	28	74%
Adequate or better for all assessed key questions	29	88%	4	67%	32	84%
Less than adequate for at least one key question	4	13%	1	17%	5	13%

Adoption summary

In 2023, the number of children approved for adoption (Figure 2.7) and the number of children legally adopted (Figure 2.12) continued the general downward trend. The number of new households approved for adoption also decreased, continuing the downward trend after a slight rise in 2021. In parallel, we saw a decrease in approved households waiting for children and young people to be placed (Figure 2.5). At the same time, there is an ongoing downward trend in the number of children and young people waiting to be matched with adopters in particular those waiting and part of a family group (Figure 2.14).

Some of the children waiting to be matched were part of a family group that services were trying to place together, which shows a strong commitment to keeping brothers and sisters together. [The Promise](#) highlights the importance of brother and sister relationships. Of new households approved to adopt, 30% (60 households) were approved for family groups of two children which is a decrease on the previous year and a break to the increasing trend since 2019 (Figure 2.4). Less than 1% (fewer than five households) were approved for family groups of three or more children, similar to the previous four years.

Children are still experiencing delays in being approved for adoption – with many services reporting a time span of six months or longer from identifying the need for a child to be placed away from home and the adoption panel formally recommending adoption for a child (Figure 2.9). Delays are also evident at the point of matching a child with their adoptive family (many services report a time span of six months or longer) and becoming legally adopted (in many cases, this took 12 months or longer) (Figures 2.11 and 2.13). In addition, the data highlights an increase between 2020 to 2023 in the proportion of long assessment times for prospective adoptive households (Figure 2.2). These factors combined extend the time it takes for children and young people to be placed permanently with a family.

The number of adoptions that break down has fluctuated from year to year over the period 2019-2023 (Figure 2.16). Over the five years covered in this report, there was a peak of 37 breakdowns in 2021, with 22 reported in 2023.

Despite the continued challenges faced by adoption services, such as finding vacancies hard to fill (see [Staff vacancies in care services 2022](#) report) most adoption services remain of good quality overall, with 74% of services evaluated by the Care Inspectorate as good or better across all quality themes/indicators at 31 March 2024 (Figure 2.18).

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This publication is available in alternative formats on request.



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