

Stepping Stones Annual Report

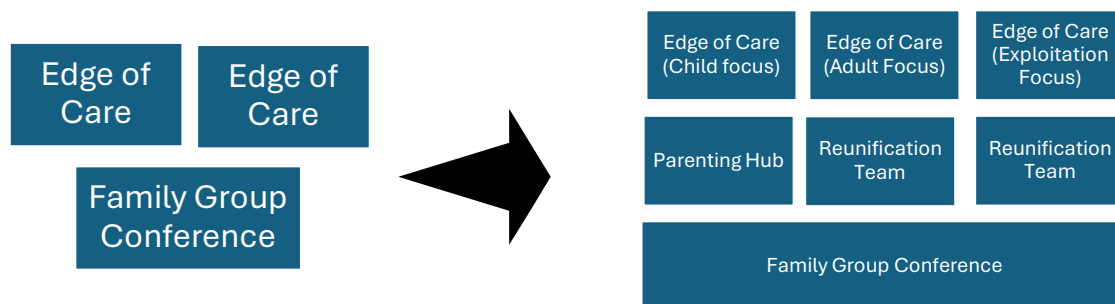
Title	Stepping Stones Annual Report
Purpose/scope	Stepping Stones Service (Year 4 of Programme) 2024-25
Subject key words	Stepping Stones, Children, Young People, Outreach, FGC (Family Group Conference), Step Down, Fostering, Residential, Therapeutic Approach, Multi-agency, Intensive Support, CLA (Children Looked After), PLO (Public law Outline)
Council Priority	Shropshire Plan – Breaking Generational Cycles; MTFS
Lead author & contact details	Maxine Ellis Service Manager, Stepping Stones, Children Looked After, UASC & Pathways and SEND
Date Established	July 2021
Date of Next Review	July 2026
Service Improvement & Efficiency Validation	
Legal Sign Off	N/A
Finance Sign Off	N/A
Approver and date	

Summary of Project Vision

The Stepping Stones Business case approved by council in 2019 set out a vision for a project which, would provide individualised, intensive, wrap around support to children and parents.

The Shropshire Plan 2022 – 2025 was the overarching strategic plan for the council and Stepping Stones aligned to it under Breaking Generational Cycles (Targeted Operating Model). The primary aim being that our intensive trauma informed approach not only with children and young people, but also with their parents / carers, addresses the impact of any adverse early experience, and will break cycles of abuse in families that lead to children and grandchildren in Shropshire becoming looked after.

A second Business Case was agreed by Council in August 2022. This allowed the upscale of Stepping Stones and to triple capacity to March 2025. A further business case to extend the upscale until March 2027, was agreed by Council in November 2024.



The primary aim of the upscale was to support the Council's Strategic Plan by continuing to deliver on cost avoidance of children and young people needing to become looked after, and with the additional capacity, give focus to reducing the number of children and young people currently in residential homes; reunifying them back home with their families or stepping them down into a foster home.

Progress

Phase 1 - Went Live on 12th July 2021, with the outreach team having been recruited and received initial training.

Phase 2 - Commenced in July 2022, with a focus on the development of the residential hub to sit within Stepping Stones, aimed at offering young people a short-term placement solution, whilst therapeutic and outreach work is carried out with the young person and their family to allow them to return home or move to a foster family.

Phase 3 - Recruitment to upscale of the original structure achieved by March 2023. Growth to the residential hub, with a new children's home Pebble House opening in May 2024.

Phase 4 - Embed Pebble House into the Stepping Stones hub, with a specific focus on children under the age of 12 years old. Approval of business case in November 2024 to extend the upscale capacity of Stepping Stones for a further 2 years, to March 2027.

The publication of the Ofsted focused visit in July 2024, highlighted the positive impact Stepping Stones was having within the wider Children's Services and they noted how embedded the process is compared to their previous visit.

Stepping Stones Benefits

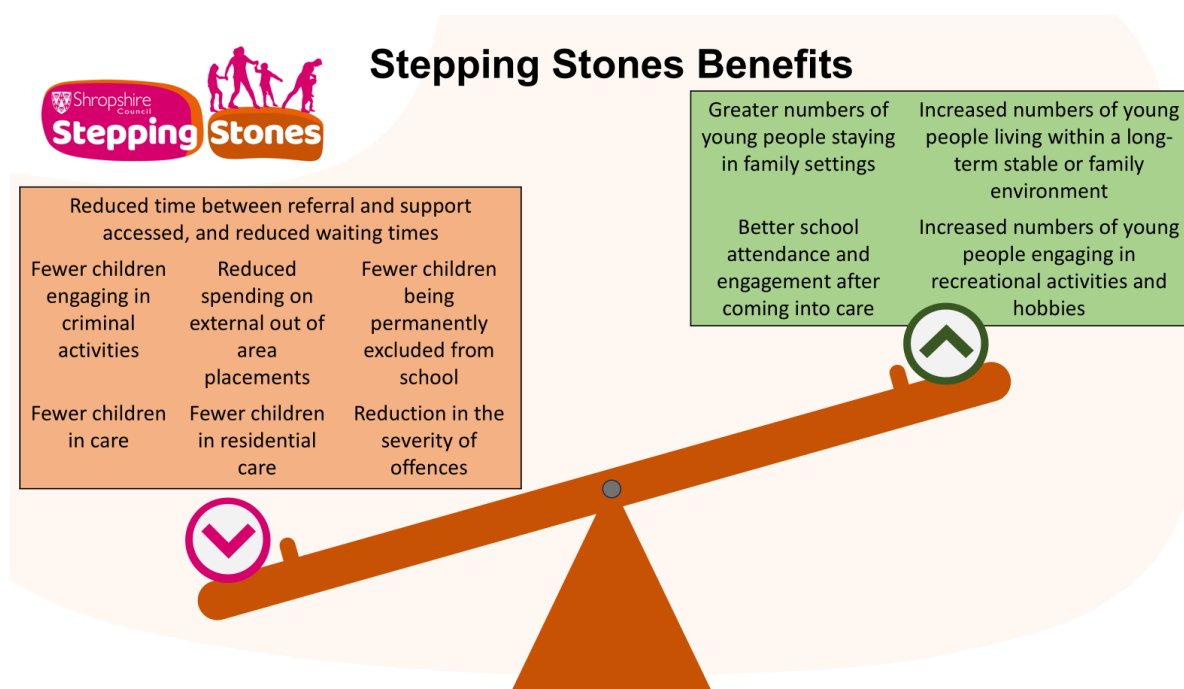


Figure 1. Stepping Stones benefits slide

Finance

- Stepping Stones achieved an in-year combined saving and avoidance of **£10.1m**, reflecting 84 children and young people being diverted from becoming looked after, 8 children avoiding a higher cost placement, and 55 children stepping down from residential homes to foster homes, reunified with birth or connected family or moving on to independence.
- Two of the step downs claimed in 2024-25 occurred in March 2024 and were claimed for the last weeks of 2023-24 as well as the 2024-25 FY.

Placement Vacated (Step Downs)	No. Of Children FY23/24	No. Of Children FY24/25
External Fostering	4 (£0.140m)	14 (£0.332m)
External Residential	14 (£1.308m)	20 (+2 claimed in March 24 who contributed to savings total) (£2.307m)

Internal Residential	3 (£0)	0
Internal Fostering	18 (£0.103m)	18 (£0.154m)
Supported Accommodation	0	1 (£0.396m)

- In 2024-25 Stepping Stones achieved a cost savings of **£3.189m** which surpassed the Year 4 target of **£3.1m** by **£89,728**

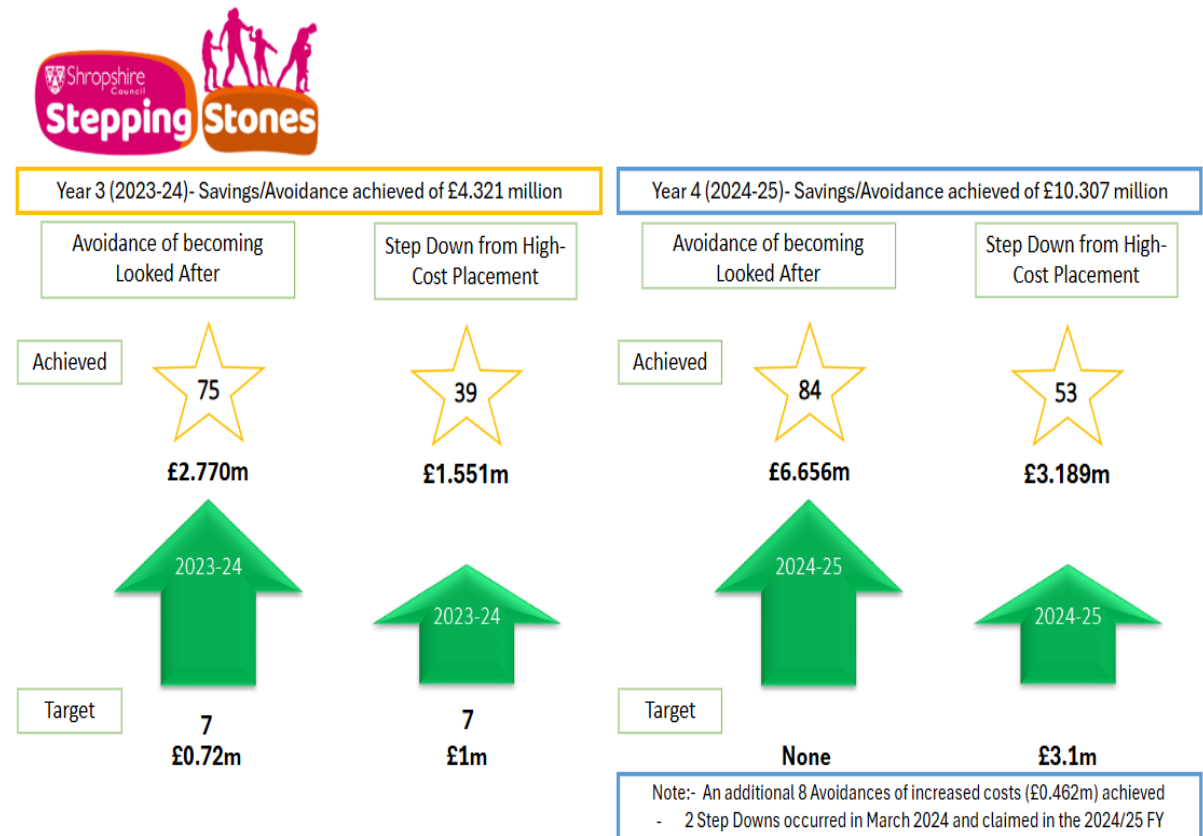


Figure 2. Target vs Achieved in 2023-4 & 2024-5

- In 2024-25, as can be seen for the charts below the step down placement types changed, to that of 2023-24. This is shown in Figure 3. There was an increase in step downs from Residential to Supported Accommodation. The number of step downs to foster care also increased from two to three.

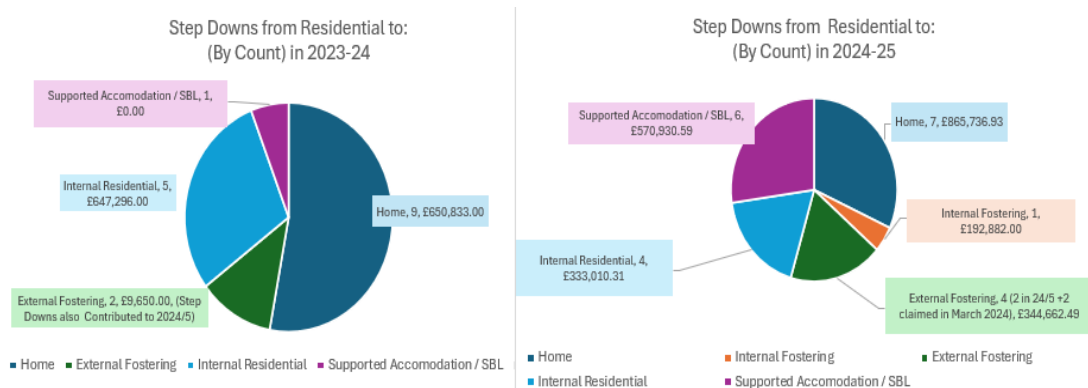


Figure 3. Step Down from Residential to Placement Type in 23/24 & 24/25

- The increase in the achieved cost avoidances from £2.770m to £6.656m (and an additional £0.462m from Avoidance of Increased Costs) between 2023-24 and 2024-25 was a result of more residential placements being avoided

Placements Avoided (Including Avoidance of Increase Costs)	No. Of Children FY23/24	No. Of Children FY24/25
Residential	19 (£1.646m)	30 (£5.371m)
Fostering	50 (£0.886m)	54 (£1.376m)
Parent and Child Residential	5 (£0.202m)	7 (£0.342m)
Supported Accommodation	1 (£0.037m)	1 (£0.028m)
Total	£2.770m	£6.656m

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Figure 4 shows when step downs and cost avoidances occurred in the 2024-25 financial year. The savings target at the end of each month is the orange bar. This visual shows that Stepping Stones surpassed the target and increased the savings the most in July to October.

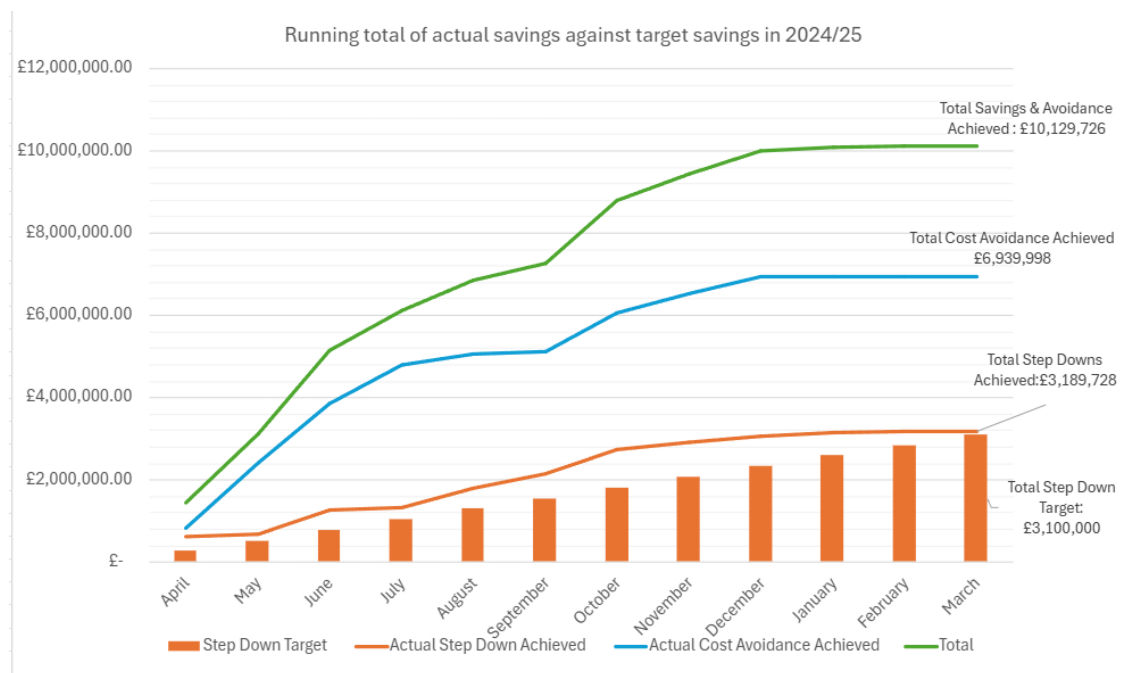


Figure 4. Running total of savings & avoidance each month

In 2024-25, Stepping Stones increased the savings they achieved compared to 2023-24 by 1.6 million. Figure 5 shows a month-by-month comparison of the 2 years. The increase in savings indicates that the step-down process has become more embedded and as resulted in a greater focus.

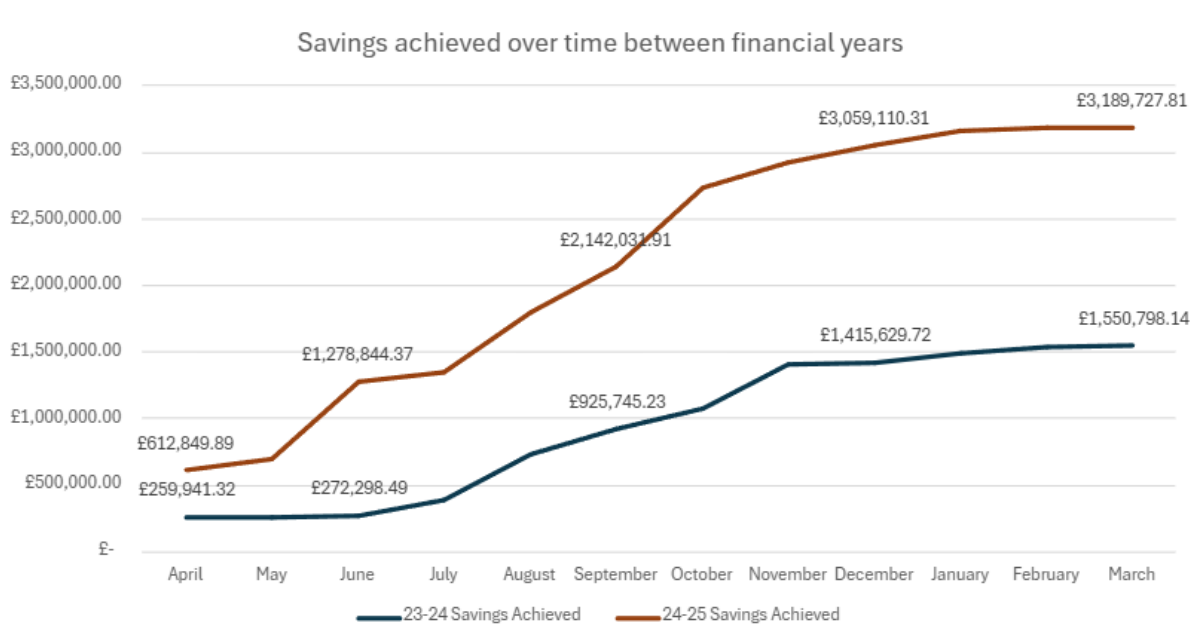


Figure 5. Savings each month in 2023-4 and 2024-5

Staffing

The upscaled service structure consists of six teams with six Senior Practitioners, who directly managed up to five Outreach Workers. The Family Group Conferencing Team and Outreach

teams were line managed by the Operations Manager, who intern was managed by the Service Manager. Due to the unsuccessful recruitment to the Speech and Language posts and the Clinical Psychologist post, a picture that continued to be reflected nationally; these posts are to be redesignated in the scale down of the service, which will allow opportunity to identify the posts that will best meet service needs. The Education Phycologist post was recruited to and reported to the Operations Manager.

In May 2024, there was a change in structure, and a Team Manager position was created providing an acting up position within the service. This post replaced the Operations Manager, who acted up to the Service Manager position.

Between 01/04/24 – 31/03/25, staff retention declined significantly. The service went from twenty-five outreach workers to fourteen, six family group conference co-ordinators to four, and six senior practitioners to four. The reduction in staff related to factors such as maternity leave, sickness; and workers leaving the service for more secure work as the end of the fixed term contracts drew nearer. Recruitment to vacant posts was paused due to all fixed term contracts within the upscale model being due to expire in March 2025, the first to expire was to be November 2024. Recruitment and training of new staff would not have been feasible due to the limited time left on contracts.

In September the educational psychologist capacity was increased from four days a week to five and this post became covered by two psychologists as a full-time equivalent post. This reflected the increase in demand for the service and the addition of Pebble House to the residential hub. In November 2024, there was approval to extend the upscale capacity of Stepping Stones for a further 2 years, to March 2027. Recruitment commenced immediately, and the first of the recruits started in March 2025.

Performance Data

Outreach Achievement 2024-25

Activity data from 01/04/23 - 31/03/24 compared to 01/04/24 – 31/03/25 shows that:

2023/24

495 children received Initial Consultations

469 children received an intervention

2024/25

492 children received Initial Consultations

485 children received an intervention

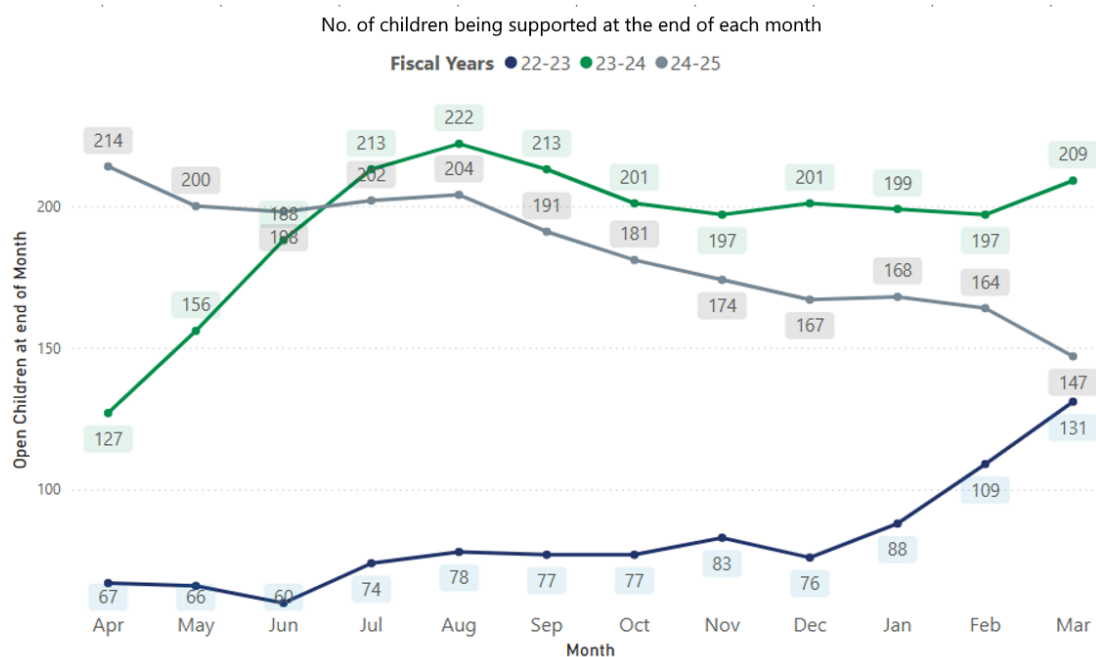


Figure 6. Children being supported each month in the last 3 years

Figure 6 shows the number of children Stepping Stones were working with at the end of each month and how this decreased in 2024-25. It fell 17% from December 2023 to December 2024. The highest number of children open at once during 2024/25 was 214 at the start of the FY. By the end of 2024/25 147 children were open to the project and receiving an intervention compared to 209 in the previous year. *This* decrease was due to (reduced staffing and a pause in recruitment due to the Council's financial position).

Legal Status

The ratio of male to female open to Stepping Stones in 2024-25 was 11:9 which is the same as 2023-24. However, the legal status of children when they started working with Stepping Stones changed as shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8. In 2023-24 the most common status was Child Protection (35%) but in 2024-25 Children Looked After was the most common status (38%). This change in referral for consultations may be linked in efforts to focus progressing children's care plans and work to step them out of care, reducing the number of children in residential placements and returning them home where it was safe to do so. Children subject to Child Protection Plans decreased by 28%, while Children Looked After plans increased by 7%.

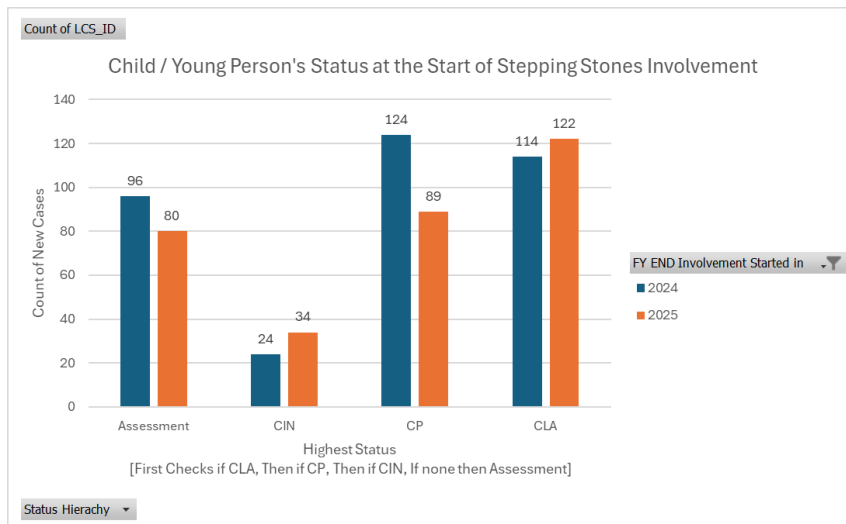


Figure 7. Status when involvement started

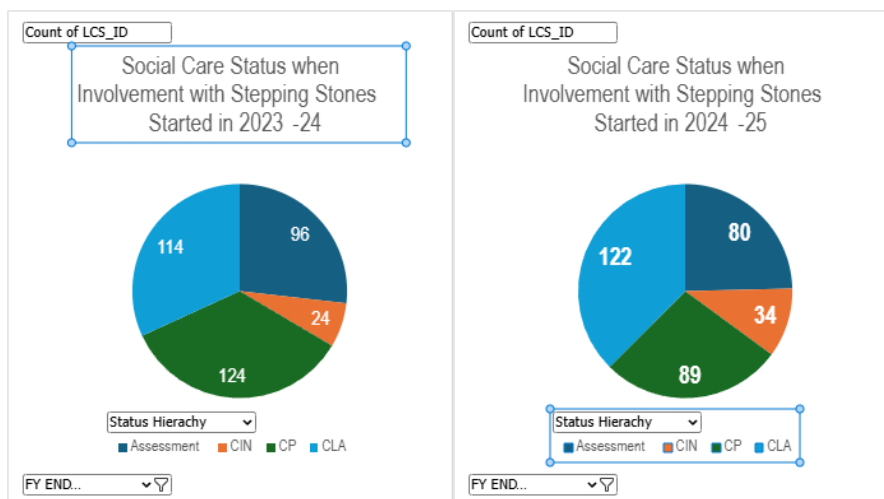


Figure 8. Pie charts of status when involvement started

These charts show the status of children and young people when their Stepping Stones intervention began, they only include children whose involvement started in the year. Children were categorised using a hierarchy. Firstly, if they had a CLA status, then CP and finally CIN. If they had none of these statuses when our intervention began, they were classed as 'Assessment,' to indicate that an assessment was being undertaken to determine their care plan going forward. The assessment grouping also includes the children who were working with Stepping Stones during a trial with Early Help to reduce the number of categories.

Allocated Teams

Assessment Team North remained the team who were supporting the most children when they started working with Stepping Stones: 68 in 23/24 and 50 in 24/25. Case Management Team Central North had the largest increase of children they were supporting at the start of Stepping Stone's involvement from 15 to 39 (160% increase). However, this is contradicted by Case Management Team Northwest decreasing from 36 to 13. To make comparisons

easier, teams into categories like Case Management, CLA Permanency, and Assessment Teams in Figure 10. This shows that the proportion of children being supported in the Disabled Children's Team & CLA Permanency decreased by the largest percentage when compared to the previous year while Case Management teams increased their percentage of new involvements.

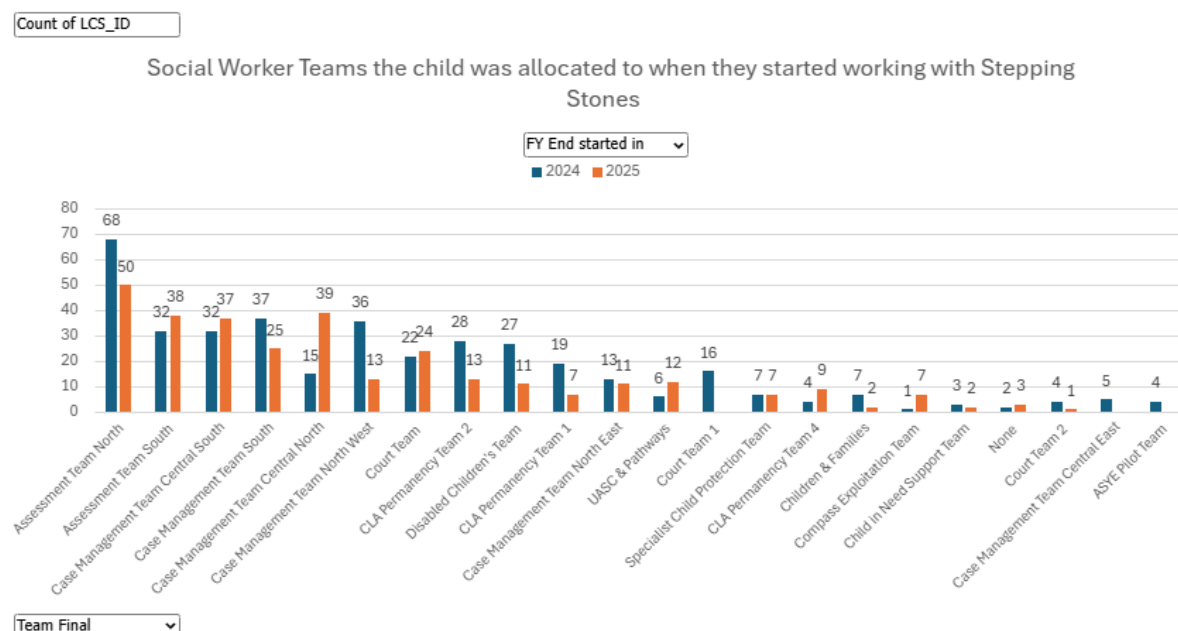


Figure 9. Allocated SW Team when Stepping Stones involvement started

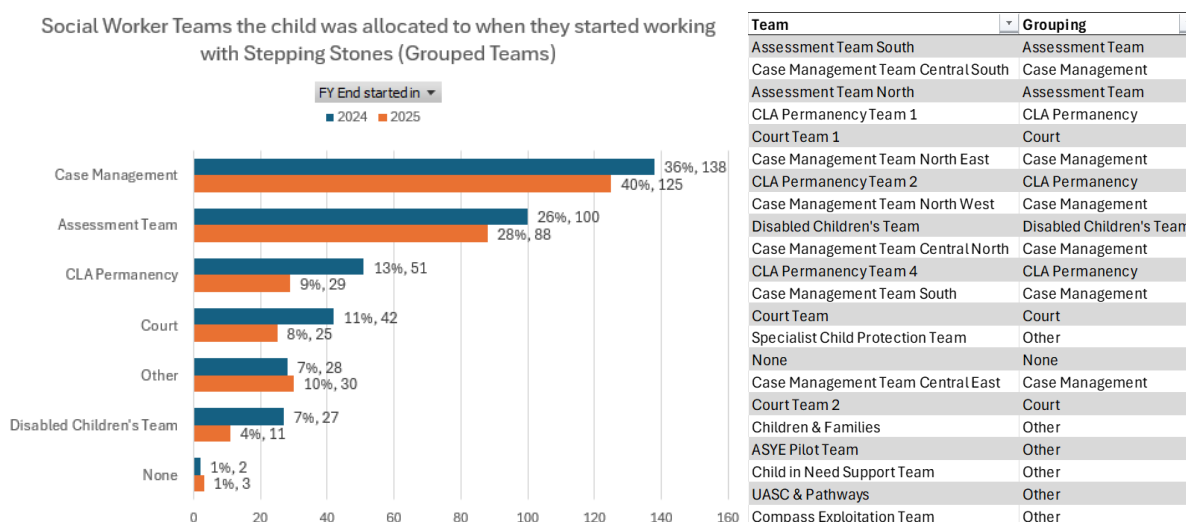


Figure 10. Allocated SW Team (Grouped) when Stepping Stones involvement started

Age of Children

There hasn't been a notable change in the distribution of ages that Stepping Stones was working with from 2023-24 to 2024-25 as shown in Figure 11. The average age of children working with Stepping Stones in 2023-24 was 8.76 and 8.73 in 2024-25.

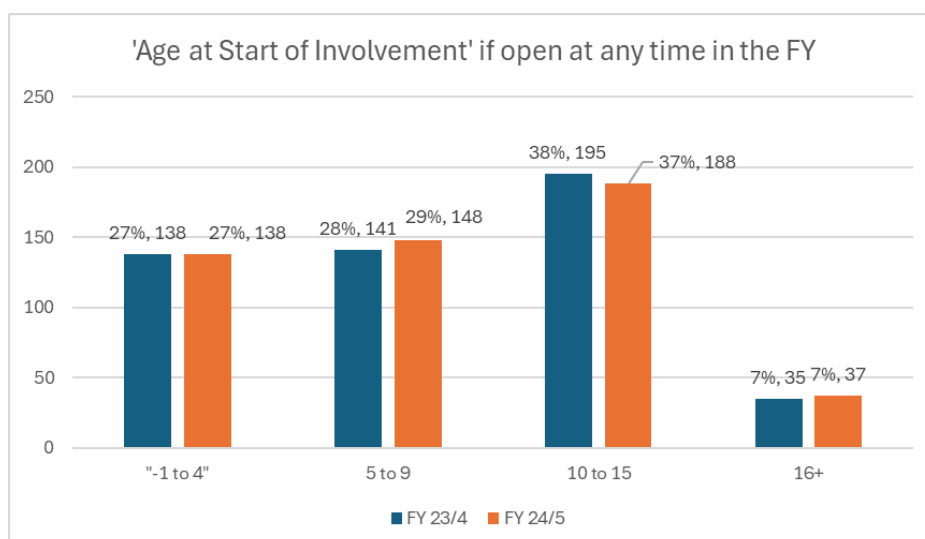


Figure 11. Age at the start of the involvement

Stepping Stones Forms

Forms	Forms Created in 2023/24	Forms Created in 2024/25
Initial Consultations	396	375
Review Consultations	312	360
Step Down Meetings	160	497
Evaluation Meetings	47	59
Closure Record	196	259
Group Supervisions	853	914
Adult Soft Measures	486	560
Child Soft Measures	337	467

The planned outcome 'Edge of Care' was the most frequently requested intervention status at the initial consultation which is the same as the previous financial year. 'Reunification Home' increased from 16% to 28%

Initial Consultations Planned Outcomes	2023/24	2024/25
Edge of Care	339 (65.32%)	307 (60.08%)
Reunification Home	83 (15.99%)	146 (28.57%)
Avoid Step up to Residential	53 (10.21%)	35 (6.85%)
Step Down to Foster Care	32 (6.17%)	13 (2.54%)
Transition to Independence / Supported Lodging	12 (2.31%)	10 (1.96%)

For Children that closed in 2024/25 without a cost save or cost avoidance form: 'Outcomes not achieved' were recorded as: 'non-engagement' was the highest selected reason with 32 forms compared to 29 forms for 'Outcomes not achieved due to risks escalating'. Non-engagement was the highest reason in 2023/24 also. However, in both financial years

'Other' was the most common selection and many of the free text answers are about the plan or situation for the child changing.

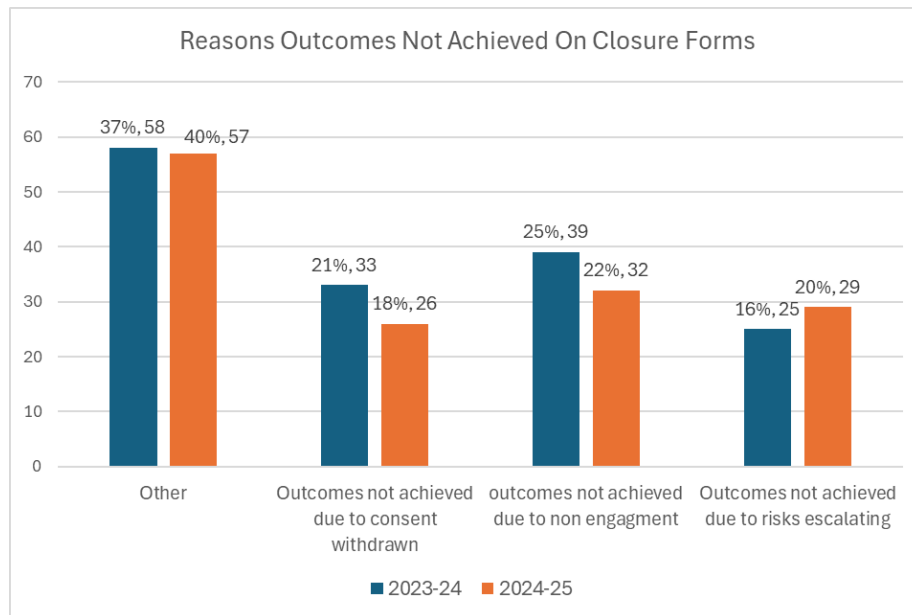


Figure 12. Reason Outcome Not Achieved on Closure Records

Involvement Length

Figure 13 and the table below show that the average length of involvements in 2024-25 increased from 2023-24's average to a length closer to 2022-23's figure. This could be an impact of increased case loads and a reduction in the intensity/frequency of visits.

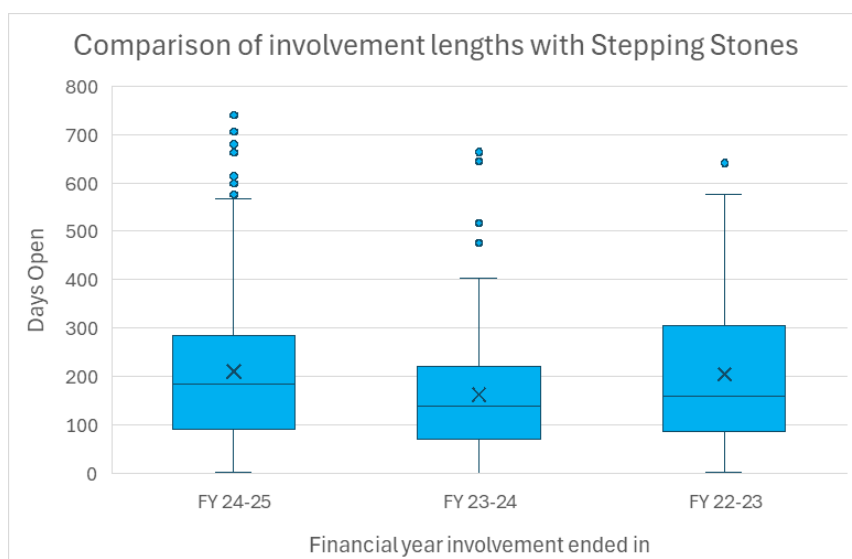


Figure 13. Stepping Stones involvement duration if ended in FY

Financial year	Mean Duration of cases ending in FY	Mean duration of cases ending in FY (Limiting Range to 5%-95%)
2022/23	204 Days	193 Days
2023/24	162 Days	154 Days
2024/25	210 Days	197 Days

Soft Key Performance Indicators Chosen on Initial Consultation Forms and Closure Records

When completing Initial Consultation, Group Supervision, and Closure forms on LCS, the Senior Practitioners select Soft KPIs/focues to indicate what type of work they aim to complete with the family. There are separate lists for child, adult and parent focues. The tables below show how many times each focus was selected on initial consultation forms and closure records made in FY2024-25.

Child Focuses	Accepted Initial Consultations	Closure Records
Wishes and feelings	195	261
Explore lived experience	186	247
Bespoke work with the child to support them	156	209

Relationship rebuilding within the family	125	162
Increasing sense of identity	73	104
Support with Education / NEET / possible exclusions	41	59
Reducing violence to peers and family	40	60
Exploitation (criminal/sexual)	27	34
Mental Health Support	14	29
Self-harm behaviours	13	15
Reduced missing episodes	8	15
Substance Misuse Support	7	13
Preparing for Independence	7	18
Improved health conditions	5	6
Adult Focuses	Accepted Initial Consultations	Closure Records
Explore lived experience	222	310
Increasing sense of identity	122	146
Domestic abuse support / perpetrator work	106	166
Mental Health Support	52	101
Life skills and budgeting (skills to manage a home)	49	79
Substance Misuse Support	42	61
Housing Support	41	61
Community support / increase network	34	62
Support with understanding positive risk taking	10	25
Employment / career opportunities (signpost to services)	9	9
Adults Service Support	5	26
Support if a learning disability is a barrier	3	10
Reduce criminality	3	0
Parent Focuses	Accepted Initial Consultations	Closure Records
Confidence building with parenting	228	302
Increase understanding of impact of adult behaviours on child.	228	297
Relationship rebuilding within the family	152	196
Safety planning	110	111
Accessing the community as a family	56	74
Reduction in child harming a parent	55	61

The rankings for focuses are similar between initial consultations and closure records. Lived experience was one of the most common categories for both child and adult focuses and confidence building was the most common parenting focus selected. Preparing for independence and adult service support were more likely to have been selected on closure records than identified at initial consultations, this could mean that these needs are only

being identified once work has started or that newer cases are less likely to need this type of support. Alternatively, an increase in key performance indicators at closure, are due to new areas of intervention being identified at 12 weekly points when soft measures are revisited. This is a tool for children, young people, parents and carers to identify areas that they would like support in.

Operational Delivery

Outreach

As can be seen from the data within this report, whilst there were twenty-one less referrals accepted, the increase in service provision across all areas was significantly increased and this was at a time where there were considerably less staff to undertake the work. This was accomplished due to the strong infrastructure of Stepping Stones which has been developed over the years and the practice that has been embedded. Regular Performance meetings ensured close management oversight. Power BI has further been developed ensuring closer monitoring of group supervisions resulting in increased consistency, an increase in the number of soft measures being completed improving in the focus of intervention, monitoring of supervisions taking place initially within 2 weeks and 6 weekly thereafter.

During the summer there was an increase in crisis support needed within the wider children's service. Balancing planned therapeutic interventions for Stepping Stones children and families, alongside crisis support for non-Stepping Stones families was challenging, but necessary for children and families on the edge of care who required crisis support. Whilst successful for a very short period, it evidenced that this support which sits outside of the scope of Stepping Stones, could not be sustained within current resources.

At the same time service development projects continued and an example of this is the pilot between Stepping Stones and Early Help, to reduce the escalation for statutory intervention by combining service expertise, providing earlier intervention of Stepping Stones therapeutic approach at an earlier stage and Early Help targeted practical support. The outcome of this work will be reviewed next year.

Multi-Agency Working

A social work feedback survey was undertaken and although the overall response rate was extremely poor, the feedback received was helpful as it resulted in a meeting with Post Adoption Support and Compass to look at how Stepping Stones support adoption breakdown.

The Stepping Stones Forum where social workers present families facing barriers to accessing services, remains well supported by our multiagency partners. Services collaborating include educational colleagues from the Virtual School, Housing colleagues, Shropshire Domestic Abuse Service, We Are with You, Adult Mental Health, the Looked After Children's Health Nurses and Probation. Housing continues to be the most requested service, followed by request for support from education

Residential Hub

Stepping Stones continues to work closely with Pebble House and Chelmaren, internal residential homes, to step children down from residential care.

Our Educational Psychologist base themselves at each of the homes for 1 day per fortnight and work with the Registered Managers, providing group supervision, training to the team and undertaking child lead sessions with the children and young people in the home.

An internal weekly tracking meeting between the respective Service Manager's, the Residential Quality and Development Lead and Stepping Stones's Team Manager; to monitor the intervention of both services and trajectory when children will move on to minimise the length of bed vacancies.

Fostering

Work as continued with the fostering service to try and increase the number of approved specialists foster carers and ensure that the right support is offered to those recruited. Stepping Stones is represented on the Fostering Transformation Board.

TACT Fostering were approached to work in partnership identifying carers for children awaiting step down to foster care. They are a small independent fostering agency with currently one foster carer in Shropshire so were keen to work together. They attempted to recruit carers in the surrounding areas close to Shropshire border but were unsuccessful. They continue to maintain links with Stepping Stones and keep us in their scope. The aim of the work with independent fostering agencies is to increase the number of children able to move to loving foster homes.

Family Group Coordinators

The Family Group Conferencing team (FGC) works with families primarily whose children are subject to Public Law Outline to divert them away from costly care proceedings or assisting families to formalise their support networks to safeguard children and identify alternative carers. Their work is focused on bringing families and their friendship network together, to formalise safety plans, minimising risks to children and reducing reliance on statutory services.

Throughout FY24/25, there were staffing challenges within the FGC service. There were four workers in post, but due to sickness only three workers available to facilitate family group conferences and meetings. The data below evidences how impressive that team has performed.

Family Group Conference (FGC)

Referrals

The chart below shows that the number of FGC referrals have stayed at a similar level to the previous year with 295 children referred at least once in 2024-25 and 291 referred in 2023-24.

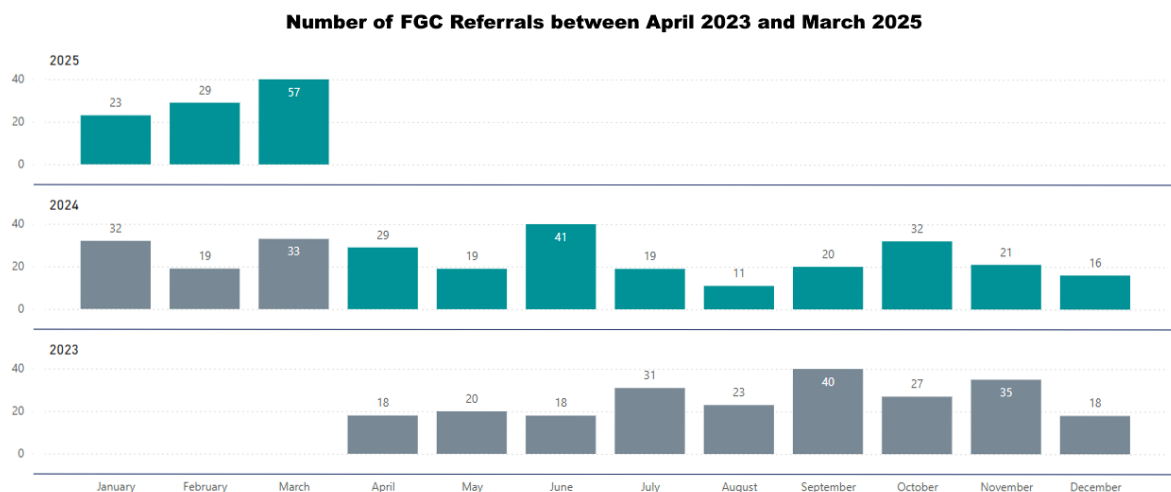


Figure 14. FGC Referrals each month

In 2023-24 and 2024-25, Case Management Teams submitted the most FGC Referral. When looking at teams individually, Assessment Team North submitted the most referrals in both years.

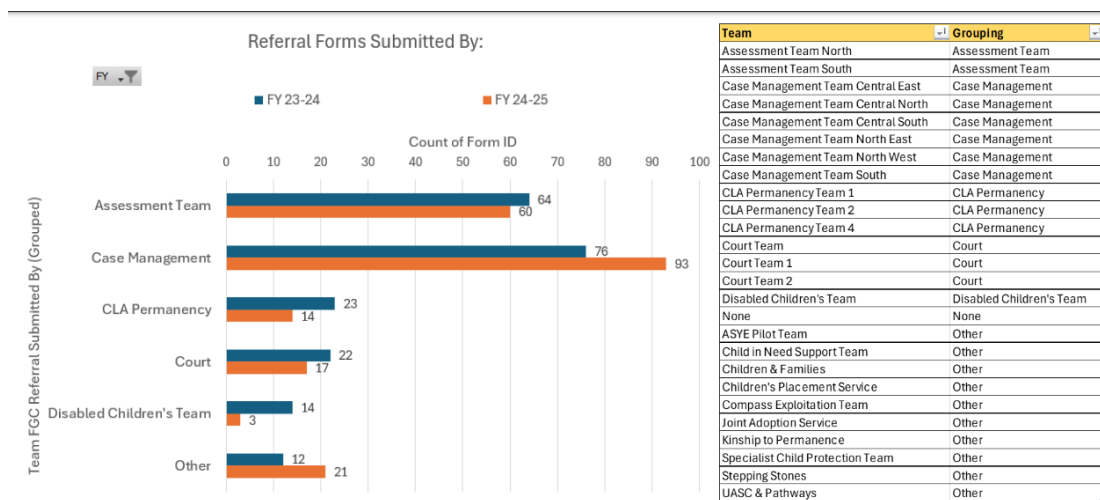


Figure 15. Allocated SW who submitted the referral

For referrals that went on to open an FGC workspace the most common status for a child when they were referred was CPP (Child Protection Plan). When compared to 2023-24, the number of children who were CIN decreased by 42% in 2024-25. The number of children who were Children Looked After increased by 28%.

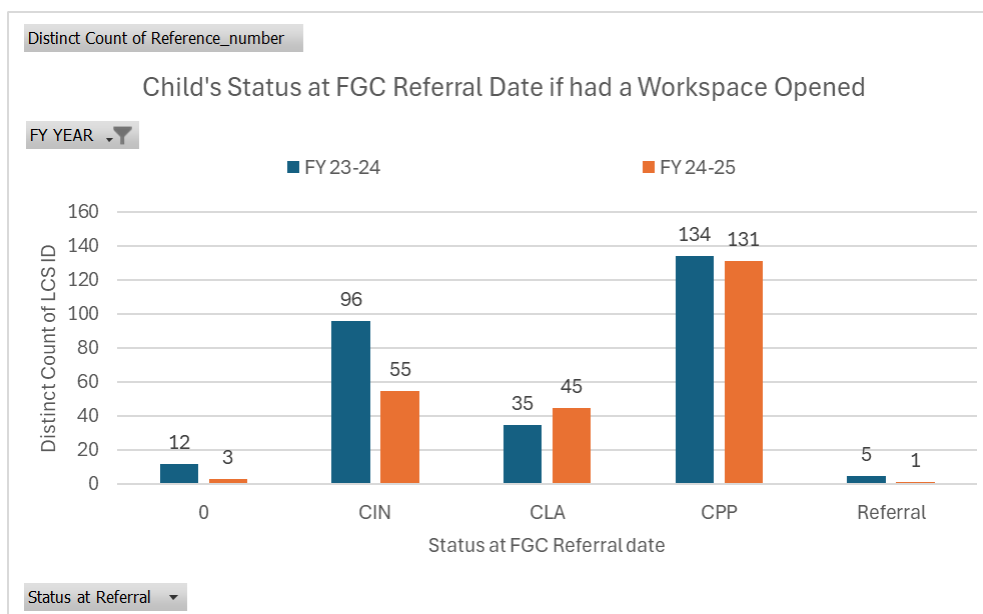


Figure 16. Status when FGC Workspaces opened

FGC Meetings

The types of meetings completed by the FGC team are FGC Conferences and Family meetings, these are different because the FGC Conference is initially facilitated by the coordinator and family are then given time to remain in the room alone to draft their own plan. Family meetings are led by the coordinator, and the plans are drafted together. Both types of meetings start with an initial meeting where the plans are devised and then a review meeting follows a few months later where the plan is reviewed for its effectiveness. The table below Figure 17 shows that while the total number of meetings decreased, they did not decrease significantly, given the challenges with the reduction of FGC coordinators undertaking them. The largest decrease was from initial FGC Conference, which by virtue of the model of the meetings require a more structured approach and specific planning.

	FGC		Family Meeting		Total
Financial year	Initial	Review	Initial	Review	
FY 22/23	53	62	82	65	262
FY 23/24	117	57	62	64	300
FY 24/25	65	46	75	85	271

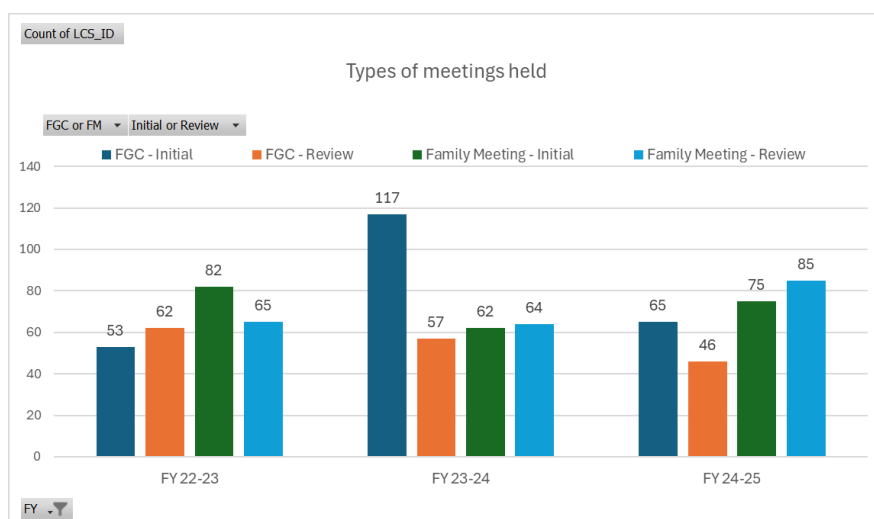


Figure 17. Number of FGC Meetings held each year

Impact of the Upscale on Children Looked After (CLA)

The upscale of Stepping Stones came into effect in the 2023-24 financial year. It is important to monitor how this upscale has impacted CLA statistics. Figure 18 shows whether a child was working with Stepping Stones when they became CLA. This percentage increased from 13% to 23% between FY22-23 and FY 23-24. It increased slightly in FY 24-25 to 25%.

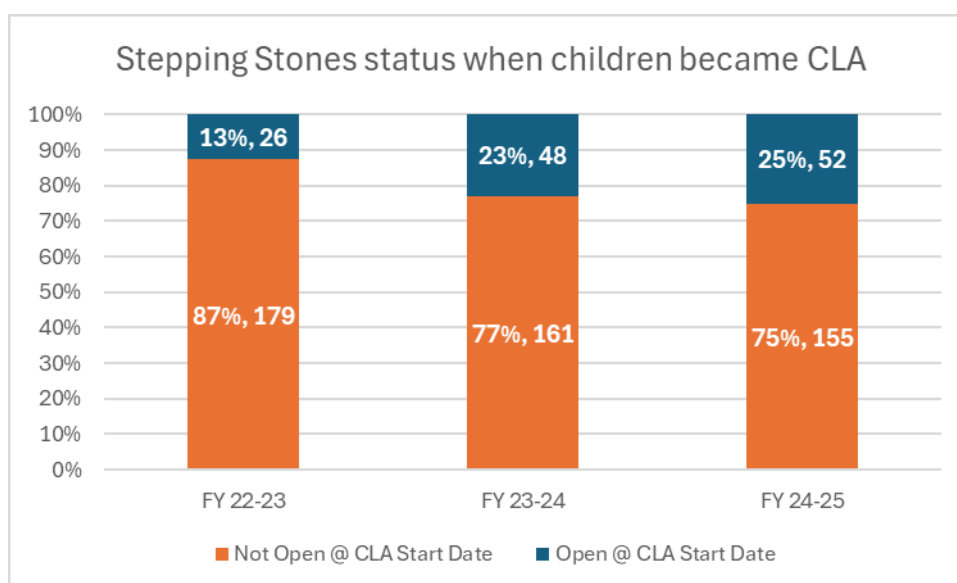


Figure 18. Percentage working with Stepping Stones if they became CLA

Stepping Stones is increasingly contributing to children ceasing to be CLA or transitioning to a 'P1 – Placed with Parents' placement. Over the past three financial years, Stepping Stones has been involved transitioning children throughout their placement move. In FY 22-23 17% of children (16) who ceased being CLA or moved to a P1 placement were working with Stepping Stones at the time. However, in FY 24-25, this has increased to 42% (45 children) demonstrating that more children can be stepped down safely with the wrap around service that Stepping Stones provides. These statistics from Figure 19 excludes young people who ceased being CLA within 1 month of their 18th birthday.

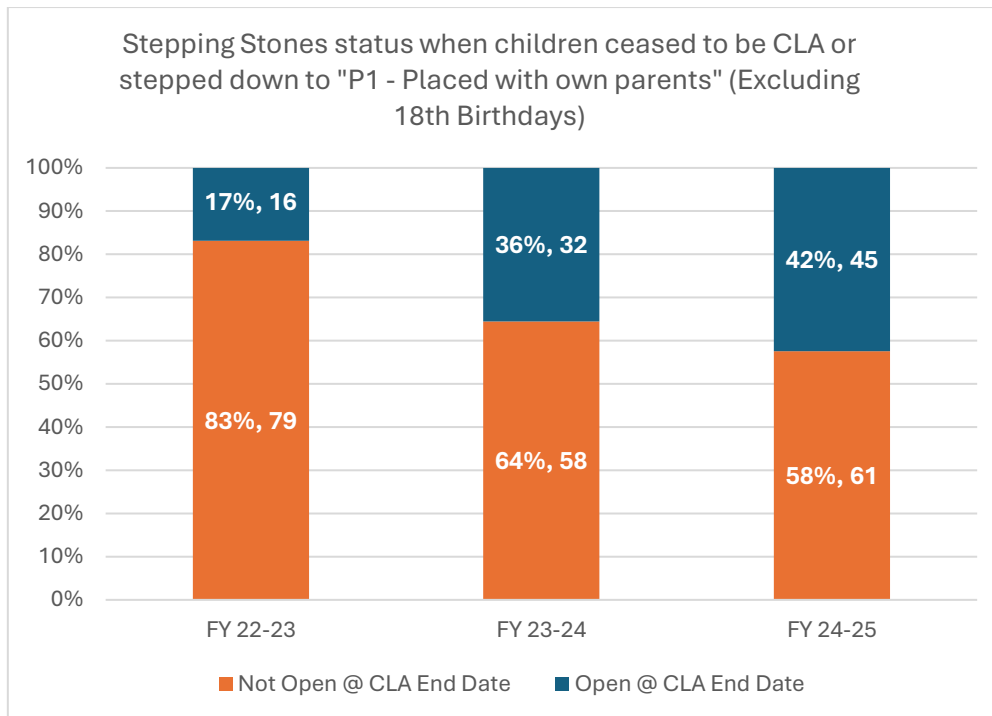


Figure 19. Percentage working with Stepping Stones when they ceased being CLA or moved to 'Placed with own parents'

Figure 20 shows how long children continued to be looked after when they ceased being CLA or moved to a P1 placement before their 18th birthday, by financial year without looking at if they were working with Stepping Stones. It shows that step downs in FY 24-25 were most common for children who were looked after for less than a year while FY 23-24 showed a larger amount of step downs for the 2-4 year period.

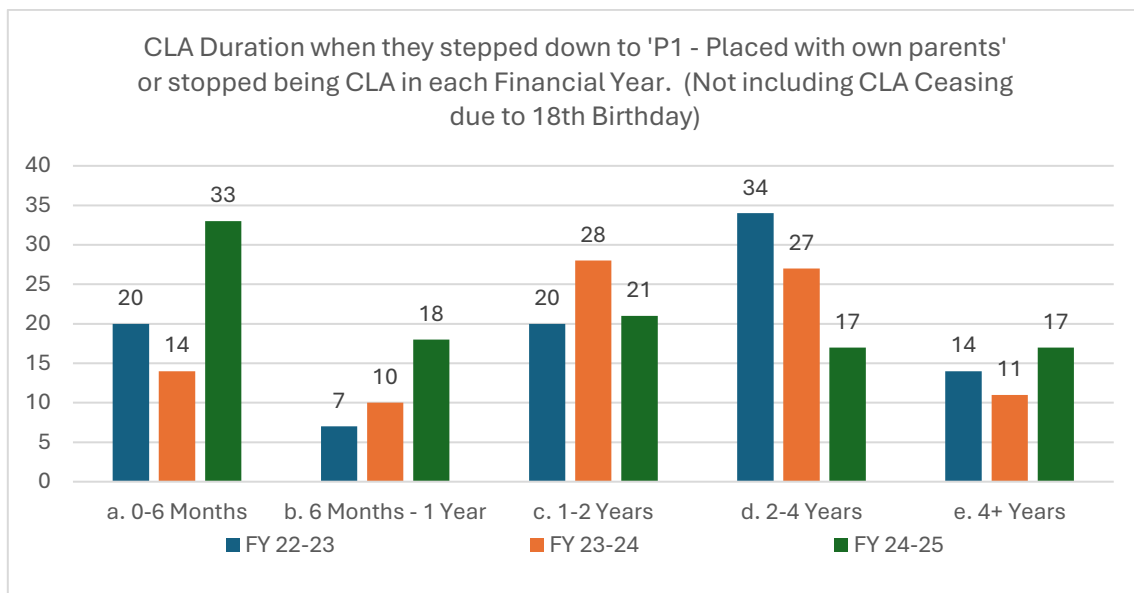


Figure 20. Number of children who ceased being CLA or moved to 'Placed with own parents' each year

Figure 21 focuses on FY 24-25 and looks at whether they were open to Stepping Stones when they stepped down. This visual shows that children are more likely to be involved in

step downs from being looked after when the child had been looked after for less than 6 months or over 4 years, compared to if the child had been CLA for 1-4 years.

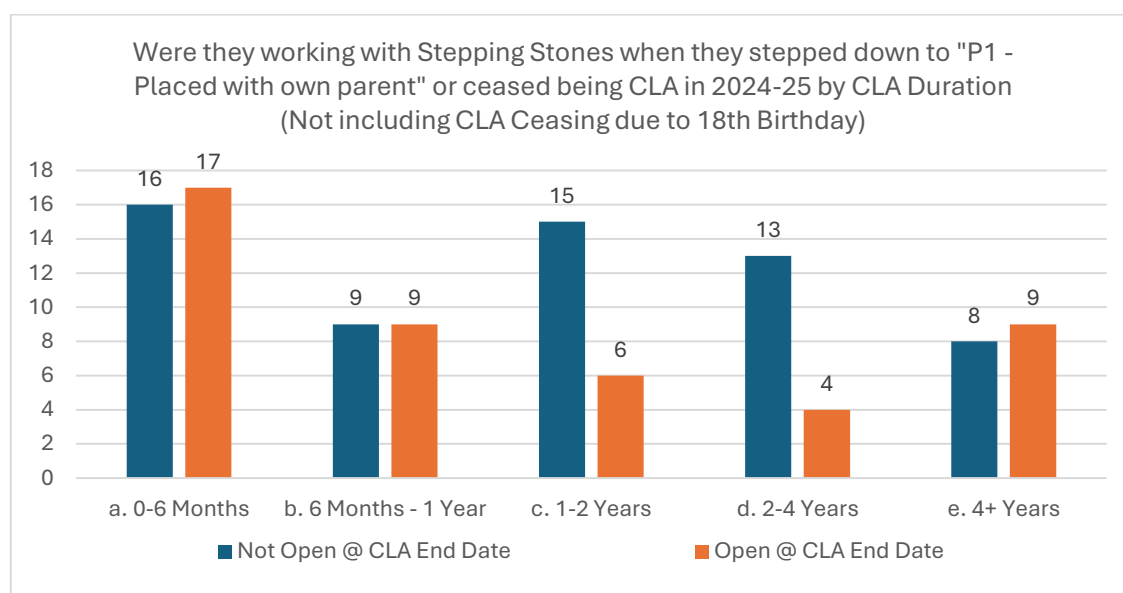


Figure 21. CLA Duration if they ceased being CLA or moved to 'Placed with own parents' in 2024-25

Since Stepping Stones began in April 2021, 242 Target Achievement Forms have been created indicating an avoidance of 242 children becoming looked after. Only 17 children became looked after following their forms being submitted as of the 31st March 2025. The table below shows which year 'Avoidance Closure Forms' were from if they stepped up later and how long it was from avoidance form to step up. The average days to step up decreases as time passes. Therefore, we do not have the complete picture because some children who were open to stepping Stones in FY21-22, only became looked after in 2024

FY of Avoidance	Number of Children	Average Days from Avoidance Form to CLA start
2021-22	4 (4 Families)	686.5 Days
2022-23	5 (1 Family)	319 Days
2023-24	6 (3 Families)	136.8 Days
2024-25	2 (1 Family)	133 Days

PLO

2023/24

130 Children commenced PLO

39 (30%) had been involved with Stepping Stones before entering PLO (open for any time before PLO started)

24 (18%) opened to Stepping Stones for the first time while they were in PLO

2024/25

148 Children started PLO

43 (29%) had been involved with Stepping Stones before entering PLO

12 (8%) opened to Stepping Stones for the first time while they were in PLO

Feedback

Compliment for Outreach Worker AL from a Parent

M said that she had found the work with Stepping Stones is going really well. J finds AL really easy to talk to. AL consistently visits J at school, always reliable and have never let him down, this has been so important to J as he has experienced this before. When asked has the situation at home improved during the time working with Stepping Stones, M replied "definitely". AL has worked with parents and shared strategies that they are using daily.

Compliment for Outreach Worker NJ from a Parent

M's first words were, "Brilliant, just brilliant", adding that, "I really feel that without NJ, I couldn't have got through this, and be where I am now. M shared that, "NJ's advice, support and constant presence, both in person, and when I needed it on the phone, has been the best thing ever, for me and the boys". M said that she, "will be forever grateful that such an amazing person has been with me and the boys, throughout our journey and I can honestly say that my confidence with parenting differently is as high as it's ever been".

NJ was described as, "patient, calm, knew so much, and made me believe in myself as a mum, and I now do feel I am doing all I can to be the best mum. NJ has helped make us a family again - and that won't be forgotten"

Compliment Passed on by a Social Worker for FGC Co-ordinator LM from a Parent

They (parents) cannot thank you enough for the FGC, it has had life changing positive impacts for them both. P's family have fully accepted R into the family now, they hug and embrace him, and they are also allowing S to visit them at their home. The FGC allowed their families to finally come together and connect.

Compliment for FGC Co-ordinator TH from a Parent

TH was helpful and a pleasure to work with, she listened to the boys in detail of their views and opinions about what they wanted both in the plan and their future going forward. She was very accommodating to them with plenty of biscuits and drinks. The experience overall was very pleasant, helpful and enlightening.

Next Steps

Phase 5 – Business case submitted in January 2025, for the expansion of Stepping Stones upscale to pilot a Placement Stability Team. It is proposed that the new team will focus primarily on children on the edge of connected carer or foster home breakdown, working intensively with both the carer(s) and the child(ren) to avoid a step up into a high-cost residential home.