



Help *at* Hand



Help at Hand annual report

December 2024

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



In my four years as Children's Commissioner for England, I have heard from more than a million children about their hopes and ambitions, and what they want from the adults making decisions in their lives. Crucially, regardless of their circumstances or backgrounds, children want their voices listened to on how to tackle key issues facing children across England.

That has become my driving force as Children's Commissioner: to listen to children's voices and experiences, and to act on what they tell me.

The work of my Help at Hand advocacy service is perhaps the best embodiment of that driving force. Day in and day out, my small team of child's rights experts intervene in cases where children's voices are being ignored or undermined, often working through knotty and complex bureaucratic challenges to deliver positive outcomes.

This is my fourth annual report on the impact of Help at Hand. It fulfils my powers under section 2D of the Children Act 2004: to provide advice, assistance, and representation to children who are living away from home or receiving social care services, and to care leavers up to the age of 25. The team of three works with individual children to resolve issues where their rights are not being upheld or they are not

receiving a suitable service. Not only does this work improve the individual child's circumstances by resolving conflicts that had prevented appropriate care being given, it also informs the office's wider research and policy work so that changes are made that reflect their experiences to benefit all children.

Over the past year the work of the Help at Hand team has played a central role in much of the office's most striking pieces of research. In particular, this has included *Waiting times for assessment and support for autism¹*, *ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions* in October, our advocacy audit *'The state of children and young people's advocacy services in England' in December 2023²* and *Children with complex needs who are deprived of liberty³* in November, based on interviews with young people under High Court deprivation of liberty orders. The latter piece of work received significant public attention on publication, including through the media, and was supported by the President of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane.

The number of cases handled by my Help at Hand team continues to grow year on year. Between September 2023 and August 2024, the team received 1,001 referrals. On 26 occasions over the course of the year, I wrote personally to decision makers including Directors of Children's Services about children where I had real concerns that their rights were being breached. As this report shows, our representations are often successful in making a real difference for children – more than nine in 10 cases where a representation is made resulted in a positive outcome – and ensure that they have access to all of their entitlements, and the quality of care and support they deserve. However, their experiences also highlight serious problems in the children's social care system, such as the lack of suitable children's homes and foster carers for our most vulnerable children, severe issues in the SEND education system leaving children out of school, and problems for looked after children accessing advocacy when they most need it, particularly children with disabilities.

The growing number of cases supported by Help at Hand led to a rebrand of the service this year to make it more accessible, in response to a direct ask from children. The team's online presence now includes an accessible video that explains the service to children with learning disabilities, a fresh new logo, clearer explanations and simpler navigation.

This year's Help at Hand report outlines key themes of home, education, and voice that have emerged from the team's work over the past 12 months. It provides examples of where they have been able to make a difference, and of how children's experiences have influenced the office's policy work.

In an ideal world, there would be no need for Help at Hand, because all children would receive excellent support and care up to and beyond 18, with support from social care professionals and advocates to

resolve any issues that arise. However, until this is the reality, the team will continue to offer advice and support to those who need it. My ambition is for England to be the best place for every child to grow up, and this will continue to be my driving focus into the next year.

Summary

Background

Help at Hand is a small team of child rights advisers working for the Children's Commissioner to provide support to children in care, children in need, those living away from home, and care leavers up to the age of 25. This includes all children and young people who are in foster care or children's homes, youth custody or hospital, as well as unaccompanied children seeking asylum, children with disabilities (both at home or in care), homeless children and care leavers. The team can be contacted by phone, email, or via the Children's Commissioner's office website, either directly by children, or by their advocates, professionals, or family members on their behalf.

The team offers advice, assistance and representation to children and care leavers whose rights have been breached. This may involve contacting their social workers and responsible children's services managers, NHS professionals, staff in secure settings and, where necessary, government officials in departments with responsibility for children, for example in the Department for Education and Home Office. The aim is always to work collaboratively with professionals to ensure that children's welfare, views, and best interests are kept at the centre of decision-making, and their rights upheld. Often this leads to closer consideration of issues and positive outcomes for the child or young person. However, where serious concerns have not been addressed, matters are escalated and, if necessary, the Children's Commissioner writes personally to the local authority's Director of Children's Services, or the responsible directors in other agencies.

Summary of case work September 2023 to August 2024

The team received 1,001 referrals and was able to make a positive impact in 92% of the 313 cases where a representation was made. The fact that children or professionals have to approach Help at Hand means that services have already failed these children to some extent. This is why the team seeks to ensure that the themes and issues emerging from its work are used to inform the office's wider work, including research, policy, reports and stakeholder engagement, with the aim of improving policy and practice nationally.

This report focuses on three main themes that have emerged from Help at Hand's work with children this year:

Home: This includes the concerns about children and young people living in illegal children's homes and care leavers struggling to access suitable housing.

Education: A consistent theme from Help at Hand's work, which continues this year, is children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) missing education, including looked after children, and particularly those who have been placed out of their home area.

Voice: Many children in care or in need are still struggling to access appropriate independent advocacy and pursue complaints via local complaints processes, meaning they are missing out on an important avenue for redress. This year, the team placed particular focus on advocacy for children living in children's homes rated as inadequate by Ofsted, which links to our other key theme of children needing a safe and suitable home.

Case studies and interviews

This report draws on interviews with and written feedback from seven people helped by the service, conducted and compiled by the office's research team between October and November 2024, reflecting on what was helpful about the service and what could be improved. It also provides real and anonymised case examples of children and young people, which highlight what they have faced, the wider issues these represent, and details of how this has informed the office's policy work.

Wider work of Help at Hand

In addition to Help at Hand's day-to-day work helping individual children, the team has also undertaken the following work:

- In September and October 2023, the team provided training to advocates on how to support looked after children who are being moved against their wishes. In late 2024 and early 2025 they are offering further free training days nationally to advocates and Personal Advisers, both online and in person, to provide the latest advice and information on supporting care leavers and upholding their rights.

- The team continued to support unaccompanied children seeking asylum through visits to Western Jet Foil, Kent Intake Unit and Reception Centres and following up on the issues children raised.
- The team made an important contribution to the office's report on children living with deprivation of liberty (DoL) orders.⁴ The serious concerns about the use of these orders for the most vulnerable children, and the conditions experienced by many of these children, have become clear through Help at Hand's work over recent years, and several children previously supported by Help at Hand were involved in the research.
- The team continued to receive notifications from Ofsted regarding children's homes that were rated inadequate and carried out checks with local authorities to ensure that the children concerned were offered advocacy. This work has now come to an end, but the involvement of advocates was beneficial for many children and in some cases brought other issues to light.
- The Help at Hand section on the website has been redesigned to make it more accessible to children and young people.

This contribution to the office's wider work will continue over the coming year to ensure that the Children's Commissioner is aware of the situation on the ground and that children's voices and experiences inform her priorities to achieve maximum impact for the children who need it most.

Help at Hand's work in figures - September 2023 to August 2024

In the year from September 1st 2023 to August 31st 2024, Help at Hand received 1,001 enquiries, similar to the 998 enquiries received the previous year. Most enquiries related to one child or young person but where the team is contacted about two or more children in the same family, or concerns about a children's home or other setting with a number of children or young people, this is logged as one enquiry, so the number of children and young people supported by Help at Hand over the past year is actually well over 1,000.

The tables in this chapter show the characteristics of children involved in these enquiries. Where the child or young person's age was known, over three-quarters (76%) were children aged 17 and under, with the majority of these (39%) aged 15 to 17, followed by 22% aged 10 to 14 (Table 1). Almost a quarter (24%) were young adults aged 18 to 26, the majority of whom (78%) were care leavers. Regarding gender (excluding those where this was not specified or unknown), boys accounted for slightly more than half of enquiries (52% compared to 44% girls) (Table 2).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of children and young people contacting Help at Hand

Age group (where known)	Number of children	Percentage (%)
0 to 4	144	5.2%
5 to 9	265	9.5%
10 to 14	612	22%
15 to 17	1,076	39%
18 to 26	666	24%
27+	21	0.8%
Total	2,784	100%

**Note: Percentages do not sum exactly to 100% due to rounding.*

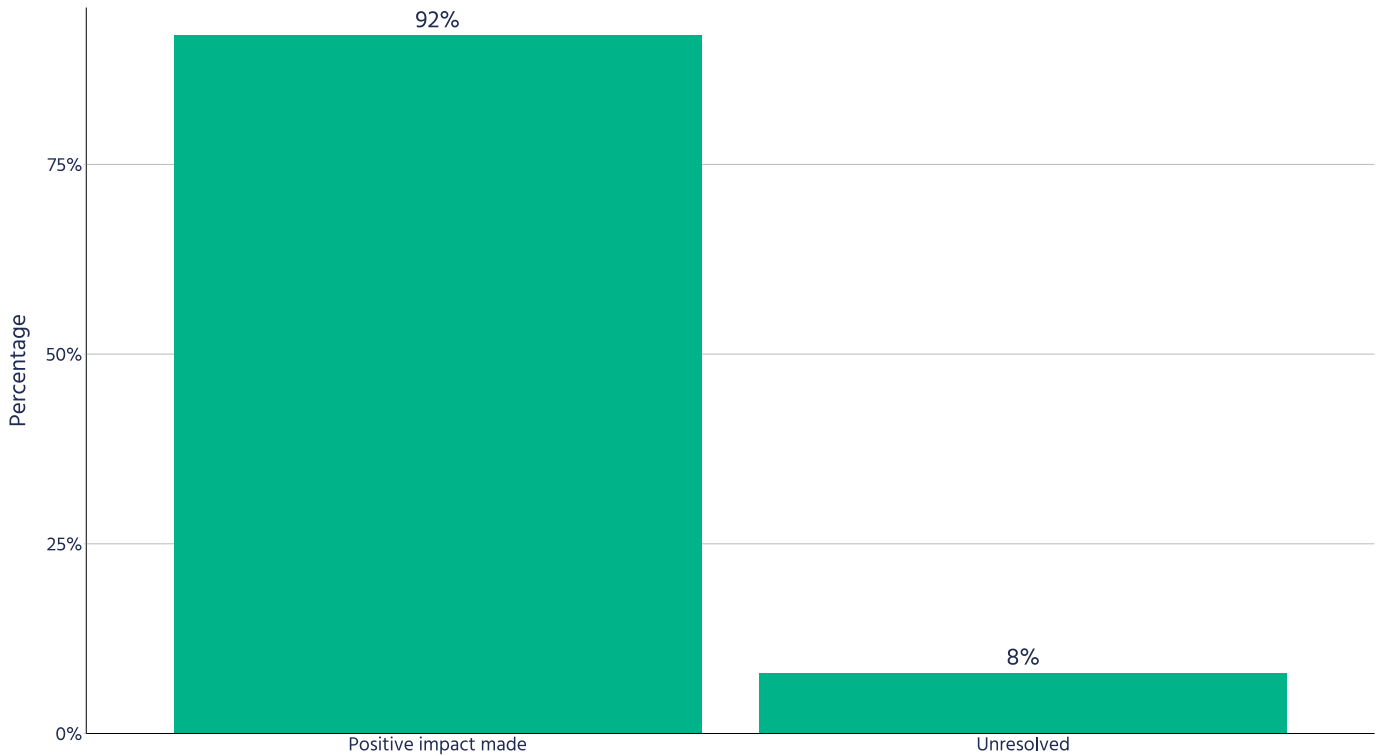
Table 2. Gender characteristics of children and young people contacting Help at Hand.

Gender (where known)	Number of enquiries	Percentage (%)
Female	300	44%
Male	360	53%
Multiple	24	3.5%
Total	684	100%

**Note that children of "other" genders have been excluded from this table due to small and disclosive numbers.*

Following 343 enquiries, Help at Hand made a representation to the local authority or another service on behalf of the child or young person, which is slightly down from the previous year, where this happened for 383 enquiries. The team made positive impact in the vast majority (92%) of cases where they made direct representations (Figure 1). Of this 92%, 43% of enquiries were fully resolved and 49% of enquiries were partially resolved. A resolved case would be where Help at Hand managed to fully achieve the outcome that a child wanted, for example, stopping an unwanted move or ensuring a homeless child is placed in local authority care. A case where Help at Hand had a positive impact but where the issue was only partially resolved could be connecting a young person with an advocate to take their issue forward, or having a proposed move paused for further consideration.

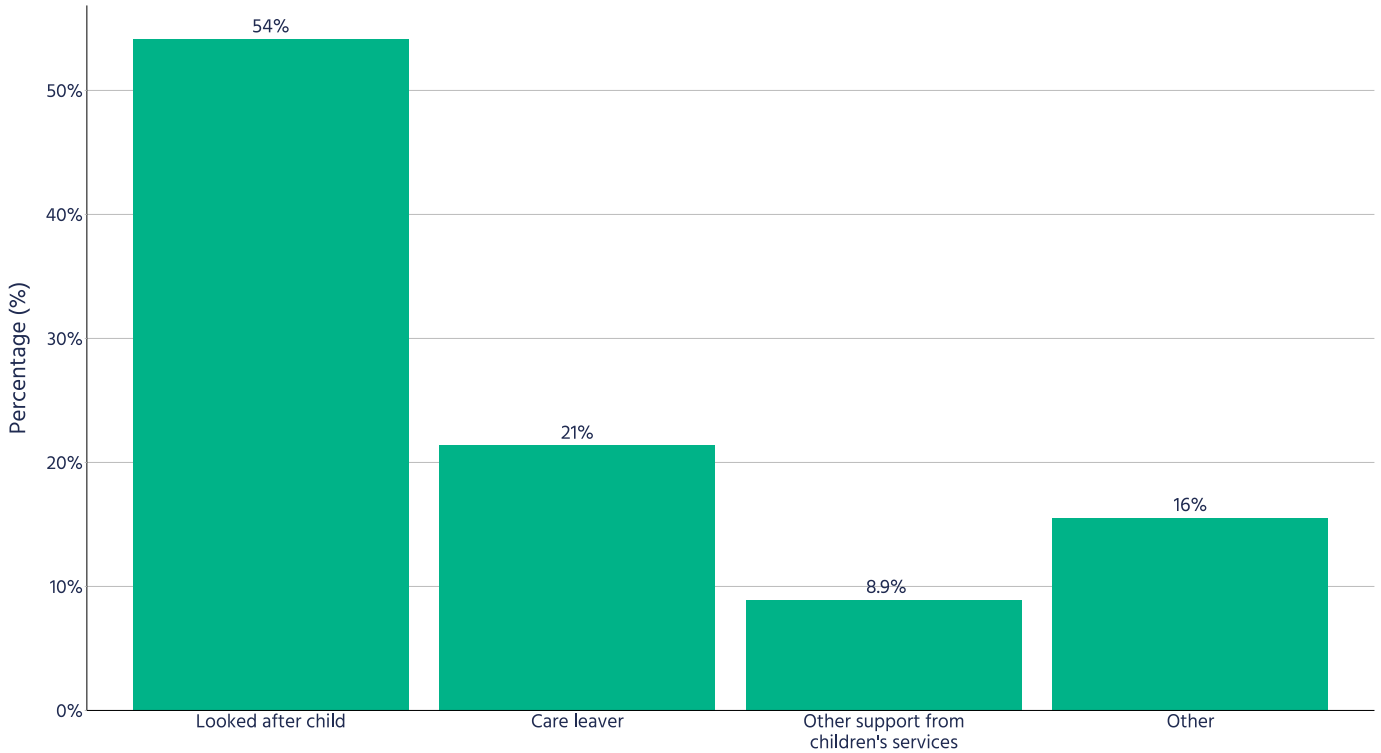
Figure 1. Outcomes of Help at Hand enquiries where a representation was made



The most common issues that children and professionals contacted Help at Hand about this year were education (16%), support for children in care (12%), complaints (10%) and housing (10%) – these were also the most prevalent issues last year though in a slightly different order.

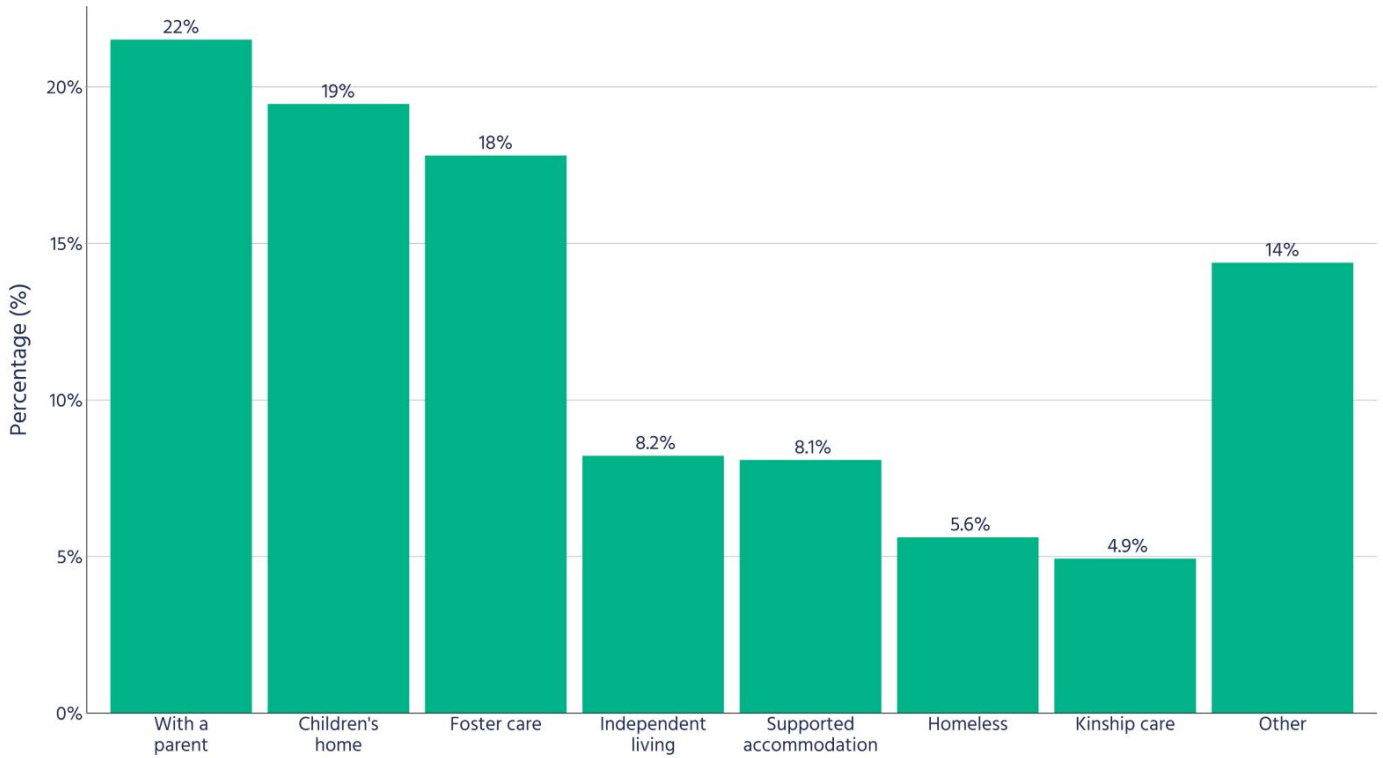
Over half (54%) of enquiries were raised either by or on behalf of a looked after child (Figure 3). These enquiries frequently related to care and support, education, and placement moves. This was followed by care leavers (21%) and children receiving other support from children’s services (8.9%), including children on child in need plans or those on child protection plans. Due to small numbers, some children (16%) have legal statuses categorised as “other” in Figure 3. These “other” legal statuses include those who were adopted, under a special guardianship order, receiving no support from local authorities, detained under the mental health act, in custody or on remand.

Figure 3. Percentage of Help at Hand enquiries from September 1st 2023 to August 31st 2024 by legal status of child (where known).



Children and young people’s most common living arrangement was at home, living with their parent(s) for over a fifth of enquiries (22%) received within the year. This was followed by those living in a children’s home (19%) or in foster care (18%) (which, combined, make up the largest proportion – 37%). A smaller but still sizable proportion of young people lived independently (8.2%) or in supported accommodation (8.1%). The ‘other’ category (14%) included children and young people who were living in custody, hospital, or kinship care, among other settings.

Figure 4. Percentage of Help at Hand enquiries by child or young person's living arrangement



Regional analysis

Of the 1,001 enquiries that Help at Hand received, a fifth (20%) were from London, followed by the South East (14%) and North West (13%). The regions least in contact with Help at Hand were the East Midlands (7.9%) and the North East (4.1%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Number of Help at Hand enquiries by region.

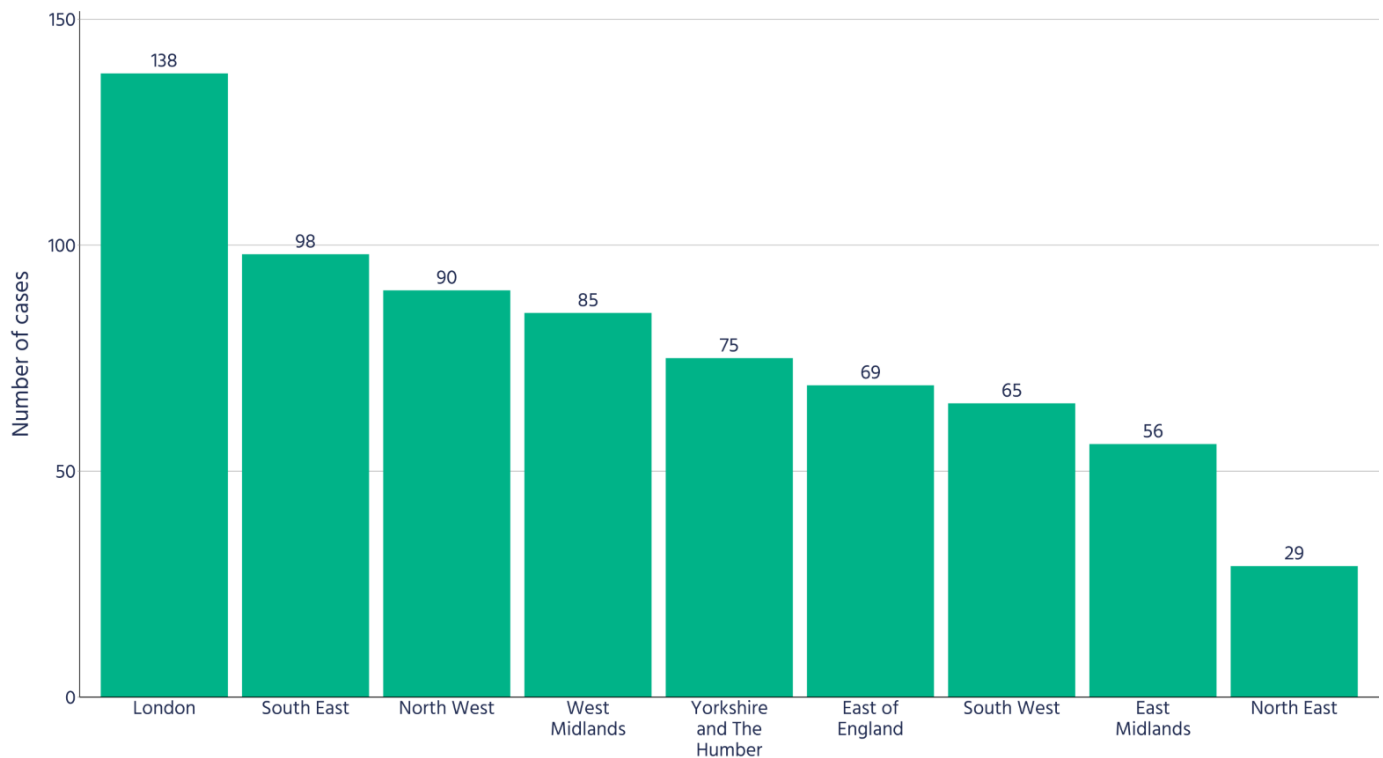


Table 3 shows that the most common presenting issues raised by region were either education or child in care support.

Table 3. Top presenting issues by region

Region	Top issue	Percentage of cases in the region (%)
South East	Education	27%
East Midlands	Child in Care Support	20%
West Midlands	Education	19%
East of England	Education	19%
South West	Child in Care Support	18%
London	Education	18%
Yorkshire and The Humber	Education	18%
North East	Child in Care Support	17%
North West	Child in Care Support	16%

The top legal status in most regions was either children with a care order or care leavers. Only the South East was different with “no status” as the most common legal status (Table 4). This is because the team supported many children living in hotels in Kent, who had not yet been given looked after status, although this should have happened

Table 4. Top legal status by region.

Region	Top legal status	Percentage of cases in the region
West Midlands	Care Order	36%
East Midlands	Care Order	29%
Yorkshire and The Humber	Care Order	27%
South West	Care Leaver (Former Relevant)	27%
North East	Care Leaver (Former Relevant)	27%
London	Care Leaver (Former Relevant)	26%
North West	Care Order	25%
East of England	Care Leaver (Former Relevant)	23%
South East	No status	16%

Living arrangement by region was more varied and split largely between those living in a children’s home (higher in the West Midlands, East Midlands and North West), those living in foster care (highest in the North East, South West and Yorkshire and The Humber) and those living with a parent (represented more in London and the South East) (see Table 5).

Table 5. Top living arrangement by region

Region	Top setting	Percentage of cases in the region (%)
North East	Foster care	32%
West Midlands	Children's home	29%
East Midlands	Children's home	28%
South West	Foster care	25%
London	With a parent	24%
North West	Children's home	24%
Yorkshire and The Humber	Foster care	24%
South East	With a parent	22%
East of England	Supported accommodation	19%

Key themes from our work with children and young people this year

*All names in case studies have been changed to protect children's anonymity

Home

'Above all, I just want a home where I can be good for a couple of years and grow up like a normal teenager.' – Tess, 14, a looked after child who contacted Help at Hand

Context

Children who are looked after by local authorities are entitled to accommodation that meets their needs and is the best available placement for them⁵. However, there is a shortage of high-quality foster carers and registered children's homes, which means many children are left in care placements that are unsuitable. Some will have prolonged stays in hospital or ad hoc arrangements, such as bed and breakfast accommodation, simply because their local authority cannot secure an appropriate foster or

children's home placement. As the case studies below make clear, this can exacerbate children's trauma and is also a real cause of concern to the professionals supporting them. Some of these children, who are deprived of their liberty, are highly vulnerable and need specialist care, with skilled foster carers or in a therapeutic children's home. However, often these options are not available leading to children being placed in unregistered settings, despite this being illegal and not in their best interests. This is never the right solution for children and can exacerbate concerns making it even harder for them to have stability and the help they need in the long-term. Sadly, the challenges with accommodation continue for many looked after children after they turn 18, due to a shortage of stable housing options for care leavers, moving out of their home area, fulfilling their ambition of going to university, or poor mental health or financial difficulties. The Help at Hand team can provide support to these young people up to 25, and attempt to find a solution to the difficulties they face.

Case examples on the theme of home from September 2023 to August 2024

Whistleblower concerns about poor care at an unregistered children's home

The team was contacted by a residential worker who had recently left her role at an unregistered children's home due to concerns about practice and safety. She explained that the home cared for two highly vulnerable children who required 2:1 support but had not been providing this level of staffing which had led to some serious incidents involving the children. Staff were also untrained, had kept inaccurate records of the care provided to children, and some did not have DBS clearance. She had shared her concerns with the local authority and Ofsted but was not clear what action had been taken as a result. The team followed up and the local authority responded, sharing information about what had been done to address the concerns, including further checks and monitoring of the children's safety. The local authority explained that they had been seeking a registered placement and were still actively doing so but had not found one willing to accept the children, due to their high level of needs.

Vulnerable child on a deprivation of liberty order in an unregistered children's home

Tess is a 14-year-old child in care who had been placed in bed and breakfast accommodation for three months when she and her advocate contacted Help at Hand. Due to Tess's history of suicide attempts, her local authority had sought a deprivation of liberty (DoL) order and placed her in an unregistered (illegal) setting as they could not find a registered children's home for her. Tess described her room in the bed and breakfast placement as totally bare, with just a mattress on the floor. The agency staff looking after her under a DoL order were concerned for her safety if she was given furniture to make her bedroom more comfortable. After having met with Tess and her advocate, Help at Hand liaised extensively with her social care team and court appointed guardian, requesting weekly updates about searches for a registered setting to meet Tess's needs. Tess's social work team said they were searching across the country for a registered setting, but was having difficulties finding a registered home that would offer Tess a place due to her high needs. The Help at Hand team will continue to support Tess and communicate with her advocate and social care professionals until a suitable registered placement is found and her needs are met.

Care leaver in hospital and out of area

Frances was a 21-year-old care leaver in hospital when a support service reached out to Help at Hand to assist with her delayed discharge. At 18, Frances started to attend university outside her home area and took a part-time job, but experienced a psychotic episode and several hospitalisations, which caused her to withdraw from university. Once Help at Hand became involved, it became apparent that there had been poor planning by Frances's parent local authority and university to ensure she had appropriate support, particularly after she began struggling with her mental health. There was also a dispute between her area's Integrated Care Board (ICB), Adult Social Care and Leaving Care team, and the ICB where the hospital was, about who would be responsible for funding accommodation when she was discharged from hospital. At the time of the referral to Help at Hand, Frances was sitting in an empty room with her belongings packed, and clearly emotionally distressed.

Help at Hand wrote to the ICB and Leaving Care leads to ask for an urgent meeting to discuss the situation so that Frances could safely be transferred to the area she had chosen, with the relevant mental health and practice support in place. Frances moved out of the hospital on the day of the meeting.

Feedback from cases helped with the theme of home

The following quotes come from emails received by Help at Hand after helping cases in the last year.

- “Just emailing to let you know that the panel went well. The placement was approved and my carers are now registered foster carers. I really appreciate all of your help during the process and I owe you so much for everything you've done. I will continue to chase outstanding actions but I think you have done so much to help me and I'll take it from here. If I need more help I'll let you know. I can't thank you enough for everything you've done.” - *Child in care.*
- “The support is hugely appreciated.” - *Care leaver regarding accommodation issue.*
- “Firstly, thank you so much for your support and the time you took to respond to me promptly when needed to and representing on behalf of my children to the council. I'm glad to Inform you that we have been offered a three-bedroom house and will be moving in this weekend! ... I'm forever grateful to your support and thank you once again.” – *Good housing outcome for a parent with disabled children in mouldy and leaky property.*

The following quotes come from written feedback and interviews conducted by the Children's Commissioner's office research team with people who had used Help at Hand.

- “When [Help at Hand] got involved hey presto within 10 days we had a social worker.” – *Parent of a disabled child.*
- “I did find using the service helpful and more importantly so did the young person.” - *Professional.*

Policy and research on the theme of home

In April 2024, the Children's Commissioner office published *The Big Ambition*¹, based on a survey carried out between September 2023 and January 2024 which had almost 14,000 responses from children with

¹

a social worker.⁶ *The Big Ambition* emphasised the importance of accommodation for looked after children, setting out the aim of ensuring that every child in care has a loving and stable home. This includes sufficient high-quality placements for all children in care, a recommendation that the Department for Education must directly invest in children's homes to drive up supply and set up a children's social care capital building fund to support local authorities to boost their own in-house provision of children's homes. The report also recommended a national foster care recruitment campaign, and government strategy to end profit-making provision in children's homes. The office has also consistently called for all accommodation for children to provide care, not just support. This includes care across all settings, meeting universal standards, for 16- and 17-year-olds, who can currently be placed in settings which legally only provide support, and not care.

The Children's Commissioner's November 2024 report on deprivation of liberty also highlights the experiences of children with complex needs, many of whom have been placed in inappropriate settings. The report calls for far greater support for children who are struggling, with an emphasis on providing high-quality therapeutic children's homes, with health and social care support, to ensure their difficulties are addressed, and they have stability and support to address their difficulties and move on from the restrictions of the order as soon as possible. The Help at Hand team was closely involved in producing the report and a number of children who had been assisted by the team shared their experiences with researchers, as well as their ideas about how the system could work better for other children like them.

The Children's Commissioner's office has also sent a data collection request to all local authorities in England, seeking information about the number and characteristics of looked after children they have placed in unregistered children's homes. The results will inform the office's future policy work on pushing for every looked after child to live in a registered children's home, challenging the profits made by private providers, and ensuring that all children have a safe and suitable home.

Education

'Please can you find me a school where I can meet friends and play football.'
– George, 12, a looked after child.

Context

Help at Hand have had increasing numbers of inquiries about children not being in education. Some of these are about children living at home but struggling to find a school that will meet their additional needs, some are care leavers struggling to access the funding and housing needed to engage in adult education; but mostly they concern children in care who are placed far from home and cannot get a school place. Often, by the time someone contacts Help at Hand the child will have been out of school for several months. Children often tell us that they are bored and lonely when not in education. Their carers tell us that it puts an enormous burden on them that threatens the stability of the home. Some common themes have become apparent: poor communication from local authority SEND teams, push back from schools who do not feel that they can meet a child's needs, and poor to no interim provision when waiting for a school place.

Case examples on the theme of education from September 2023 to August 2024

Child with an EHCP living out of area with a disability

Sonny is a looked after child who has profound disabilities. He was removed from his parents at a young age and placed with specialist foster carers who could meet his needs. These carers live in a different part of the country, but his original 'home' local authority retained parental responsibility for him as a looked after child. However, responsibility for his special educational needs was transferred to the local SEND team who, after consulting with his home local authority, found Sonny a place at a special school.

While he did well with his foster carers, it soon became clear that Sonny would need nursing support to attend school, as the school staff could not manage his medical needs. Funding this was the responsibility of the Integrated Care Board (ICB) covering Sonny's home local authority. The assessment was completed six months after Sonny joined the school but there was a dispute between services which continued for many months, so more than a year after Sonny had been added to his school roll, there was still no health funding to enable him to attend. Sonny's carers contacted Help at Hand for support, and the team wrote to his social care and education professionals, urging them to resolve this for him as soon as possible. It became clear that confusion around funding and the responsibilities of the teams in different areas was creating obstacles and delays.

During this time, Sonny remained out of school. His foster carers arranged a package of positive activities for him in the community and asked the SEND teams to cooperate on approving and funding an Education Otherwise Than at School (EOTAS) package instead, but this was not agreed. Sonny's health has deteriorated significantly. By the time an agreement was reached on health funding, it was clear that he would not be able to return to school. Only at this point did the professionals finally agree that EOTAS was the best option for him, though it took many more weeks and another letter from the Children's Commissioner for the SEND teams to agree.

Thankfully, Sonny has incredible foster carers who have dedicated themselves to meeting his needs and to ensuring he is impacted as little as possible by the problems in the systems determining his support. The Children's Commissioner wrote to senior officials at the Department for Education and NHS England, as well as both local authorities, to share Sonny's story and to ask for the issues his case highlights so glaringly to be considered more deeply – and with the urgency they deserve.

Local authority stopping school transport for looked after children

A children's home manager contacted Help at Hand on behalf of two children in her care. The home was not in the local authority the children were from. The children were both disabled, had educational health care plans, and were attending a special school that was agreed between the authorities. However, neither child was going to school as funding for their transport to school was not agreed, after one local authority withdrew their funding.

Help at Hand made representations on behalf of the children to both local authorities requesting that situation be remedied immediately. This appeared to encourage local authorities to speak to each other and an agreement was found quickly, ensuring that the children could return to school.

Looked after child with EHCP placed out of area with no school place

George is a 12-year-old child in care who was placed far from home in a different local authority. His advocate contacted Help at Hand to ask for assistance as George had been out of school since the move and had an outdated Education Health and Care Plan. Help at Hand made inquiries, and it became apparent that the SEND team at the local authority where he was living (responsible for his education) were not communicating with his social care team or his carers. Help at Hand made multiple representations on behalf of George to his local SEND team and eventually his EHCP was updated, and a special school that could meet his needs was identified.

Feedback from cases helped with an education theme

The following quotes come from emails received by Help at Hand after helping cases in the last year.

- "I'm sure your support and encouragement has been instrumental in moving this situation along. Thanks so much." - *Advocate for a child in care with an EHCP out of school.*

- “Thank you so much for your support in getting this resolved. Yes, [name]’s place has been agreed and I am pleased that he will be attending a school which appears to be able to meet his needs.”
- *Virtual School Head for a looked after child placed out of area.*
- “This is great progress for both boys - thank you again for your help in getting the process moving, it's very much appreciated.” - *Placement manager for two looked after children with additional needs out of school.*

The following quotes come from written feedback and interviews conducted by the Children’s Commissioner’s office research team with people who had used Help at Hand.

- "After [Help at Hand] got involved I had very thorough minutes and actions and people I could hold accountable". After Help at Hand got involved, "the whole demeanour of the meetings changed, became more professional." [...] "everyone stood to attention, they knew they had to do what they were supposed to be doing. Because they come from the Children’s Commissioner’s office that makes them do their job. It was a lifeline." – *Parent of a disabled child.*

Policy and research on education

The Commissioner is committed to using her role to make sure every child’s right to education is protected. *The Big Ambition* survey results showed that children deeply value their education. They see the importance of going to school or college and understand that working hard now will help set them up for success in later life. The Children’s Commissioner has published several reports that take an in-depth look at the current barriers that exist for children accessing good education and the possible solutions for this. These include: *Children Missing Education: The Unrolled story*⁷ and *Waiting times for assessment and support for autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions*.⁸ The Commissioner will be doing further work on these issues in the upcoming year.

Voice

‘I want to talk to them before they make decisions about me. It’s not fair.’ – Antony, 14, a looked after child.

Context

A child's right to be heard is enshrined in much of the law and guidance relating to their care and education. However, we find at Help at Hand that on the ground, in children's real lives, they are still struggling to get their voices heard. This may be because they cannot access an advocate or that they are being prevented from using the complaints process – whatever the reason Help at Hand tries to put their voices at the centre of decision making.

Case examples on the theme of voice from September 2023 to August 2024

Access to complaints process

Katie's home manager contacted Help at Hand to express concern that Katie's complaints about her care were not being addressed by the local authority. Katie has had some difficult relationships with professionals, where she has felt very let down, and she wanted her home manager to act as her advocate. Help at Hand made inquiries to the local authority who then agreed to progress the complaint. Unfortunately, no progress was made, and it was apparent there was a funding issue relating to employing an independent investigator in accordance with stage 2 of the complaints procedure. Help at Hand made further representations and eventually the complaint was investigated and the findings shared with the child. Recommendations from the report are now being implemented by the local authority.

Access to advocacy – Unaccompanied Child Seeking Asylum care leaver

Abdi came to the UK as an unaccompanied child seeking asylum. He was looked after by a rural local authority in the west of the country but was placed, in accordance with his wishes, in London in supported accommodation. He did well there and had a college place and a football team. His support worker called Help at Hand because a couple of days after Abdi turned 18, he was told that he had to move to his parent local authority in three days. Help at Hand spoke to Abdi and made representations on his behalf. Help at Hand tried to make an advocacy referral for him and discovered there was no commissioned service for care leavers from his local authority. After our representations, reassurances were given that Abdi would have access to an advocate – but he was allocated to one. The Children's Commissioner escalated concerns and set out care leavers entitlements to advocacy and Abdi's case in particular to the Chief Executive of the council. After this an advocate was allocated and much of Abdi's formal complaint was upheld at stage 2. His asylum application has been granted and he has stayed in London.

Access to a non-instructed advocate

Youseff's family member contacted Help at Hand with concerns about his care. Youseff has severe autism, learning disabilities and is non-verbal. He is a child in care and was living in a children's home. Help at Hand made inquiries about Youseff's safety but also requested that he has access to an advocate that is specialised in assisting children who do not have capacity to instruct them. It took several attempts to get a reassurance that an advocate would be allocated.

Feedback from cases helped with the theme of voice

The following quotes come from emails received by Help at Hand after helping cases in the last year.

- "I would like to start off by thanking you for everything you've done for me and the countless times you have advised me. It has been a pleasure to work with you and you have been very helpful." - *Child, assisted by Help at Hand with getting accommodation.*
- "I would just like to say thank you for all your help and support in resolving this matter, there is no doubt that this outcome was only achieved because of your assistance so thank you once again." - *Advocate, relating to Help at Hand assistance in preventing a child being moved against their wishes.*
- "Thank you again for everything you did, you provided invaluable help and support to ensure [name] received appropriate accommodation and felt heard." - *Staff member from a Young Offender Institution.*

The following quotes come from written feedback and interviews conducted by the Children's Commissioner's office research team with people who had used Help at Hand.

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- “They do every single thing they can do to make sure that that young person feels heard and feels listened to and the young people appreciate it.” – *Professional*.
 - “For my daughter it gave her hope that something was going to change, take her seriously.” – *Parent of a disabled child*.
 - “One particular boy, he's out [of the secure setting] now. And he said that it was nice to know that someone else was pushing to make sure they got the right support.” – *Professional*.

Policy and research on the theme of voice

In December 2023 the Children’s Commissioner published *The State of Children and young people’s advocacy services in England*.⁹ This report draws on data from local authorities on what advocacy support they provide and from qualitative interviews from advocates. The Children’s Commissioner calls for independent advocacy for children on an opt-out basis for children in care and an opt-in basis for children in need.

Between April 2023 and November 2024, the Children’s Commissioner office was notified immediately when children’s homes received a provisional rating of inadequate by Ofsted, notifications have now ceased. Following notifications, the Help at Hand team requested that the local authority or local authorities responsible for the children living there confirm that the children have access to advocacy. The Help at Hand team wrote to the relevant local authorities with the aim of ensuring that the child’s right to independent advocacy was met at these crucial moments. The Help at Hand team had conversations with advocacy services that have supported children who were living in homes that received an inadequate Ofsted rating. From these conversations, it is clear that local authorities engage differently with their commissioned advocacy services to ensure that children in these situations are provided with advocacy support. It is hoped that this work will have formed a habit in local authorities immediately offering advocates whenever a child is in this situation.

Looking ahead

The number of children and young people receiving assistance from Help at Hand has been steady over the past 12 months and the team will continue to support as many children as possible - especially the most vulnerable children who are looked after, disabled, or living away from home for other reasons, including unaccompanied children seeking asylum.

Help at Hand is excited to be offering free training sessions to frontline professionals working with care leavers over the next few months. The training seeks to address issues for care leavers that come up repeatedly within the team's work for example, needing a guarantor to privately rent while at university.

Over the next year Help at Hand will continue to work closely with Children's Commissioner colleagues to ensure that the experiences of children are informing the policy work of the office. For example, we expect that Help at Hand expertise will be drawn on extensively for the Children's Commissioner's forthcoming report on unregistered children's homes.

Methodology

Quantitative

Help at Hand keeps track of and manages enquiries using a log system which collects relevant information such as age, gender, legal status of the child or young person, setting, reasons for contacting (presenting issues), risk rating, actions taken and outcomes, on a per enquiry basis. The analysis filters this set of data to the specified date range of 1st September 2023 to 31st August 2024.

Qualitative

A sample of individuals who had contacted Help at Hand in the same period (1st September 2023 to 31st August 2024) were contacted by the Children's Commissioner's office's research team. With the aim of ensuring that this review captured the experiences of a diverse group of children and young people with differing needs, samples were first drawn from the following five groups: care leavers, children in care, children in need but not in care (including those on child in need and child protection plans),

unaccompanied children seeking asylum, and children in the secure estate. The rest of the contact details were randomly drawn from enquires not already sampled.

Two professionals provided written feedback, and five people were interviewed by the research team by phone or video conference, all in the period October to November 2024. Of the five interviews, two were with young people, neither of whom were able to specifically distinguish their experience of dealing with Help at Hand from other services they had encountered. This was also the case for one advocate interviewed. The other two interviews were with one parent of a disabled child and one professional, both of whom were able to describe their Help at Hand experience.

Three of the four substantive contributions were entirely positive, with the other positive in tone (“I continue to recommend this service”) but noted a lack of feedback on the actions taken by the Help at Hand team after the professional shared their concerns. Two also discussed greater awareness of the service as a possible area for improvement. The written feedback and interview notes and transcripts are included in this report to illustrate the nature of the positive feedback provided by the four people.

References

- ¹ Children's Commissioner's Office. (2024). *Waiting times for assessment and support for autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/waiting-times-for-assessment-and-support-for-autism-adhd-and-other-neurodevelopmental-conditions/>
- ² Children's Commissioner's Office. (2024). *The state of children and young people's advocacy services in England*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/the-state-of-children-and-young-peoples-advocacy-services-in-england/>
- ³ Children's Commissioner's office (2024). *Children with complex needs who are deprived of liberty: Interviews with children to understand their experiences of being deprived of their liberty*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/children-with-complex-needs-who-are-deprived-of-liberty-interviews-with-children-to-understand-their-experiences-of-being-deprived-of-their-liberty/>
- ⁴ Children's Commissioner's office. (2024) *Children with complex needs who are deprived of liberty: Interviews with children to understand their experiences of being deprived of their liberty*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/children-with-complex-needs-who-are-deprived-of-liberty-interviews-with-children-to-understand-their-experiences-of-being-deprived-of-their-liberty/>
- ⁵ Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Vol 2: Care planning, placement and case review
- ⁶ Children's Commissioner's Office. (2024). *The Big Ambition: Research Report*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-ambition/>
- ⁷ Children's Commissioner's Office. (2024). *Children Missing Education: The Unrolled Story*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/children-missing-education-the-unrolled-story/>
- ⁸ Children's Commissioner's Office. (2024). *Waiting times for assessment and support for autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/waiting-times-for-assessment-and-support-for-autism-adhd-and-other-neurodevelopmental-conditions/>
- ⁹ Children's Commissioner's Office. (2024). *The state of children and young people's advocacy services in England*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/the-state-of-children-and-young-peoples-advocacy-services-in-england/>
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Help at Hand is the Children's Commissioner's advice and assistance service for children in care, children who have a social worker or are working with social services, children living away from home and care leavers.

Children, young people, or their advocates can get in touch with Help at Hand for free by phone, website or email.

0800 528 0731 (9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday)

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