

Looked After Children: trends in numbers, rates & spend

Including the Cordis Bright Looked After Children Stress Test

October 2025



Introduction

This document uses publicly available data to examine recent trends in the numbers, rates and spend on looked after children (LAC) in England.

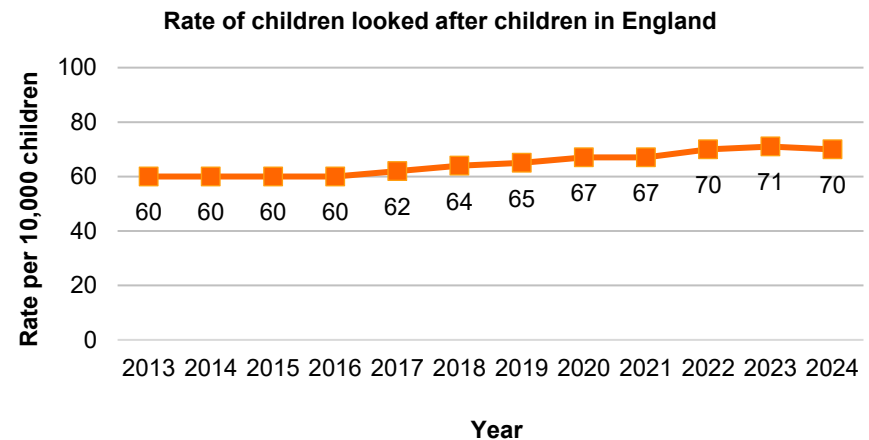
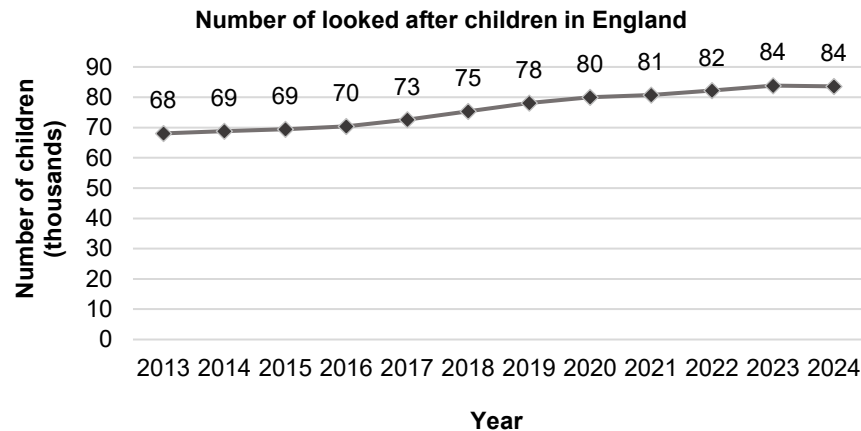
The first section presents **national trends from 2013 to 2024**.

The second section examines **trends across local authorities**.

As part of this, it highlights those local authorities that we think, from the data, may be experiencing the most pressures in catering for LAC.

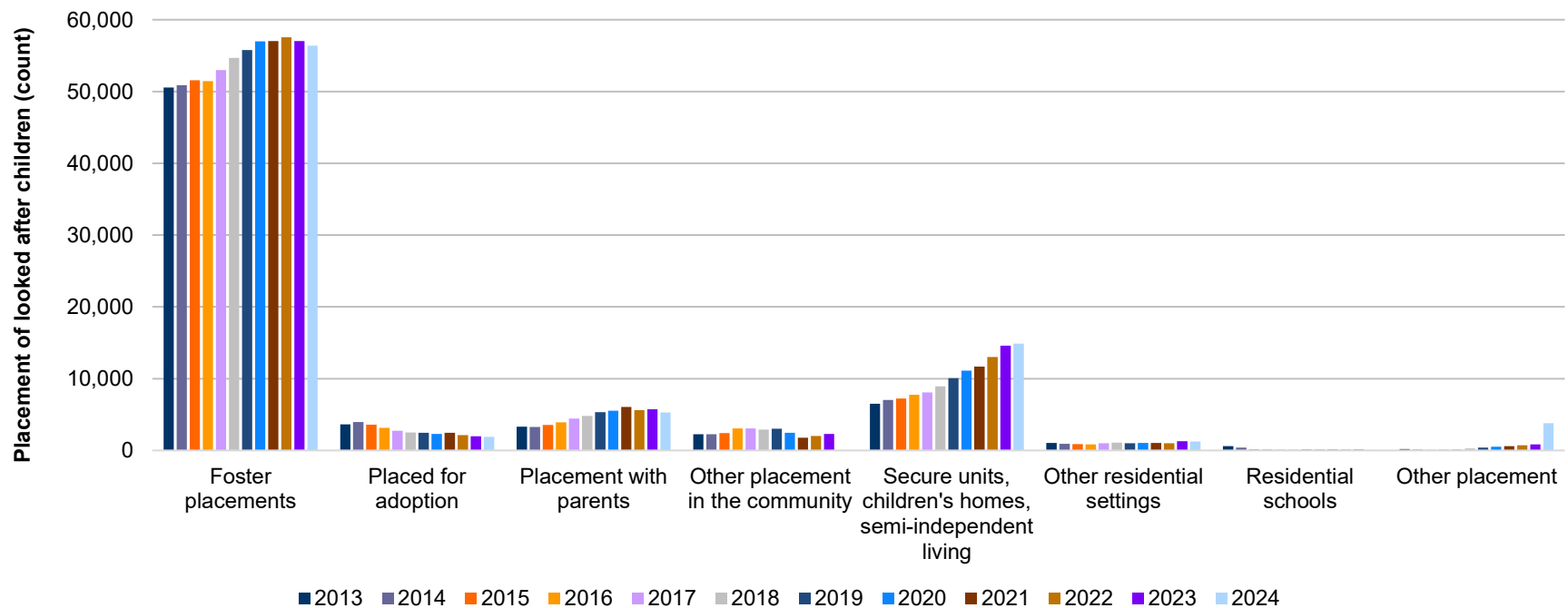
We also highlighted local authorities that may be sites of effective practice.

Numbers and rates of Looked After Children



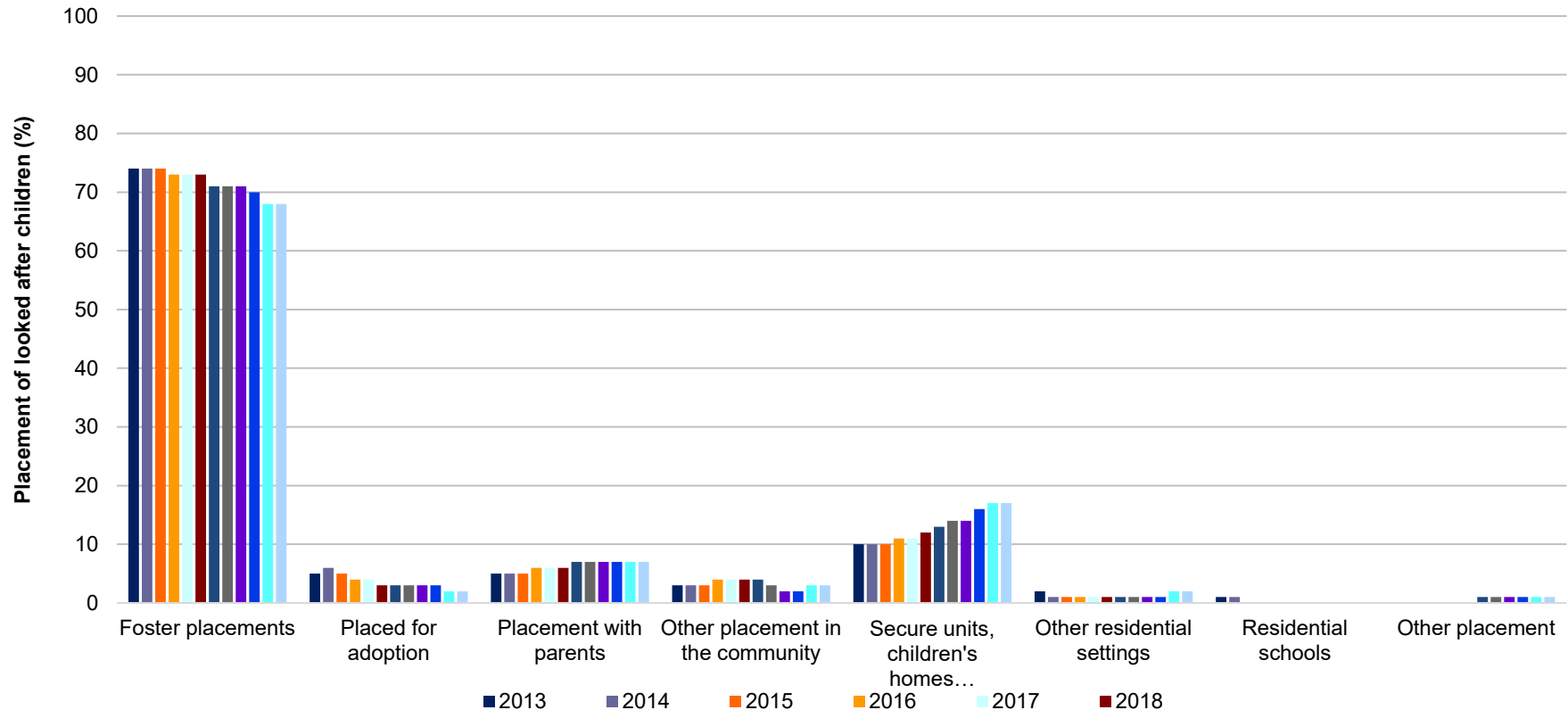
Between 2013 and 2024, the number of LAC at 31 March increased from **68,060** to **83,630**, i.e. **23% increase**. The rate of LAC remained **relatively static** (at 60 per 10,000) **until 2016**, after which it increased **approximately 1.6 children per 10,000 each year** until **2024**. The fact that numbers and rates are increasing suggests that growth is driven by something other than overall population growth. Increases are likely to be due to complex and multi-faceted reasons. Interestingly, in **2024** the number of LAC and rate of LAC per 10,000 **declined**. This could indicate a potential shift in trend.

Placement of Looked After Children (#)



Foster care remains by far the largest placement type for LAC. The number of LAC placed in foster care increased steadily from 2013, peaking at 57,540 in 2022, before falling slightly in 2023 and 2024. The second most common placement type is **secure units, children's homes, and semi-independent living**. These have grown year-on-year since 2013. **Placements for adoption** have declined since 2013. The 'other' placement category is noticeably larger in 2024 compared with earlier years, indicating an emerging trend.

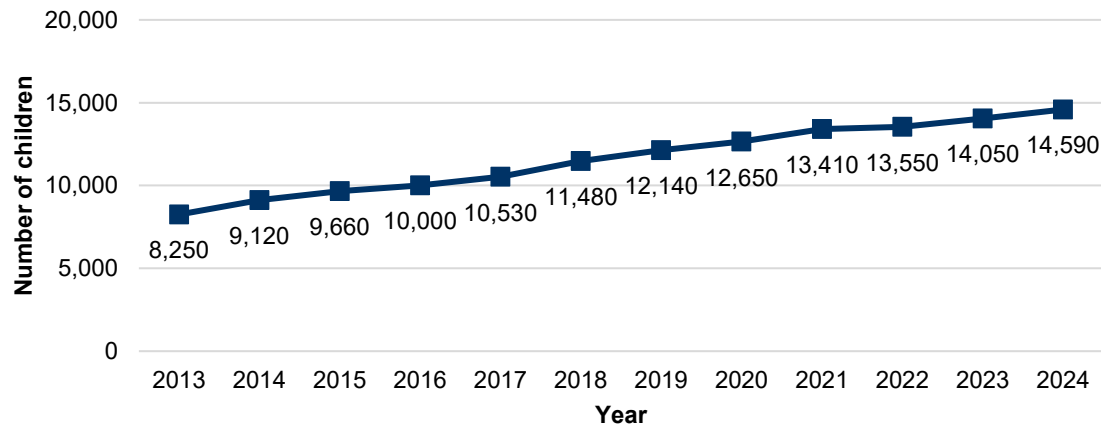
Placement of Looked After Children (%)



Although **foster care** remains the largest placement type, its share has **fallen** by 6% since 2013, reflecting a proportional decline despite rising numbers. In contrast, **secure units, children's homes, and semi-independent living** have **grown** in number and proportion, up 7% between 2013 and 2024. **Adoption placements** declined by 3% in the same period, while placements with parents have remained stable since 2019.

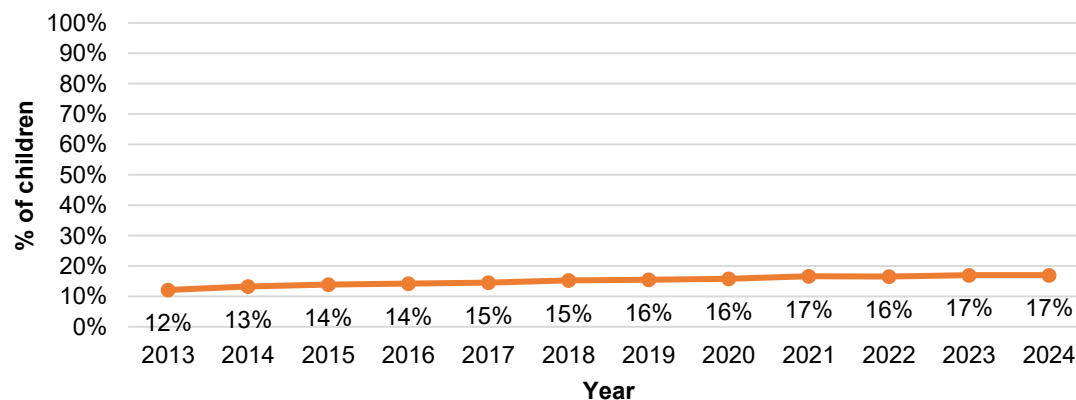
Placement of LAC 20+ miles away & outside of local authority boundary

Number of LAC placed out of LA boundary and over 20 miles from home at March 31



The number of LAC being placed more than 20 miles away and outside of the local authority boundary has increased every year from **8,250** in **2013** to **14,590** in **2024**, an increase of **77%**.

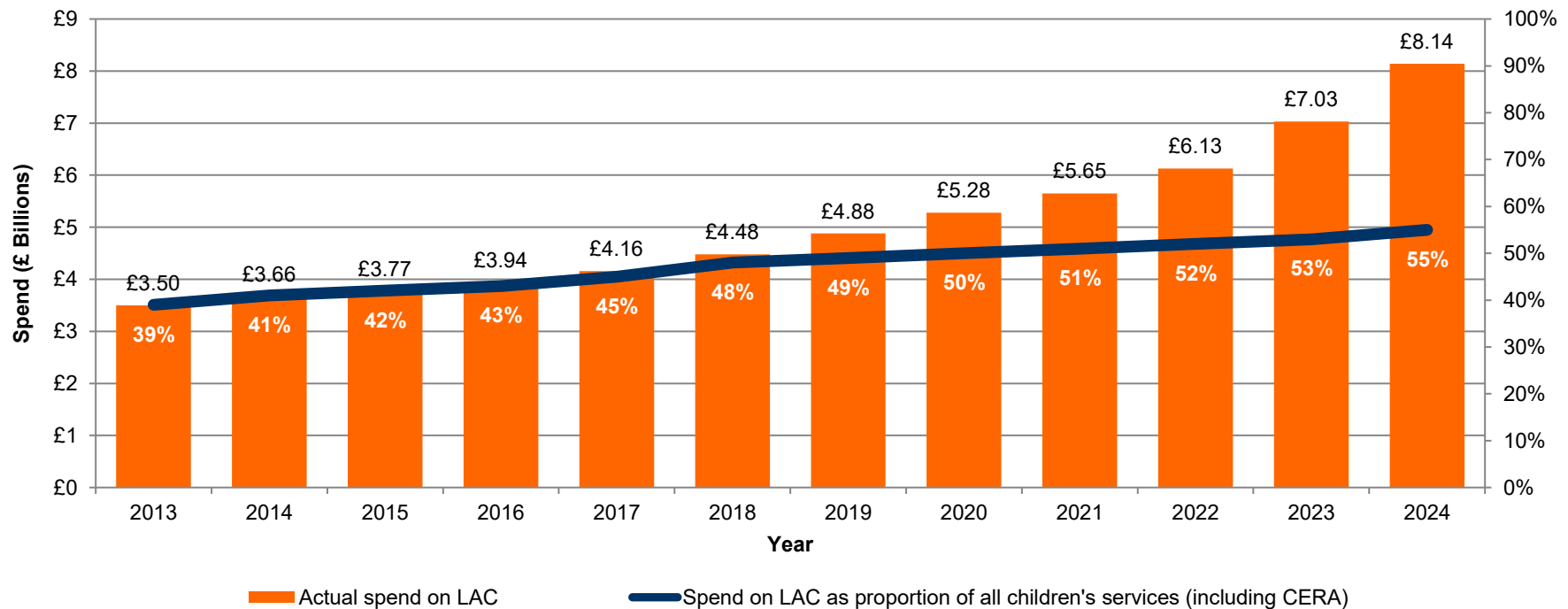
Percentage of LAC placed outside LA boundary and over 20 miles from home at March 31



Between 2013 and 2024, the proportion of LAC placed far from home rose from **12%** to **17%**, mirroring the increase in numbers over the same period. This highlights the growing difficulty local areas face in finding sufficient local capacity to meet children's needs.

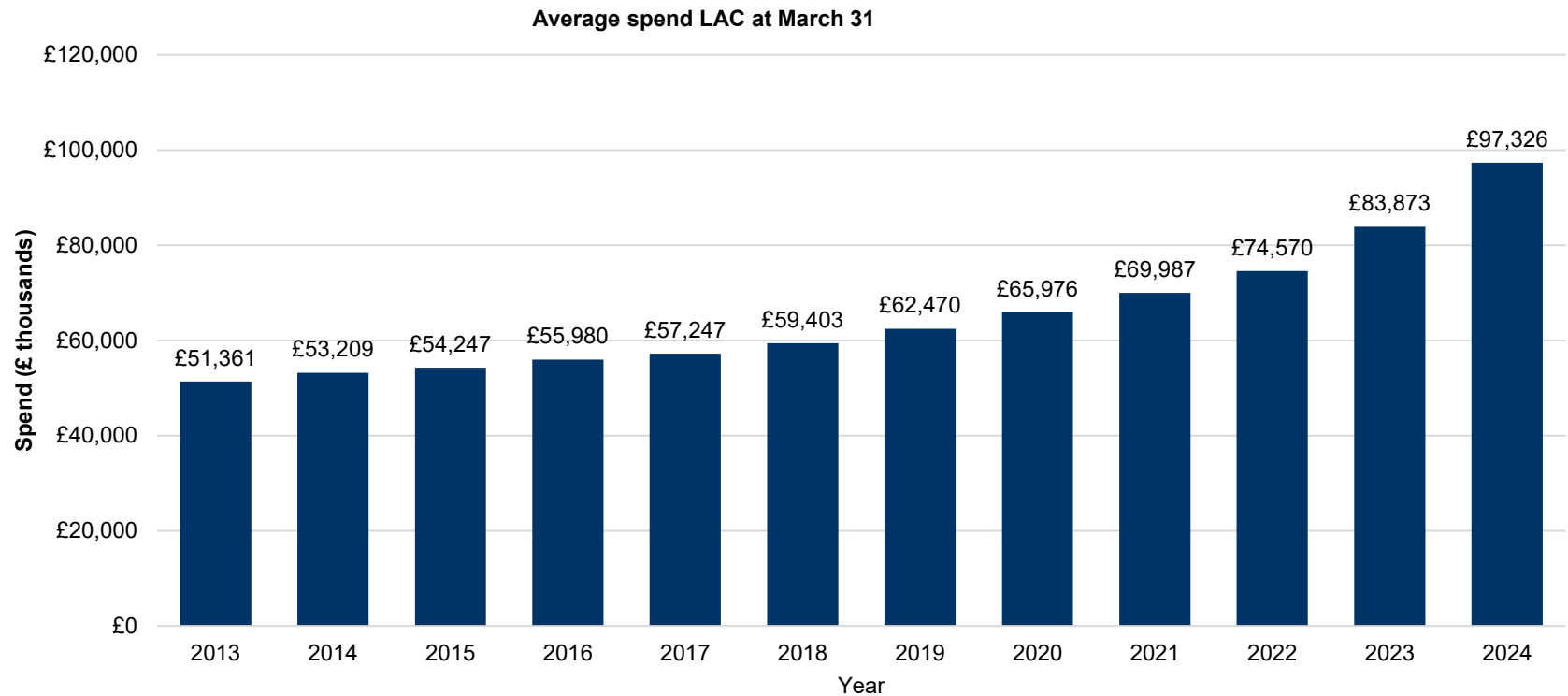
Total spend on Looked After Children

Total LA spend on LAC by local authorities (£billions)



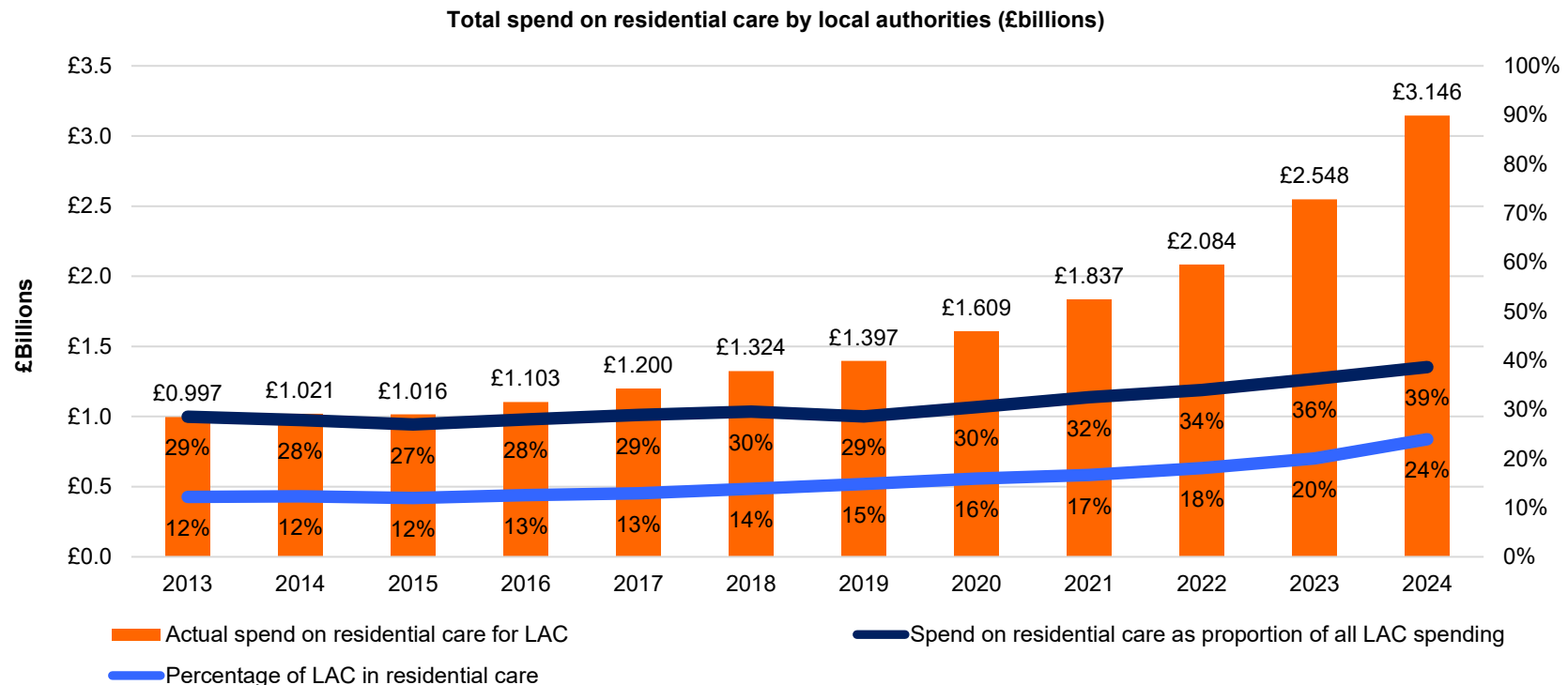
Total spending by local authorities on LAC rose from £3.50bn in 2013 to **£8.14bn** in 2024. Part of this increase was due to inflation - prices rose by **36%** over this period, adding about £1.26bn. Even after adjusting for inflation, spending still grew by **£3.38bn** – an increase of **71%**. At the same time, spending on LAC took up a larger share of children's services budgets, rising from **39%** in 2013 to **55%** in 2024.

Spend per Looked After Child per year



The average spend per LAC has also risen steadily – from **£51,361** in **2013** to **£97,326** in **2024**. Of this increase, around £18,490 was due to inflation (36% over the period). Even after adjusting for inflation, average spend still grew by **£27,475** – a **39%** increase.

Spend on residential care for Looked After Children



Total spend on residential care rose from **£997m** in **2013** to **£3.146bn** in **2024**, an **increase of 216%**. Residential care now accounts for a bigger share of overall LAC spending (**39%** in **2024** compared with **29%** in **2013**). This is likely linked to the fact that the number of LAC in residential care increased from **10,570** in **2013** to **20,030** in **2024**. Taking this and inflation (around 36% over this period) into account, spend per child in residential care has risen by about **22%**, suggesting placement costs have risen, as this increase cannot be explained by higher numbers of LAC or inflation alone.

The Looked After Children Stress-Test

Investigating beyond national averages, finding differences between local authorities

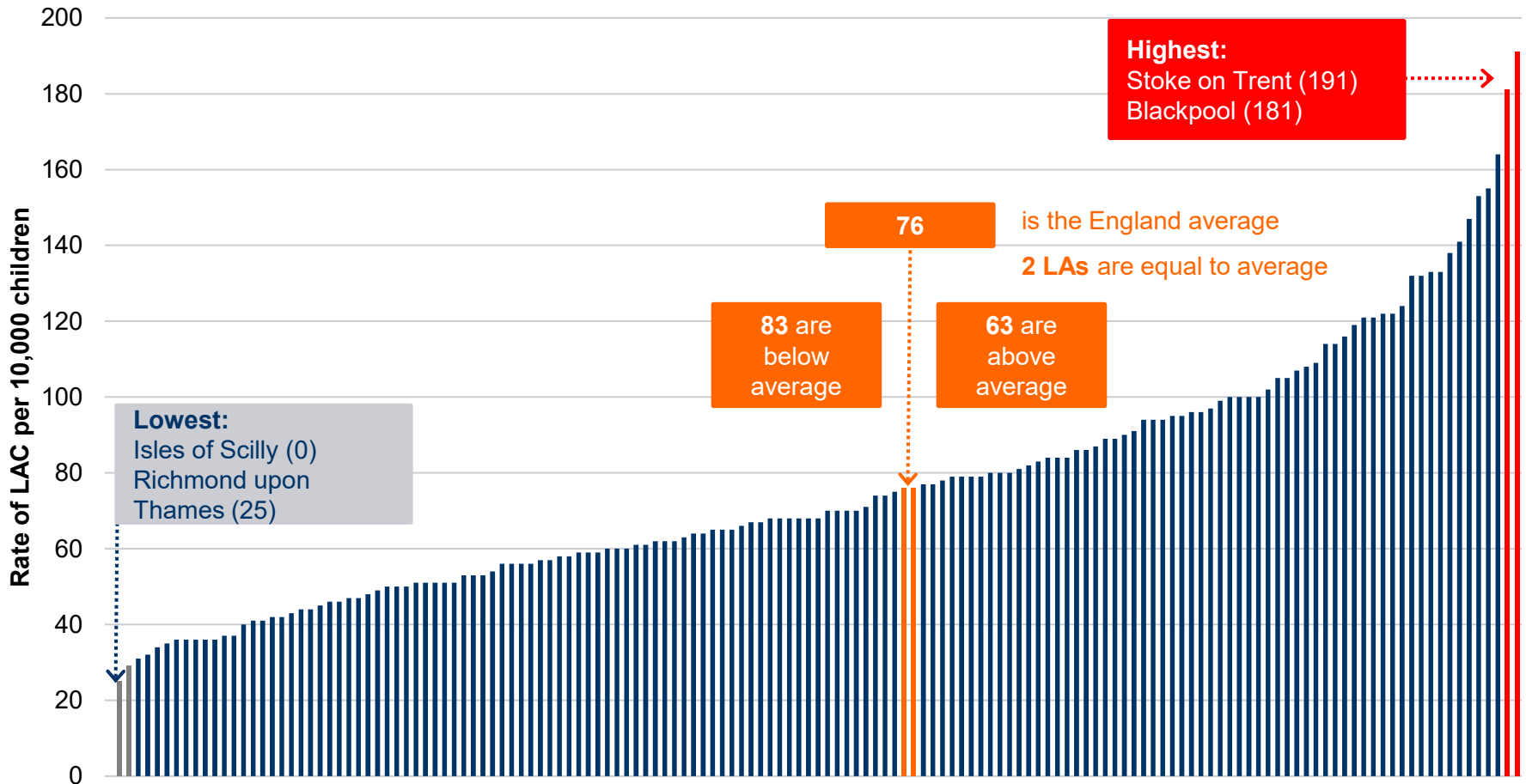
Introduction to the stress test

- The national averages disguise substantial differences between local authorities in numbers, rates and spend on LAC.
- This section examines these differences and highlights those local authorities (LAs) that the data suggests might be experiencing the most challenges in catering for LAC.
- The indicators included in the analysis are shown below.

Indicators (2024)	Indicators (2019-2024)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rate of LAC • Percentage of LAC in residential care • Percentage of LAC 20 miles or more from home and outside local authority boundary • Percentage of children's services budget spent on LAC • Percentage of LAC budget spent on residential care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in rate of LAC • Change in percentage of LAC in residential care • Change in percentage of LAC placed in residential care • Change in percentage of children's services budget spent on LAC • Change in percentage of LAC budget spent on residential care

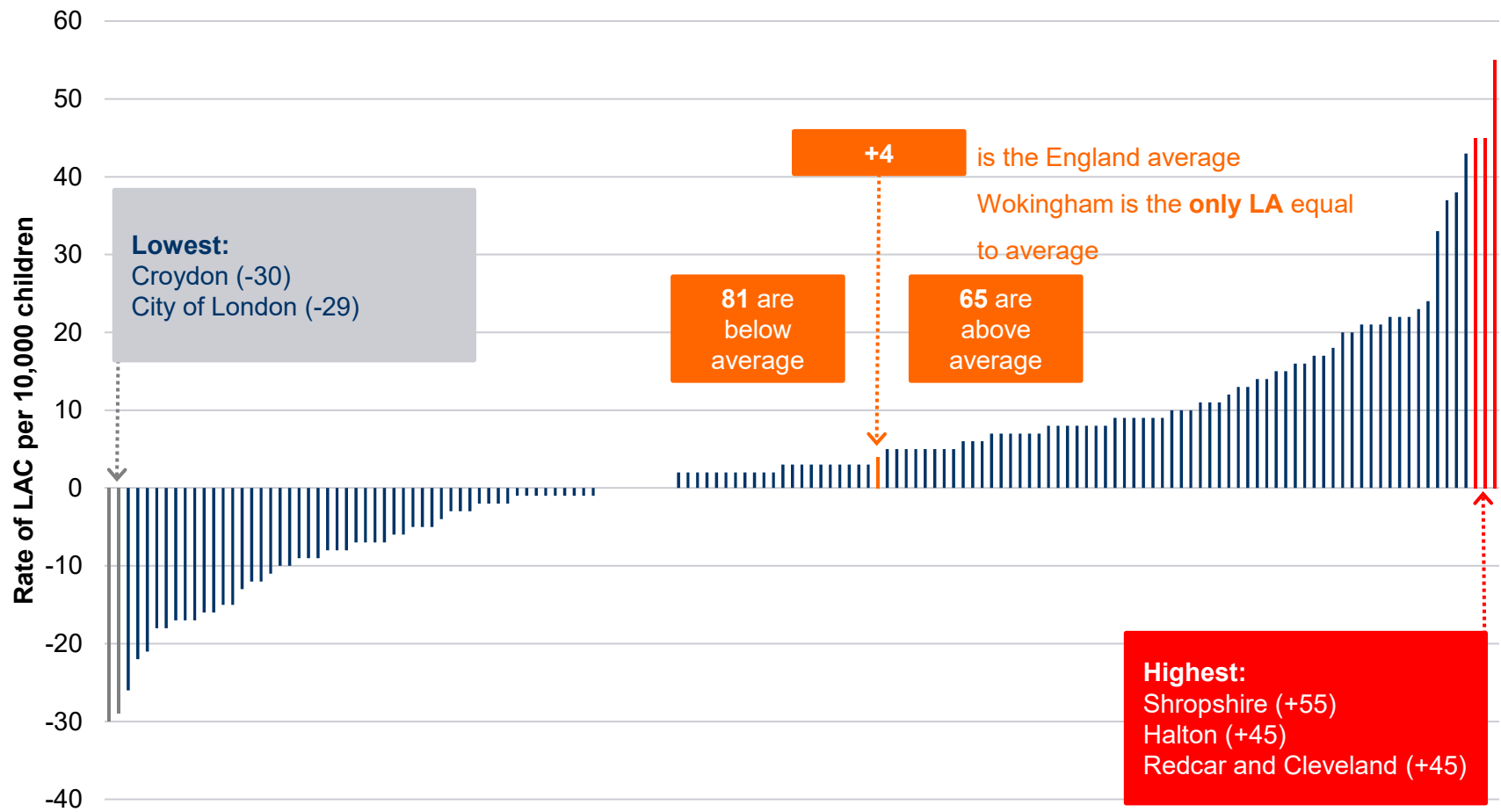
Note: Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole, Cumberland and Westmorland & Furness, and North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire have been excluded from the analysis due to local authority boundary changes.

Rate of Looked After Children (2024)*



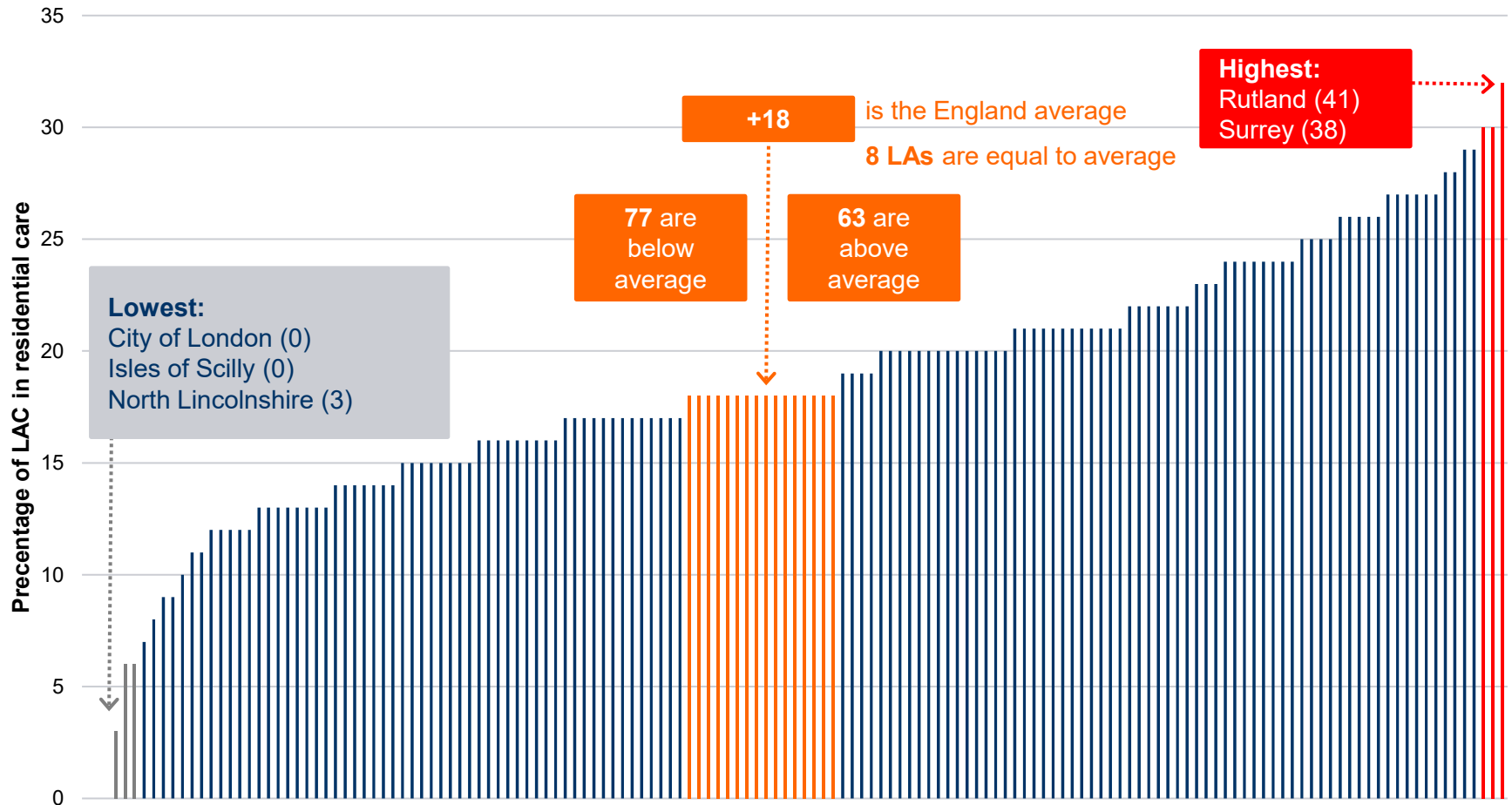
*At 31st March 2024

Change in rate of LAC (2019-2024)*

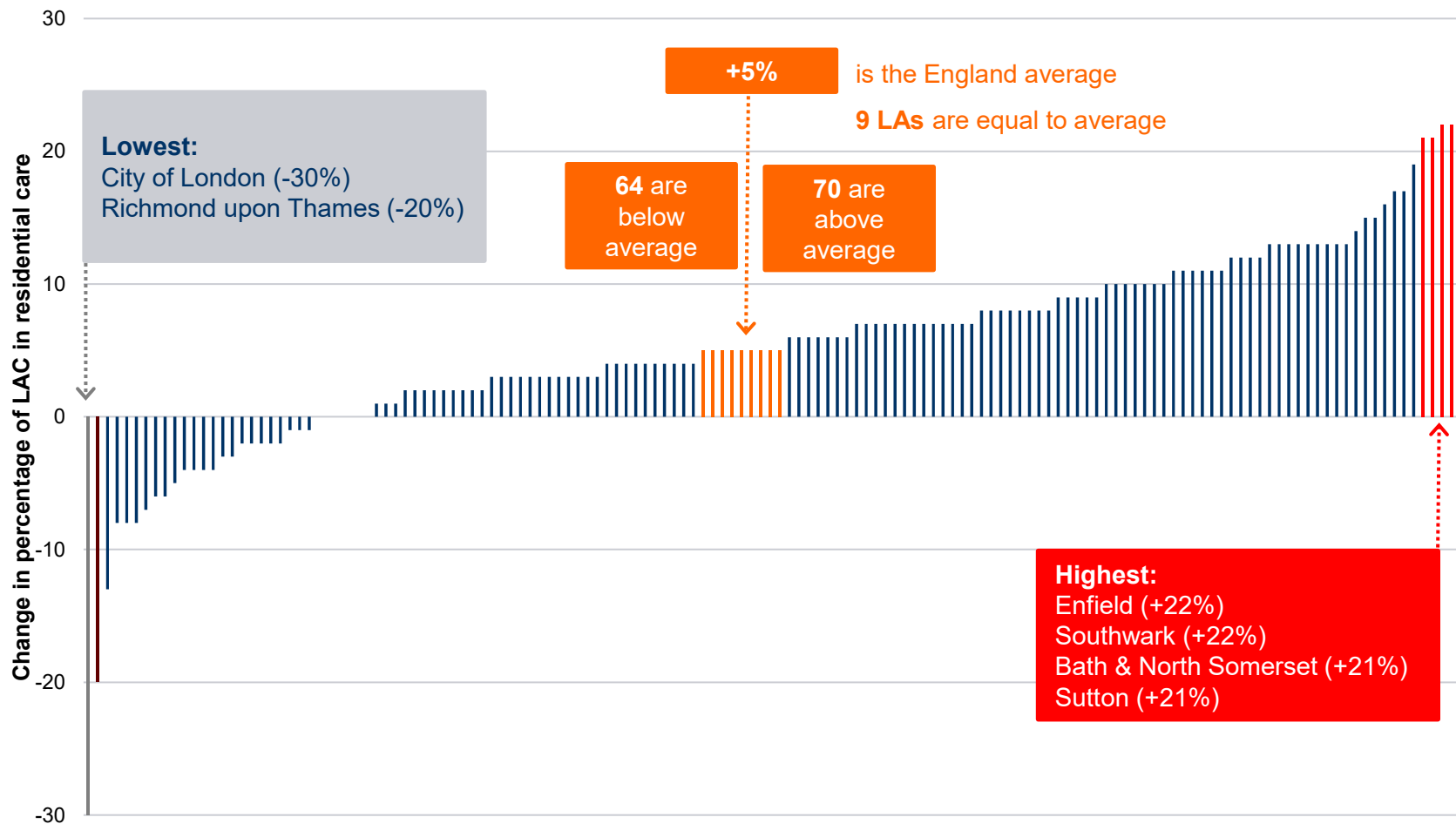


*Northumberland is not included in this analysis as no data was recorded in 2019

Percentage of LAC in residential care (2024)*

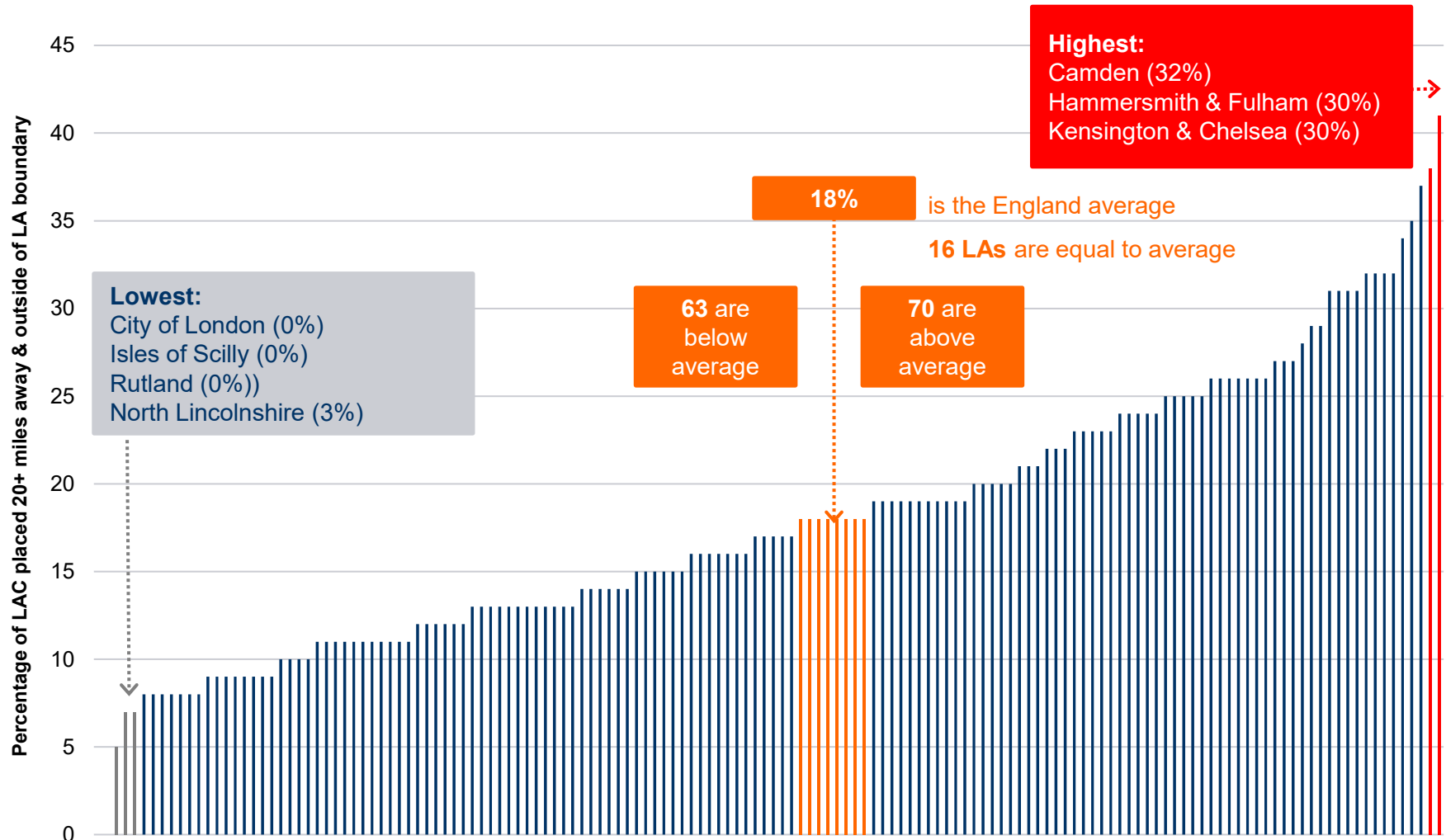


Change in percentage of LAC in residential care (2019-2024)*

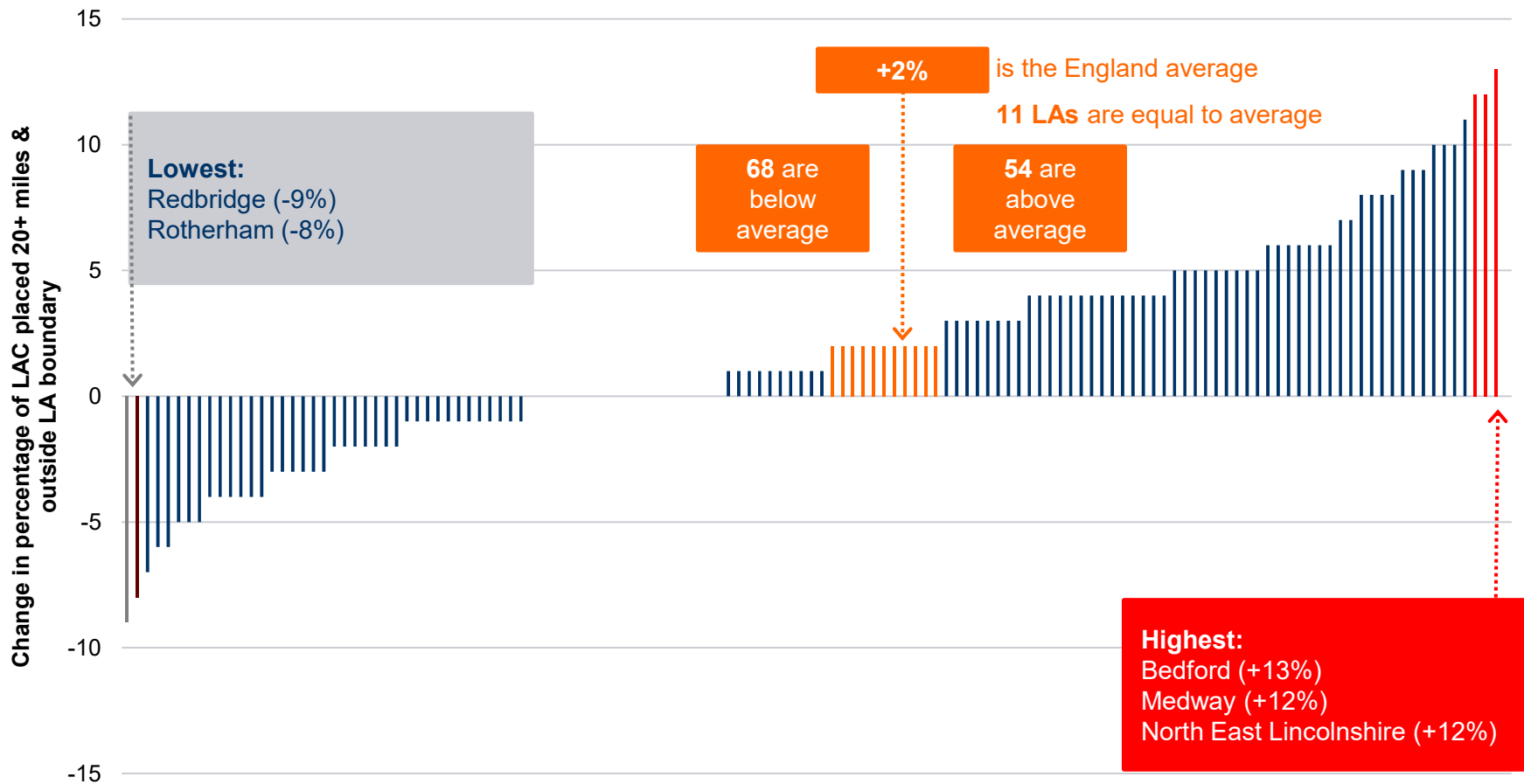


*Swindon, Sandwell, Isles of Scilly, Rutland, and Hammersmith & Fulham are not included in this analysis as no data was recorded in 2019.

Percentage of LAC placed 20+ miles away & outside of LA boundary (2024)*

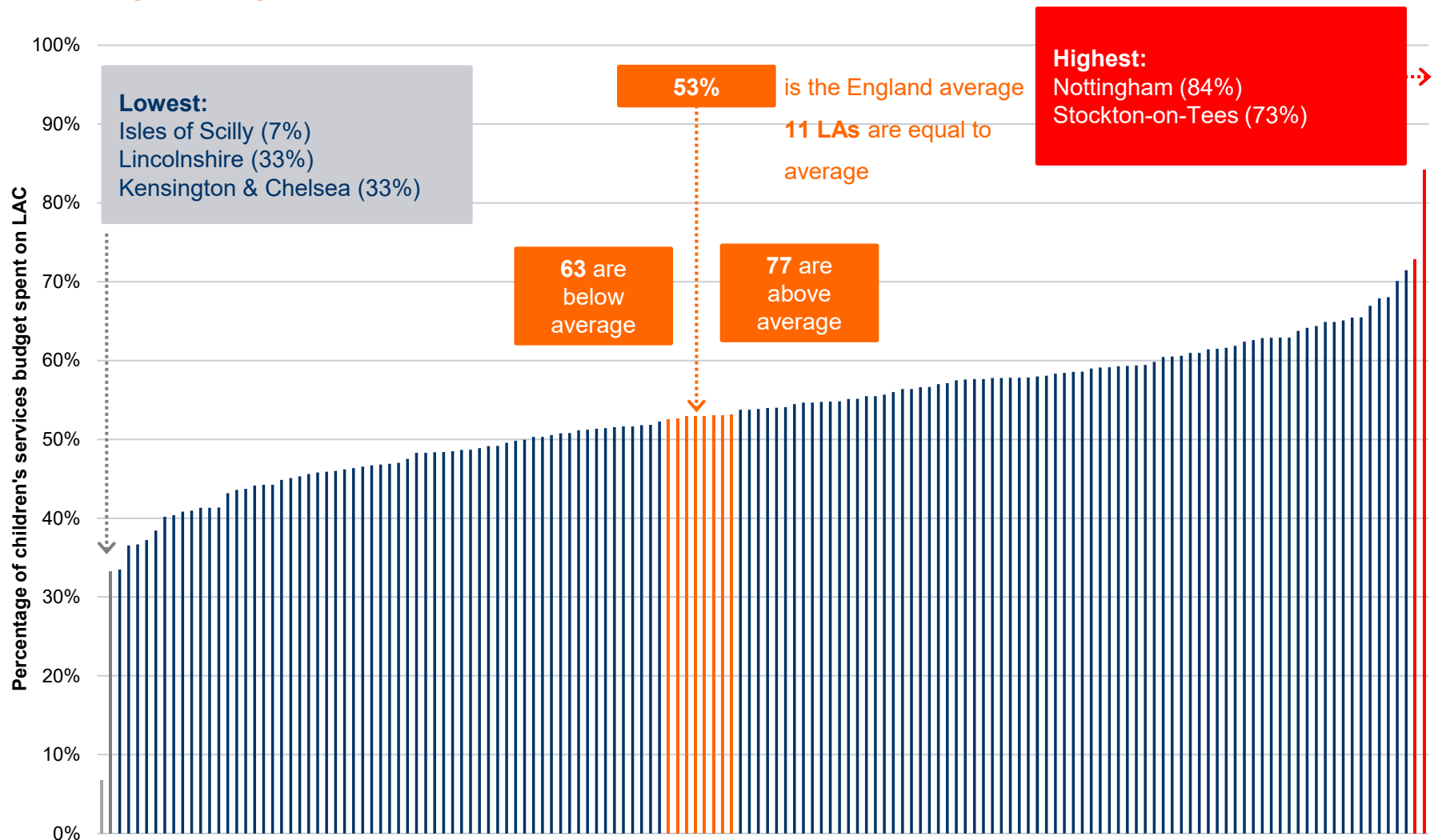


Change in percentage of LAC placed 20+ miles & outside LA boundary (2019-24)*

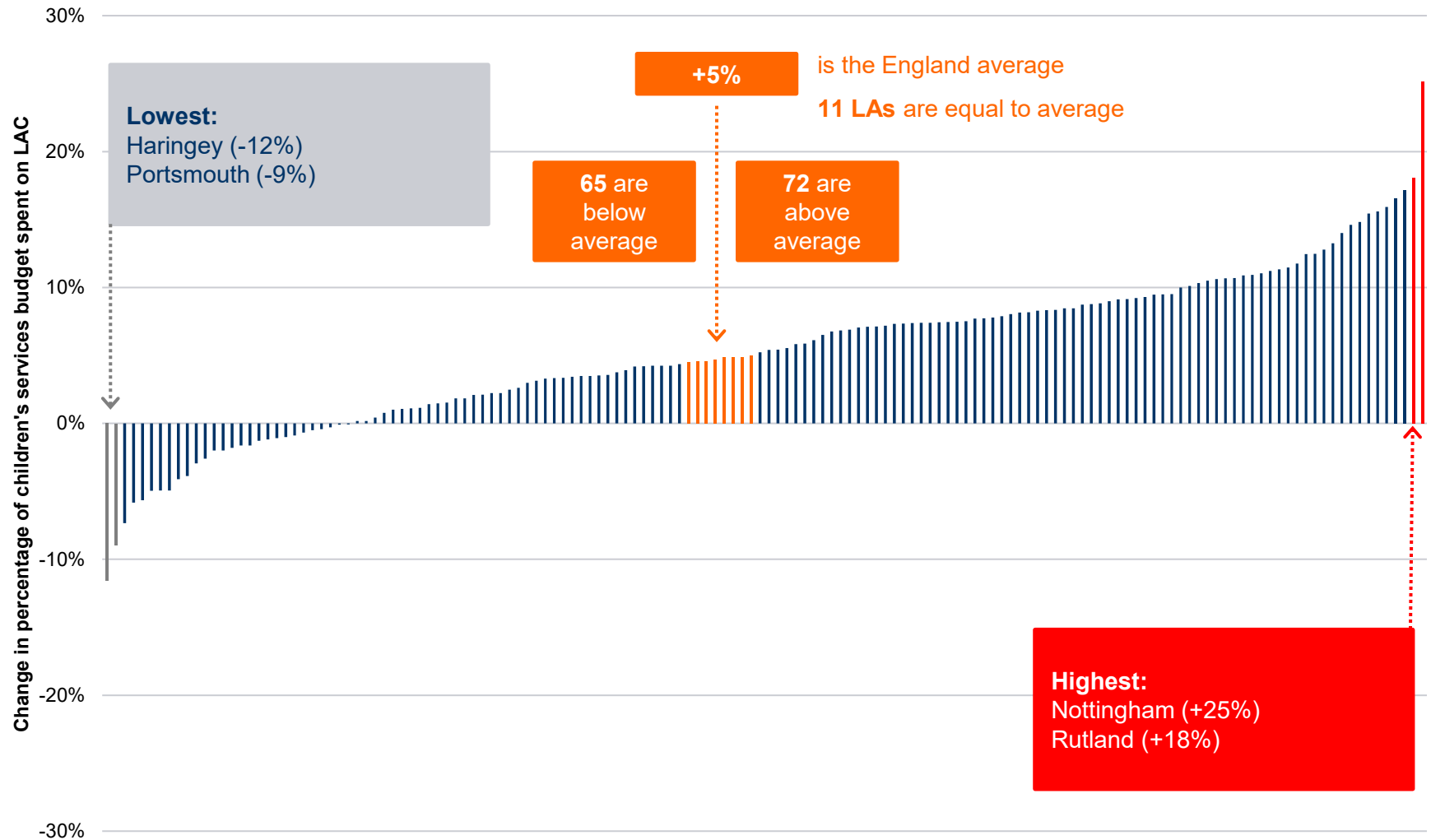


* Reading, Slough, Richmond upon Thames, Halton, Croydon, Darlington, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Wandsworth, Sunderland, Sefton, Gateshead, Blackburn with Darwen, Knowsley, and Oldham are not included in this analysis due to no recorded data in 2019.

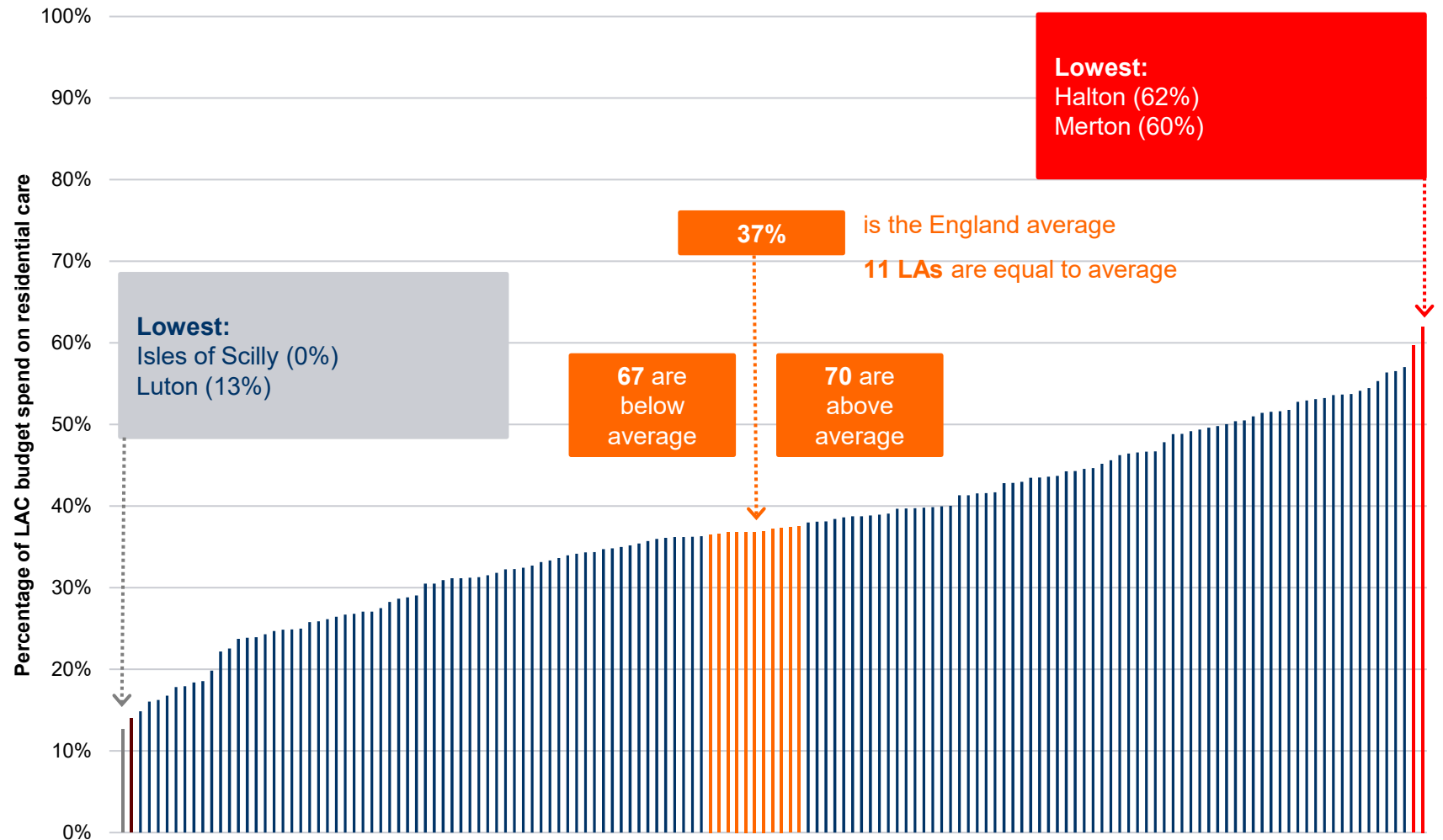
Percentage of children's services budget spent on LAC (2024)



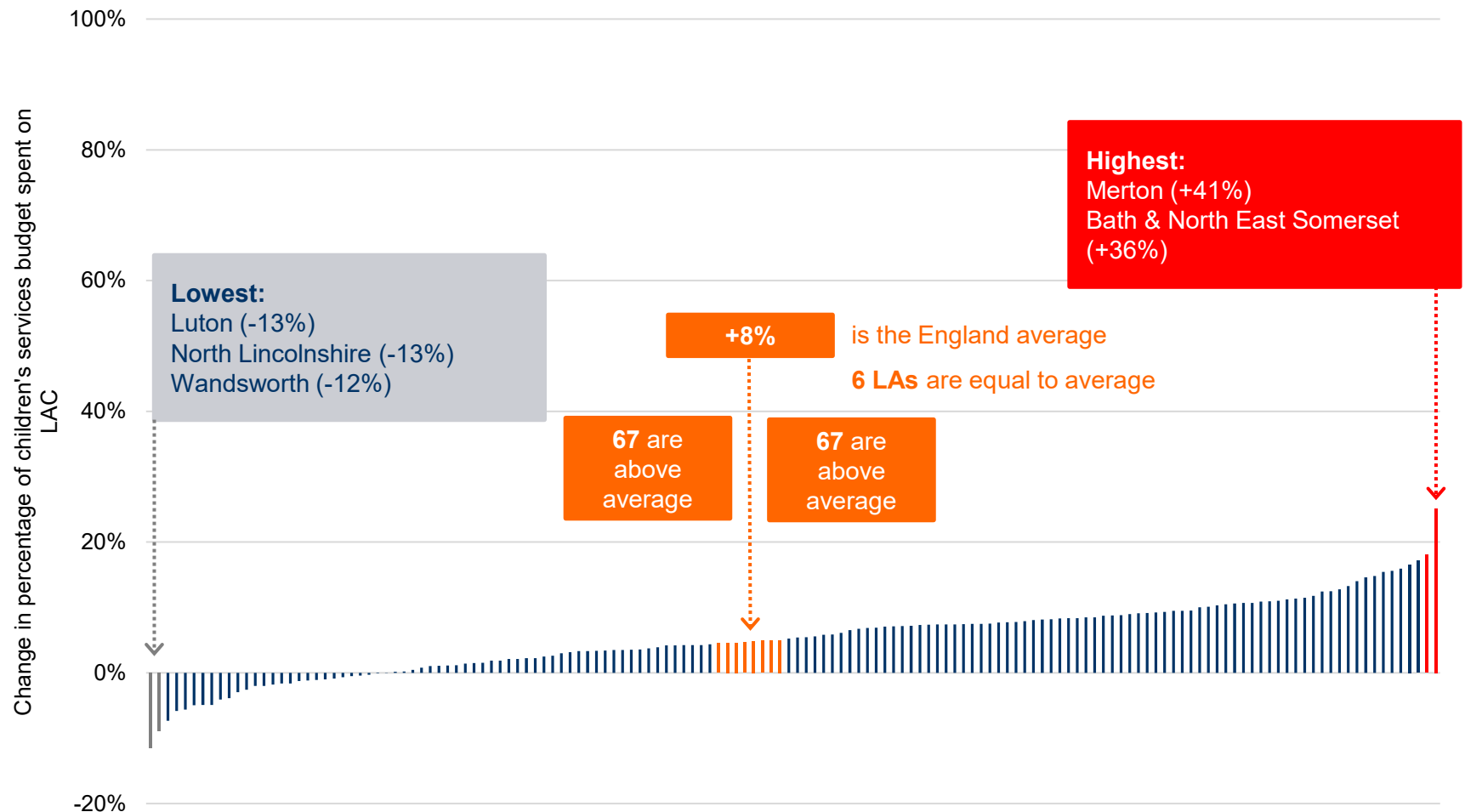
Change in percentage of children's services budget spent on LAC (2019-24)



Percentage of LAC budget spent on residential care (2024)



Change in percentage of LAC budget spent on residential care (2019-2024)



Top 20 'most stressed' local authorities

- The tables overleaf show the c.20 'most stressed' local authorities for each indicator in the stress-test.

20 “most stressed” local authorities

Rate of LAC		Residential care		20 miles outside of LA	
Rate	Change in rate	Rate	Change in %	Rate	Change in %
Stoke-on-Trent	Shropshire	Camden	Enfield	Rutland	Bedford
Blackpool	Redcar & Cleveland	Kensington & Chelsea	Southwark	Surrey	Medway
Hartlepool	Halton	Hammersmith & Fulham	Sutton	Swindon	NE Lincolnshire
Liverpool	Stoke-on-Trent	Hertfordshire	Bath & NE Somerset	Buckinghamshire	Milton Keynes
Redcar & Cleveland	County Durham	Buckinghamshire	Suffolk	Oxfordshire	Swindon
Middlesbrough	Gateshead	Westminster	Wokingham	Luton	Kingston upon Thames
NE Lincolnshire	Lambeth	East Sussex	Leicestershire	Reading	West Sussex
Halton	Solihull	Nottingham	Peterborough	Windsor & Maidenhead	Shropshire
Gateshead	Bradford	Enfield	East Sussex	Cambridgeshire	Leicester
Darlington	Hartlepool	Wokingham	South Gloucestershire	Somerset	Bradford
Stockton-on-Tees	Herefordshire	Surrey	Hertfordshire	Derby	Rutland
St. Helens	Camden	Sutton	Nottinghamshire	Kingston upon Thames	Somerset
Tameside	Isle of Wight	Swindon	Derbyshire	Torbay	Stoke-on-Trent
County Durham	Plymouth	Leicestershire	Sheffield	Bedford	Bristol, City of
Kingston upon Hull	Kensington & Chelsea	South Gloucestershire	Bradford	Milton Keynes	Worcestershire
Shropshire	Barnsley	Southwark	Essex	Medway	Leeds
Torbay	Stockport	Hounslow	Thurrock	Peterborough	Windsor & Maidenhead
Isle of Wight	Bristol, City of	West Sussex	Barnsley	Bracknell Forest	Bath & NE Somerset
Wirral	Stockton-on-Tees	Nottinghamshire	Cornwall	Slough	Central Bedfordshire
Herefordshire	Cornwall	Somerset	Dorset	Sutton	Nottinghamshire

20 “most stressed” local authorities (cont.)

% of children's services budget spent on LAC	
Rate	Change in %
Stockton-on-Tees	Nottingham
Shropshire	Rutland
Worcestershire	City of London
Stoke-on-Trent	Redcar & Cleveland
Middlesbrough	Brent
Somerset	NE Lincolnshire
County Durham	Wokingham
Thurrock	Stockton-on-Tees
Cheshire West & Chester	Bexley
Cheshire East	County Durham
Gateshead	Worcestershire
Peterborough	Cornwall
Staffordshire	Calderdale
Derbyshire	Stoke-on-Trent
Lancashire	Cheshire West & Cheshire
Darlington	Halton
North Tyenside	North Tyneside
Blackpool	Bristol, City of
Derby	Blackpool
Redcar & Cleveland	Newham

% of LAC budget spent on residential care	
Rate	Change in %
Halton	Merton
Merton	Bath & NE Somerset
Leicester	East Sussex
East Sussex	Medway
Tameside	Bristol, City of
Bradford	Rutland
Redcar & Cleveland	Thurrock
Nottingham	Cheshire West & Cheshire
Isle of Wight	Peterborough
Bath & NE Somerset	Bradford
Doncaster	Stockport
Knowsley	York
Buckinghamshire	Enfield
Warrington	Barnsley
Bristol, City of	Nottingham
Middlesbrough	Herefordshire
Peterborough	Sutton
Cheshire West & Chester	Isle of Wight
Sunderland	Buckinghamshire
Darlington	Bedford

Ones to watch in 2024...

Local authority	Number of indicators in which LA is in top 20 'most stressed' (2024)
Bristol, City of	Nottingham
Redcar & Cleveland	Rutland
Stoke-on-Trent	City of London
Bradford	Redcar & Cleveland
Peterborough	Brent
Nottingham	NE Lincolnshire
Buckinghamshire	Wokingham
Cheshire West & Chester	Stockton-on-Tees
East Sussex	Bexley
Halton	County Durham
Isle of Wight	Worcestershire
Shropshire	Cornwall
Somerset	Calderdale
Sutton	Stoke-on-Trent
Bath & NE Somerset	Cheshire West & Cheshire
County Durham	Halton
Rutland	North Tyneside
Stockton-on-Tees	Bristol, City of

In 2024, **18 LAs** were in the top 20 for **at least four indicators** of stress.

This is an **increase of 10 LAs** since the last stress test was produced in 2022.

Ones to watch in 2024 (cont.)

2022	2023	2024
Bristol, City of (5)	Gateshead (5)	Blackpool (5)
Redcar & Cleveland (5)	Halton (5)	Gateshead (5)
Stoke-on-Trent (5)	Nottingham (5)	Tameside (5)
Bradford (5)	Somerset (5)	Halton (4)
Peterborough (5)	Stockton-on-Tees (5)	Hartlepool (4)
Nottingham (4)	Derby (4)	Kingston upon Hull (4)
Buckinghamshire (4)	Hartlepool (4)	Oxfordshire (4)
Cheshire West & Chester (4)	Isle of Wight (4)	Sefton (4)
East Sussex (4)	Medway (4)	Southampton (4)
Halton (4)	NE Lincolnshire (4)	Stockton-on-Tees (4)
Isle of Wight (4)	Oxfordshire (4)	
Shropshire (4)	Redcar & Cleveland (4)	
Somerset (4)	Shropshire (4)	
Sutton (4)	Sutton (4)	
Bath & NE Somerset (4)	Swindon (4)	
County Durham (4)	Stoke-on-Trent (4)	
Rutland (4)	Haringey (4)	
Stockton-on-Tees (4)		

Two LAs, Halton and Stockton-on-Tees, have been in the 'most stressed' category for three years in a row.

Ones to watch in 2024 (cont.)

Local authority	2023# stress indicators	2024# stress indicators	Change
Haringey	4	0	-4 decrease
Oxfordshire	4	1	-3 decrease
Northumberland	3	0	-3 decrease
Richmond upon Thames	3	0	-3 decrease
Gloucestershire	3	0	-3 decrease
Gateshead	5	3	-2 decrease
Derby	4	2	-2 decrease
Hartlepool	4	2	-2 decrease
Plymouth	3	1	-2 decrease
York	3	1	-2 decrease
Hillingdon	2	0	-2 decrease
Sefton	2	0	-2 decrease
Walsall	2	0	-2 decrease

13 LAs had decreased numbers of stress indicators between 2023 and 2024.

This reduction suggests pressures may be easing in some LAs.

References

Slides 3 - 6

- [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2022 to 2023](#)
- [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2023 to 2024](#)

Slides 7 - 9

- [LA and school expenditure: 2022 to 2023 financial year](#)
- [Financial year 2023-24 LA and school expenditure](#)

Slides 12 -17

- [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2022 to 2023](#)
- [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2023 to 2024](#)

Slides 18 -21

- [LA and school expenditure: 2022 to 2023 financial year](#)
- [Financial year 2023-24 LA and school expenditure](#)

Slide 23

- [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2022 to 2023](#)
- [Children looked after in England including adoption: 2023 to 2024](#)

Slide 24

- [LA and school expenditure: 2022 to 2023 financial year](#)
- [Financial year 2023-24 LA and school expenditure](#)



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