



DARLINGTON
Borough Council

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee Agenda

9.30 am

Monday, 28 October 2024

Council Chamber, Town Hall, Darlington, DL1 5QT

Members of the Public are welcome to attend this Meeting.

1. Introductions/ Attendance at Meeting
2. Declarations of Interest
3. To approve the Minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 2 September 2024 (Pages 3 - 4)
4. Adoption Tees Valley Annual Report 2023/24 –
Report of the Service Manager – Adoption Tees Valley
(Pages 5 - 40)
5. Performance Indicators Quarter 1 2024/25 –
Report of the Assistant Director – Children’s Services
(Pages 41 - 72)
6. Children and Young People's Plan 2024-2027 –
Report of the Assistant Director Commissioning Performance and Transformation
(Pages 73 - 76)
7. Learning and Skills Annual Report 2023/24 –
Report of the Assistant Director for Education and Inclusion
(Pages 77 - 82)

8. Children's Services Self-Assessment - Overview –
Report of the Assistant Director – Children's Services
(Pages 83 - 124)
9. Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2023/24 –
Report of the Assistant Director – Children's Services
(Pages 125 - 142)
10. Work Programme –
Report of the Assistant Director Law and Governance
(Pages 143 - 154)
11. SUPPLEMENTARY ITEM(S) (if any) which in the opinion of the Chair of this Committee are
of an urgent nature and can be discussed at this meeting
12. Questions



Luke Swinhoe
Assistant Director Law and Governance

Friday, 18 October 2024

Town Hall
Darlington.

Membership

Councillors Ali, Allen, Crudass, Dulston, Garner, Johnson, Layton, Renton, Storr and Toms

Statutory Co-optees

Carly Stonier

Non Statutory Co-optees

Maura Regan, Janet Woodcock, John Armitage and Sally Hudson

If you need this information in a different language or format or you have any other queries on this agenda please contact Paul Dalton, Democratic and Elections Officer, Operations Group, during normal office hours 8.30 a.m. to 4.45 p.m. Mondays to Thursdays and 8.30 a.m. to 4.15 p.m. Fridays email: paul.dalton@darlington.gov.uk or telephone 01325 405805

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 2 September 2024

PRESENT – Councillors Allen (Chair), Ali, Crudass, Garner, Layton, Storr and Toms

APOLOGIES – Councillors Dulston, Johnson and Renton, ,

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Chris Bell (Assistant Director of Children's Services) and Tony Murphy (Assistant Director Education and Inclusion)

CYP7 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at this meeting.

CYP8 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THIS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 24 JUNE 2024

Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 24 June 2024

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 24 June 2024 be approved as a correct record.

CYP9 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS YEAR END 2023/24

The Assistant Director – Children's Services provided members with an update on performance against key performance indicators.

Points of note included the 8401 contacts being the highest on record and a 58% increase from 2020/21 while also showing a higher level of complexity on average. The 768 referrals reported were a reduction from 2022/23 figures (but still a 49% increase on 2021/22) with 358 children currently in care.

Members were informed that timeliness on assessments is showing improvements with 95% meeting targets, with a major factor in this being the stabilising of staff. However, stability of placements remains a challenge with children being moved more often than desired.

Questions raised included as to whether the large numbers of referrals are the result of the COVID period with officers confirming that this is the case and that numbers are not anticipated to reduce for some time. Members also asked to clarify what external agencies assist the service with officers stating that they are often health or education based with a number of partner agencies included however the service always have full sight of any work being undertaken.

Further questions included as to whether there has been a noticeable impact on resources with an increase in children being returned home and it was confirmed that there has not been a significant impact, and that support is available for families where needed. It was also asked if support is available for care leavers with officers confirming that personal advisers and one to one advisers are available alongside the Care Leavers Covenant.

Discussions were held which included as to whether a “Risk Assessment” scheme could be introduced or standardised across schools, in the vein of the system employed in care homes to identify children’s possible needs. Officers stated that they could contact colleagues in Adult services to check if any schemes could be translated and also assured members that the Vulnerable People Panel also looks at any cases that schools have concerns over with schools being able to get in touch with staff to discuss any concerns whenever they arise. A further discussion was held regarding the reasons why children may need to be moved with officers stating that it is often due to need outpacing the number of placements available with children occasionally having to wait to move to the most suitable placement for them.

RESOLVED – Members noted the content of the performance information provided and members also expressed that they would be willing to share any fostering information in ward newsletters and on social media.

CYP10 THE UNIFORM EXCHANGE SCHEME

The Darlington Partnerships Director provided members with an update on the uniform exchange scheme which continues to see growth in use. The relocation to a unit beside Feetham’s multi storey car park has been successful, saving cost whilst providing a good facility for both volunteers and customers.

Members were informed that help with school uniforms was showing a great number of searches on the Darlington Council website and following this it was determined that the scheme would be valuable for residents. The new location is now running with positive feedback from both volunteers and the public who visit the site with 3006 customers to date.

Discussion was held with regards to the affordability of school uniforms with members commenting that having incorrect uniforms can make children feel singled-out with minor changes to uniforms making them unsuitable for donation or handing-down resulting in families having unsustainable uniform costs.

It was also suggested that sewing lessons for parents could be useful to help longevity of uniforms.

RESOLVED - Members noted the content of the update provided and members expressed their approval of the scheme and appreciation of the efforts of those involved.

CYP11 WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25

The Group Director of Operations submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to this Scrutiny Committee’s work programme and to consider any additional areas which Members would like to suggest should be included in the previously approved work programme

RESOLVED – That the work programme be noted.

Adoption Tees Valley

Annual Report 2023-2024



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1. Executive Summary

Adoption Tees Valley has continued to thrive and develop as a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), with this year seeing a greater degree of pan regional partnership working with our neighbouring North East RAA's- Adopt Coast to Coast and Adopt North East. We have also progressed the partnership with the North East Integrated Care Board (ICB) through our innovative work together in developing the Multi Disciplinary Adoption Support Service- MDASS. Regional partnership working has enabled the RAA to draw funding from Adoption England for development and positive impact, aligned to the objectives in the National Adoption Strategy. Adoption England has recently published its own strategic plan for the forthcoming 3 years, and ATV, overseen by the Board, has continued to develop in line with national strategic priorities.

1.1 Adoption Nationally

Nationally, the numbers of children being placed for adoption and numbers adopted has been falling, although for the year of 2023-24 there has been a small upturn. The numbers of adopters recruited has reduced, and there is some concerns around the gap growing between the numbers of children requiring adoption, and numbers of available families to adopt. We know nationally that adoption provides a stable and secure childhood for many children, however, there is an increasing awareness that adopted children have many complex long-term emotional, social, learning and health needs arising from early trauma, neglect, and harm. Their needs must be understood in the context of early care experience, and their adoptive parents need support to meet these needs and provide nurturing family life. Adoptive parents, and young people themselves, tell us they need services provide continuing support, available as and when needed throughout childhood and into adulthood.

1.2 Culture Change in Adoption

So, what is the future of adoption, and what will adoption look like for children and their families in years to come? Adoption England (AE) – the national collaboration of Regional Adoption Agencies, has implemented a programme of culture change in adoption- a long-term objective to change thinking and practice, underpinned by social and adoptee drivers for change. Key to the culture change agenda is to increase the understanding of the importance of maintaining significant relationships in adoption, for adopted people and their birth families.

The President of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, made a significant speech on this matter at the POTATO (Parents of Traumatized Adolescents and Teenagers Organisation) conference in May 2024 referencing the research work of the University of East Anglia (UEA), around the importance of maintaining lifelong links for adopted children. We recognise the continued importance of the need to remain open to birth family contact, and investing our professional care, effort and resource into maintaining those relationships, whether directly, or indirectly. Through the research undertaken by UEA, and the Adoption Barometer (Adoption UK) we know that for adopted adults and young people there is a huge importance in understanding their families of origin, reasons for being adopted, and maintaining those lifelong links. ATV has engaged with the national programme and through discussion with the Board and partners, will be developing ethos and culture which promotes a greater understanding and opportunity for maintaining significant relationships.

1.3 Early Permanence

Early permanence in adoption continues to be a key priority nationally, and for the region and ATV has continued to focus on early work with the 5 partner Local Authorities, to consider early permanence planning, pre-birth and pre-care in some instances. There remain challenges to creating the opportunity for more children to access an early permanence placement, however, there is good evidence over this year of significant strengthening of practice and understanding. ATV believes that early permanence is aligned to culture change in adoption, whereby early contact between carers who may go on to adopt, and the child's birth family takes place during the fostering period. We know this builds relationships between adoptive parents, and birth relatives, which has importance for potential future contact, and identity needs. Unfortunately, ATV has continued to have lower numbers than hoped for of carers who will undertake EP, however, we know that where EP is planned, there is a significant strength of practice, with a stronger preparation course, more information and high-quality support for carers undertaking this route. ATV is offering a dedicated Early Permanence Support Group, and it is well received and well attended by all EP carers. Through the pan regional funded Concurrency Project, now in its second year, we have worked more closely with the regional fostering services, to embed a shared understanding of the role of EP, and the roles of professionals supporting these placements.

1.4 Voice and Influence

During this period, we are proud to have strengthened the mechanisms by which young people and adopters can influence the direction of the RAA, and have their voice heard. Young, adopted people have a strengthened opportunity to meet with other adopted children, through the monthly “Youthy” group, which is now held in a local youth club. There is also a dedicated Voice and Influence group, Adoptbats, which is focused on young people having a say about what its like to be adopted, and how they think the system should change to improve the lives and experience of adopted young people.

Adoptbats are currently making a film about what its like to be adopted, supported by Blue Cabin, a local creative therapy charity.

1.5 Multi-Disciplinary Support to adopted children and families- MDASS

During this period Adoption Tees Valley has worked closely with Adopt North East, Adopt Coast to Coast and the NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB) to develop a multi-disciplinary adoption support service, across the NE region. This is a funded project and is 1 year into the funding period of 2 years. This project sits under the national strategy to strengthen support to adopted children and their families. The new MDASS project is now staffed with a Service Manager, Psychologist, Speech and Language Therapist, Occupational Therapist, and 3 social work consultants. The Service Manager has begun to work with the team to develop the service specification, which will be offering a consultancy and therapeutic service to adopted families, and professionals across the region working with them. The model of support is Dyadic Developmental Psychology (DDP) which focusses on attachment, for children who have had early experience of trauma, neglect and harm. It is planned that service delivery will start from the summer of 2024, and the longer-term plan for sustainability is to draw funding from the Adoption Support Fund (ASF).

The aim of MDASS will be to significantly strengthen the support to families, from a multi-disciplinary therapeutic perspective, providing access to psychological consultation, assessment and intervention, for children with multiple and complex needs. This service will be aimed at getting more quickly to delivery of a therapeutic plan which will help children. It will aim to reduce the pressures of children's needs, improve quality of family life and outcomes, and prevent family breakdown.

1.6 The work of ATV

Recruitment of prospective adopters has been a challenge for the agency over this year, a challenge also for many other regional and national RAA's. It is thought that the cost-of-living crisis, alongside the effects of the pandemic seeing a rise in adult mental ill health and increasing awareness of the complex needs of adopted children has impacted on the numbers of people wanting to consider adoption. We want to continue to show the public that ATV, and partners are there to support children and families in the short and longer term.

The numbers of children placed has been largely stable over this past year and is comparable with the previous year. However, we have seen a significant rise in the number of children who have had disruptions and have left placement, most of whom have had a change in plan for permanency. These disruptions are uncharacteristic of the pattern for children placed through ATV and have been considered at every level, including during a Board development session, to learn from the disruption meetings and reports. This matter will be considered in the chapter relating to children's placements, needs and outcomes.

During this year, ATV has restructured to strengthen management of the core areas of the adoption service, and to strengthen leadership for the future of ATV. This means that each of the areas of recruitment, matching and placements, and adoption support are led by a team manager, and the operational activity is overseen by a Deputy Service Manager.

2. Governance

Adoption Tees Valley is overseen by the Board of Directors, which is comprised of Directors, or Assistant Directors of the 5 Local Authorities; an adoptive parent; a Virtual School Head. The ATV Service Manager attends all Board meetings. The ATV Board provide strategic direction, oversee finance and overall governance of the RAA.

Each LA Council oversees the work of the RAA through presentation of the Annual and Bi Annual reports at Scrutiny, and/or Corporate Parenting Boards, and in some cases, representation of elected members on the ATV Panel.

3. Key Performance Indicators for the period 1.4.23-31.3.24

Key Indicator	ATV 2022-23	ATV 2023-24	Current c/w previous	National Govt Target where applicable
Adopter Approvals	55	38	Dec 31%	N/A
Children referred to ATV	223	138	Dec 38%	N/A
Children with ADM -BID (Best interests' decision)	100	87	Dec 13%	N/A
PO	87	79	Dec 9%	N/A
Matches	81	75	Dec 7%	
Placed	76	78	Inc 2 %	N/A
Early Permanence	11	8	Dec 27%	
Adoption Orders	84	76	Dec 10%	N/A
Disruptions – pre order	1	12		N/A
Timescale – A2 (PO to match)	146 days	130 days	Improved	121 days
Timescale A10 – BLA-Moved in with Adopters	411	392 days	Improved	421 days

The above data will be referred to in each section, to provide a base line for discussion and review of the year's performance.

Where applicable, data for each Local Authority will be detailed within the report.

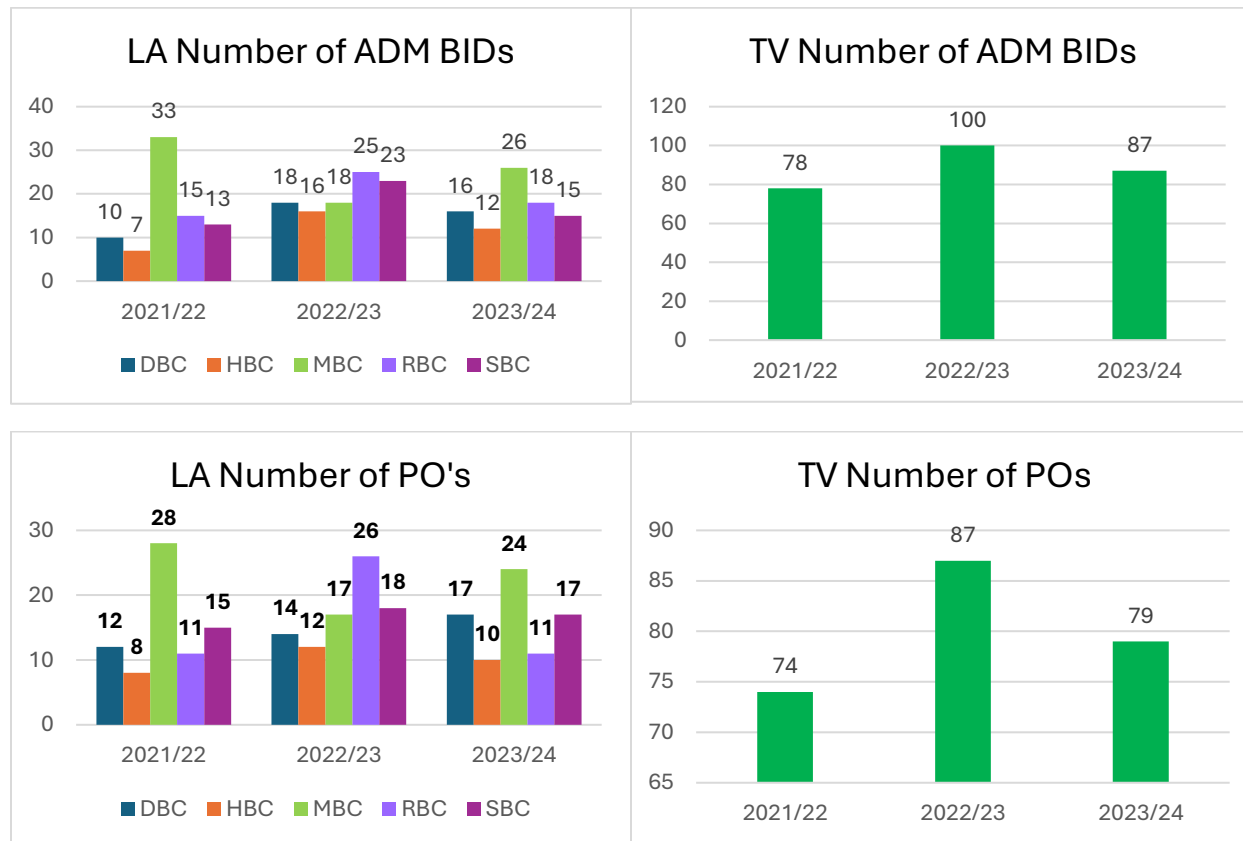
4. Children Referred, Permanence Planning, Matching and Placements

4.1 ATV and Local Authority Data

The numbers of children referred to ATV has significantly decreased within this period, compared with previous years. We don't know why this is, as numbers of children with a LA decision on a plan for adoption and Placement Orders granted has reduced, but not by the same level as referrals. The LA's may be improving the earlier planning, and referring children who are more likely to go on to an adoption plan.

In the previous year the conversion from referral to ADM was 45%, while in this year the conversion rate was 63%. This means the children referred are more likely to go on to have an adoption plan.

The numbers of children where the Local Authority has made a Best Interests plan of adoption (ADM BID) has decreased by 13% to 87, and the numbers of children who have gone on to Placement Order (PO) is 79, a decrease of 9% on the previous year.

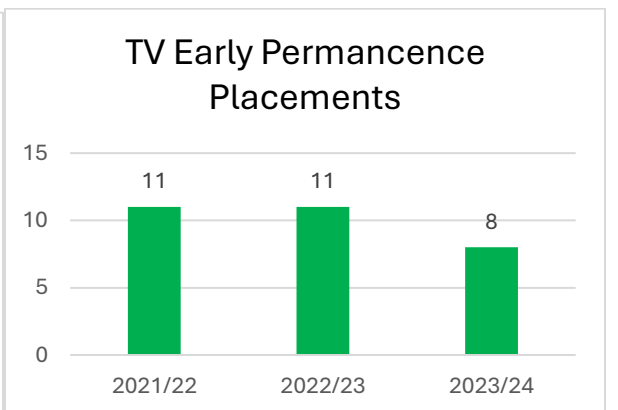
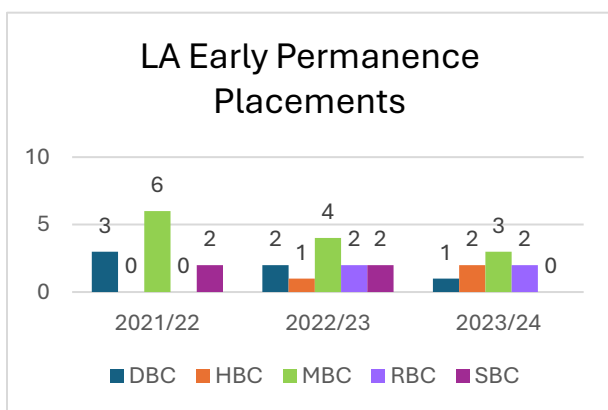
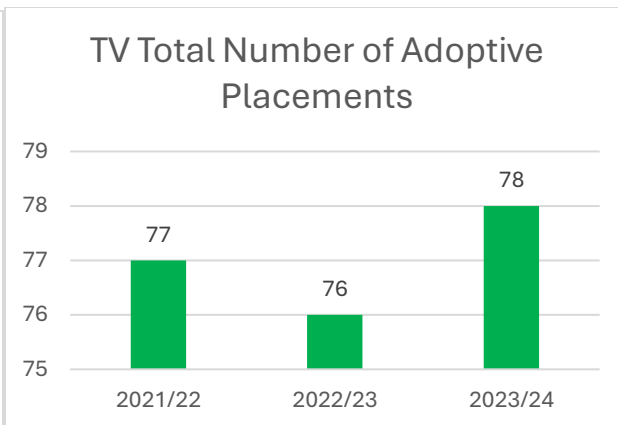
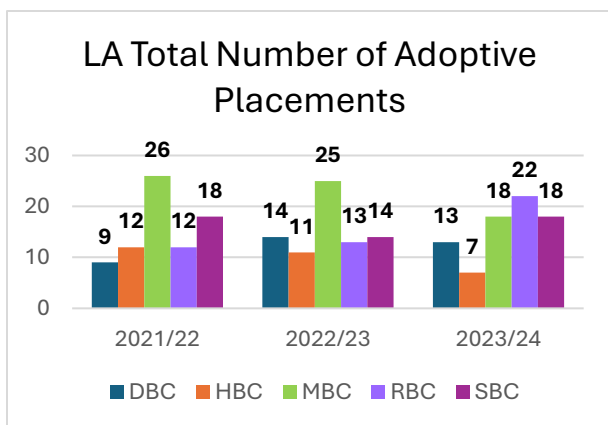


For individual Local Authorities, Middlesbrough has returned to the numbers of ADM's and PO's that is more consistent with previous years after a dip in adoption plans last year.

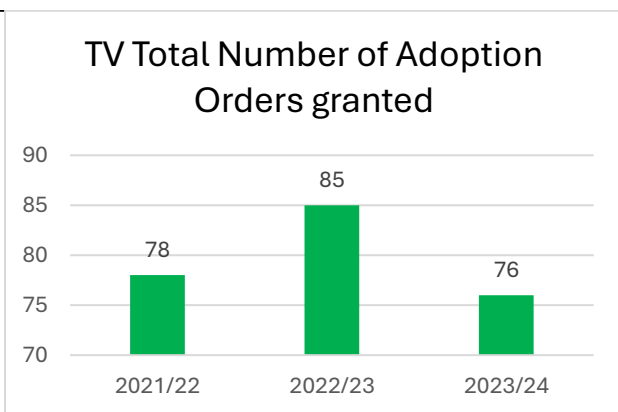
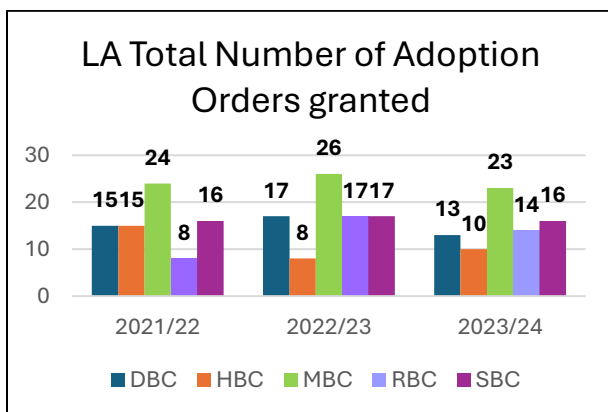
Redcar and Cleveland and Stockton have reduced the numbers of ADM's compared with the previous year, and Redcar and Cleveland had a significant drop in Placement Orders, from 26, to 11.

Hartlepool is seeing a year on year rise in the numbers of children with PO.

The number of children placed for adoption has remained consistent, while placements through early permanence have dropped by 27% (3) since last year.



The numbers of adoption orders have decreased by 10% compared with the previous year.



4.2 Disrupted Placements prior to the Adoption Order

The biggest area of concern over this period has been the numbers of disruptions with 12 children having had a disruption compared with just 1 in the previous year.

In all cases an independently chaired disruption meeting has been convened to understand the reasons why a placement didn't continue as was planned.

Some notable factors have emerged during this analysis, case by case, enabling themes to be considered and analysed.

- All but one child were in a sibling group.
- All the sibling groups included a child over age 7 at the time of placement.
- All but 1 of the children were placed with external adopters, from VAA's or another RAA/LA.
- All but one of the children were placed some distance from the home area.

Other factors associated with assessment of children's needs, care planning, transitions, adopter assessment and contingency planning have emerged. There has been significant reflection on learning from the disruption meetings including with partner LA's at Board, and within ATV. New measures have been put in place to address factors identified from learning and review. However, it is recognised that for older children, there are some inherent risks that moving to a new family, especially at some distance may not work out as planned.

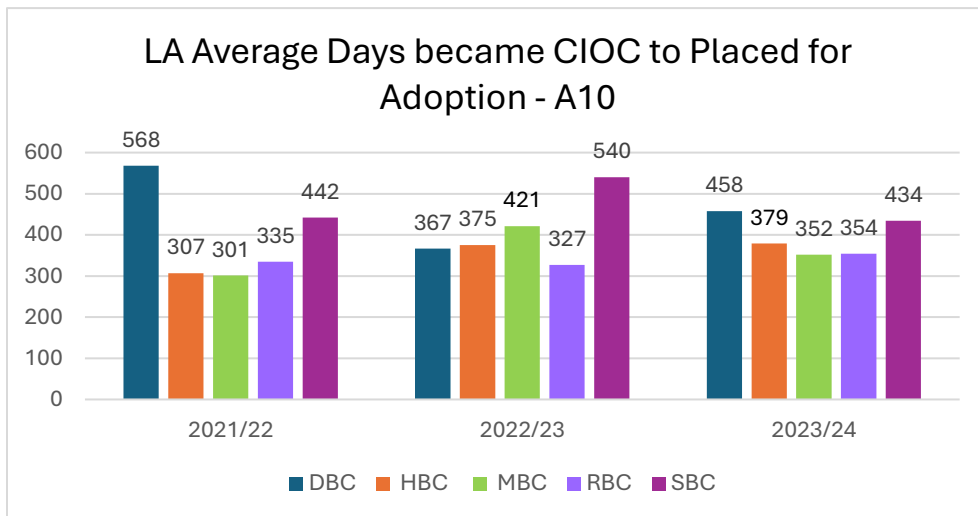
The ATV Board has agreed that increased access to assessment of children's therapeutic needs is required when planning for adoption, and it is agreed that such specialist assessments will be resourced in more cases, and especially for older children and sibling placements.

4.3 Timescales for children for matching and moving in with their adoptive family

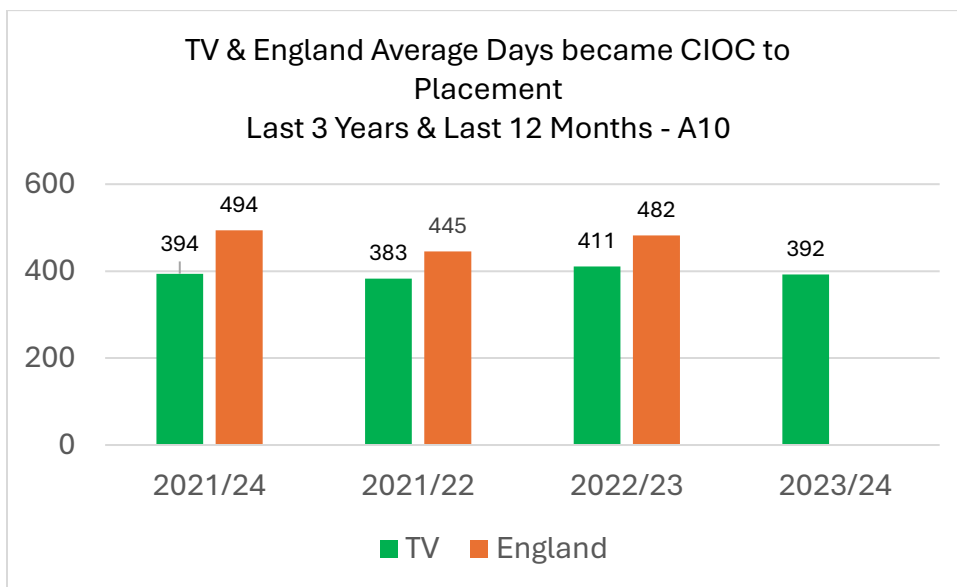
Timeliness of adoption for children has improved compared with the previous year, and ATV continues to find families and progress them to match and placement in good time, on average.

A10- became Child in Our care, to Moving in with Adopter

In adoption we focus most significantly on the time between the child becoming a child in our care and moving in with adoptive parents. This is the A10 timescale, and the government sets 421 days as its target.



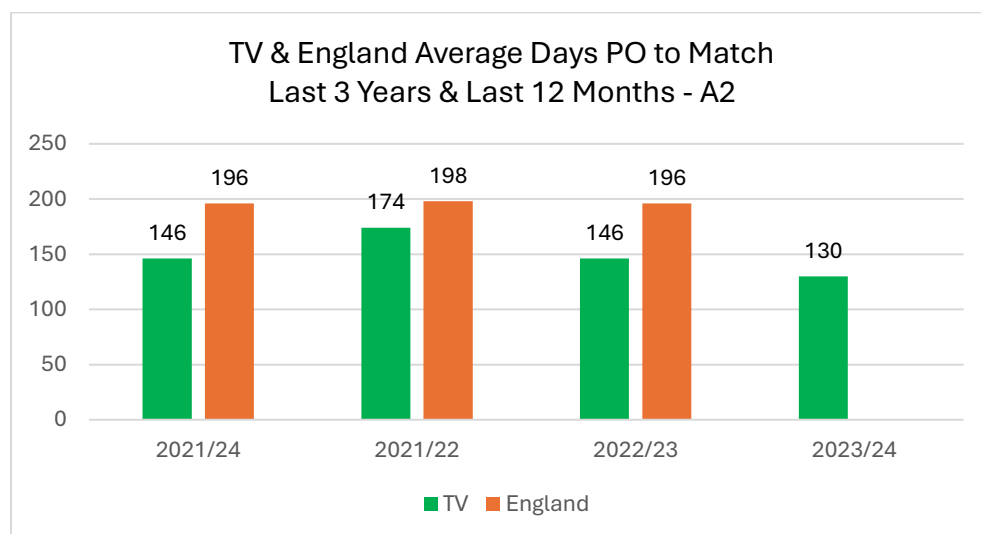
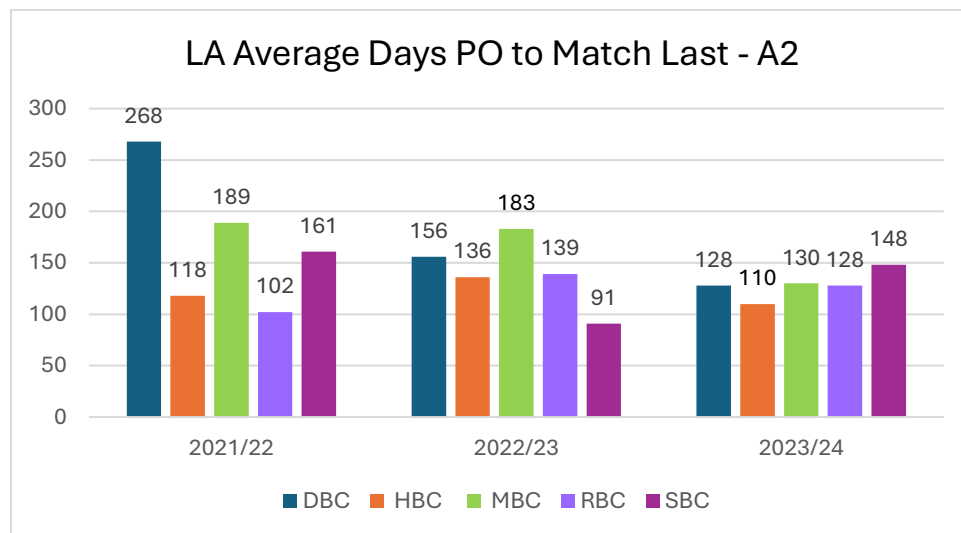
(Data based on children who have been adopted in this year).



ATV continues to perform well against national comparisons and has improved this year. There is an embedded process for early referral of children, and early consideration of potential families who may be linked to the child, in advance of the Placement Order being granted. Its important therefore to monitor the numbers of referrals to ensure that all children are considered at an early stage, even where adoption does not go on to be the final plan.

A2- Placement Order to Match

ATV also measures the time between Placement Order (PO) and matching a child for adoption, this being the time beyond Court decision to award a PO to confirming the match with a family. This is the A2 figure, and the government target timescale is 121 days.



In Tees Valley this figure has reduced over the previous year on average, but remains a little over the government target, although has been better than England average for RAA's.

There is variation in the Local Authority performance around timescale over this year, and caution should be noted in that numbers in adoption are relatively small, therefore small changes in numbers can affect averages.

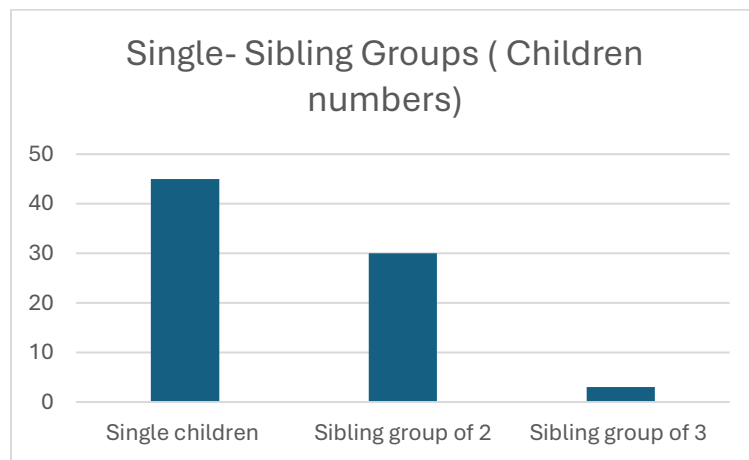
For children adopted in Middlesbrough and Stockton this year, the timeliness of becoming a child in our care to move in with adopters has reduced considerably, while it has increased for Darlington children.

For children from Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland, timeliness from Placement Order to match has reduced in this year, while it has increased for Stockton children.

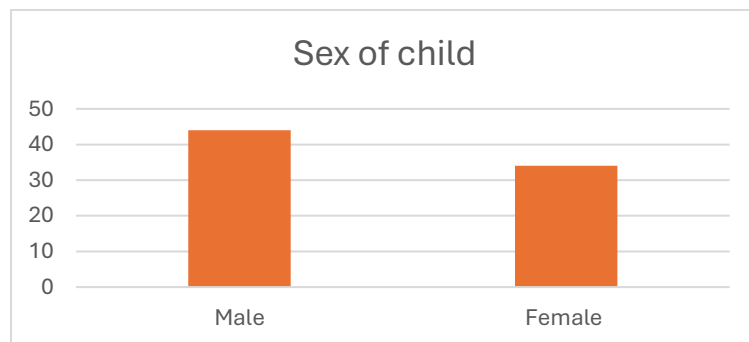
The data is based on the timescales for children who have been adopted in the year.

4.4 Needs of Children Placed and Children Waiting with Placement Order

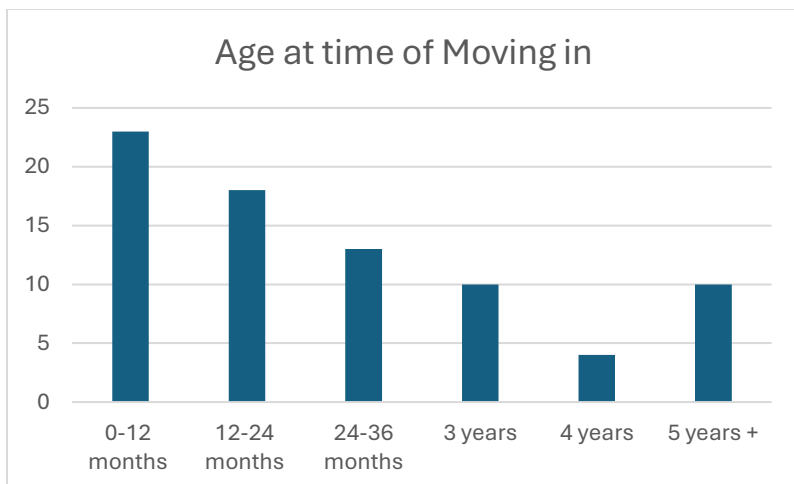
Children Placed



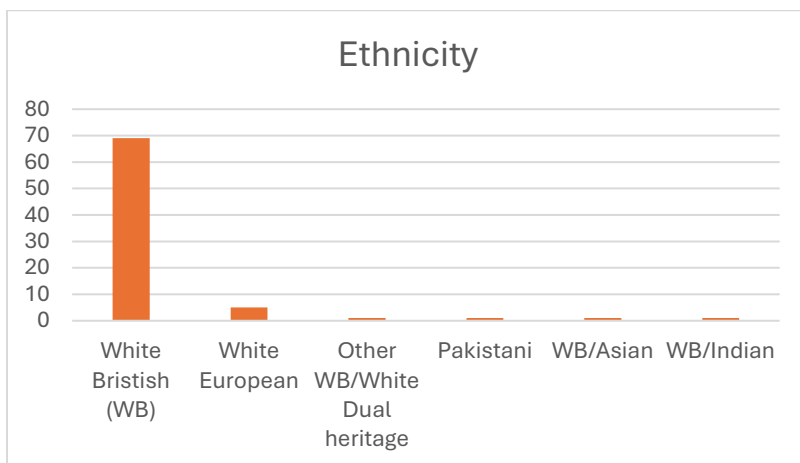
58% of children placed were single children, and 42% of children were in a sibling group, with one sibling group of 3 having been placed together.



56% of children placed were male, and 44% female.



While it continues to be the case that most children placed for adoption are aged under 1 year (29%), and aged 1-2 years (23%) the data shows that in this year 18% of all children were over 4 years, and 13% of the children were over 5 years. ATV has therefore been seeking to find suitable families for a high number of children who are considered harder to match due to age, and factoring in the older children in sibling groups, shows how there are greater risks of disruption, or of not finding suitable families.



The significant majority (88%) of children placed within this year have been of White British background. There were 5 children of White European background, and 4 children of Asian ethnicity, with 3 of these being dual heritage.

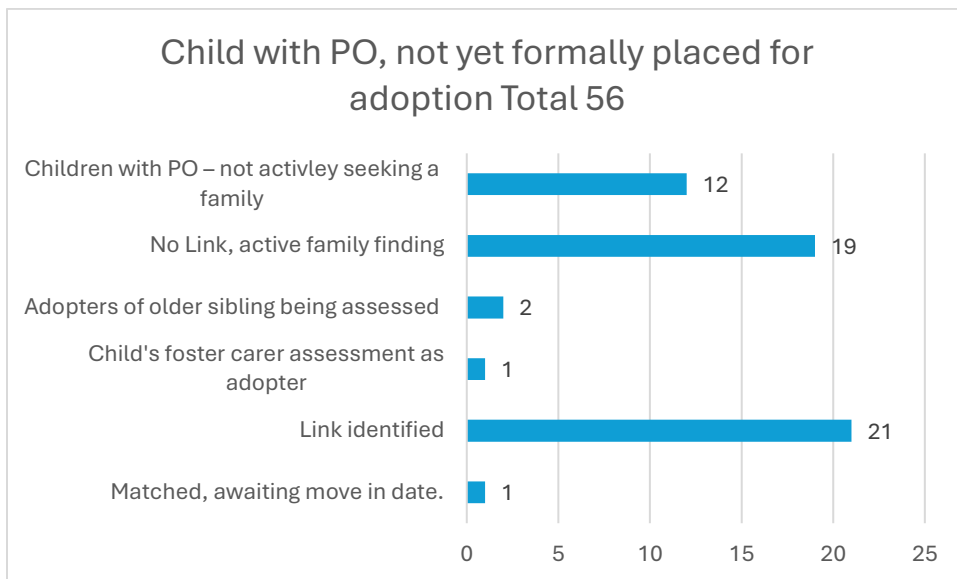
Of the children placed, 13 were considered to have significant emotional/health/learning or neurodivergent needs.

Children waiting with a Placement Order, not yet placed as of 31.3.24.

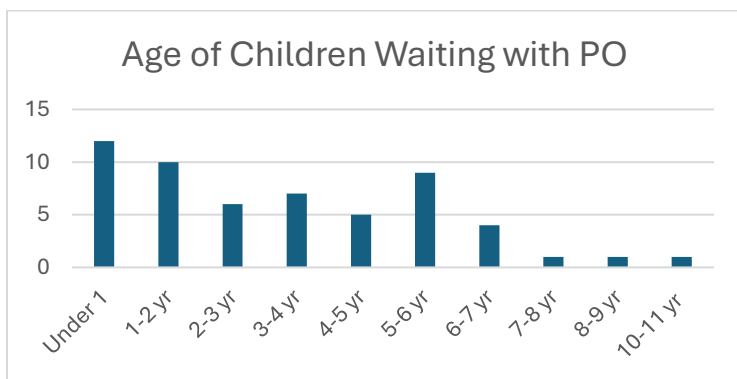
There were 56 children with a Placement Order not yet formally placed for adoption on 31.3.24.

25 had active plans progressing to be adopted by an identified linked family, 19 had no link at that time, and a further 12 were children for whom the Local Authority had ceased active family finding, including children who had had a disruption.

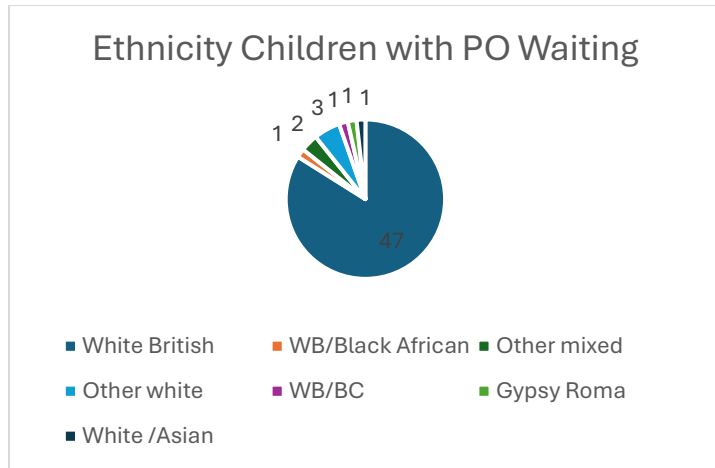
Thus, of the 56 children with a PO, not placed, 19 were children for whom there was active family finding.



Needs of children with a PO, not placed



- Single children- 27
- Sibling groups of 2 children – 10 groups, 20 children
- Sibling groups of 3 children – 3 groups, 9 children



22 children waiting were identified as having additional complex needs, including emotional, attachment, behavioural, and neurodivergency needs.

4.5 Summary of the priority needs for children requiring adoption in Tees Valley

In summary, ATV is currently identifying a high number of children who have a plan of adoption, and with a Placement Order who:

- Are in sibling groups
- Are older children, aged 4 +
- Have additional complex needs associated with early health (FASD), trauma, attachment difficulties, and neurodivergent conditions.

Many of the older children have experience of living in harmful environments, with poor care, and have moved around the foster care system, prior to coming for a plan of adoption.

The implications for strategic planning, and assessment of these children's needs will be part of the forward planning priorities, and vision for ATV moving forward.

4.6 Finding Families for Tees Valley Children

The priority for seeking suitable families for Tees Valley children is internally approved ATV adopters.

Where it is clear no suitable family is available for a child with a progressing adoption plan, ATV uses the strong links established with regional Voluntary Adoption Agencies to seek a placement. The agency also seeks placement with other RAA's in the region.

Children are placed on Linkmaker, the data system for sharing details nationally of children needing families, and of approved adoptive families. Through Linkmaker families are identified across England who wish to express and interest in children waiting.

ATV has promoted children for adoption through Activity Days, funded nationally, and Activity Days held within the RAA's own centre.

4.7 Internal – External Placements

Year	Internal ATV	External	Total
2021-22	58 (75%)	19 (25%)	77
2022-23	52 (67%)	25 (33%)	77
2023-24	51 (65%)	27 (35%)	78

There has been an increased reliance on external VAA's for ATV placements over this year. This is due to lower numbers of approvals, and ATV adopters being unwilling to consider older children and older children in sibling groups.

Notably in this year, more children have gone to VAA's outside of the North East region, with 6 regional VAA placements, and 12 wider external VAA placements.

21 children have been linked through Linkmaker; 1 through an Activity Day; and 4 through local VAA meetings.

5. Recruiting, Preparing and Approving Adopters

Recruitment of adopters has been challenging in this period, for reasons outlined in the Executive Summary.

Additionally, there have been some challenges with timescales for assessment, with stage 1 timescales having met significant delays in some cases due to a small number of factors:

- Delays associated with medical checks. There have been some delays in awaiting the Medical Advisor summary, and in turn the MA's awaiting GP reports. Where prospective adopters (PA) complex health needs, these require further understanding by the MA in stage 1, and this can take time, as the PA consultant is required to provide their opinion.

To address delays, ATV has now worked with the ICB to introduce an additional MA, who will have responsibility for all adult health reports and working with regional GP's.

- Delays associated with worker absence or change of worker.

	Total 2022-23	Total 2023-24	Current c/w previous	England 2023-24 where applicable
Initial contacts/enquiries	309	232	Dec 25%	
Initial Visits to prospective Adopters	106	92	Dec 13%	
Stage 1 Starts	58	60	Inc 3%	
Stage 2 Starts	51	50	Dec 2%	
Adopter Approvals	55	38	Dec 31%	
Carers approved who can do early permanence	10	6	Reduced	
Numbers in assessment at the end of the period	38	41	Inc 8%	
Numbers waiting to be matched at end of period	29	22	Dec 24%	
Timescale S1 (Govt target 60 days)		101	Improved	134
Timescale S2 (Govt target 121 days)	156	139	Improved	150

The key challenge is achieving adoptive parents in this region for the needs of children who require adoption. The high numbers of children who have had a disruption to placements, almost all of which were out of area, indicates that we need to find more people in this region who can offer permanence via adoption to our children.

During this year there has been an adjustment to the settling in allowance offered to the prospective adopters of siblings, whereby all the budget is now

profiled to adopters who will take siblings, with a payment of £3000 to adopters internally approved, who adopt siblings. This in recognition of the very real financial pressures of taking on more than one child at the same time. We need to consider more active profiling of this allowance, and additional supports available to adoptive parents, to encourage more people to feel confident to take the children we need to find families for.

The numbers of prospective adopters who want to do early permanence has reduced in this year which is a downturn from the previous year, and goes against the national trend, which is an increase.

There is a Pan Regional Project for early permanence, which ATV are actively involved in. The reflections from the project consultant, based on analysis of the ATV data is that ATV is operating with a threshold for a concurrency project- a greater emphasis on children returning home, which is leading to more families dropping out of the EP route. This feedback has also been received from adopter feedback. To address this, ATV are refocusing on the balance between preparing carers for the potential for a child to return home, with a realistic picture that most who are placed through EP go on to be adopted.

6. Early Permanence

6.1 Support to Early Permanence carers.

The following supports are available to early permanence carers:

- Dedicated adoption social worker throughout the process
- Training and preparation for early permanence- a 2 day course
- Social Worker led EP support group- STEP
- Additional training and preparation around the fostering role.
- Peer buddy system
- Allocated supervising social worker from the Fostering Service
- Fostering allowance during the fostering period

The Adopter Survey completed in April 2024 gave positive views from adopters who had undertaken early permanence, especially in relation to the support received for EP carers (average 4.8/5). The survey provided feedback that the training is very focused on preparing carers for a child returning home, and as detailed above, the balance of preparation is being reviewed.

Carers feel clear about their fostering role, and the expectations of them during this period, and feel the benefits are an earlier relationship with the child.

6.2 EP Children’s Care Plan Outcomes

In this period, all 8 children placed under early permanence have continued with an adoption plan, with no children having been reunified with parents.

6.3 Working in Partnership with LAs and other agencies

Following national learning, ATV has worked with the 5 LA’s to implement the practice of an ATV worker attending all Legal Gateway meetings. This means early permanence is discussed before the LA initiates care proceedings. At the time of this report, this practice is embedded in 2 of the 5 LA’s- Stockton and Middlesbrough. We are now beginning to see effectiveness in this practice, with more early referrals of children and consideration of EP more widely.

We know we need to influence wider stakeholders to understand and feel confident in planning for early permanence, including understanding it is not a plan of adoption until the PO is granted, and that EP carers are well prepared for this.

There will be a pan regional conference in October 2024, aimed at wider stakeholders in LA’s, CAFCASS and the Judiciary to promote a shared understanding of EP.

There is a decision to plan an Adoption Subcommittee of the Local Family Justice Board, to ensure wider stakeholder engagement with early permanence.

7. Adoption Support

Adoption Tees Valley continues to offer a 3 tier Adoption Support Offer.

Tier 1	Universal
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocated Social Worker until 12 months post adoption order • Adoption Support Plan in all cases • Young People’s Group, exclusively for adopted children within a local youth club venue (age 7-16) • Play and Stay group weekly in ATV, providing support and relationships for adoptive parents and younger children (age up to 5) • Access to CATCH • Loud and Clear music group, run by the Sage within ATV • Family and Friends Network training • Parties and activity days within ATV

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to Keep In Touch (formally Letterbox) – for children, birth parents, and adoptive parents.
<p>Tier 2 Targeted</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Therapeutic parenting support training • Future Stars • Nurturing Attachments • Non-Violent Resistance • Education Support from ATV Education Support Worker
<p>Tier 3 Therapy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Therapeutic services provided commissioned services, and funded through the Adoption Support Fund • Specialist assessment, where needed, through commissioned services • Allocated social worker, for assessment of adoption support needs, and development of an adoption support plan to meet needs.

7.1 Assessment of Adoption Support Needs

ATV has implemented a different process for beginning the assessment of adoption support needs when this is requested by an adoptive parent. There is now an early duty response and a booked telephone session to commence the assessment.

<p>In this period there were 127 assessments of adoption support needs completed, compared with 126 in 2022-23.</p> <p>The average timescale from enquiry to allocation to a social worker was 7 days.</p> <p>The number of applications to the Adoption Support Fund was 267. In many cases the applications are repeated applications and have not had a new assessment of adoption support needs. In 2022-23 this was 289.</p> <p>The value of applications submitted was £943,112.35, compared with £1,060,650 in the previous year.</p>
<p>68 Adoptive parents completed the survey around satisfaction of timeliness of adoption support, and the average rating was 3.99 out of 5.</p> <p>The overall satisfaction with adoption support provided was 4.12 out of 5</p>

It's been brilliant to know we have support if we need it

They have explained all the processes and kept me informed throughout, they have provided good training opportunities and tailored them for my circumstances. They have been a great support through an emotional time. I feel reassured and have no doubts that they will continue to support us after the adoption order has been granted.

My child is benefiting from Theraplay and she is processing information well. Having sessions myself with the same therapist is helping me to help my child and to teach school good therapeutic parenting strategies to help my child. whilst also gaining confidence in the way that I am doing things and handling behaviours at home.

While there were many positive examples of how adoption support assessments have helped children and families, we know some families still feel they wait too long. We aim to increase early access to a social worker where needed and reduce waiting times. We will do this by reviewing the case allocation system and introducing new staff to support Adoption Support Fund applications, giving our social workers more time to undertake face to face work with children and families.

We are introducing a new set of national measures through our case management system to help us improve the quality of data and management oversight of cases, and of timeliness of completion of assessments.

7.2 Stay and Play

The group continues to run weekly within ATV and is well attended by adoptive parents and children in the pre school years. The groups tend to be attended while parents are on adoption leave.

On average 8 parents and their children attend the Play and Stay group each week.

19 families have accessed this support group over the year.

The average satisfaction with Stay and Play in the Adopter Survey was 4.71 out of 5.

To be with other adopters is an amazing source of support and advice.

I love attending group, I feel a connection with all the parents and it's great to discuss my thoughts and get others advice.

We will continue to run our weekly Stay and Play sessions, which we know is great source of peer support, and early help for families.

7.3 Education Support

Education Support is funded via the partnership of the Virtual Schools within the 5 Local Authorities of ATV and continues to be a unique offer within Tees Valley, when considered across the national adoption system. The education support offered is through advice and information, rather than direct classroom support to children, which is provided through the education plan for the child, where needed. The Education Support worker is trained in the Thrive Approach, which is a developmental and trauma sensitive approach and model, also used within education and development settings within this region. The Thrive approach helps to identify gaps in the child's development due to early life experiences and uses games and activities to start helping to address those needs. It is a holistic approach so that schools and parents can deliver the games and implement a consistent approach.

The ESW is also delivering a course on attachment for schools, as part of the Local Authorities and Schools Qualification for teachers. The course is rooted in attachment awareness and trauma informed practice, with an aim of helping education staff to attend to the attachment systems of children, to better help them to settle and to learn.

The course utilises Virtual Reality headsets to help participants engage experientially with the child's lived experience.

The dedicated education support worker within ATV has this year worked with 118 children. This is an increase of 10 children on the previous year, and 26 more than in 2022-23.

The breakdown by Local Authority is set out below.

DBC	23	HBC	14	MBC	18	R&CBC	24	SBC	38
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In the adopter survey 43 families said they were aware of the education support service, 18 said they weren't aware, and 10 were not sure.

Of those who had used the service, the satisfaction with the education support service was 4.67 out of 5

She (ESW) has attended meetings at school and provided school with Thrive training

Attended meetings with school and I to support my son in getting the right help in school to meet his needs.

School staff have also fed back, showing the beneficial impact of the course for teaching staff ...

It was really interesting training, and I loved the VR headsets, as it created a real-life feeling for what some children experience in their everyday life. I still think about it to this day., and how I can adapt my own approaches to fully support our children.

The training yesterday was very eye opening for me. I did the training in my teacher training year with RCTTP and it was hard to relate to the training as much as I couldn't really apply it to my class as I didn't have one at the time. Now having my own class and redoing the training it helped me identify children who could be vulnerable or need additional support.

7.4 Pan Regional Commissioning Project – Innovation in Adoption Support

ATV is working with the wider pan regional RAA's on a commissioning project to innovate in adoption support services. This project is managed alongside the MDASS Project and has input from the North Tyneside lead Commissioning Manager in Children's Services. The vision is that all 3 NE based RAA's will use the experience and guidance of the commissioning project to develop a new adoption support offer across the 3 RAA's, which will serve to better unify the supports available to all North East based adoptive families, and will meet current gaps in service delivery.

This funded project is in its early days, however, a needs analysis exercise has taken place, and all adoption staff across the 3 RAA's have been surveyed for their views on where are the gaps, and what the barriers are.

7.5 Birth Parent Support and Access to Records

ATV has commenced a new contract for these 2 elements of adoption support, following a re-tendering process, supported by Stockton BC Procurement team.

The contract was awarded to Arc Adoption NE, having previously been delivered by Adoption Matters. Arc Adoption NE provided best value in tendering and offer significant expertise in the specialist adoption arena.

The contract commenced 1.4.23 and is a 2 year contract.

Birth Parent Support

Arc Adoption NE provide the statutory independent birth parent support through counselling advice and information, from the time at which adoption is the local Authority plan for the child. This service is complemented by ATV who can offer support to birth parents, in setting up Keep In Touch arrangements, and with ongoing Keep In Touch.

There were 94 new birth parents referred to the service within this period.

At the yearend, 74 birth parents were "active" to the service, i.e. actively engaged with receiving a service from Arc Adoption NE in respect of support around their child's adoption.

Access to Adoption Records

Arc Adoption provide the statutory service to adult adoptees and their birth relatives in respect of accessing birth records around adoption. The service requires sensitive and experienced counselling, redaction of records as required, and provision of a report for the adult adoptees. The service interfaces with each of the 5 Local Authorities in the partnership, who continue to hold children's adoption records.

55 individuals accessed their birth records in this period, of which 48 were pre-commencement and 7 were post commencement. This refers to the legislation governing access at the time of the adoption, which changed in December 2005, to increase rights and access to information for any adopted person over the age of 18.

Overall, Arc Adoption NE have worked closely with ATV to take on the existing cases, and new referrals, ensuring a smooth transfer of responsibility for this

sensitive area of the work. ATV and Arc meet quarterly to review the contract and ensure any anomalies are given due focus.

8. Voice and Influence of Young People, and Adoptive Parents

ATV has an established young people's group which has run for the previous 2 years and was in operation prior to the pandemic.

Over this year, the groups for young people have changed, with the previous 2 young people's group being brought to one single group, for adopted children and young people aged 7-16 years.

A second group is the Voice and influence Group and has a clear focus on enabling children and young people to have a voice and influence ATV practice and that beyond.

8.1 Young People's Group

In ATV we are proud that we now have an established group for adopted young people and have directed its development with the feedback received from young people and their parents. We have brought together adopted children from age 7-16 to meet monthly, with the aim of promoting a positive identity for young people around adoption and enabling them to build friendships and confidence through the group.

Young people fed back last year that they would like more opportunity for activities and a more "young person" focused setting. Previously the group ran in the ATV Centre, however, now runs in a local youth club, with dedicated access only to ATV for that evening session. This means that ATV can offer the opportunity for young people with a wide range of needs and preferences to meet and use the facilities and activities on offer, while building friendships and relationships. Activities such as table football, crafts, and games consoles are taken up by the young people. The young people wanted to have a tuck shop available which is now running, and there is also a sensory room for young people who need a calmer environment.

Feedback is positive from children and parents, with many parents also taking the opportunity to meet with other adopters and build their own networks too.

In the period November 2023- July 2024 there have been 8 sessions run in the Youth Club, with 29 young people accessing this group regularly, and 9 who have attended all sessions.

Children said...

I have made 2 friends, and they are nice and so are the ladies who are there.

I have enjoyed meeting other adopted children.

A parent said....

"As a family I wish we had done this a long time ago. It is really heartwarming to us all as a family especially A and myself. Knowing that there is support. Also, it helps both boys build up a resilience. Seeing others in a similar situation. I feel this will help both of the boys feel and see that adoption is just part of life. They are no different. To see other children feel as ease., play, chat. .. take part in activities gives them all a great foundation and positive memories to hold on to always".

"For a little while B has often felt different due to being adopted and has had lots of questions. She finds it reassuring and comforting when she spends time around other adopted children, she finds it comforting that she's not the only one. B benefits from attending the group as it gives her the chance of socialising with other adopted children".

Feedback through the Adopter Survey indicated that there is a gap for children aged 5-7 as children pre-school can access the Play and Stay Group and aged over 7 can access the Youth Group. Currently, ATV doesn't have staffing resources to run a third group, however, we will continue to look at what can be offered to children in this age group, on a regular basis.

8.2 Voice and Influence

The ATV Voice and Influence group has been running now for around 12 months. 4 young people are active members. ATV reached out to all families in regular contact, however, this small group are the pioneers of Voice and Influence in ATV. The group have named themselves AdoptBats, and they meet monthly with 2 staff from ATV.

Currently, they young people are bringing together their voice and view through a creative project with Blue Cabin which is co-producing a film about what its like to be adopted. Young people are concerned about how adopted

young children feel and cope in school; about life story work, and about Keep in Touch arrangements with birth family and parents.

Current plans are underway to deliver a launch of their film, at a dedicated event for wider stakeholders, which will include Board members, Virtual School Heads, adoption social workers and other young, adopted people.

The young people attended and met with the Middlesbrough Council Corporate Parenting Board in 2023, to share their ideas about what work they are doing and what's important to them.

8.3 Adopter Forum

ATV Adopter Forum runs monthly and is a small group of adoptive parents who meet with managers from ATV to review agency practice with adopters' views in mind. The Adopter Forum have supported the implementation of a weekend event and have advised that more support forums and groups should be held outside of usual working hours, leading to a co-produced event with the Darlington heritage railway museum due to take place in July 2024.

The forum has shared views about the way in which early permanence is supported and have assisted with development of the 2024 adopter survey, and have reviewed feedback.

9. Panel

The Adoption panel sits weekly and is now held once per month as a face to face panel, with all other panels being virtual. Due to pressure on panel, it has been operation practice to schedule 5 panels per month.

There have been 61 panel meetings in the year.

There are 2 Independent Chairs of Panel, and 2 vice chairs of panel, 3 of whom are social workers, with significant senior management experience in adoption work, and one who is an adoptive parent with significant panel experience. There are 32 central list members, and 5 Medical Advisors. Diversity of adoption panel members has increased over the last year in respect of more males, and a member with lived experience of being adopted. Despite significant efforts it has not been possible to recruit a more ethnically diverse panel to date.

Panel is managed and led by a manager within ATV, who also acts as the Agency Advisor to Panel.

The panel manager has developed a stronger quality assurance (QA) mechanism, with QA feedback from all people who are involved in panel helping to improve quality, consistency and the experience of adopters and others attending. There is a quarterly quality assurance report which is provide to Local Authority senior managers to provide feedback on the quality of reports presented.

Central list members have a programme of training and engagement, with quarterly newsletters providing feedback on the outcomes of panel, and updates on relevant agency or legislative matters.

Panel members have undertaken training within this year on:

- Cultural Humilities
- Trauma Timeline, and trauma informed practice
- Early permanence
- Culture change in adoption

A full report on panel business and quality of practice is provide to the ATV Board on a 6 monthly basis.

10. Quality Assurance

ATV operates from a position of continuous improvement, across all areas of the work. The service continually develops and seeks to improve through alignment with wider sector influences, changes, and developments; its own feedback mechanisms; audit; research; inspection; self-assessment.

Quality assurance is carried out through a variety of mechanisms. Key means of assuring quality are outlined below, and the service plan 2023-25 is underpinned by a cross cutting platform of continuous improvement and quality assurance. The ATV Board has a role in being assured of quality of the service delivery, and a risk register is in place around key areas of risk for delivery, and/or quality concerns. At a recent Board Away day it was decided that we will work together to review the vision for ATV moving forward.

Service Plan

There is a service plan, which has been developed through work with managers and staff, and is reflective of local development, and the national strategy and agenda on adoption. This plan will be updated quarterly and presented to the ATV Board with monitoring of progress against target measures, and outcomes.

Practice Models

The service adopts elements of several key practice models in delivery of the adoption service.

The **Secure Base Model** (Schofield and Beek) is an operational model of attachment for children placed with alternative care givers and is used in preparation training and in assessment of adopters, and adoption support.

The **UEA Moving on to Adoption** is adopted in practice in many cases and is adapted dependent on the needs of the child, and family. Learning from our disruptions indicates we have more work to do within the wider system to understand the core principles of this model and implementation in practice. Moves due to foster carer circumstances remain a stubborn issue in this region. As detailed above, the service has adopted the **Trauma Timeline**, and is promoting trauma informed practice, within the RAA's own work, and across partner agencies.

Aspects of **Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy and Practice (DDP)** (Dan Hughes) are supported through the service delivery, including PACE parenting. 8 staff have now received level 1 training in DDP and it is planned for more to undertake this.

The Education Support worker is trained in the **Thrive** approach and adopts this within work with families and across schools.

ATV adopts a relational based approach throughout its work, both with families and children, and with staff in the service.

Performance Monitoring

The RAA collates detailed adoption performance data, as required by the (former) ASGLB for quarterly returns. ATV has a key role in co-ordinating with partner LAs on adoption performance data. A quarterly balanced scorecard (BSC) is produced, which details performance measures, as set out within this annual report. There is a quarterly meeting with each Local Authority adoption service lead, to review each individual LA performance, key practice themes, and also for the LA to be assured about the adoption service. The BSC is presented quarterly to the ATV Board.

Panel

Panel forms a key QA function for the work of ATV and partner agencies. In this year a separate Panel Quality Assurance Action plan has been developed, which is shared and reviewed by the Panel manager, Service Manager, and panel chairs.

Surveys and Feedback

An adopter survey has been undertaken, as reported on above. Changes have been made as a result of feedback and will continue to be made.

Children and Young people have fed back on the groups that have been run. The voice and Influence group will have a role in seeking children and young people's views more widely.

Policies Review 2024

ATV policies have been reviewed to ensure that they reflect current and most up to date practice and expectations.

Policies will be available on the ATV website.

Supervision

All staff receive monthly supervision in ATV, which includes reflective practice. All staff have an annual appraisal which sets out their further personal development plan for the year ahead, aligned to their own career and role, and service planning.

Workforce Development

The service offers and supports workforce development, aligned to service and sector development, and learning needs of staff. Workforce development may be through attending a training event, shadowing, or through group reflective sessions.

Examples within this year are:

- Culture Change in Adoption
- DDP training – level 1
- Matching Standards Training
- EP Practice Standards

3 managers have undertaken level 5 management qualification. This will strengthen the management capacity in ATV and support overall succession planning.

Audit

Audits have been regularly carried out with staff involved in individual cases. The audit process has been LA specific in this year, due to a number of partner LA's undergoing full ILACS inspections by Ofsted.

Audit has helped the service reflect on quality of case records and ensuring that records reflect what an adopted person may need in the future. It has also informed practice standards and implementing these within the team.

Ofsted

One of the partner LA's, Hartlepool, has been inspected by Ofsted, which includes inspection of the RAA- Adoption Tees Valley, through the lens of the Local Authority. Hartlepool received an Outstanding grading, and ATV was positively recognised within the report.

11. Finance

11.1 2023/24 Financial Year End Position

The year end position for the Adoption Tees Valley budget is presented below:

Expenditure	Budget 2023/24	Outturn 2023/24	Variance 2023/24
Employees	1,767,000	1,680,000	(87,000)
Running Costs	264,000	349,000	85,000
Support Service Costs	113,000	115,000	2,000
Interagency Fees	500,000	525,000	25,000
Total	2,644,000	2,669,000	25,000

Employee costs underspent due to delays filling vacant posts in year and savings on staff mileage.

Running costs overspent due to:-

- additional utility costs of premises, noting that the Emergency Duty Team has been co-located for the past 24 months and utility costs have risen due to this (24-hour heating and lighting)
- additional adoption support and post adoption costs, associated with placements with Voluntary Adoption Agencies where the child (ren) has not been adopted within a 12-month period.

11.2 Interagency Fees

Interagency fees exceeded the budget figure by £25,000. Additional contributions from each Local Authority are as follows:

	Percentage	Budget 23/24	Actual Cost 23/24	Additional 23/24
Darlington	15.95%	80,000	84,000	4,000
Hartlepool	14.22%	71,000	75,000	4,000
Middlesbrough	27.16%	136,000	142,000	6,000
Redcar & Cleveland	15.95%	80,000	84,000	4,000
Stockton	26.72%	133,000	140,000	7,000
	100.00%	500,000	525,000	25,000

11.3 Contributions for 2024/25

Contributions from each Local Authority will remain at the same percentages in 2024/25, as in 2023/24.

The ATV Board has commenced a review of the financial contribution percentage from partner local Authorities, to ensure that there is an equitable and fair allocation of costs, commencing 2025-28.

12. Priorities for Forward Planning

The annual report and review provide the data evidence, linked to the wider national adoption strategy, for setting priorities for ATV for the forthcoming year. As detailed in the Executive Summary, ATV Board have sought to establish a Vision for ATV for the next 3 years, based on national adoption developments, and learning from practice through independently chaired disruption meetings. What is clear is that children's long-term outcomes, and the wellbeing of adoptive and birth families is a high priority for ATV, and its partner agencies. The priorities for the forthcoming year are:

1. Recruiting more adoptive parents locally, who can take the children we need to find families for.

We will strengthen marketing, and the first contact enquiry process, to reduce delay, and strengthen a consistent approach from a small dedicated and experienced team.

We will promote the offer of the settling in allowance for ATV adopters who can take siblings.

We will continue to review the core “offer” for adopters for more complex children with our partner LA’s and Board.

We will work together with partner LAs to ensure that there is an adoption experienced, ATV led consideration of local adopters, for children, when planning for permanence.

2. Children’s voices will be heard, and young people will have an influence in how adoption services and wider services consider the needs of adopted people.

We will produce the Voice and Influence film with Adoptbats, and will ensure that it s used for wider stakeholder awareness raising.

We will hold an event for Board and stakeholders, with Adoptbats, to share young people’s views on what needs to change.

We will ask Adoptbats to help achieve the engagement and views or more adopted young people, to make sure we are listening to, and involving adopted children in having their say.

3. Learning from Disruptions

We will use the learning from independently chaired disruptions to inform ATV practice, and wider LA practice in care planning for adoption.

ATV Board will have oversight of disruptions in adoption.

We will work with the national planned research into disruption in adoption.

4. Early Permanence Planning will continue to be a priority

We will review the balance of key messaging around what early permanence is for adoptive parents in the early stages of their journey with ATV.

We will work with all 5 LA’s to develop mechanisms for ATV involvement in legal gateway planning.

We will involve ADM's in the LA where there is a difference of view between ATV and the LA around an EP plan for the child.

We will contribute to leadership of the pan regional conference on EP for wider stakeholders.

We will contribute to a LFJB plan for early permanence, and be part of a wider Adoption Sub Committee on Adoption.

5. Culture change in adoption practice will be promoted through ATV and partner agency practice and development

We will hold a team event on Culture Change in Adoption.

We will promote learning and awareness through workforce development in partner LA's and wider stakeholders.

The ATV Board will provide leadership on Culture Change through their role in ATV and in partner agencies, and through a shared vision statement.

We will promote the pan regional conference at which the UK leading adoption academic, Professor Beth Neil, will provide the keynote speech on Culture Change and Early Permanence.

6. Access to Adoption Support – the right help at the right time.

We will review the caseload allocation and our case holding system, to reduce active case holding by a social worker, enabling swifter access to assessment of adoption support needs.

We will work with the pan regional MDASS service, and with the pan regional commissioning project, to seek to implement new and better ways of allocating the right assessment and support to families.

We will implement the new data reporting measures in the AS system, to ensure we can deliver the new national AS data reports.

We will continue with our 3 tier adoption support system, encouraging take up and access to all tiers, by children and parents.

7. Retaining a high-quality staffing team

We will work to ensure that staff have access to high quality training and supervision that gives high job satisfaction and maintains skills and motivation.

We will create opportunities for progression and development wherever possible.

We will creatively use the skills and experience of ATV staff to help ATV development, and to develop the workforce in wider partner agencies.

Vicky Davidson Boyd

July 2024

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 28th October 2024

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS QUARTER 1 2024-25

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Members with an update on performance against key performance indicators.

Summary

2. This report provides performance information (April 2024- June 2024) in line with an indicator set agreed by Monitoring and Coordination Group on 2 July 2018, and subsequently by Scrutiny Committee Chairs.
3. It is suggested monitoring focuses on issues and exceptions, and relevant Assistant Directors will attend the meeting to respond to queries raised by the committee regarding the performance information contained within this report.
4. Where indicators are reported annually, quarterly updates will not be available.

Where are we performing well?

5. 0.5% referrals took over 3 working days to be completed in Q1 2024/25 which is outperforming our target of 5%.
6. At the end of Q1 2024/25, there were 205 families, 416 children open to the Building Stronger Families team. A further 60 families with 108 children were open to an external agency supporting the families.
7. In Q1 2024/25, 100 % of all Return Home Interviews (RHI) (excluding children from other authorities) were offered, 81.6% of which were offered within 72 hours and 71.1% of the children engaged in their RHI.
8. 259 children had a C&F assessment completed in Q1 2024/25. This is below the 418 assessments started in Q1 2023/24, but still double the number started in Q1 2021/22 (135). 89.6% of C&F assessments were completed with the 45-day timescale. This is an increase to previous years and evidence of targeted work and support.
9. 115 children were subject to a Child Protection plan (CP) as at the end of June 2024 with a rate of 51.7 per 10,000 population with a CP plan. This is an increase on previous years and comparable to the increase in CiN plans open and decrease in Children in Care seen during the same period last year.
10. 100% of Child Protection Cases were allocated to a qualified social worker.

11. 291 children were in care as at June 2024, 19 (6.5%) of which are unaccompanied asylum-seekers. 10 children from Darlington came into care in Q1 2024/25 from 9 families. This is a significant decrease when compared with the 46 children who came into care in Q1 2023/24.
12. 8.7% of our CiC, as of June 2024, have had 3 or more placements within the previous 12 months. This is below target (10%), which is an improvement as we have remained above target for some time.
13. 9.3% of our CiC have been placed 20 or more miles away from home as of June 2024 which is the lowest number of children in over a year. This relates to young people who have been placed in residential care due to their disability / placed with family / or placed for adoption, and this provision is not available within 20 miles.
14. 93.8% of our care leavers aged 19-21 and 96.5% of our care leavers aged 22-25 were in suitable accommodation at the end of June 2024. 12.5% of the young people, aged 19-21, were engaging in education including studies beyond A level, and 70.3% young people were in training or employment (34.4% in full time and 35.9% in part time). 5.3% young people, aged 22-25, were engaging in education (all of which are in studies beyond A level) and 77.2% young people were in training or employment (22.8% in full time and 54.4% in part time).

Where do we need to improve?

15. In Q1 2024/25, 81.0% of the children had their referral completed within 1 working day not meeting our 90% target.
16. 77.5% of Child Protection statutory visits were completed within 10 working days in Q1 2024/25 and 94.9% of the visits were completed within 15 working days. Although below target (90%), this is an improvement on Q1 2023/24 where 70.1% of visits occurred within timescale.
17. 73.5% of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC) were held within 15 working days from the strategy meeting / section 47 being initiated, excluding children who were transferred-in conference, Q1 24/25. We work with partner agencies who need notice so that they can prepare reports and arrange for someone to attend the meeting. The decision that there is a need for an Initial Child Protection Conference is one that needs to be made within a short timeframe. Generally, this means that the decision needs to be made in less than 10 working days.

When dealing with complex situations this can be a challenge for the social worker and their managers. Performance has dropped in recent times due to late notification by the Social Work Teams that a Child Protection Conference is needed. This is being continually monitored through Performance Clinics. This measure is below the target of 95%.

18. 80.0% of the initial CiC reviews and 81.2% of subsequent review were carried out in timescale. At the end of March 2024, to enable better quality reviews to be undertaken, the decision was taken by the Senior Leadership Team that if the Social Worker's report was not completed for the Child's Looked After Review, then the meeting would be rearranged. In Quarter 1, this decision has impacted on the number of reviews held within the required timescale (both initial and subsequent Reviews). The decision was taken due to reviews being held without full information being available. This is being monitored through Performance Clinics.
19. 84.6% of statutory visits for Children in Care (CiC) were completed in timescale in Q1 2024/25. This is an improved performance compared to Q1 2023/24 (81.8%) but remains below target (90%).
20. Currently, 59.0% of our Children in Care aged under 16 (who have been looked after for at least 2.5 years) have been in their current placement continuously for at least 2 years. This is below our 68% target and due to some safeguarding placement moves taking place in June, it has taken us below 60% which is the lowest performance in over a year.

Recommendation

1. It is recommended:
 - a) That performance information provided in this report is reviewed and noted, and relevant queries raised with the appropriate Assistant Director.

Chris Bell
Assistant Director of Children's Services

Background papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Sharon Raine Head of Performance and Transformation: Extension 6091

Council Plan	This report contributes to the Council Plan by involving Members in the scrutiny of performance relating to the delivery of key outcomes with regards to Childrens Social Care.
Addressing inequalities	This involves members in the scrutiny of the level to which Childrens Social Care contributes to ensuring that opportunities are accessible to everyone, with a focus on ensuring a good job, home and/or social connections for all.
Tackling Climate Change	This report does not identify any issued relating to climate change.
Efficient and effective use of resources	This report allows for the scrutiny of performance which is integral to optimising outcomes and ensuring efficient use of resources.
Health and Wellbeing	This report supports performance improvement relating to improving the health and wellbeing of residents.
S17 Crime and Disorder	This report supports the Councils Crime and Disorder responsibilities.
Wards Affected	This report supports performance improvement across all Wards.
Groups Affected	This report supports performance improvement which benefits all groups.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report may have an impact on their emotional and physical health, social development, education, and future employment.



DARLINGTON
Borough Council

Children's Social Care Performance & Practice Report

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Quarter 1 2024/25

Scrutiny

Scrutiny

Quarter 1 2024-25 Performance Summary

Referrals: 123 referrals, involving 210 children were started in Q1 2024/25, a decrease on the 226 referrals in Q1 2023/24. 81.0% (170 / 210) of the children had their referral completed within 1 working day in Q1 2024/25, not meeting our 90% target, however the timescale is comparable to Q1 2023/24 (81.1%). 0.5% took over 3 working days to be completed in Q1 2024/25 which is outperforming our target of 5%.

Re-Referrals: In Q1 2024/25, 40 of the 210 children referred (19.1%), from 24 families, was a new referral within 12 months of their last referral starting. This is above target (18%), but a large reduction on the 86 children re-referred during Q1 2023/24. Due to the reduction in referrals being open to social care, it has resulted in a high percentage calculated, although the actual number is the lowest seen in a quarter since Q4 2021/22.

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Building Stronger Families: At the end of Q1 2024/25, there were 205 families, 416 children open to the Building Stronger Families team. A further 60 families with 108 children were open to an external agency supporting the families.

282 children from 125 families closed to the Building Stronger Families team (BSF) in Q1 2024/25. 80.8% (101 / 125) of the families (225 children), made a degree of progress during this time resulting in either a step down to universal services or closure. This is a positive increase compared to the 71.7% of families that closed in Q1 2023/24 with a degree of progress.

Missing: The total number of missing episodes in Q1 2024/25 was 49 involving 31 individual children and young people. This is a reduction compared to Q1 2023/24 which saw 117 episodes of missing involving 58 individual children. The reduction is mainly seen in the missing of CiC young people.

In Q1 2024/25, 100% of all Return Home Interviews (RHI) (excluding children from other authorities) were offered, 81.6% of which were offered within 72 hours and 71.1% of the children engaged in their RHI.

Children & Families Assessments: 259 children had a C&F assessment completed in Q1 2024/25. This is below the 418 assessments started in Q1 2023/24, but still nearly double the number started in Q1 2021/22 (135). 89.6% of C&F assessments were completed with the 45 day timescale. This is a positive increase to previous years and evidence of targeted work and support.

Section 47 Enquiries: 66 section 47 enquires were started in Q1 2024/25, involving 120 individual children, 10 of which were already on an open Child Protection (CP) plan. This a reduction on the 111 section 47 enquiries started during Q1 2023/24.

Child Protection Conference timeliness: 73.5% of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC) were held within 15 working days from the strategy meeting / section 47 being initiated, excluding children who were transferred-in conference, during Q1 2024/25.

We work with partner agencies who need notice so that they can prepare reports and arrange for someone to attend the meeting. The decision that there is a need for an Initial Child Protection Conference is one that needs to be made within a short timeframe. Generally, this means that the decision needs to be made in less than 10 working days.

When dealing with complex situations this can be a challenge for the social worker and their managers. Performance has dropped in recent times due to late notification by the Social Work Teams that a Child Protection Conference is needed. This is being continually monitored through Performance Clinics. This measure is below the target of 95%.

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Child Protection Plans: 115 children were subject to a Child Protection plan (CP) as at the end of June 2024 with a rate of 51.7 per 10,000 population with a CP plan. Of the 30 children who became subject to a CP plan in 2024/25, 7 became subject to a CP plan for a second or subsequent time within 2 years of the previous plan ending (23.3%), and 9 children (30.0%) had been subject to a CP plan for a second time ever. The target for this measure is 6%, but due to the lower numbers starting a plan, this has resulted in a very high percentage.

Child Protection Statutory visits: 77.5% (666 / 859) of Child Protection statutory visits were completed within 10 working days in Q1 2024/25 and 94.9% (815 / 859) of the visits were completed within 15 working days. Although below target (90%), this is an improvement on Q1 2023/24 where 70.1% of visits occurred within timescale.

Children in Care: 291 children were in care as at June 2024, 19 (6.5%) of which are unaccompanied asylum-seekers. 10 children from Darlington came into care in Q1 2024/25 from 9 families. This is a significant decrease when compared with the 46 children who came into care in Q1 2023/24. 1 young person came into care after accepted by the Home Office as UASC (Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child). 18 children and young people, from 18 families ceased to be in care in Q1 2024/25.

Children in Care Reviews: 100.0% of Children in Care (CiC) were allocated to a qualified social worker, 80.0% of the initial CiC reviews and 81.2% of subsequent review were carried out in timescale.

At the end of March 2024, to enable better quality reviews to be undertaken, the decision was taken by the Senior Leadership Team that if the Social Worker's report was not completed for the Child's Looked After Review, then the meeting would be rearranged. In Quarter 1, this decision has impacted on the number of reviews held within the required timescale (both initial and subsequent reviews). The decision was taken due to reviews being held without full information being available. This is being monitored through Performance Clinics.

Children in Care Statutory visits: 84.6% (695 / 822) of statutory visits for Children in Care (CiC) were completed in timescale in Q1 2024/25. This is an improved performance compared to Q1 2023/24 (81.8%) but remains below target of 90%.

Children in Care Placements: 8.7% of our CiC, as of June 2024, have had 3 or more placements within the previous 12 months. This is below target (10%), an improvement as we have remained above target for some time. Currently, 59.0% of our Children in Care aged under 16 (who have been looked after for at least 2.5 years) have been in their current placement continuously for at least 2 years. This is below our 68% target and due to some safeguarding placement moves taking place in June, it has taken us below 60% which is the lowest performance in over a year.

89.3% of our CiC have been placed 20 or more miles away from home as of June 2024, positively the lowest number of children in over a year. This relates to young people who have been placed in residential care due to their disability / placed with family / or placed for adoption, and this provision is not available within 20 miles.

Initial Health Assessments: 70% of IHA's completed in Q1 2024/25 were completed within the required timescale of 5 days and 88.9% of those children received a health assessment within 20 days.

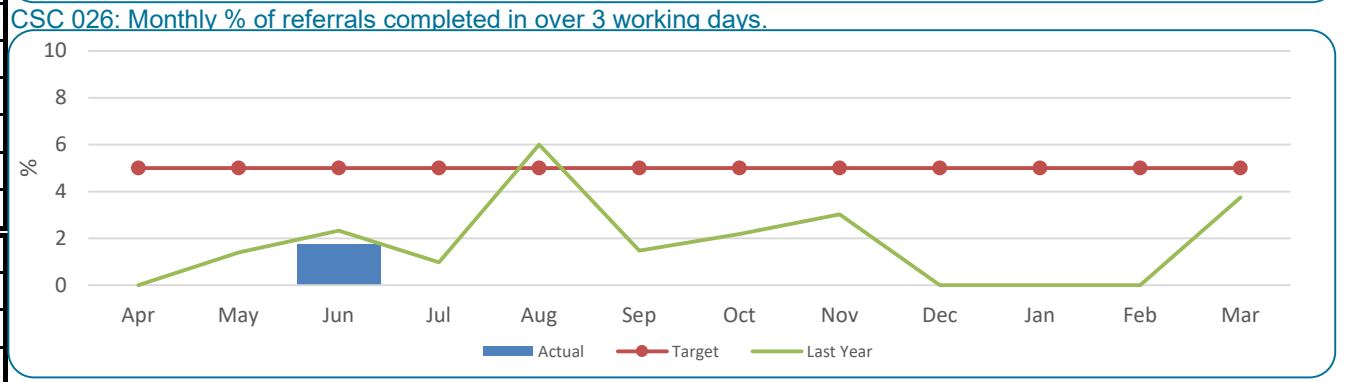
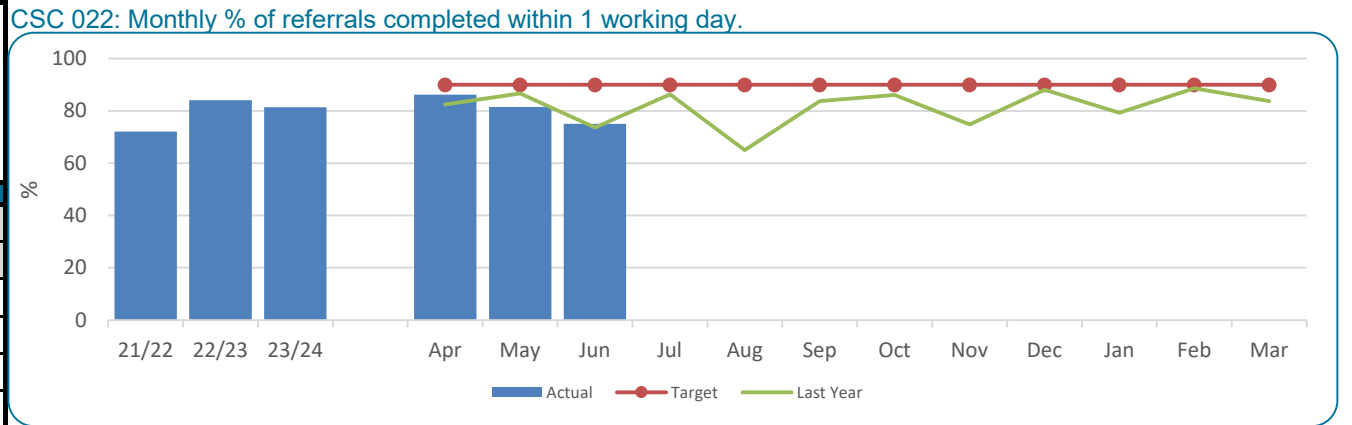
Health and Dental Reviews: 72.5% of children due a review health assessment by June 2024 have had one completed and 26% of the children in care have an up-to-date health check. Currently only 2.9% of the children and young people are refusing to attend a health review. 26.5% of children due a dental health assessment by June 2024 have had one completed. Currently 5.9% of the children and young people are refusing to attend a dental check-up. The young people are continually reminded of the benefits of having a check-up and encouraged to take part.

Care Leavers: 93.8% of our care leavers aged 19-21 and 96.5% of our care leavers aged 22-25 were in suitable accommodation at the end of June 2024. 12.5% of the young people, aged 19-21, were engaging in education including studies beyond A level, and 70.3% young people were in training or employment (34.4% in full time and 35.9% in part time). 5.3% young people, aged 22-25, were engaging in education (all of which are in studies beyond A level) and 77.2% young people were in training or employment (22.8% in full time and 54.4% in part time).

REFERRALS: TIMELINESS

DEFINITION Percentage of referrals completed within 1 working day and over 3 working days. Referrals completed within 1 working day indicates that decisions regarding the services required are made in a timely manner to minimise drift and delay and to ensure that children are safe.

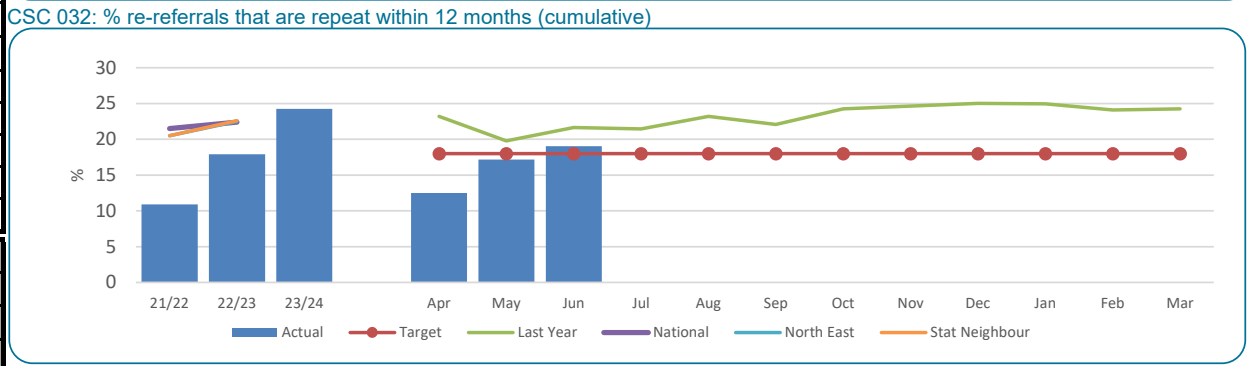
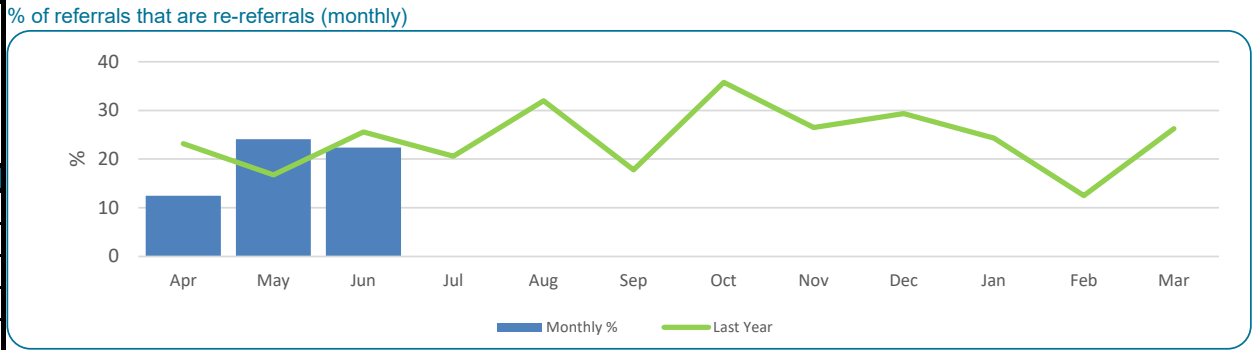
		CSC 022	CSC 026
		Monthly % of referrals completed within 1 working day.	Monthly % of referrals completed in over 3 working days.
In Month Performance	Target	90%	5%
	Apr-24	86.3	
	May-24	81.5	
	Jun-24	75.0	1.8
	Jul-24		
	Aug-24		
	Sep-24		
	Oct-24		
	Nov-24		
	Dec-24		
	Jan-25		
	Feb-25		
	Mar-25		
Annual Trend	2021/22	72.1	5.6
	2022/23	84.1	0.8
	2023/24	81.4	1.7
	2024/25	81.0	0.5



REFERRALS: RE-REFERRALS

DEFINITION Percentage of re-referrals that are received within 12 months of a previous referral (based on referral start dates and in line with DfE definition).
A re-referral to Children's Social Care could be an indication that the previous referral was inappropriately closed down without addressing the initial concerns or issues.

		CSC 034	CSC 032	
		Monthly number of re-referrals that are repeat within 12 months	% re-referrals that are repeat within 12 months (cumulative)	% of referrals that are re-referrals (monthly)
In Month Performance	Target		18%	
	Apr-24	10	12.5	12.5
	May-24	13	17.2	24.1
	Jun-24	17	19.1	22.4
	Jul-24			
	Aug-24			
	Sep-24			
	Oct-24			
	Nov-24			
	Dec-24			
	Jan-25			
	Feb-25			
	Mar-25			
Annual Trend	2021/22	106	10.9	
	2022/23	286	17.9	
	2023/24	333	24.2	
	2024/25	40	19.1	

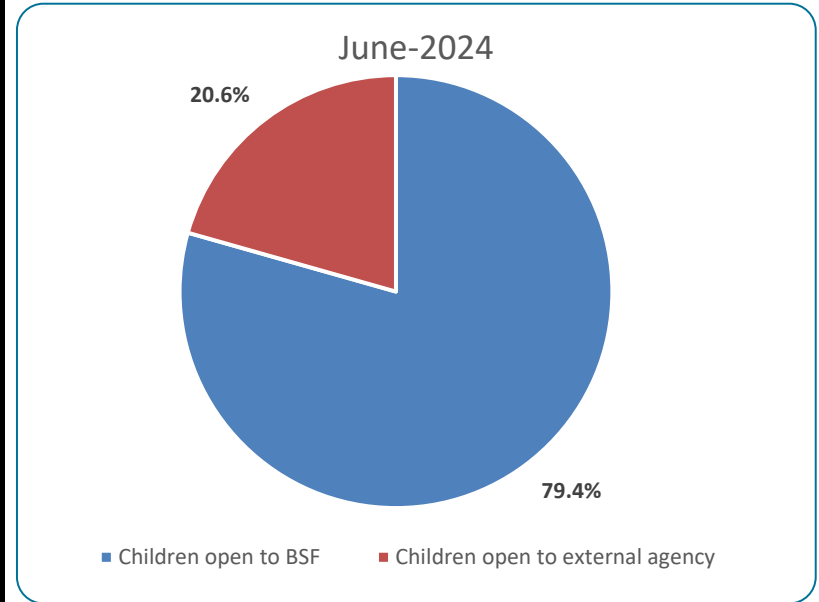


BUILDING STRONGER FAMILIES: OPEN EPISODES

DEFINITION The number of children and families that have an open episode with the Building Stronger Families (BSF) team at the end of each reporting month. Also reported is the number of children and families that have an open episode with an external agency. The proportion of children open to BSF is then calculated using the total cohort and displayed as a percentage.

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		Open to BSF at month end		Open to an external agency at month end		% of children open to BSF
		Children	Families	Children	Families	
In Month Performance	Apr-24	418	201	128	65	76.6%
	May-24	429	208	117	63	78.6%
	Jun-24	416	205	108	60	79.4%
	Jul-24					
	Aug-24					
	Sep-24					
	Oct-24					
	Nov-24					
	Dec-24					
	Jan-25					
	Feb-25					
	Mar-25					
	Annual Trend	2021/22	411	191	73	35
2022/23		490	218	125	68	79.7%
2023/24		423	197	125	64	77.2%
2024/25		416	205	108	60	79.4%

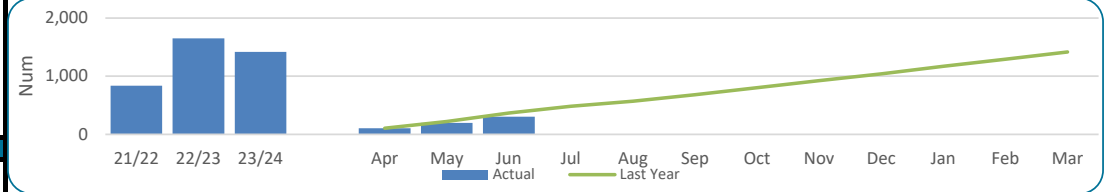


EARLY HELP ASSESSMENTS: STARTED

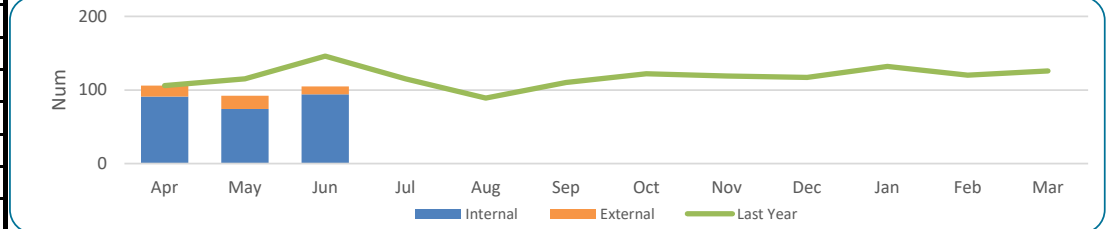
DEFINITION The number of individual Early Help Assessments (EHA) started in month and year to date, including those initiated by external agencies. The start date of the EHA is taken from the form created date in Liquid Logic and the start date of the external EHA is taken from the contact date when the agency informed us of the EHA.

		CSC 002		CSC 001	
		Total number of individual EHA's started in month (inc. external)	Number and percentage of the EHA's initiated by external agencies per month	Number of individual EHA's started; year to date (inc. external)	
In Month Performance	Target			TBC	
	Apr-24	106	15	14.2%	106
	May-24	92	18	19.6%	199
	Jun-24	105	11	10.5%	303
	Jul-24				
	Aug-24				
	Sep-24				
	Oct-24				
	Nov-24				
	Dec-24				
	Jan-25				
	Feb-25				
	Mar-25				
Annual Trend	2021/22	839	161	19.2%	839
	2022/23	1,650	223	13.5%	1,650
	2023/24	1,417	204	14.4%	1,417
	2024/25	303	44	14.5%	303

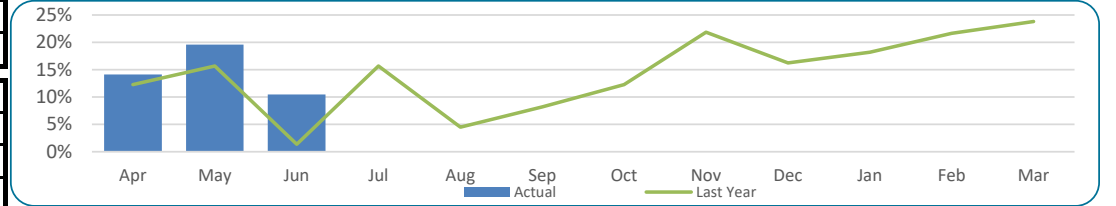
CSC 001: Number of individual EHA's started; year to date (inc. external)



CSC 002: Total number of individual EHA's started in month (inc. external)



% of the Early Help Assessments initiated by external agencies per month



MISSING: EPISODES

DEFINITION	The number of episodes of children going missing in Darlington, including Children in Care, Children in Care with another authority and children who are not currently open to Social Care. The percentage of Return Home Interviews (RHI) completed within 72 hours and the level of engagement by the child. The number of episodes missing is cumulated to give a year to date figure but the children are only counted once for the year to date total.
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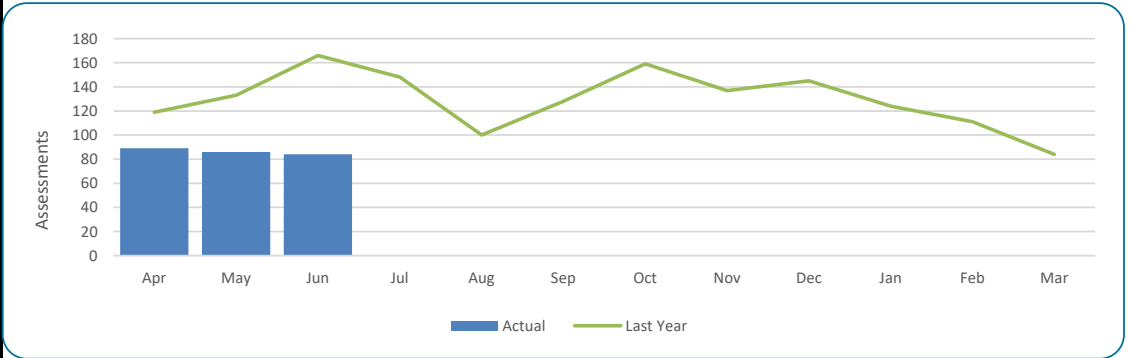
		CSC 215		CSC 246			
		Total number of missing episodes and children involved in month		Missing - Children in Care with DBC		Of which are in a placement more than 20 miles from home	
		Episode	Child	Episode	Child	Episode	Child
In Month Performance	Apr-24	19	12	7	2		
	May-24	16	12	8	4		
	Jun-24	14	11	6	4	2	2
	Jul-24						
	Aug-24						
	Sep-24						
	Oct-24						
	Nov-24						
	Dec-24						
	Jan-25						
	Feb-25						
	Mar-25						
Annual Trend	2021/22	582	174	253	31	22	4
	2022/23	691	162	383	31	2	2
	2023/24	423	122	152	27	13	6
	2024/25	49	31	21	8	2	2

ASSESSMENTS

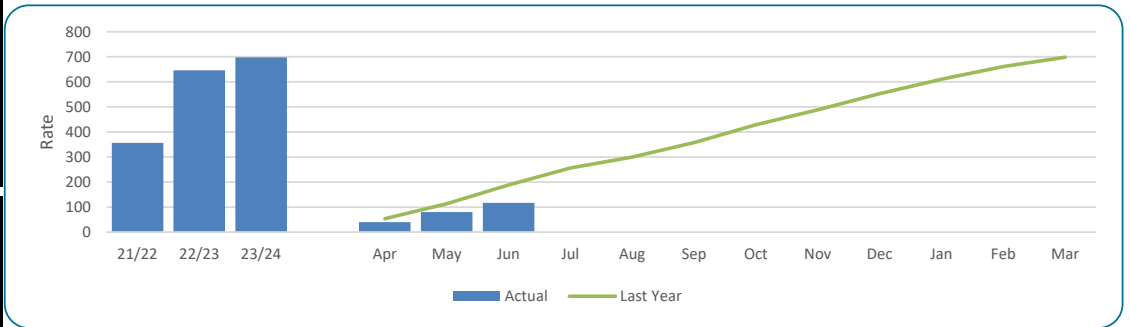
DEFINITION Monthly and cumulative number of Children & Families (C&F) assessments completed for a child.

		CSC 037	CSC 036	CSC 035
		Monthly number of C&F assessments completed	Number of C&F assessments completed year to date	Rate of C&F assessments completed per 10,000 of the 0-17 population.
In Month Performance	Apr-24	89	89	40.0
	May-24	86	177	79.5
	Jun-24	84	259	116.4
	Jul-24			
	Aug-24			
	Sep-24			
	Oct-24			
	Nov-24			
	Dec-24			
	Jan-25			
	Feb-25			
	Mar-25			
Annual Trend	2021/22	806	806	356.1
	2022/23	1461	1,461	645.5
	2023/24	1,554	1,554	698.3
	2024/25	259	259	116.4

CSC 037: Monthly number of C&F assessments completed



CSC 035: Rate of C&F assessments completed per 10,000 of the 0-17 population.



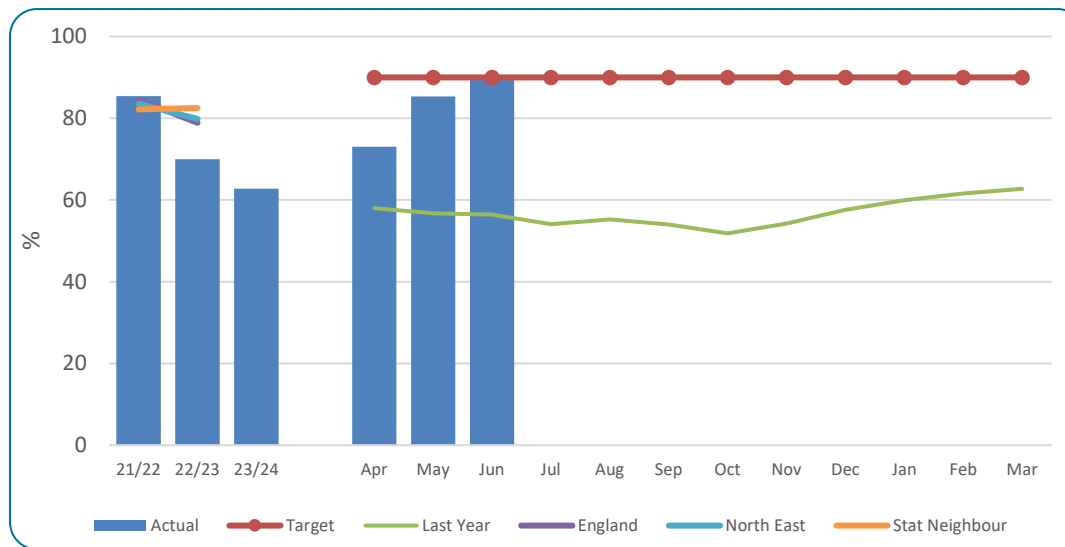
ASSESSMENTS: TIMELINESS

DEFINITION	<p>Of those assessments completed in a period, the percentage completed within 45 working days. Day zero is the first working day on or after the start date of the referral, or strategy discussion decided to initiate S47 enquiries, or where new information indicates that an assessment should be undertaken. The end date is the first working day on or after the recorded date the Team Manager closes the single assessment.</p> <p>A process indicator as a proxy measure for improved child safety and how quickly services can respond when a child is thought to be at risk of serious harm. Local authorities should investigate and address concerns in a timely and efficient way.</p>
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		CSC 038	CSC 040
		% C&F Assessments completed within 45 working days (year to date)	Monthly % completed within 45 working days
In Month Performance	Target	90%	90%
	Apr-24	73.0	73.0
	May-24	85.3	97.7
	Jun-24	89.6	98.8
	Jul-24		
	Aug-24		
	Sep-24		
	Oct-24		
	Nov-24		
	Dec-24		
	Jan-25		
	Feb-25		
	Mar-25		
Annual Trend	2021/22	85.4	
	2022/23	70.0	
	2023/24	62.7	
	2024/25	89.6	98.8

% C&F Assessments completed within 45 working days (year to date)

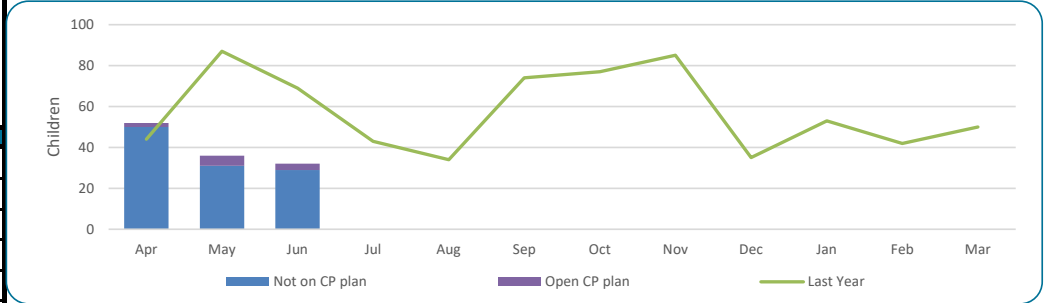


SECTION 47 ENQUIRES: STARTED

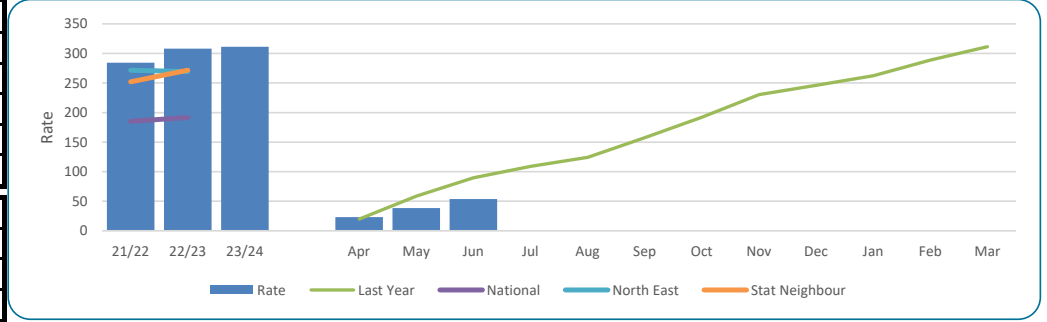
DEFINITION Number of children who have had a section 47 enquiries started monthly and year to date and the actual number of enquiries started.

		CSC 166		CSC 164	
		Section 47 enquiries started in the month	Number of children who had a section 47 enquiry	Of which also had an open CPP plan	Rate of section 47 enquiries started per 10,000 of the 0-17 population (Cumulative)
In Month Performance	Apr-24	28	52	2	23.4
	May-24	20	36	5	38.7
	Jun-24	18	32	3	53.9
	Jul-24				
	Aug-24				
	Sep-24				
	Oct-24				
	Nov-24				
	Dec-24				
	Jan-25				
	Feb-25				
	Mar-25				
	Annual Trend	2021/22	317	633	14
2022/23		351	681	30	308.3
2023/24		372	693	22	311.4
2024/25		66	120	10	53.9

Number of children; showing the total including and excluding those already on CPP



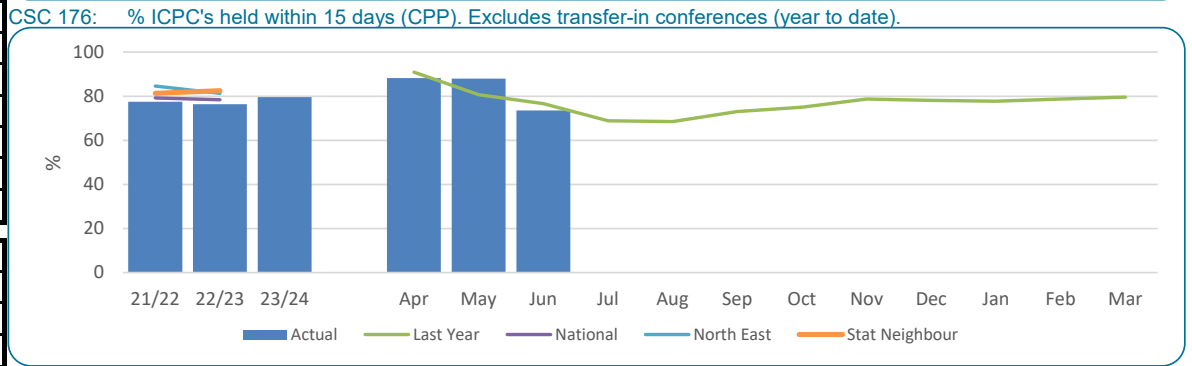
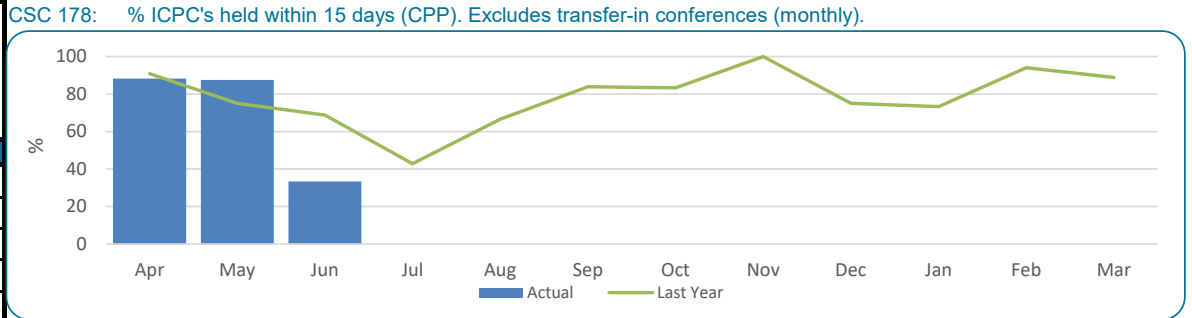
Rate of section 47 enquiries started per 10,000 of the 0-17 population (inc. children already on CPP)



INITIAL CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCES: TIMELINESS

DEFINITION Of those Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) held within the period (excluding transfer ins), the percentage recorded in the Safeguarding Unit workbook where Child Protection strategy meeting / section 47 enquiry to ICPC are within 15 days (CPP). This provides an indication of how quickly the safety of the child is considered by a multi-agency meeting.

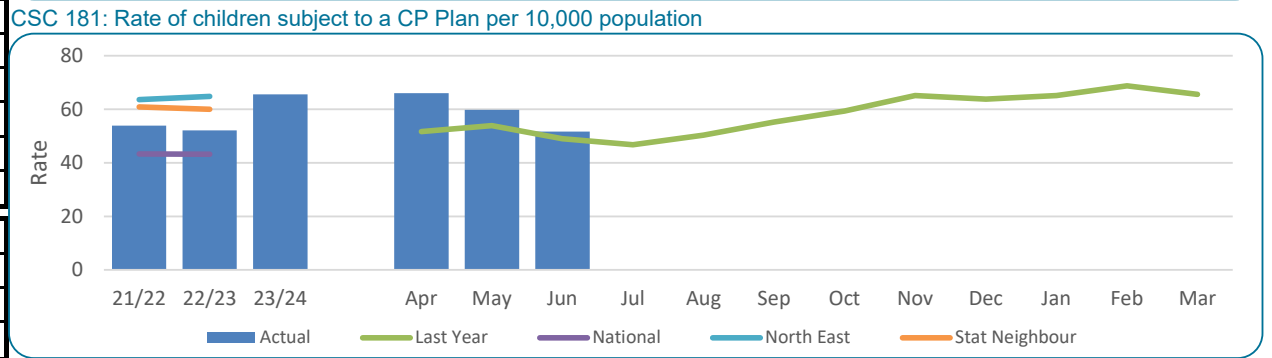
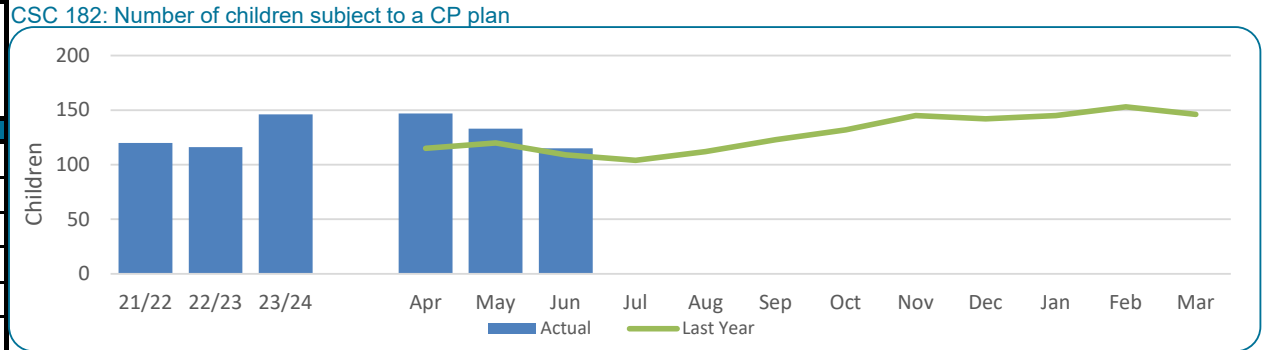
		CSC 178		CSC 176	
		% ICPC's held within 15 days (CPP). Excludes transfer-in conferences (monthly).		% ICPC's held within 15 days (CPP). Excludes transfer-in conferences (year to date).	
In Month Performance	Target				95%
	Apr-24	15 / 17	88.2	15 / 17	88.2
	May-24	7 / 8	87.5	22 / 25	88.0
	Jun-24	3 / 9	33.3	25 / 34	73.5
	Jul-24				
	Aug-24				
	Sep-24				
	Oct-24				
	Nov-24				
	Dec-24				
	Jan-25				
	Feb-25				
	Mar-25				
Annual Trend	2021/22			135 / 174	77.5
	2022/23			119 / 156	76.4
	2023/24			171 / 215	79.5
	2024/25	25 / 34	73.5	25 / 34	73.5



CHILD PROTECTION PLANS

DEFINITION	Number of children subject to a Child Protection plan at the end of the month.
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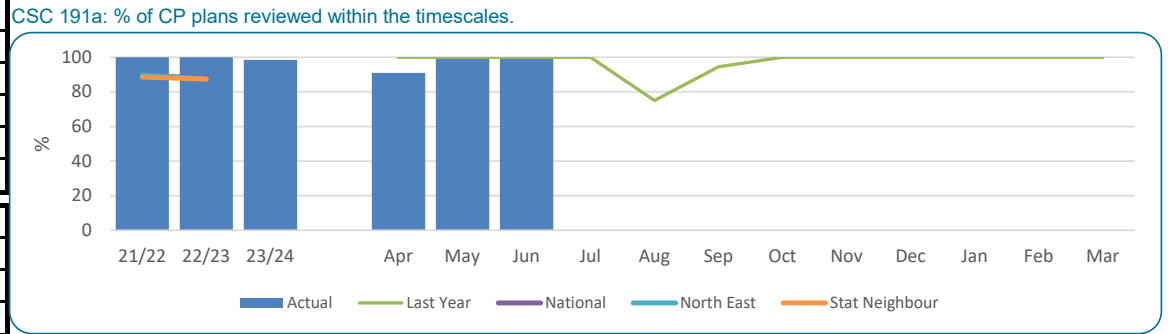
		CSC 182	CSC 181
		Number of children subject to a CP plan	Rate of children subject to a CP Plan per 10,000 population
In Month Performance	Apr-24	147	66.1
	May-24	133	59.8
	Jun-24	115	51.7
	Jul-24		
	Aug-24		
	Sep-24		
	Oct-24		
	Nov-24		
	Dec-24		
	Jan-25		
	Feb-25		
	Mar-25		
Annual Trend	2021/22	120	53.9
	2022/23	116	52.1
	2023/24	146	65.6
	2024/25	115	51.7



CHILD PROTECTION PLANS: ALLOCATION & REVIEWS

DEFINITION Reviews are a key element in delivering CP Plans and effective reviews should ensure the provision of good quality interventions. This indicator is a proxy for the measurement of effectiveness of the interventions provided to children subject to a CP plan. "Working Together to Safeguard Children" guidance requires that the first review should be within 3 months of their ICPC and thereafter at intervals of no more than 6 months.

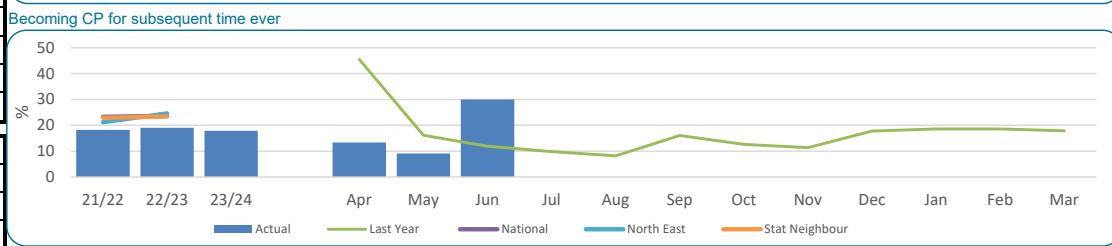
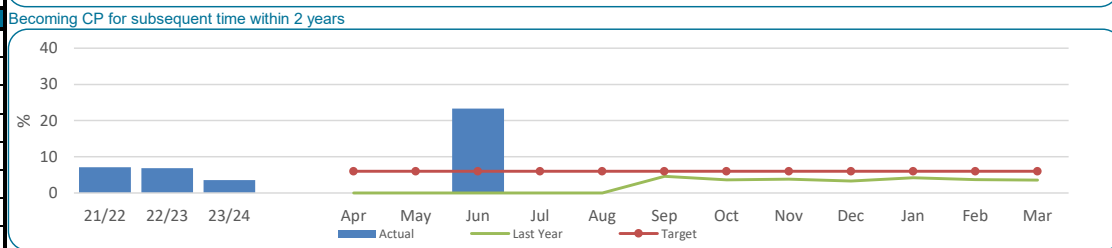
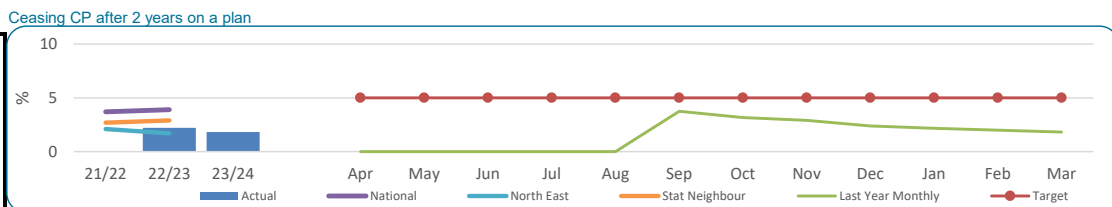
		CSC 183	CSC 191a
		% of children with a CP plan allocated to a qualified social worker	CP plan review meetings held in timescale during the month
		Target	100
In Month Performance	Apr-24	100.0	10 / 11
	May-24	100.0	18 / 18
	Jun-24	100.0	17 / 17
	Jul-24		
	Aug-24		
	Sep-24		
	Oct-24		
	Nov-24		
	Dec-24		
	Jan-25		
	Feb-25		
	Mar-25		
	Annual Trend	2021/22	100.0
2022/23		100.0	155 / 155
2023/24		100.0	193 / 196
2024/25		100.0	45 / 46



CHILD PROTECTION PLAN: TIME PERIODS

DEFINITION Percentage of children ceasing to be subject to a Child Protection Plan who had been subject to a Plan for 2 or more years, and percentage of children becoming subject to a Child Protection Plan for the 2nd or subsequent time within a) 2 years of a previous plan, and b) with a previous plan at any point. These indicators reflect the underlying principle that professionals should be working towards specified outcomes which, if implemented effectively, should lead to all children not needing to be the subject of a Child Protection Plan within a maximum of two years, or becoming subject of a Child Protection Plan for a second or subsequent time.

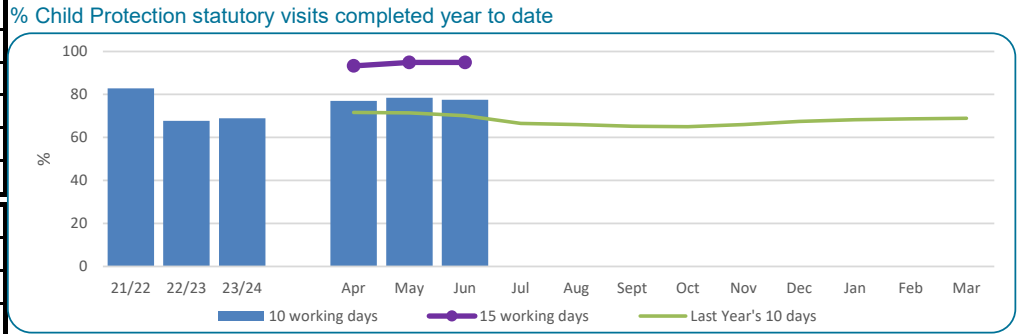
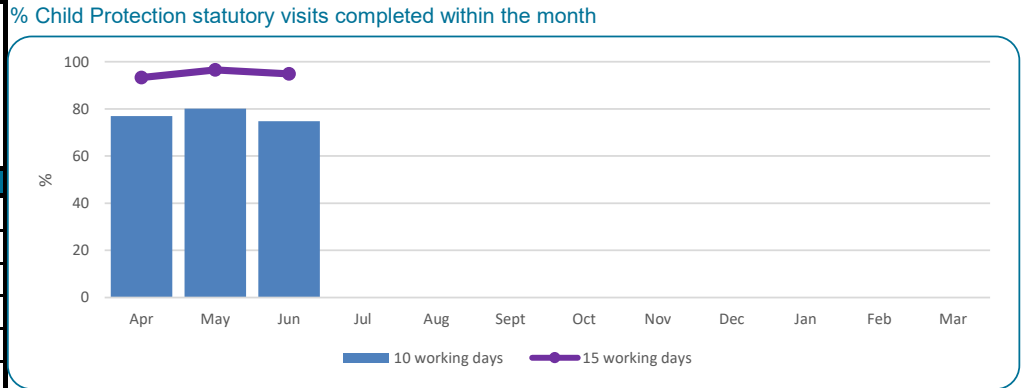
		CSC 186		CSC 188			
		% children ceasing a CP plan who had been subject to CP for 2 or more years (Cumulative)		% of children becoming subject to a CP plan for a 2nd or subsequent time within 2 years of a previous plan ending (Cumulative)		% of children becoming subject to a CP plan for a 2nd or subsequent time ever (Cumulative)	
In Month Performance	Target		5%		6%		
	Apr-24	0 / 14	0.0	0 / 15	0.0	2 / 15	13.3
	May-24	0 / 34	0.0	0 / 22	0.0	2 / 22	9.1
	Jun-24	0 / 60	0.0	7 / 30	23.3	9 / 30	30.0
	Jul-24						
	Aug-24						
	Sep-24						
	Oct-24						
	Nov-24						
	Dec-24						
Jan-25							
Feb-25							
Mar-25							
Annual Trend	2021/22	0 / 121	0.0	11 / 154	7.1	28 / 154	18.2
	2022/23	3 / 135	2.2	9 / 131	6.9	25 / 131	19.1
	2023/24	3 / 166	1.8	7 / 196	3.6	35 / 196	17.9
	2024/25	0 / 60	0.0	7 / 30	23.3	9 / 30	30.0



CHILD PROTECTION: STATUTORY VISITS

DEFINITION Percentage of children subject to a Child Protection (CP) plan who had all statutory visits carried out within timescales and percentage of Child Protection statutory visits completed within timescale monthly and year to date.

		CSC 252a		CSC 252b	
		% CP visits completed within 10 working days within the month	% CP visits completed within 15 working days within the month	% CP visits completed within 10 working days year to date (cumulative)	% CP visits completed within 15 working days year to date (cumulative)
In Month Performance	Target	90	90	90	90
	Apr-24	77.0	93.3	77.0	93.3
	May-24	80.1	96.5	78.5	94.9
	Jun-24	74.8	94.8	77.5	94.9
	Jul-24				
	Aug-24				
	Sep-24				
	Oct-24				
	Nov-24				
	Dec-24				
	Jan-25				
	Feb-25				
	Mar-25				
Annual Trend	2021/22			82.9	96.8
	2022/23			67.8	90.0
	2023/24			69.0	90.4
	2024/25	74.8	94.8	77.5	94.9

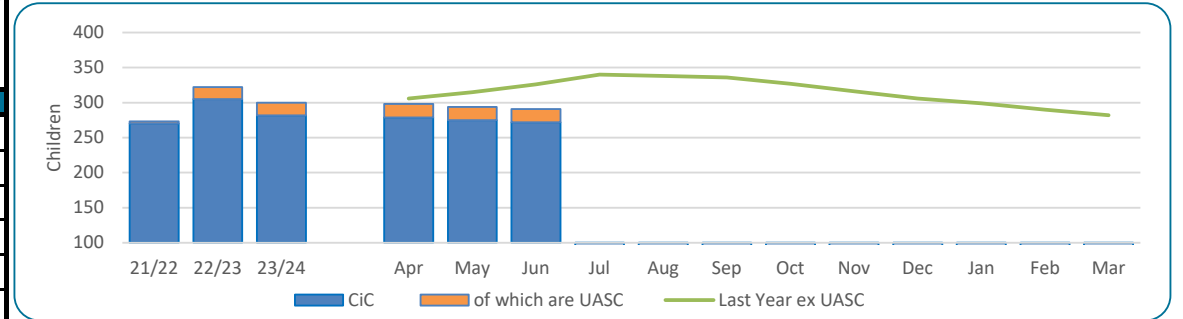


CHILDREN IN CARE

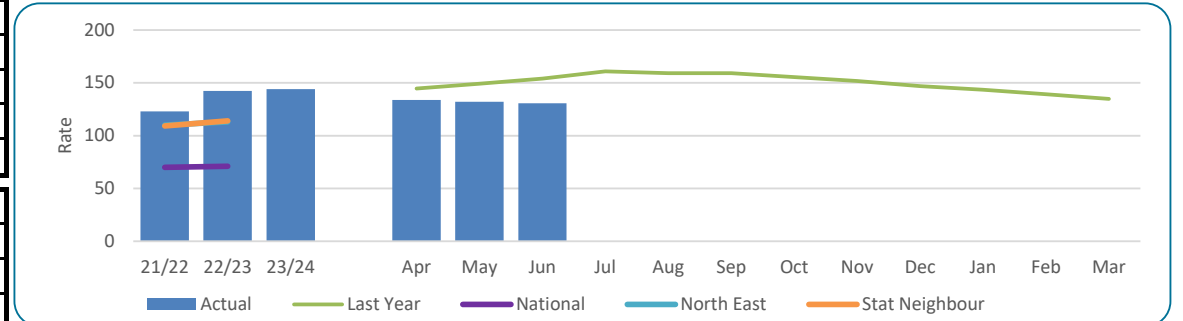
DEFINITION Number of Children in Care (CiC) at the end of each month and of which are Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (UASC).

		CSC 201	CSC 207	CSC 200
		Total number of Children in Care	Of which are identified as a UASC	Rate of CiC per 10,000 population
In Month Performance	Target			95
	Apr-24	298	19	133.9
	May-24	294	19	132.1
	Jun-24	291	19	130.8
	Jul-24			
	Aug-24			
	Sep-24			
	Oct-24			
	Nov-24			
	Dec-24			
	Jan-25			
	Feb-25			
	Mar-25			
Annual Trend	2021/22	273	3	123.0
	2022/23	322	17	142.3
	2023/24	300	18	134.8
	2024/25	291	19	130.8

CSC 201: Total number of Children in Care



CSC 200: Rate of CiC per 10,000 population

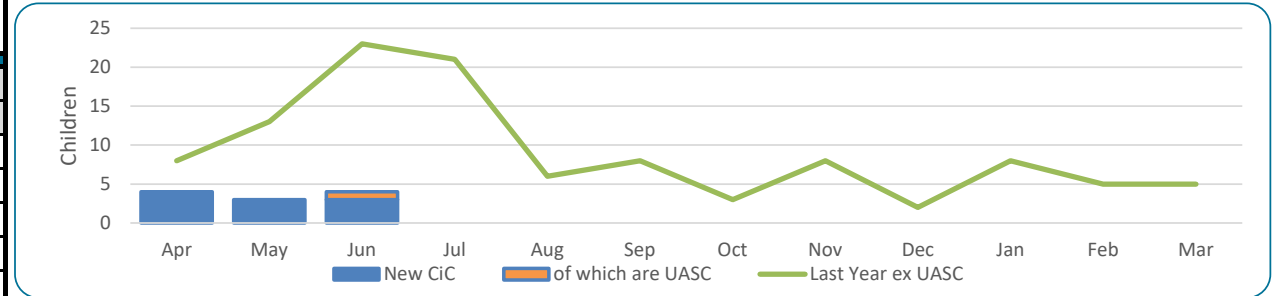


CHILDREN IN CARE: COMING INTO CARE

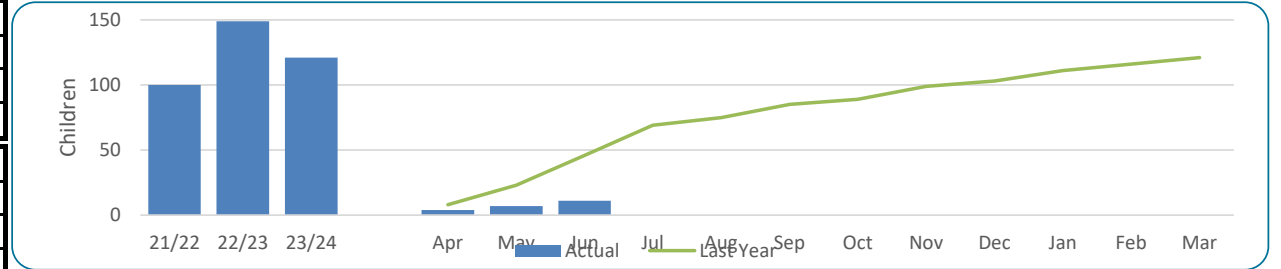
DEFINITION Number of children coming into the care of the local authority during the month and year to date and where they are an unaccompanied asylum seeking child (UASC). This is further broken down to show their first placement type.

		CSC 209	CSC 208b	
		Monthly number of children coming into care	Cumulative number of children coming into care	of which are UASC
In Month Performance	Apr-24	4	4	
	May-24	3	7	
	Jun-24	4	11	1
	Jul-24			
	Aug-24			
	Sep-24			
	Oct-24			
	Nov-24			
	Dec-24			
	Jan-25			
	Feb-25			
	Mar-25			
Annual Trend	2021/22	100	100	2
	2022/23	149	149	18
	2023/24	121	121	11
	2024/25	11	11	1

Monthly number of children coming into care



Total number of children coming into care within the year



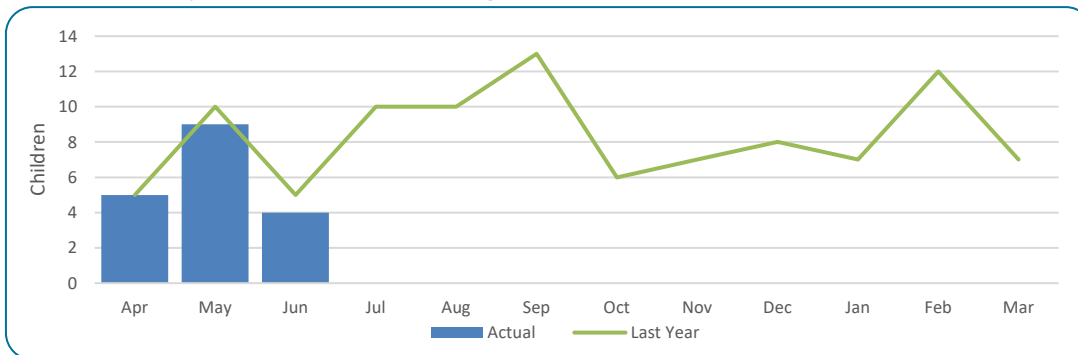
CHILDREN IN CARE: CEASING CARE

DEFINITION Number of children ceasing to be a Child in Care during each month and year to date and their destination when they ceased being in care. This could be due to returning home to parent or other person with no PR (planned and unplanned), having a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) / Child Arrangement Order (CAO) granted by the courts to a carer, adoption or turning 18 years old and becoming a care leaver and supported by a personal advisor. Other reasons why a child could cease care could be due to receiving a custodial sentence or moving out of the area and transferring to a different local authority.

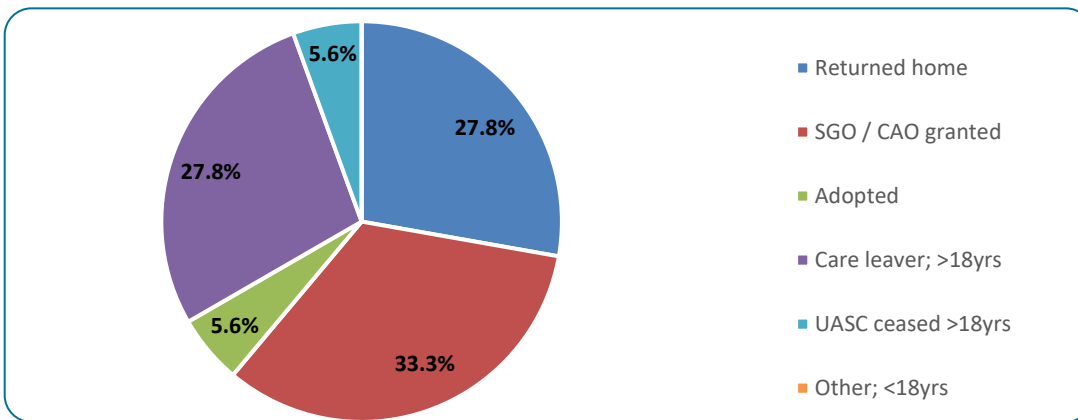
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		CSC 212	CSC 211
		Monthly number of children ceasing care	Cumulative number of children ceasing care
In Month Performance	Apr-24	5	5
	May-24	9	12
	Jun-24	4	18
	Jul-24		
	Aug-24		
	Sep-24		
	Oct-24		
	Nov-24		
	Dec-24		
	Jan-25		
	Feb-25		
	Mar-25		
	Annual Trend	2021/22	99
2022/23		100	100
2023/24		143	143
2024/25		18	18

CSC 212: Monthly number of children ceasing care



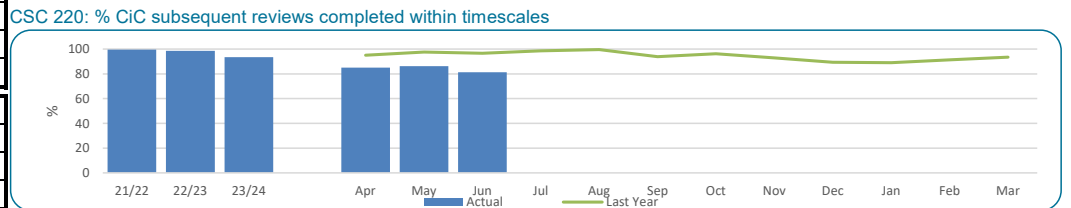
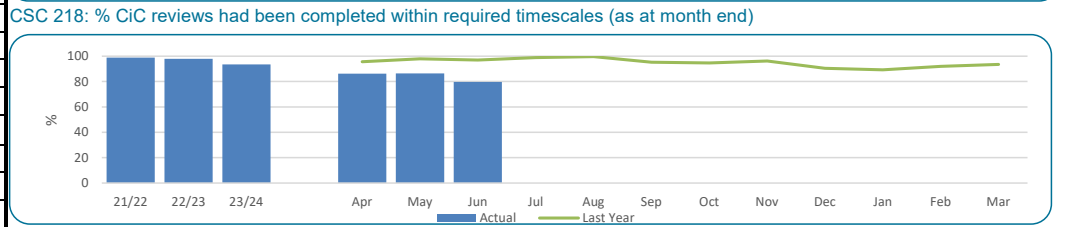
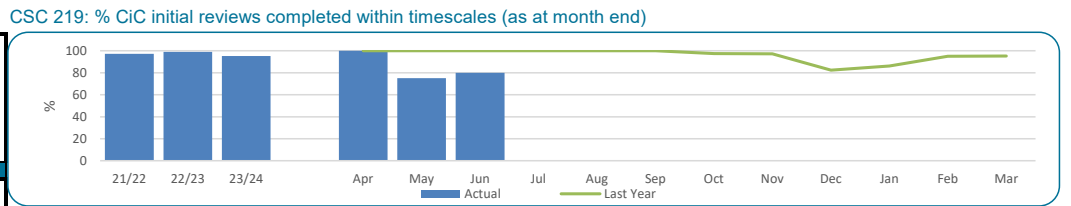
Cumulative reason for children ceasing care



CHILDREN IN CARE: REVIEWS

DEFINITION The purpose of the review is to consider the plan for the child's welfare, to monitor the progress of the plan and amend it as necessary in light of changed information and circumstances. The statutory intervals are within 20 working days of placement, then within 3 months and 6 monthly thereafter, but reviews may be rescheduled or held inside these intervals if there are significant changes to the child's care plan..Percentage of the current Children in Care (CiC) who have had their initial review, and all of their subsequent reviews completed within the required timescales.

	Target	CSC 219		CSC 218		CSC 220	
		% CiC initial reviews completed within timescales (as at month end)		% CiC reviews had been completed within required timescales (as at month end)		% CiC subsequent reviews completed within timescales	
		Num	100	Num	%	Num	100
Apr-24	4 / 4	100.0	63 / 73	86.3	57 / 67	85.1	
May-24	6 / 8	75.0	114 / 132	86.4	106 / 123	86.2	
Jun-24	8 / 10	80.0	125 / 157	79.6	121 / 149	81.2	
Jul-24							
Aug-24							
Sep-24							
Oct-24							
Nov-24							
Dec-24							
Jan-25							
Feb-25							
Mar-25							
Annual Trend							
2021/22	68 / 70	97.1	243 / 246	98.8	225 / 226	99.6	
2022/23	104 / 105	99.1	297 / 303	98.0	278 / 282	98.6	
2023/24	59 / 62	95.2	271 / 290	93.5	260 / 278	93.5	
2024/25	8 / 10	80.0	125 / 157	79.6	121 / 149	81.2	

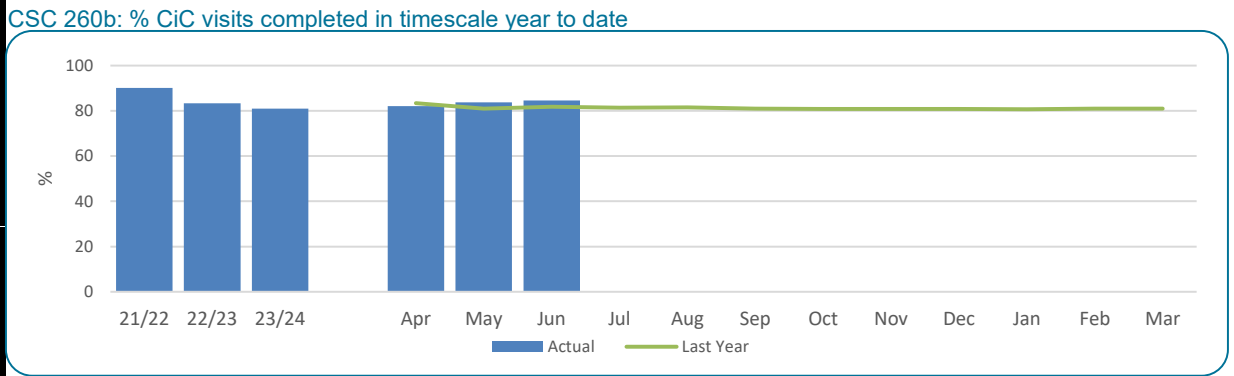
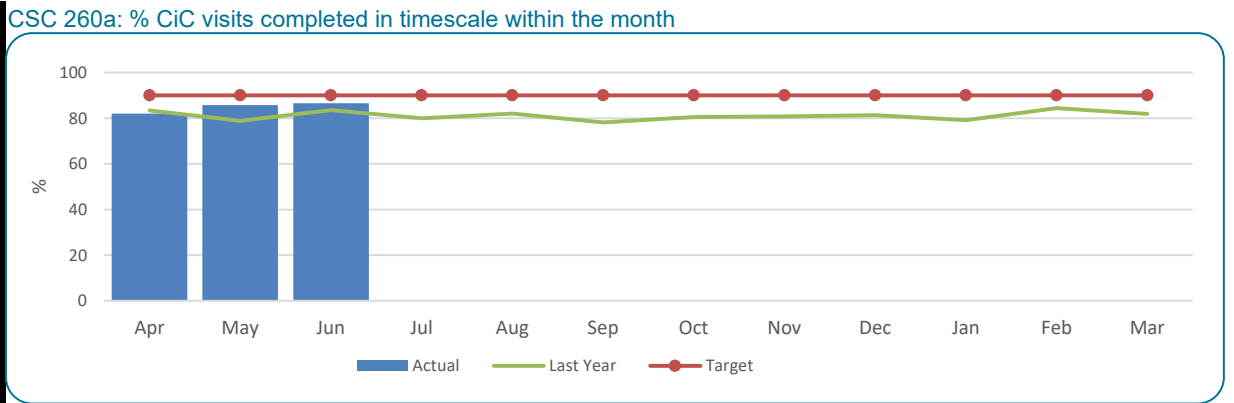


CHILDREN IN CARE: STATUTORY VISITS

DEFINITION	Percentage of Children in Care (CiC) who had all statutory visits completed within required timescales each month and year to date.
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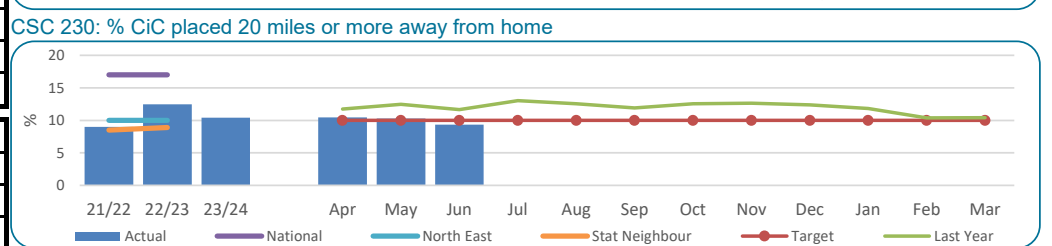
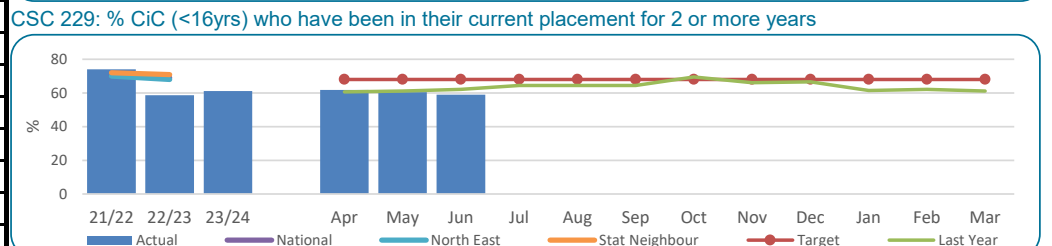
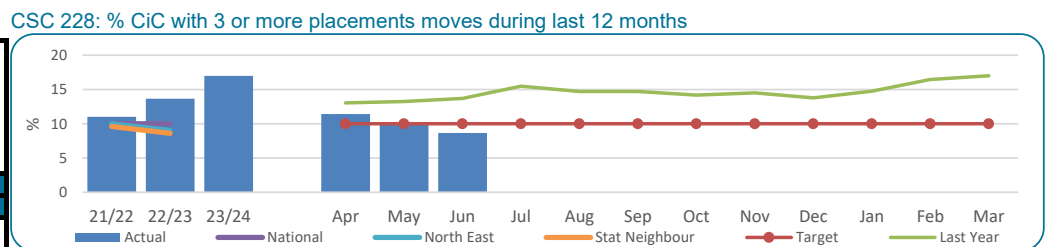
		CSC 260a	CSC 260b
		% CiC visits completed in timescale within the month	% CiC visits completed in timescale year to date
In Month Performance	Target	90	90
	Apr-24	82.1	82.1
	May-24	85.7	83.7
	Jun-24	86.6	84.6
	Jul-24		
	Aug-24		
	Sep-24		
	Oct-24		
	Nov-24		
	Dec-24		
	Jan-25		
	Feb-25		
	Mar-25		
Annual Trend	2021/22		90.1
	2022/23		83.4
	2023/24		81.0
	2024/25	86.6	84.6



CHILDREN IN CARE: PLACEMENTS

DEFINITION Of those Children in Care (CiC) at the point in time (excluding series of short-term placements), the percentage that had 3 or more separate placements in the previous 12 months; who (under the age of 16 years) had been in their current placement for 2 or more years. and who were placed more than 20 miles away from their home address. Proper assessment and an adequate choice of placements to meet the varied needs of different children are essential if appropriate stable placements are to be made. Inappropriate placements often break down and lead to frequent moves. Nevertheless, the circumstances of some individual children will require 3 or more separate placements during a year if they and others are to be kept safe.

	Target	CSC 228		CSC 229		CSC 230	
		% CiC with 3 or more placements moves during last 12 months		% CiC (<16yrs) who have been in their current placement for 2 or more years		% CiC placed 20 miles or more away from home	
		Children	%	Children	%	Children	%
Apr-24	34	11.4	79	61.7	29	10.5	
May-24	29	9.9	75	60.5	28	10.3	
Jun-24	25	8.7	72	59.0	25	9.3	
Jul-24							
Aug-24							
Sep-24							
Oct-24							
Nov-24							
Dec-24							
Jan-25							
Feb-25							
Mar-25							
Annual Trend	2021/22	30	11.0	88.0	74.0	25.0	9.0
	2022/23	44	13.7	74	58.7	37	12.5
	2023/24	51	17.0	77	61.1	29	10.4
	2024/25	25	8.7	72	59.0	25	9.3

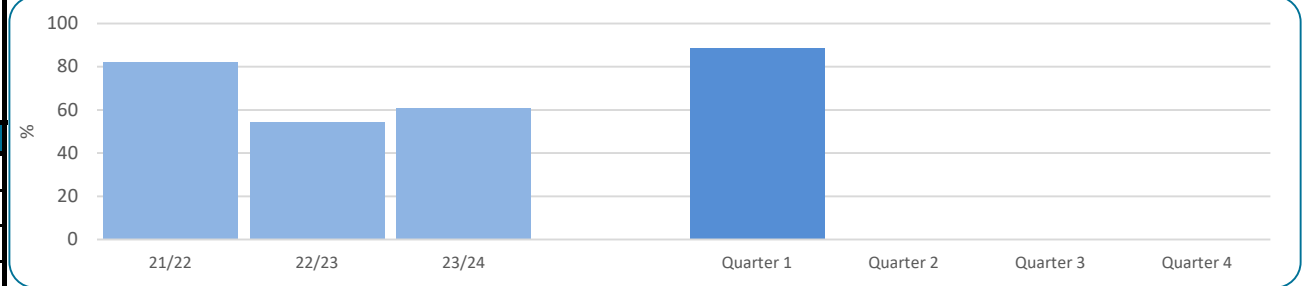


CHILDREN IN CARE: INITIAL HEALTH ASSESSMENTS

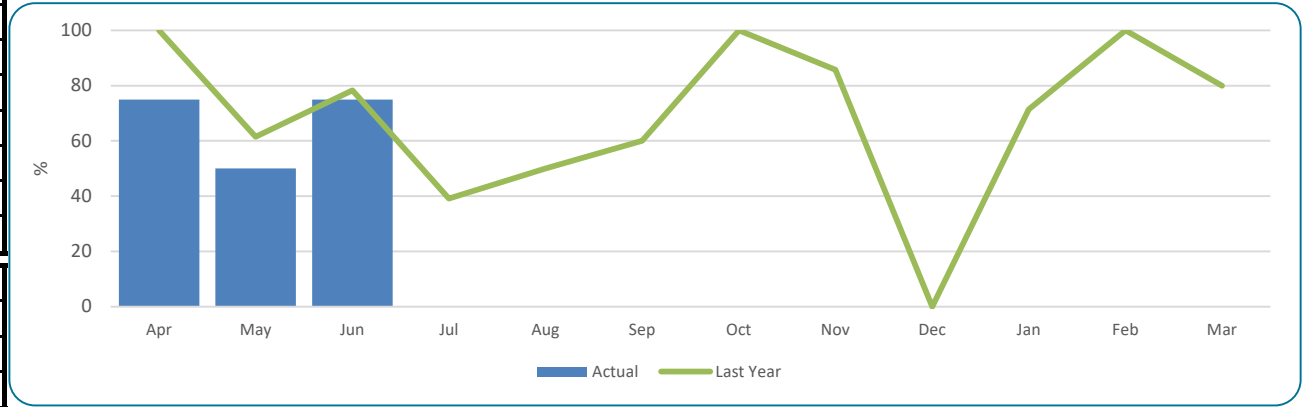
DEFINITION Percentage of Initial Health Assessments completed within 20 working days of a child coming into our care year to date (data from Health), and percentage of IHA forms returned to Health within 5 working days. This excludes children / young people coming into care due to being remand or UASC.

		Completed IHA within 20 working days (by Health)	IHA forms returned to Health within 5 working days
In Month Performance	Target	95	
	Apr-24		3 / 4
	May-24		1 / 2
	Jun-24	8 / 9	3 / 4
	Jul-24		
	Aug-24		
	Sep-24		
	Oct-24		
	Nov-24		
	Dec-24		
	Jan-25		
	Feb-25		
	Mar-25		
Annual Trend	2021/22	82.1%	89.4%
	2022/23	54.5%	72.4%
	2023/24	60.7%	65.5%
	2024/25	88.9%	70.0%

Completed IHA within 20 working days (by Health)



IHA forms returned to Health within 5 working days



CHILDREN IN CARE: HEALTH ASSESSMENTS

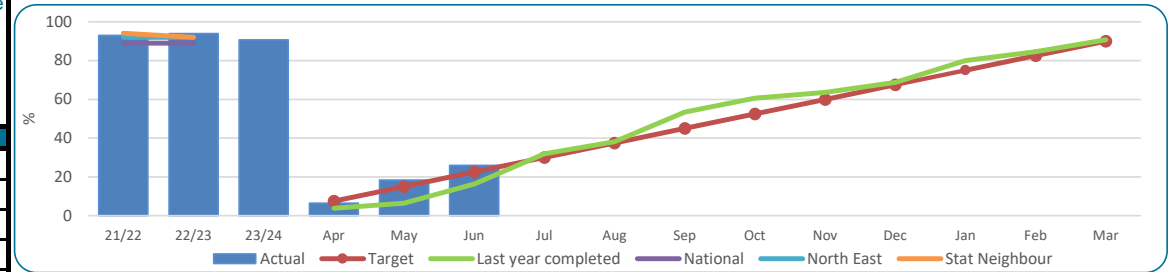
DEFINITION Of the Children in Care (CiC) at 31 March who had been in care continuously for at least 12 months, the percentage who have had their Review Health Assessment (RHA) completed and the percentage who have an up to date Health Check (excludes any who will turn 18 before 31st March). Children in Care share many of the same health risks and problems as their peers, but often to a greater degree. These indicators track the participation of our Children in Care's health as a proxy for monitoring the general health and wellbeing of the children, as well as providing a check on the effectiveness of joint working with Health to secure good health outcomes for Children in Care.

CSC 250

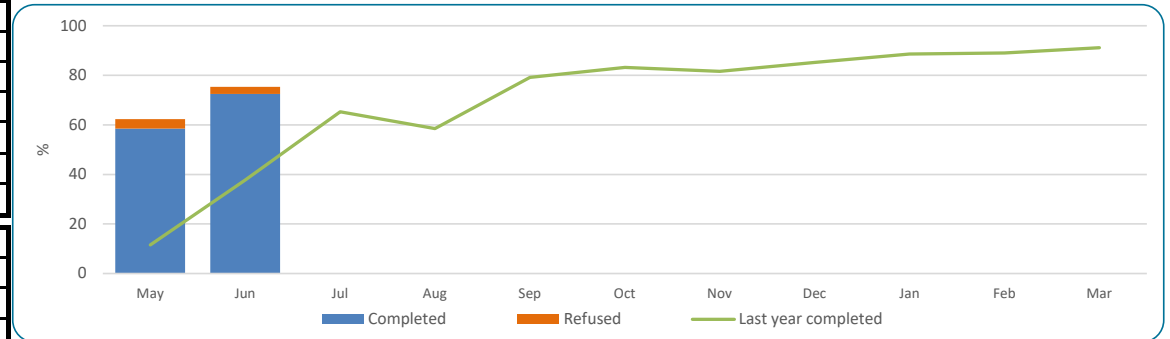
CSC 250b

		CSC 250	CSC 250b
		% of CiC who have an up to date health checks	% of CiC who are due and had a review health check completed (year to date)
In Month Performance	Target	90%	90%
	Apr-24	6.4	5.6
	May-24	18.3	3.8
	Jun-24	26.0	2.9
	Jul-24		
	Aug-24		
	Sep-24		
	Oct-24		
	Nov-24		
	Dec-24		
	Jan-25		
	Feb-25		
	Mar-25		
Annual Trend	2021/22	93.0	3.7
	2022/23	94.0	1.6
	2023/24	90.7	1.3
	2024/25	26.0	2.9
	2024/25	72.5	72.5

CSC 250: % of CiC who are up to date for a review health check



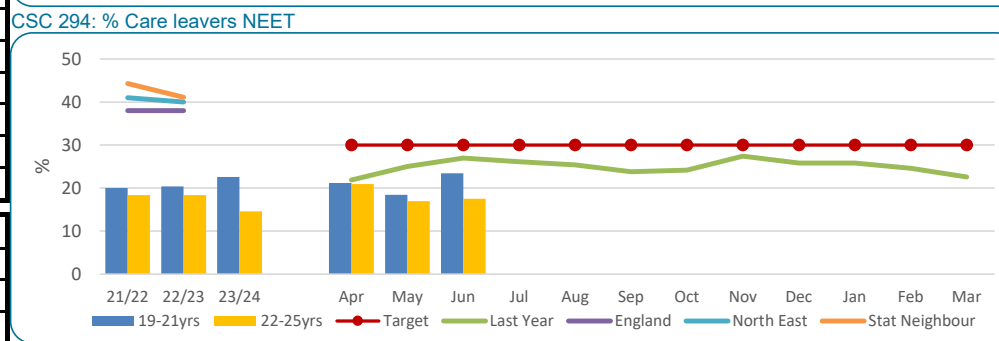
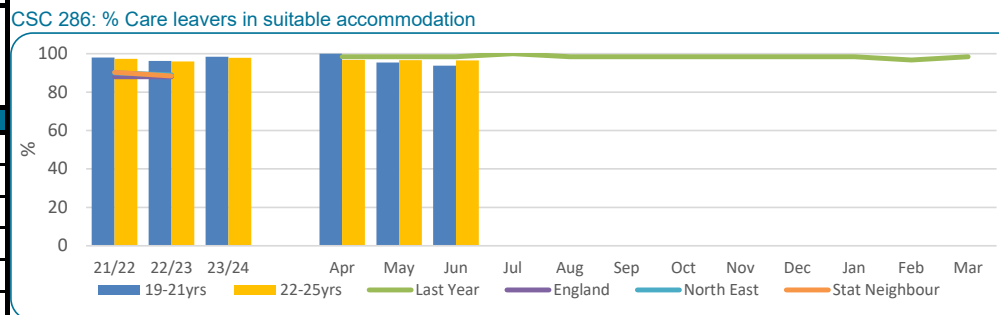
CSC 250b: % of CiC due a review health check (year to date) that have had one, and % that refused



CARE LEAVERS

DEFINITION Former relevant care leavers split to show the young people who, at 31st March, will be aged 19-21 and those who will be aged 22-25. The percentage who were in suitable accommodation at their most recent contact, and the percentage who were not in employment, education or training at their most recent contact. This measures accommodation and employment outcomes for young people formerly in care - a key group at risk of social exclusion. It is intended to increase the proportion of former care leavers who are in suitable accommodation and employment, education or training.

		CSC 286 19-21 year olds		CSC 294 22-25 year olds	
		% Care leavers in suitable accommodation	% Care leavers NEET	% Care leavers in suitable accommodation	% Care leavers NEET
In Month Performance	Target	90%	30%		
	Apr-24	100.0	21.2	96.8	21.0
	May-24	95.4	18.5	96.6	16.9
	Jun-24	93.8	23.4	96.5	17.5
	Jul-24				
	Aug-24				
	Sep-24				
	Oct-24				
	Nov-24				
	Dec-24				
	Jan-25				
	Feb-25				
	Mar-25				
Annual Trend	2021/22	98.0	20.0	97.3	18.4
	2022/23	96.3	20.4	95.9	18.4
	2023/24	98.4	22.6	97.9	14.6
	2024/25	93.8	23.4	96.5	17.5



**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28 OCTOBER 2024**

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PLAN 2024 - 2027

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report provides an update to Childrens Scrutiny on the development and planned implementation of the Children and Young People's Plan 2024 - 2027.

Summary

2. The Children Act (2004) introduced powers for the Secretary of State to require local authorities to produce plans to show how partner agencies with a duty to co-operate under the act were discharging their duties in respect of children's services.
3. Although there is no longer a requirement to produce a Children and Young People's Plan, it is considered good practice to still produce a strategic document across partners (there is still a statutory duty on partner agencies to co-operate to support and safeguard children). The draft plan supports the vision and seeks to contribute to the ambitions of the Council Plan, the overarching strategic plan for Darlington until 2027.

Recommendation

4. It is recommended that :-
 - (a) Scrutiny consider the content of the CYPP 2024 – 2027;
 - (b) Scrutiny agree the recommended next steps for the CYPP 2024 - 2027

Christine Shields
Assistant Director Commissioning Performance and Transformation

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Christine Shields: Extension 5851

Council Plan	This report contributes to the priorities agreed in the Council Plan
Addressing inequalities	There are no implications arising from this report
Tackling Climate Change	There are no implications arising from this report
Efficient and effective use of resources	This report supports the efficient use of resources through shared partnership priorities
Health and Wellbeing	This plan supports the strategy to improve the health and well-being of children and young people
S17 Crime and Disorder	This plan will support measures to reduce crime and disorder amongst young people
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	All Children and Young People
Budget and Policy Framework	There are no implications for the Budget or Policy Framework
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This plan supports all children including Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

5. The Children and Young People’s Plan (CYPP) is one of the identified delivery plans within the Council Plan and identifies what key actions will be taken to deliver the agreed priority for children – the best start in life, realising potential and raising aspirations.

6. This is a partnership plan which shows how organisations and agencies in Darlington will work together collectively to improve outcomes for all children and young people in Darlington. A multiagency Steering Group has been in operation since 2017 and will continue to be responsible for implementing the CYPP over the next three years. Membership of the group includes:
 - Darlington Borough Council

 - NHS partners from the Integrated Care Board, primary care (GPs) and hospital trusts (County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust and Tees Esk and Wear NHS Foundation Trust)

 - Local schools and colleges

 - Police

 - Fire Brigade

 - Parent Carer Forum

 - Darlington Hippodrome

- Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations including Healthwatch, YMCA, Family Action, Blue Cabin, Darlington Mind and Youth Focus North East

Outcome of Consultation

7. Following extensive data analysis and engagement activity with children, young people and key stakeholder agencies and organisations, five emerging priorities have been identified. These will form the basis of the Children and Young People Plan for the next three years.
8. Emerging Priorities:
 - Health – Being as healthy as possible
 - Education – Schools and learning
 - Family and Carers – Life support and growing towards independence
 - Employment – Training and real opportunities
 - Community – Being part of Darlington’s activities, opportunities and environment
9. A poster and video have been produced by children and young people as part of the engagement activities undertaken to develop the CYPP. These can be reviewed in the below link.

Implementation of the Plan – Next Steps

10. Five sub groups of the CYPP Steering Group have been established leading on each of the priorities. The groups are currently considering what key actions are needed which will make the most impact. These will be agreed by the end of October 2024.
11. The CYPP will be launched in November 2024 with updates on progress being posted on the Council website (see link below) at six monthly intervals as well as through engagement and consultation activities being held throughout 2025.

www.darlington.gov.uk/cypp

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**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28 OCTOBER 2024**

LEARNING & SKILLS ANNUAL REPORT 2023/24

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Members with an update on the performance of the Learning & Skills Service for academic year 2023/24.
2. To allow Scrutiny members oversight of, and an opportunity to challenge, the performance of this externally funded service

Summary

3. Learner numbers and performance remain high but the service faces a number of challenges going forward.
4. The service is growing provision whilst continuing to respond to employer and community need.
5. The service was inspected by Ofsted in June 2022, retaining its assessment of 'Good' overall.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that Members note the content of this report

Tony Murphy
Assistant Director for Education and Inclusion

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Paul Richardson: Mobile 07947247224

Council Plan	The service contributes to the priorities in the Council Plan allowing people to develop their potential, improve their skills and help improve their employment opportunities
Addressing Inequalities	The service actively supports the diversity agenda
Tackling Climate Change	The service promotes sustainability
Efficient and effective use of resources	Scrutiny of performance is integral to optimising outcomes
Health and Wellbeing	The service actively promotes health and wellbeing
S17 Crime and Disorder	The service supports the Council's crime and disorder responsibilities, young people engaged in learning are less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour
Wards Affected	The service offers provision across all of Darlington
Groups Affected	The service offers learning for 16–18-year-olds and adults
Budget and Policy Framework	The service is externally funded. This report does not impact on the budget and policy framework
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	Looked After Children or Care Leavers may access the service offer

MAIN REPORT

The Learning & Skills Service

7. The Learning & Skills Service is the external training arm of the Council and is funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) to provide learning and skills provision for the local community. The service has been an Ofsted 'Good' provider since 2004.
8. The service provides a range of training from Pre-entry Level to Level 5, including:
 - (a) 16-18 study programme and diploma courses
 - (b) Adult Education, including basic skills such as English, maths, ICT/Digital
 - (c) Learning for Inclusion
 - (d) Bespoke Employer Led Programmes (BELPs)
 - (e) Family Learning
 - (f) Intensive Support
 - (g) Distance Learning
 - (h) English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
 - (i) Apprenticeships
9. Learning & Skills supports some of the most disadvantaged adults, young people and families in Darlington and contributes to the priorities of both the Children and Young People's Plan and the Council Plan. Often the provision delivered provides a stepping-stone to those taking their first steps back into learning and a number of past learners have moved on to higher level learning at Darlington College and other providers.
10. Teaching takes place across three main sites: the Coleridge Centre, Bennet House and the units at Lingfield Way, as well as in a number of school and community settings.
11. Apprenticeship provision includes Health and Social Care, Business Administration, Motor Vehicle, Site Joinery and Leadership and Management.

Learner Numbers

12. In 2023/24 the service had 1,501 (1,540) enrolments (previous year's numbers in brackets) across a wide range of programmes, including:
 - (a) 73 (46) 16–18-year-olds on Study Programme
 - (b) 1,370 (1,445) people on Adult Skills courses
 - (c) 58 (49) Apprenticeship starts

Funding

11. The service is totally externally funded. The overall funding generated from the ESFA and TVCA for the Learning & Skills Service in 2023/24 was £1,129,883 (£809,763). This was split as follows:
 - (a) £370,245 (£189,938) 16-18 Study Programme (ESFA)
 - (b) £398,632 (£324,590) - Adult and Community Education (TVCA)
 - (c) £33,849 (£37,234) - Adult and Community Education (ESFA)

(d) £300,140 (£242,294) - Apprenticeships (ESFA / Employers)

(e) £27,017 (£15,707) – Level 3 Funding (TVCA)

Performance

12. Due to the impact of the pandemic on post 16 providers no national or provider level achievement rates were published in 2020/21 or 2021/2. Final achievement rates for 2023/24, with national benchmarks will be published in March 2025.

Provision Type	Overall Achievement Rate		
	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24 (Provisional)
16-18	68.9%	75.8%	69.4%
19-23	84.9%	92.3%	94.8%
24+	82.8%	93.3%	94.4%
Learning for Inclusion	97.2%	99.0%	99.8%
Apprenticeships	64.7%	63.2%	55.1%

13. The achievement rate percentage is calculated by multiplying the number of learners who complete their course by the percentage of those that sat their exams/ assessments and passed.

Learner Progression

14. Learner progression, or the positive destination rate, measures the percentage of learners who move into education, employment or training after completing a course with Learning & Skills. TVCA changes in the Learning for Inclusion (previously Community Learning) offer have resulted in a decrease in positive progressions following a shift from qualification led funding to funding for individuals.

Provision Type	Positive Destination Rate		
	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24 (Provisional)
16-18	73.0%	97.8%	78.9%
Adult Skills	82.0%	85.8%	89.0%
Learning for Inclusion	87.5%	68.9%	64.0%
Apprenticeships	81.1%	87.9%	85.5%

Learner Satisfaction

15. Learner satisfaction (those rating the service good or above) has risen from 91% in 2022/23 to 98% in 2023/24.

Employer Satisfaction

16. Employer Satisfaction (those rating the service good or above) rose from 96.3% in 2022/23 to 100% in 2023/24.

Ofsted Inspection Outcome

17. The service was inspected in June 2022 and retained its overall grade of 'Good'. The inspectors looked at eight discrete areas;

(a) The quality of education	Good
(b) Behaviour and attitudes	Good
(c) Personal development	Good
(d) Leadership and management	Good
(e) Education programmes for young people	Good
(f) Adult learning programmes	Good
(g) Apprenticeships	Good
(h) Provision for learners with high needs	Good

18. Only three areas for improvement were identified, all of which have been addressed.

- (a) Ensure that all tutors use information about learners' starting points to effectively plan learning that meets individual needs
- (b) Ensure that all learners benefit from a range of work experience opportunities
- (c) Ensure that tutors receive appropriate training to enable them to continue to develop their teaching skills

19. The report highlighted the fact that the service is meeting the needs of the local community and local businesses, learners were well supported and that the service was well led.

Challenges Ahead

20. In 2023/24 TVCA allocated a budget of £503,889 for Learning & Skills delivery, as a result of over-performance in-year the service was awarded a further £153,328. That over-performance has not been recognised in the 2024/25 TVCA allocation and there has been no indication to date as to whether in-year growth will be available again. This will constrain delivery if additional funds cannot be released by TVCA.

21. TVCA are due to re-tender adult provision for academic year 2025/26, the service will have to submit a bid to continue to deliver adult education beyond this academic year.

22. Due to the devolution deals in the North-East the ESFA allocation reduced from £66,776 in 2023/24 to £27,540 in 2024/25. This means that the service will not be able to draw down funding for learners from County Durham. In 2025/26 we expect to lose the remaining £27,450 due to the North Yorkshire devolution deal. This will limit delivery to learners with Tees Valley postcodes.

23. Funding rates do not rise with inflation, and pay rises are unfunded, therefore unless the service can attract additional funding from TVCA the service will likely show an in-year deficit from 2025/26. To that end the service has already undertaken a review of expenditure and made the decision to withdraw delivery of the Motor Vehicle apprenticeship at the end of academic year 2023/24 due to lack of demand and the high costs associated with the delivery.

24. Proposed changes in government policy, such as relaxations of the apprenticeship levy may well impact on the service delivery.
25. At the end of academic year 2024/25 the service will vacate the Coleridge Centre and move to the new Adult Skills Centre in the old Northern Echo building. Impact on delivery is unknown at this point.

**CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28 OCTOBER 2024**

SELF ASSESSMENT - OVERVIEW

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To provide Scrutiny with the Annual Self- Assessment for Children’s Services so that constructive ‘critical friend’ challenge takes place to drive improvement in public services.

Summary

2. Darlington Children’s Services update each quarter an assessment of social work practice, inclusive of Early Help, based on changes in performance data. To bring the information into a stand-a-lone easy read document an annual self-assessment overview document is completed.
3. The self-assessment draws on existing documentation and activity and reflects the local authority’s business for children’s services. It identifies what leaders are doing to maintain or improve good practice for children and their families, demonstrating the effectiveness of our actions and address weaknesses in practice, with clear, appropriate plans to improve services.
4. The self-evaluation should answer three questions:
 - What do we know about the quality and impact of social work practice in our local authority?
 - How do we know it?
 - What are our plans for the next 12 months to maintain or improve practice?
5. The self-assessment is used as part of Ofsted’s ILACS Annual Engagement Meeting and plays an important role in their understanding of local authorities and how they work. It helps them see assess if leaders and managers have a grip on practice and are taking suitable action.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that the contents of the report are considered in terms of Children’s Services role and functions and critical challenge is afforded to improve outcomes for children and their families.

Chris Bell
Assistant Director of Children’s Services

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Sharon Raine - Head of Performance and Transformation

Council Plan	This report contributes to the Council Plan by involving Members in the scrutiny of practice relating to the delivery of key outcomes with regards to Children and Young People
Addressing inequalities	This report involves members in the scrutiny of the level to which Children’s Services contributes to ensuring that opportunities are accessible to everyone, with a focus on ensuring a good job, home and/or social connections for all.
Tackling Climate Change	This report does not identify any issued relating to climate change.
Efficient and effective use of resources	This report allows for the scrutiny of practice which is integral to optimising outcomes and ensuring efficient use of resources.
Health and Wellbeing	This report supports practice improvement relating to improving the health and wellbeing of residents.
S17 Crime and Disorder	This report supports the Councils Crime and Disorder responsibilities.
Wards Affected	This report supports improvement across all Wards.
Groups Affected	This report supports improvement which benefits all groups.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report may have an <i>impact</i> on their emotional and physical health, social development, education, and future employment.

MAIN REPORT

See attached Self – Assessment Document

Darlington Children's Services

Self-Assessment 2023-24



Knowing ourselves and knowing our children,
young people and families



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Introduction and Overview

This document reflects the journey of Darlington Borough Council's Children's Services within 2023-24, reflecting the performance data, qualitative information, and evidence of impact during this period of time, considering the areas of strength, areas of challenge and developments to the service in response to these.

This past year's progress is within the context of the outcome and findings of our most recent ILACS, which took place in October 2022 and found that the service was Good overall with Outstanding services for Children in Care, recognising the significant work that has been undertaken to improve outcomes for Children and Families in Darlington since the previous full Inspection in 2018. The findings reaffirmed our belief that in Darlington we have a culture based upon strong foundations of Relational and Restorative Practice that leads to the best outcomes for Children and Families.

"The development of creative relational approaches to practice are modelled to staff through each layer of management. This is cultivating a culture of learning and an environment where good social work is thriving." OFSTED, December 2022

The past year has also seen a Focused Visit to consider arrangements for Children in Need and children subject of a Protection Plan in October 2023. The visit recognised continuous progress within services since the time of the ILACS and in particular found relationships to be a particular strength.

"Senior leaders have ensured a relentless focus on continuing to improve the experiences of children who need help and protection in Darlington. Leaders have developed a workforce culture that is helping to develop and sustain high-quality social work practice." OFSTED, November 2023

The year has also seen great progress within our regulated Homes for Children with 100% of our children's home being found to be Good, an improvement from the previous year where only 25% of homes were Good. These outcomes have been built upon the foundations of a drive to ensure that relational and restorative practice was consistently in place across our children's homes and further evidence of the move towards a consistent service wide culture of practice.

Our ongoing progress has been achieved through the lens of our Strengthening Families Plan, which is our One Service Plan, and is a continuation of the work initiated through our partnership work with the Department for Education and Leeds City Council which commenced in 2019 and formally concluded in 2022. Following the success of the program we ensured that the positive foundations were built upon through the development of our own internal plan.

The Plan for 2023-24 had 5 Strategic Priorities, underpinned by our 3 Key Principles;

Strengthening Families 2023 -24	
Principles	Strategic Priorities
Great Social Work Practice so children are safe, and families supported to find their own solutions	Embed a restorative culture
	Grow how we learn and improve
Family First Helping them stay together and, where that isn't possible, working with families to return children home	More solutions through Family Group Conferences
Business Efficient making the best use of the resources we have	Better capability to support children
	Best use of resources

Through this work we have delivered on a number of key projects during 2023/24 including;

- Completion of Relational Practice Leadership Training and roll out of internally led Relational Practice Group Sessions with Team Managers and frontline Practitioners
- Placement Sufficiency Plan to increase number of foster care and residential placements
- Completion of Experts in Practice for 3 Practitioners and plans to renew for coming year
- Development of Staying Close, Lifelong Links and Peer Mentoring schemes
- Sector Led Improvement work to focus on strategies

These key service developments have taken place within a context of continued increased demand for services, and we remain ambitious and committed to ensuring that the needs of children and families in Darlington are well met and high quality services are provided.



Chris Bell
Assistant Director of Children's Services



James Stroyan
Group Director of People (DCS)

Darlington Context

The past year's progress has been in the context of key challenges in terms of demand, workforce stability and placement sufficiency.

In terms of demand for services, our number of contacts to the Front Door has continued to rise year on year with a 38.4% increase in contacts since the new Front Door arrangements were embedded in 2020. Whilst this trend is to be expected following our move in 2020 to a relational, conversational style, the level of complexity of need has continued to drive increased numbers of referrals and the contact to conversion rate increasing. Whilst the past year has seen a reduction in referrals and conversion rates compared to the previous year, the referral rates are still beyond the levels seen before the significant increases commenced in 2022.

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Contacts (children)	8,182	9,910	10,736	11,324
Referrals (children)	748	1,014	1,613	1,374
Conversion %	9.1	10.2	15.0	12.1

The increase in demand and associated complexity in need has led to changes in both the number of children subject of a Child Protection Plan and the number of Children Cared For. During the previous year and into 2023 we saw a trend emerging of increasing Children in Care numbers, increasing numbers of Children placed with Parents subject to Care Orders but lower rises in terms of Child Protection Numbers. This saw Children in Care numbers increase by 29% between April 2022 and September 2023, during the same period the number of Children subject of Child Protection Plans only increased by 2.5%. As a service we challenged ourselves via our relational model around our approach and decision making and supported social workers to safely and proportionately utilise Child Protection and Public Law outline processes and this resulted in Children in Care numbers decreasing between September 2023 and April 2024 by 15%, whilst during the same period Child Protection numbers increased by almost 19%.

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Child Protection Plans	87	120	116	146
Children in Care	272	273	322	300
PwP (%)	8.1	12.8	14.3	11

These increases in demand have been coupled with challenges with the workforce through the past year, with a turnover of staff at 21.3% at the start of the year and a vacancy rate at 7.4. This resulted in increased caseloads for workers, due to challenges in recruiting agency workers sufficiently. This subsequently had an impact upon performance with annual performance assessment timeliness, recording of visits and placement stability all declining as a result. It should be noted that whilst annual performance has declined (for example with assessment timeliness at 62.7%, compared with 69.2%

and 85.4% in previous years) the in-year trend shows positive changes (timeliness was 54% in Quarters 1 and 2, but was 73% in Quarters 3 and 4 alone and 83.4% in quarter 4 alone).

During this period a high level of qualitative analysis and quality assurance has been in place to understand the impact on children and families which will be detailed in the next section.

We have also used our relational model to approach our workforce stability and recruitment and retention, with increased drop in engagement to understand existing workforce well-being and needs and through bespoke recruitment events. This has led to a significant improvement in turnover (9.8% at year end, compared to 21.3% at the start of the year) and vacancies (2.2% at the end of the year compared to 7.4% at the start of the year). These changes are being seen in caseloads, with the average social worker caseload 18.2 at the end of the year compared to 23.2 at the start of the year. These positive changes give us confidence for practice further improving in the coming year.

The other key challenge has been around placement sufficiency and placement stability, with a lack of suitable placement options a key challenge and declining placement stability for those existing placements creating negative impacts for children and young people.

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
ST Stability (% with 3+ moves)	8.0	11.0	13.7	17.0
LT Stability % (foster placement)	42.3	45.8	36.6	35.8

Having analysed the drivers behind the worsening placement stability, we identified greater placement stability in our own in-house resources when compared with independent providers. This provided the evidence for a corporate approach to increase our in-house placement capacity, with a plan to increase numbers of foster carers through an enhanced foster carer offer and to increase our children’s home provision. The plan was approved at Full Council in March 2024 and will form a key part of the strategic approach in the coming year.

What is the quality and Impact of Social Work Practice and how do we know?

Following our ILACS in 2022 we have maintained a clear focus on continuous improvement, whilst also recognising that this has been in the context of our services experiencing significant and sustained increases of demand for services, with increasing numbers of children and families requiring support. We have maintained regular and robust performance management and oversight to understand the impact that these increases have had on service delivery and to also understand what is driving these changes, and the impact on the quality of practice in Darlington.

Through performance management we developed a clear understanding that the timeliness of our actions had declined, for example in relation to the completion of assessments, which were 62% and the timeliness of recording of statutory visits, 90.4% for Children on a CP Plan and 81% for Cared for Children. However, we have used our Quality Assurance functions to understand the impact on services and these reassure ourselves that social workers are making effective and proportionate decisions and interventions with families, but in some circumstances, they are struggling to complete and record these interventions in a consistently timely manner.

In addition to regular performance management, we have maintained the Weekly Review Meeting which analyses, through the lens of quality and impact, the decisions made at the front door and at the point of case allocation. This is continuing to provide a high level of oversight into practice, in real time, and help us understand the impact of our decision making upon children and families. The Weekly Referral Meeting is multifaceted, allowing us to maintain robust oversight on the quality of referrals to Children's Social Care, decision making at the Front Door, as well as considering the management direction afforded to social workers upon allocation and ensuring our response has been prompt and proportionate.

Through this work we have identified an increasing contact to referral conversion rate and an increasing number of "No Further Action" Assessments, 59.6%. Through the Weekly Review Meeting, and thematic sampling, we have been able to identify themes relating to the withdrawal of consent post allocation, where we have then seen an increase in re-referrals of these families. This has allowed us to respond accordingly, implementing a Re-referral Meeting to review these examples alongside social workers in a reflective space to consider what could have been done differently initially. A focused piece of work is underway to understand this change and to reflect in practice improvements in the coming year, ensuring that families receive the right support at the right time.

We continue to undertake regular Practice Review Audits, which is a collaborative approach to audit and understanding quality and impact. We have reflected upon findings from the ILACS about the benefit of family engagement and involvement in the process and have amended our processes to seek greater input from families in our audit process, alongside reflective discussion with the allocated social worker to provide a space for immediate learning.

Our Practice Review Audits are providing reassurance about the quality of services and the positive impact on families, in the context of the impact on timeliness performance as described. For the Practice Review Audits completed in 2023-2024, it was found that 75% of Assessments and Analysis were Outstanding or Good, 75% of Plans were Outstanding or Good, 81% were found to have an overall intervention that was Outstanding or Good and 76% led to an Outstanding or Good outcome when considered in the context of the reason for the referral. Practice Reviews Audits also found 79%

of case files showing Outstanding or Good evidence of relational practice. However, they also highlighted that only 55% showed evidence of Outstanding or Good Management Oversight on children's case files, despite assurance from the allocated social workers that this had been provided. This is consistent with some of our improvement plans identified previously and has resulted in the review and launch of our refreshed Supervision Policy. Conversely, through our Weekly Referral Meeting, we have consistently observed a significant improvement in the quality of Management Direction provided to social workers when allocated new Child & Family Assessments; this is through, robust and clearly sets out the next steps.

Our Practice Review Audits have demonstrated an overall improvement in the quality of practice across 2023-2024, with a reduction in findings of Inadequate, and a greater proportion finding practice to be Good or Outstanding.

Alongside these measures, we have also implemented Practice Weeks to support our understanding of the quality of practice in Darlington, this involves Senior Leaders spending the week close to practice, facilitating Practice Conversation with practitioners, undertaking Observations of Practice, and seeking feedback from children and young people, and their parents and carers. This has helped ensure our approach to quality assurance is dynamic and provides multiple and varied opportunities to underpin our understanding of quality and provide greater depth. For example, our Practice Review Audits have continued to highlight challenges in terms of chronologies being evident on children's case file, however activity through our Practice Week identified that whilst this continues to be an area for development, social workers know their children and families well, including their history and how this needs to be considered in terms of accumulative harm.

Our Practice Development Group was launched in June 2023, which replaced the activity and focus of the Quality Improvement Group. These meetings are chaired by the Assistant Director, or the Head of Practice and Quality (PSW) and the purpose is to understand the key practice themes emerging from our Quality Assurance activity. In particular the Practice Review Audits and Weekly Review Meetings, to identify actions, share best practice and to address any thematic issues within practice, as gathered through quality assurance. This Practice Development Group includes Heads of Service and Service Managers as well as Quality Assurance Leads, the Principal Social Worker, the Relational and Restorative Practice Lead colleagues from the Performance Team and Workforce Development. This membership ensures that leaders are crucial to the ongoing development of our practice, and the culture that underpins our this, and they are essential to the effectiveness of the group moving forward and ensuring that it has a real impact and ensuring learning can be acted upon quickly to drive continues practice improvement. The group also has strong links into the Assistant Director clinics so that we gain a real sense of crossover and cohesion between performance and quality.

The group has thus far identified themed audits around re-referrals and no further action assessments and further development and support around reflective management oversight to be key priorities.

The overall focus in terms of quality centers around our Relational and Restorative Practice model and the evidence not only of the key elements of our Practice Umbrella being utilised but also on the impact of the interventions on children and families. A key thread running throughout the different strands of our Quality Assurance work has been our Relational Practice Model, from the feedback from children, young people, parents, and carers to evidence on children and young people's case files and the impact this is having on their outcomes, to the feedback from our workforce.

RELATIONAL PRACTICE UMBRELLA



We use Strength Based and Relational methods to support children, young people and families in Darlington.

Click on the umbrella to hyperlink to the WFD RP intranet resource page

Working "with" children, young people and families brings ownership to decisions.

Solution Focused Practice	Elements of Signs of Safety	Restorative Practice	Strength Based Working
Solution Focused Practice concentrates on helping people move towards the future that they want and to learn what can be done differently by using their existing skills, strategies and ideas – rather than focusing on the problem.	Signs of Safety is a strengths-based, safety-orientated approach to casework designed for use throughout the safeguarding process. Darlington use elements of Signs of Safety when working with children young people and families.	Restorative Practice is based on developing dignity, healing, and strength in relationships. Restorative practice is a strategy that seeks to repair relationships that may have been damaged.	Strengths-based practice identifies and draws on strengths and assets allowing all parties to work together to determine the best outcome. This approach focuses on positive attributes of a person or a group, rather than the negative ones.

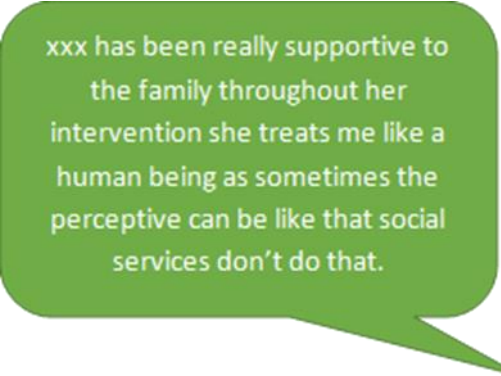
Family Feedback

Through our Practice Review Audits, feedback is sought from families by auditors during this process. This allows us to gain greater insights into the experience of those accessing our services. This allows us to address any immediate areas of learning with the allocated practitioner, but also draw trends and themes over time.

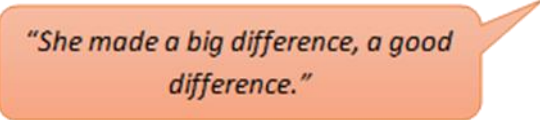
We have strengthened this further, by making Family Feedback a core aspect of our recently established annual Practice Weeks, utilizing staff from across the service to make contact with families which recently resulted in 72 people providing their feedback. What was overwhelmingly evident from this feedback was the difference our relational approach to practice has made, with the vast majority of parents and carers highlighting positive, meaningful, and helpful working relationships, with a number recognise a shift they had seen from previous engagement several years ago.

Parents and carers fed back that they had been treated with respect, dignity and felt that they had not been judged by their practitioner, particularly about their pasts. Many shared that they had been listened to and were also able to share their views and speak openly about their wishes and feelings.

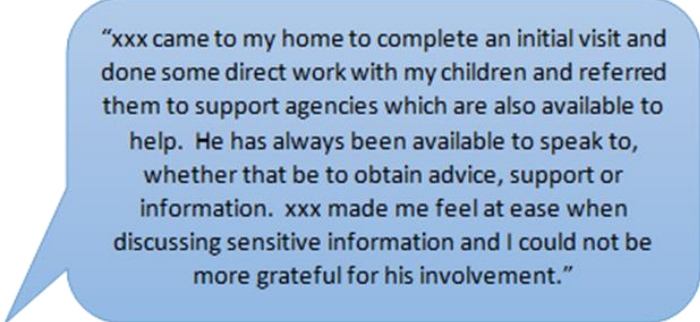
Many reflected that they had felt that they were supported and that their practitioner was there for them when they needed advice and guidance and that they were kind, empathetic, and easy to talk to. Further, many felt that the practitioner had put the time and effort in to build trusting working relationships with them and their children.



xxx has been really supportive to the family throughout her intervention she treats me like a human being as sometimes the perceptive can be like that social services don't do that.



"She made a big difference, a good difference."



"xxx came to my home to complete an initial visit and done some direct work with my children and referred them to support agencies which are also available to help. He has always been available to speak to, whether that be to obtain advice, support or information. xxx made me feel at ease when discussing sensitive information and I could not be more grateful for his involvement."

The Experiences and Progress of Children in Need of Help and Protection

Identifying and responding to children’s needs and appropriate thresholds

A continued rise in contacts has contributed to a busy year for the Children’s Initial Advice Team (CIAT). With the re-modelling of the Front Door in March 2020 a rise in the number of contacts was predicted and the Front Door was designed to meet this demand, encouraging partners to contact CIAT with concerns for children, or for advice. However, what was not predicted was that towards the end of the pandemic, and particularly during 2022/23, there was a significant rise in referrals to the Assessment and Safeguarding Teams, as well as a rise in referrals to the Building Stronger Families Team. This placed a great deal of pressure on the whole service and an ongoing understanding of what was driving the increase in referrals was essential; knowing ourselves and knowing our families had never been so important.

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Safeguarding concern (contacts)	4,428	5,347	5,730	5,993
Non-Safeguarding concern (contacts)	868	1,386	2,003	1,693

We know that an increase in contacts has come about due to a variety of factors, however the main factor is that the model introduced in 2020 promotes conversation and stronger relationships with partners and the discussions held in relation to any concern for a child are not focused on meeting a defined threshold or viewing the service as a ‘gateway’ to statutory services but rather a conversation and working together to gain the right outcome. This approach promotes ‘contacts’ being made into the Front Door, and this is an approach that sits well with the relational framework that Darlington has created and families and the workforce benefit from this. However, it is recognised that regionally contacts in Darlington are much higher than in other areas, even those who adopted a similar approach, for example, Newcastle.

The model used and approach adopted at the Front Door certainly promotes higher numbers of contacts, but it is likely that this then contributed to higher numbers of referrals into social care during 2022/23. In response, there has been focused work done, including extensive training in relation to the model being delivered service wide, including to external partners. This is helping teams work together better, in a joined up way with a vision and understanding that is agreed and well tested, the Front Door, social care teams and Building Stronger Families, as well as external partners are beginning to view themselves as part of a whole system and in 2023/24 a lower and more appropriate conversion rate of referrals to social care has been achieved.

Of note, 768 referrals, involving 1,374 children were started in 2023/24. This is a 14% decrease compared to 902 referrals for 1,613 children in 2022/23, but still an increase when compared to 514 referrals for 1,014 children in 2021/22.

Our end of year referral rate per 10,000 was 617.4. Analysis of the North East ADCS Benchmarking report 2023/24 informs that our referral rate per 10,000 is below that of the North East average rate of referrals (692.5) and a reduction on 2022/23 (724.8).

Darlington has dropped from 4th highest out of the 12 authorities in 2022/23 to 6th highest for 2023/24, although physically we still received the least number of referrals.

Darlington has the second highest percentage of referrals being received from the Police, with only Durham above us. Both these force areas are covered by Durham Constabulary. A review is being carried out to establish what we might be doing differently to other local authorities, and whether this is another driver in the increase in referrals to social care

Data from quarter one 2024/25 is promising in that the conversion rate is now one that remains lower, more appropriate and in-line with expectations following the focused development work.

Although the model itself is vitally important to consider, societal factors have also played a part in the number of contacts received, as well as referrals to social care, however some of the factors that contributed to referrals to social care were present two years ago, yet the conversion rate doubled in 2022/23 (see table below), compared to the two previous years. Whilst the pandemic and issues such as poverty and mental health certainly need to be given weight in relation to any rationale for such an increase, we fully recognised that we needed to look at adapting the way we work and look more to our partners to help provide a more proportionate response to meet the needs of our children and their families in a way that during periods lockdown had not always been achieved.

The increase in the number of contacts, along with the presenting issues are elements of helping to gain a picture of what life is like for a child and their family in Darlington, however this is only one part of the bigger picture. It was necessary for senior leaders to go further and one of the strengths of the current senior leadership team is an ability and willingness to not only understand what children and families experience and need, but to understand the impact our intervention has and to make sure improvement is always the aim. This meant it was vital that practice and decision making needed to be understood in a far deeper way than ever before, it was necessary to 'hold a mirror' to the whole service and to work together to not just analyse data but to work hard on what is found by demonstrating a 'no blame culture' where honesty and transparency is essential if change and improvement was to follow.

This approach was a successful element of the focused piece of work that has taken place at the Front Door during 2023/23, the aim was to ensure that our vision of right service, right time is truly achieved as it was recognised and accepted that through analysis of outcomes, an increase in referrals to social care and an increase in re-referrals then this was not being achieved. This is where the culture of learning and a high support, high challenge approach was to play the main part in turning the curve.

Analysis of the data has helped us understand that since moving out of the pandemic, the primary drivers for the increase in referrals remain poverty, domestic abuse/offending/violence, substance misuse and mental health. These issues are in the main impacting on our families and bringing about more involvement from Children's Services. As we and partner agencies are feeling the pressure of increased workloads and stretched funding, along with partnership wide challenges with staff retention and recruitment, it is vital that partnership working is strong and effective. This is an area of focus for Darlington; work is underway to further strengthen our partnerships and challenge one another on what more we can do individually and together.

It is evident that the success of the Front Door has improved relationships with partners and that continued success is reliant on effective partnership working, with consistent partnership feedback via our formal surveys. However, we have seen a decrease in external led early help work with

reduced involvement from Universal services/partners taking on Early Help Assessments and targeted work (see below). This year we will draw on our strong partnerships to refresh our approach and will utilise the model used at the Front Door, we will revitalize how we work, and this will help with decision making from the first point of contact. We will include partners in our vision to share the load and empower them to work with us to ensure that the right service at the right time is being provided; this should be the least intrusive and always proportionate.

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
EHA's started	623	839	1,650	1,417
Of which are initiated by external agency	127	161	223	204
	20.4%	19.2%	13.5%	14.4%

We utilised the launch this year of a Strategic Early Help Board to set the scene for how we want to work moving forward. The Early Help Strategic Board is accountable to the Statutory Safeguarding Partners, and it is responsible for the strategic and operational delivery of effective, targeted, and coordinated preventative and early help support for children, young people, and families.

The Board will deliver on the aims and ambitions set out in the currently being developed strategy document, it will assist with building on, and developing the vision for an integrated, preventative early help system for children, young people, and families in Darlington. This system will help identify a family's needs as early possible as and when needs and issues emerge. It will support the objectives of the Supporting Families programme which in turn will help reduce demand on specialist services and will promote whole family approaches through partnership working for a holistic response to families and to make best use of collective resources, strengthening links into localities and schools.

The use of the Board will support the partnership to develop innovative ways to provide a joined up, seamless offer to support children, young people and their families to improve outcomes and empower families to continue their success and deliver on our vision to ensure children live healthy, active, happy and fulfilled lives and feel a sense of belonging in their community. An increase in external led EHAs will be one way in which this will be achieved, as well as finding effective ways of gathering and using data and intelligence to understand need; changing demands; areas of high deprivation in order to target resources and develop new approaches to effectively respond to the most vulnerable will be one of the aims and the need to improve communication across the Early Help system and ensure that there is a good understanding of provision and clear pathways of support for children, parents and carers and professionals will always be a focus.

Data in relation to Building Stronger Families and our early help system is becoming more sophisticated and is helping us to understand what practice and outcomes look like from a quantitative perspective but then through evaluation and feedback from families then the voice of the family is assisting with qualitative information being gained, understood and contributing to improvements and this developing service area.

Timeliness of EHAs (BSF) for 2020 - 24

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
% EHA's completed within 30 days of referral	87.0	36.7	36.3	29.1

It can be understood from data that the timeliness and completion of EHAs in Building Stronger Families has deteriorated. Further analysis of the impact and outcomes of Early Help Assessments has helped us understand that by applying a more relational approach to the work carried out with families' better outcomes have been achieved, this has sometimes meant that assessments may begin slightly later than the 'start date' in line with the families circumstances and wishes, they may also take longer to complete to ensure the appropriate plan/outcome is achieved. It is positive that there has been a reduction in families opening to Building Stronger Families for a second time within the same year with 72 children/33 families referred back into the service during 2022/23 and 45 children/25 families during 2023/24. Positively, of the children that ceased with BSF, there was 5.1% less children with a contact within a month of them ceasing in 2023/24, 0.4% more within 6 months and 1.6% more in over 6 months. There were fewer step ups to social care in 2023/24 compared to 2022/23 and a 5.5% increase in children not having a further contact within 3 months after the reporting year end.

The service uses a mix of audit activities but from 8 formal audits undertaken between April and September 2023, 7 were rated as Good with 1 deemed to require improvement. Real areas of strength were evident using good quality genograms and chronologies to inform the assessment and plan. The influence of good quality and relational and restorative practice was evident and there was evidence of good quality management oversight.

Feedback from families supported the findings:

“She has always been helpful, she helped get Warren back to school and has helped with other things we asked for too.”

“Making plans with school was easier with the help of Amanda.”

There has been an increase in the number of EHAs (see below table) and staffing pressures and these factors have all contributed to the deterioration in the completion of EHAs, what is reassuring is that the overall outcomes for families have been good despite the delay in completion of the assessment.

Alongside this a new assessment has recently been developed, this is less repetitive and more succinct, and far more family led, there is a focus on direct work and multi-agency input rather than focusing on a lengthy narrative style assessment.

Numbers of children/families for 2020 – 24

	Open to BSF at month end		Open to an external agency at month end		% of children open to BSF
	Children	Families	Children	Families	%
Apr-23	487	223	123	65	79.8%
May-23	491	230	124	68	79.8%

Jun-23	511	240	97	52	84.0%
Jul-23	472	225	97	57	83.0%
Aug-23	468	225	87	51	84.3%
Sep-23	460	223	60	35	88.5%
Oct-23	377	179	55	30	87.3%
Nov-23	375	182	65	32	85.2%
Dec-23	452	221	72	37	86.3%
Jan-24	491	232	70	37	87.5%
Feb-24	396	180	95	50	80.7%
Mar-24	423	197	125	64	77.2%
2020/21	253	123	93	43	73.1%
2021/22	411	191	73	35	84.9%
2022/23	490	218	125	68	79.7%
2023/24	423	197	125	64	77.2%

Making good decisions and providing effective help

Decision making flows from the front door through to the social work teams who provide help and support to children. Darlington has five Assessment & Safeguarding teams who support children from the point of referral through to permanence. This is routed in relational practice and supports locality based social work practice. Each team is responsible for specific localities, enabling better relationships with partners within those localities.

All referrals are allocated by a social work manager or advanced practitioner with clear direction provided to the social worker. This is evidenced in all our Child & Family Assessments. Decision making and early response to referrals is monitored live via our Weekly Referral Meeting. This enables the senior leadership team to have assurance that the right decisions have been made early into a child's journey and enables challenge to take place when necessary, and to provide effective challenge in "real time" when this has not been achieved.

During 2022/23 there was an increase in re-referrals, and this continued into 2023/24. In 2022/23 the re-referral rate was 17.7% compared to 10.9% the previous year, during 2023/24 this has risen to 24.2%. In response to this monthly deep dive activity is carried out and is focused on each re-referral to establish the rationale and establish findings with an analytical and action-based approach taken. The deep dive activity is led by the relevant Service Manager but also includes other relevant members of SLT to ensure that findings are linked to learning in practice and focuses on decision making. Re-referrals with the same presenting issue are analysed in terms of the timescale within which they have been re-referred and analysis of patterns for individual teams and workers has also proved useful for targeted work around development and improvements in practice, management oversight and decision making. The previous Child & Family Assessment is also quality assured to check the purpose of assessment and content to ensure that the presenting issue was addressed. Any areas that were not addressed are highlighted between CIAT and Assessment and Safeguarding. Allocation to the previous worker is attempted in every re-referral where appropriate as those established relationships already exist, and this prevents the family having to repeat their story and journey.

Assessment

1,554 children had a Child & Family Assessment completed in 2023/2024. This is a continual increase when compared to 2022/23 (1,461) and 2021/2022 (806). Appropriateness of referrals for assessment is monitored via the Weekly Referral Meeting, including effective oversight of transfer from and to early help services.

Assessment timeliness is an area which needs focused improvement. In summer/autumn 2023 we saw an increase in contacts progressing to referral which led to increased workloads. This increased demand impacted on our assessment timelines which was that 62.7% of our Child & Family Assessments were completed within timescales. Between April 2023 and October 2023 assessments were averaging at 52.5% per month within timescales and this has now increased to an average of 80.5% within timescales per month. This is in line with demand decreasing and is an ongoing focus. We have embedded increased management oversight of delayed assessments, by ensuring where an assessment is delayed, oversight is recorded by the team manager and any impact on the child is considered.

We continue to see over half (59.6%) of our Child & Family Assessments concluding with no further action. Thematic audits of no further action assessments are taking place regularly and themes are

shared across the service area. In some circumstances this is linked to reduced timeliness of completing assessments meaning work with the families during the longer intervening assessment period has resolved the identified needs. A weekly re-referral meeting has been established to look live at re-referrals and reflect with team managers on practice. This is linked to no further action Child & Family Assessments leading to re-referrals. Findings from Practice Review Audits tells us that overall, the quality of Child & Family Assessments has continued to improve across the year, demonstrating that children and families largely receive the right help at the right time, where Child & Family Assessments consider children's needs well, and lead to clear, good quality plans. Following feedback from partners in our Quality Assurance Partnership Meeting, we have introduced outcome meetings at the conclusion of Child & Family Assessments to enable full information regarding the outcome to be shared with partners involved with the child. This enables partners to understand next steps for the child and if there is no longer a role for social care, for partners to understand the rationale for this and any identified ongoing vulnerabilities. The impact of this should be that partners are well informed, children receive the right support and more children receive support as a 'step down' from social care.

Child in Need

324 children were an open Child in Need (CiN) at the end of March 2024. This is an increase compared to the end of March 2023 (265) but is more in line with prior years (March 2022, 325 and March 2021, 328). Since towards the end of 2023 we have seen a steady increase in the number CiN plans open which coincides with an increase in Child Protection plans and a decrease in children in our care.

Our biggest referral factor is domestic abuse, and this continues to be a key reason for children to be active as children in need. Waiting lists to access domestic abuse services can be lengthy in Darlington. In response to this we have trained most of our social workers and family workers in 'Moving Forward' which is a programme that can be delivered directly with our families who have experienced domestic abuse. The aim is then to reduce the impact of domestic abuse on the children and prevent the reoccurrence of harm. We will be able to measure the impact by seeing children successfully closed to social care without re-referral within our weekly re-referral meeting where domestic abuse is a factor we can explore if Moving Forward was completed with the family, if not why and if it has, what has reduced the impact of this being successful.

Another significant factor for children is parental mental health and an approach used in the Building Stronger Families team is one that is accessible to families who are also open to social care, this links in with one of the ten headlines from the Supporting Families Programme, this being "improved mental and physical health". Practitioners use a whole family approach from the outset of their work with families, they are trained in root causes so very skilled in considering what may be driving behaviours/struggles for adults, as well as children. Practitioners support adults to access local services, including Talking Therapies, Social Prescribing Team, Mind and We are With You (substance misuse and mental health very often present together). A Walk and Talk Group for parents is offered and this focuses on improving mental health, as well as physical health, with a mindful approach. Parenting programmes also help educate parents around ACES and mental health and the impact this has on themselves and therefore their children. As part of any pre-birth referral Building Stronger Families assessment consent is requested from the expectant mother for a referral to be made to perinatal mental health team if deemed appropriate, many are referred to this team during the assessment, those that step-up will already have consent gained as the perinatal team do not accept referrals until later in the pregnancy.

Children in need of protection

We held 527 strategy discussions in 2023/2024, 37 of which related to children with an active child protection plan. This is linked to an increase in referrals but is a factor that needs ongoing focus. An independent review of our use of strategy discussions highlighted several strengths and areas for further learning. Strengths included our response to referrals when a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm is timely and, in most records, parental consent is sought to share information when safe to do so, our practice is child centred, and children's lived experience is understood. Areas of learning included how practitioners engage with families from the first point of communication, focusing more clearly on the current concerns and considering history but not allowing history to as strongly influence current thinking, how we work with families where we doubt their honesty and management oversight offering more direction and challenge. 21.4% of strategy discussions led to no further action, this may suggest we are too quick to look at a 'procedure' before liaising with the family to better understand any concerns and the decrease in strategy discussions leading to a section 47 enquiry (71.4%) is further evidence of this.

146 children were subject to a Child Protection (CP) Plan at the end of March 2024, this is an increase on previous years but in line with an increase in Child in Need plans and a decrease in the number of children becoming looked after. When comparing this to our neighbouring authorities, our rate for CP remains below the regional rate. Our increase in children who require protection plans is due to our focus on ensuring children become looked after only when they have had intensive support and where risks can no longer be managed safely.

We have continued to embed relational practice throughout all our teams and remain committed to more family led solutions through use of Family Group Conferencing (FGC). 107 families had an FGC in 2023/2024 however this is only 42.3% of families referred with the remaining families involvement ending without an FGC taking place. Only 4 families had an FGC end due to the children coming in to care which evidences that FGC's are impacting positively on outcomes for children.

Children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan

At the end March 2024, 146 children were subject to a Child Protection Plan, a rate of 65.6 per 10,000 children under the age of 18 years. This is a higher position than last year when the figure stood at 116 (a rate of 52.1 per 10,000).

One parent whose child has benefited from a Child Protection Plan told us

‘The social worker has helped us get to a point I’m at now where I haven’t taken drugs for over a year and half and I have my own place. The social worker has given me encouragement, they’re been sorting things out with X (Mam). They have treated me with respect, everything has been spot on and nothing could have been done differently’.

Category of Abuse	National 2023	DBC 2024
Neglect	49%	61.0%
Emotional	37%	31.5%
Physical	7%	6.8%
Sexual	4%	0%
Multiple	2%	Not used

The highest proportion of children, where the risk is either Neglect or Emotional Abuse, is similar to the national position. The rate for Physical Abuse is in line with the national position. For more than half of the year the rate for sexual abuse ranged from 1- 4%, but the end of year figure was 0%. Due to the relatively small size of the population in the borough, local percentages relating to categories can be impacted by one or two families either becoming, or ceasing, to be subject to a Child Protection Plan.

Children who become subject to a second or subsequent plan being agreed at any time after a previous plan is always carefully considered. It is sometimes the case that there are adverse and very different changes in a child’s life and a second or subsequent plan is necessary, however exploring this is important so that the impact of the previous intervention is known and any learning from this acted on. Our rate for 2023-24 was 17.9%, a similar position to the previous 2 years. This is slightly better than the National average of 24% and regional average 25% (most recent published data).

2.7% of children have been subject to a child protection plan for over 2 years and 4.1% have been subject to a child protection plan for 18 months to 2 years. Identified children at 18 months are reviewed by the responsible Service Manager alongside the Team Manager. This has not been

captured on the children's record and this will now be recorded and will be a reflective discussion with the social worker, team manager and service manager.

What does the quality of our CP work look like based on audits?

Findings from Practice Review Audits tell us that across the year, the quality of planning in reviewing for those children subject to a Child Protection Plan continues to improve, with evidence of plans that are measurable, outcome focussed and with trackable actions. Further, we have seen evidence of professional challenge, with a stronger focus on the prevention of drift and delay, with evidence that Family Group Conference is becoming increasingly considered at the earliest opportunity.

Management Oversight of Frontline Practice

Management oversight of front line practice has been a consistent area of focus. This has led to improved management oversight at the point of Child & Family Assessments being allocated to offer clear direction to practitioners. This is complimented by our weekly review meeting where we look in live time at our response to referrals, including the management oversight at various points from the point of contact through to allocation of the Child & Family Assessment.

We have rolled out a RAG rated supervision policy across the services whereby the team manager agrees the frequency needed for supervision based on the child's needs. Children who are subject to Child Protection Plans or looked after in short term placements are supervised monthly with children subject to Child in Need Plans or long-term matched children in our care having 12 weekly supervisions. Each child's circumstances are individually considered and their status is only one factor that is considered, this means supervision of front line practice is led by the child's needs.

Monthly Practice Review Audits are completed by members of the senior leadership team collaboratively with practitioners and their team managers. This enables senior leaders to understand what practice for our children is like and by speaking to family members as part of the quality process, this enables a holistic view to be formed. Monthly Practice Review Audits enable practitioners to have time to discuss the family they are working with and reflectively explore strengths and areas for development.

Alongside this we recently held our first practice week which consisted of members of the senior leadership team and team managers completing a series of direct observations of practice, practice conversations and gathering family feedback to enable us to better understand what our practice looks like, and its impact on children and families.

Robust oversight of children subject to legal processes takes place through our legal planning procedure. This ensures decisions to issue care proceedings or for a child to become looked after is made by a Head of Service. All legal planning meetings are chaired by either a Head of Service or Service Manager to ensure oversight of planning for our children.

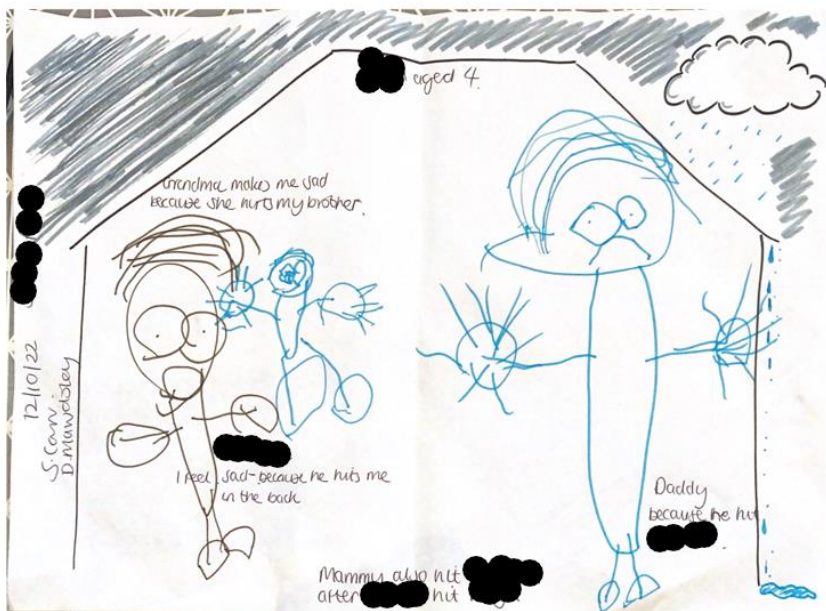
Our management structure lends itself to quality oversight of our teams with each Service Manager having clear roles and responsibilities. An example being one Service Manager is responsible for transition planning for children to adulthood and another is a lead for adoption. This enables consistent oversight from a member of the senior leadership team across key areas of focus.

Participation and direct work with children and families

Olivia Winward 16.04.2024

Your Name: Olivia Winward	Important People in your life: mum, dad, Ebony, Harvey, Rhys, my cousins - Abigail + Noah.
Who is your social worker and how can you contact them? Hayley Smith TEL: 07935 548526	Who is on your helping hand? Draw a hand or around your hand and write the names of 5 people who you can talk to about your worries.
What is your social worker and other people worried about? About what I told Miss O'Sullivan that I don't like it when my mum and dad argue. Hayley is worried about how this makes me feel. She is also worried about what I see and hear at home.	(Hand-drawn diagram of a hand with names on the fingers: dad, Tutor Miss Coban, Miss O'Sullivan, Ebony, Trusted adult, mum)
When do you feel safe? When I am with mum and dad and they are not having arguments.	When I don't feel safe.... I will... ring Ebony on her mobile and ask her to pick me up.
When do you want to happen? For them to stop the arguments and for us to all spend time as a family.	I want you... come and see me and talk to me.

A variety of direct work tools are used to engage children and understand their lived experiences. An area of development this year has been to develop the use of a narrative approach to case recording, writing directly to children in our records so when they read them, they can understand sensitively why we were involved. Some social workers have developed profiles about themselves to give to children and this is something we are encouraging the wider workforce to develop.



Direct work impacts directly on outcomes for children. The above direct work was used to understand two young children's experiences at home where concerns about domestic abuse and physical abuse were present. The direct work with the children coupled with multi-agency concerns

enabled the social worker to make an application for the children to be placed outside of parental care and they were subsequently placed for adoption.

We use Mind of My Own as one of many tools available to social workers. This has been a challenging area to engage children and the workforce with. Whilst it is available for children, it isn't used to the level we would like. Workshops are being delivered regularly to improve practitioners confidence.

Alongside this we have invested in Blue Cabin's Creative Life Story work programme. This has enabled us to have two experts in practice across the organisation to support our use of life story work. In 2024/2025 we are investing in a virtual memory box to further capture children's life story. We have a premise that all direct work is life story work and it is essential children understand why we are involved with their family.

Identifying and responding to all types of abuse recognising the vulnerability of specific groups of children

Children who go missing or are being/or at risk of being exploited are identified in the first instance via the Children's Front Door and this action is supported by a Daily Missing Meeting. This meeting ensures all missing episodes are considered and any risk associated with these episodes, for example, exploitation, is carefully analysed and appropriate responses agreed.

Over the past three years in particular, the blend of embedded processes, good and consistent management oversight, together with multi-agency involvement brings together an opportunity to focus on individual children, but also work on an intelligence base where mapping helps bring about knowledge of children linking in with other children and adults where risk could increase.

This blend of forums such as an operational Missing and Exploited Group (MEG), the use of a Police led Child Exploitation Vulnerability Tracker (CEVT) and tools such as the Child Exploitation Matrix that can lead to a referral to MEG is proving effective. From a strategic perspective, the Strategic Child Exploitation Group (CEG) is held quarterly and is held jointly with Durham. Attendance at the quarterly Regional Harm Away from Home meeting means that learning across the region is shared and joint approaches between authorities is strengthened.

A weekly Community Safety Check in Meeting has also proved effective, internal and external partners are able to join this as a responsive meeting to immediate concerns and issues that arise linked to individuals, hotspots, vehicles and relevant incidents. This meeting aims to make spaces and places safer for young people and assists further with the gathering of intelligence/inform mapping.

A Child Exploitation Worker commissioned via Barnardo's is part of the Front Door Service, as is a Missing from Home Worker. The Child Exploitation Worker holds a caseload and works across the whole service, including with the children's homes in the Borough.

Each month/quarter/annually data is carefully analysed with the number of missing episodes within the month and the number of individual children they relate to shown in an age range. A clear picture of who our children are that are missing is gained and the response in terms of engagement in the Return Home Interview (RHI) and the timescale within which this is held is also clear. Importantly the quality of these RHIs is audited and learning and outcomes shared with teams and development of the service always looking to be improved.

The total number of missing episodes in 2023/24 was 423 involving 122 individual children and young people. This is a positive reduction compared to 2022/23 which saw 691 episodes of missing

involving 162 individual children. 93 (76.2%) children in 2023/24 had 3 or less missing episodes, 20 (16.4%) children were reported missing between 4 and 9 times in the year. 9 (7.4%)

Young people in care have seen the largest decrease in missing episodes compared to 2022/23, going from 55.4% (383 / 691) of the total episodes to 35.9% (152 / 423) of the total episodes. There has been a focused piece of work carried out jointly across services and with Police and children's residential homes and this has assisted with this improvement.

Improvement is needed in relation to data gathered regarding children at risk of/being exploited. This is an issue not just regionally but nationally, it has been highlighted through various learning reviews and yet data in this area of social care still requires development strategically to reflect the picture of exploitation in cities, towns, and villages. The data does not consistently help to provide an understanding of what type of exploitation a child might be suffering and what the level of risk is.

This is an area of work that is ongoing, however with data presently what we do know is during 2023/24 there have been 8 children identified as at risk/suffering from Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) cases and 20 children at risk of/suffering Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).

In 2023/24, 13 young people open due to CSE or CCE were reported missing for 82 episodes. 5 young people were on an open CiN plan when reported missing (15 episodes), 3 were open to BSF (8 episodes), 1 was not currently open to social care (1 episodes) and the remaining 8 young people were a Child in Care at the point they went missing with a total of 58 episodes.

Gathering more sophisticated and accurate data is necessary if prevention of harm in relation to exploitation is to be achieved, this will also assist with ensuring an appropriate response is always provided.

Children with disabilities

We have a dedicated team who support children with disabilities. This team is responsible for assessing children's needs and eligibility but also any safeguarding concerns. Whilst there is a clear criteria for children to be active to the children with disabilities team, an individualised approach is taken for children. This means that even if a child is not eligible but has overriding needs, they will be supported as children in need, child protection or looked after. Whilst we continue to have no children active to a child protection plan specifically within the children with disabilities team, we do have a child subject to a Care Order at home and a child subject to ongoing proceedings. This is because if the child's primary need is safeguarding, rather than eligibility for paid services, children including those with a disability sit within our Assessment and Safeguarding Teams.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children

We engaged with the National Mandated Transfer Scheme to support unaccompanied children to be placed within the Darlington area. We have worked hard to develop support for our unaccompanied children which includes a bespoke Duke of Edinburgh award, regular drop in's and we have recruited a care experienced peer mentor who was an unaccompanied child to provide additional support.

At 31 March 2024, we had 16 Unaccompanied young people in our care, this was a decrease from 17 in our care as of 31 March 2023. 10 of these young people were placed in Darlington with 6 placed out of area.

Children from Gypsy, Roma and travelling families

In Darlington, we have many families from the Gypsy, Roma and Travelling community. Social workers within Darlington have had specialist training to develop their understanding of traveler culture to aid their assessment of children and families. Specialist support is commissioned via education, Traveller Education and Attainment Service. They offer support to families with accessing education support and are a great source of knowledge and support for social care. Children who are home educated are visited by an education safeguarding lead who has a specialism in supporting travelling families.

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

Areas of Strength	Areas for Development
<p>Assessments and risk assessments are strong, considering the child's history in context and clearly articulating risk</p>	<p>Improve the evidence of relational practice in all recording including direct work, the "voice of the child," in chronologies, children's records and plans</p>
<p>Our Weekly Referral Meeting – giving clear oversight, Strong Challenge and Strong Support</p>	<p>Proportionate and timely assessments, directed by management at allocation. Reviewed throughout the assessment process to prevent delay.</p>
<p>Relational Practice embedding across our whole service</p>	<p>Improving our understanding of reasons for "No further action" outcomes to assessment, particularly in relation to children and families who have been subject to section 47 investigations</p>
<p>Increasing level of Family Group Conferencing</p>	<p>Increase the use and understanding of contingency planning for children, including encouraging families to do so within their FGC</p>
<p>Robust oversight of legal and permanence tracking</p>	<p>Increase the use of relational language in all written communications with families and letters before proceedings in particular</p> <p>Improve the timeliness and recording of management supervision. Ensure that supervision clearly gives direction and drives progress on children's plans</p>

The Experience and Progress in Care and Care Leavers

Making good decisions

Senior Management oversight and approval is in place for all requests for a child to become looked after, high support and high challenge supports scrutiny of work undertaken. In most families input from Keeping Families Together and/or Family Group Conferencing is recommended where this has not already happened. This ensures that for most families decisions made for children to come into care are timely, proportionate, and based upon a clear, recorded understanding of the issues and risks.

We reviewed our approach to decision making panels and have simplified this to two panels, a Practice Solutions Panel with multi-disciplinary attendees supporting practitioners to find the right solutions for children and families, and make sure we make the best use of available resources. This approach makes a range of expertise and knowledge available to find the best solutions and follow through support, which we expect this to have a positive impact on placement stability. Our Complex Needs Panel focuses on high-cost support needs where funding is shared, for example with Health.

Numbers of Children in Care has decreased, with 300 Children in Care at the end of 2023/24, compared with 322 the previous year. 121 children came into care in 2023/24 from 81 families. This is a decrease when compared with the 149 children who came into care in 2022/23 from 104 families.

Legal Gateway Meetings are held for all children where consideration is being given to commencing the Public Law Outline or Care Proceedings. Senior managers chair these meetings and legal advice is taken to ensure that only those children and families that require this level of intervention receive it. Following on from this initial meeting, Permanence Planning and Tracking Panel (PPTP) meetings are scheduled in on a regular basis to ensure that PLO and Court proceeding progress without drift or delay. The introduction of a social work information proforma, and the improved use of analysis, is evidencing decision making more clearly.

There is rigorous management oversight of pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline through a range of senior management panels. This means that when risk to children escalates, children's plans do not drift. Letters to parents before proceedings are swiftly completed and set out in detail what is expected of them. However, letters use language that does not reflect the local authority's relational approach.

When care proceedings are initiated, a range of panels provide effective senior management oversight of social work practice so that children's plans progress at pace, and within their timescales. These arrangements provide robust scrutiny and ensure a strong focus to support effective and timely permanence planning. Knowledgeable social workers complete detailed assessments and good-quality court reports. This assists the court in making well-informed permanence decisions for children. Care proceedings progress in a timely way.

Following on from this initial meeting, Permanence Planning and Tracking Panel (PPTP) meetings are scheduled in on a regular basis to ensure that PLO and Court proceeding progress without drift or delay. Our aspiration is that all recording of legal processes should be relational, specifically written with the idea that the child will read it, if not now, then at some point in the future, supporting young people to understand their history and the decisions made in a way that can support any ongoing recovery from trauma.

A review of the wording of our 'Letter before proceedings' was undertaken by the Senior Leadership Team with support from our legal colleagues. The letter is now more relational in language ensuring it is more accessible in terms of readability, thus improving understanding and engagement from parents. Children and their families are held at the centre of our planning for children; and exploration of family placement options via FGC and Viability Assessments is the first consideration for a child being removed from parental care.

Well-informed and timely viability assessments of family members are completed, which inform children's long-term living arrangements. This means that children benefit from living with their own family and with their siblings when this is in their best interests.

Once a plan for permanence is identified, Permanence Planning Panel meetings take place. Meetings are chaired by a senior manager who provides scrutiny and ensures focus on understanding the child's journey in care, this supports effective permanence decision making. They consider the appropriateness of any use of Section 20 for Children Looked After and the rationale; and that where Care Orders are in place they are regularly reviewed with clear actions and timescales. Permanence Tracking panel meetings also take place with relevant operational managers and the Principal Solicitor to ensure a focus on permanence planning, with the view to prevent drift and delay for children.

Well-developed senior manager-led panel arrangements are providing effective oversight of children's plans. This provides direction and guidance to managers and social workers in their work with children and families and is helping to reduce drift and delay.

Early permanence planning is well considered by social workers, and management oversight of permanence decisions is robust. Timely and good quality viability assessments of connected carers ensure that arrangements for children are safe and appropriate.

A strong emphasis is placed on securing legal permanence for children through the making of special guardianship orders. Special guardianship is seen as an immensely important permanence option for children. The preparation, advice and support which are provided for special guardians is matched to the preparation, advice and support which are available to foster carers and adopters.

Discharge of Care Orders and reunification to parent's care takes place in a carefully planned and managed way. A reunification pathway has been produced for the Looked After Through Care Team which identifies the role of KFT, FGC and the IRO. Decisions to reunify children to their family's care are made following robust assessment and overseen by a senior management at a Placement Planning Meeting and subsequently reviewed to ensure Care Orders are discharged at an appropriate point.

20% of Foster carer and Connected reviews fell out of timescale during 2023, in part due to staff turnover and absences in the fostering team and because of the time it took to replace the dedicated Independent Reviewing Officer employed to carry out the reviews. The outstanding

reviews were complete within the first quarter of 2024/25. This highlighted weaknesses in our off-system processes, particularly in management information to effectively progress with supervision and reviews. We have now moved these processes into our electronic case management system, so managers have visibility of these activities from due date to completion. A new Independent Reviewing Officer took up post in October 2023, who worked with the management team to prioritise and complete all overdue reviews, this has been maintained and we are confident this will continue moving forward.

Participation and direct work with children in care and care leavers

We continue to build on activities and groups for children and young people to get involved with, including Younger Children in Care, Safe Space, Lego Club, a girls' group and our regular care leavers forum. Young people are involved in the selection process for key roles in staff recruitment and input questions into our fostering selection process, which we are developing into a more active role in the panel. We are planning to hold our first conference for children and young people where they will be able to share what matters to them and inform service development plans.

A care leaver representative is on the Health of Children in Care and Care Leavers group which meets bi-monthly to deliver a strategic plan on health outcomes for children in care and care leavers.

Our Corporate Parenting Panel meets regularly, and is well attended internally, corporately and by care leavers. It is an active forum where good news stories are shared and celebrated, service plans and developments are tested (and in some cases grown), but above all there is a shared objective to do the right thing for children and young people and it is an environment where healthy challenge is welcome.

Helping and Protecting

Multi agency work involving our Front Door and residential homes has been effective in reducing missing episodes with nearly half the number in 2023 (141) compared to the previous year (271); our proactive approach and the impact of this work has been recognised by Durham and Darlington police, their Missing from home and Stronger Families Coordinator said,

'I have found that working in partnership with Darlington looked after children services has been imperative in making sure that we as partners are doing what we can to keep children safe. As part of our commitment to one another we have regular meetings so that any concerns/issues can be escalated and resolved in a timely manner. There has been a real collaborative and problem-solving working ethos between us which can be evidenced through the reduction of recorded missing children's episodes in Darlington.'

Our work with Blue Cabin and Creative Life Story continues and is proving effective in helping young people understand and make sense of their situation, now led by a therapeutic social worker, the model complements relational practice, and we are looking to continue funding this into the future.

We built on our partnership with Blue Cabin, introducing music-making activities for care-experienced young children to help with attachment and support relationship building. All our carers with a child under 4 now have their music bags and this venture has developed into a positive support group for carers of babies and young children. The musical activities have also positively supported children

moving on to a new home with adopters joining sessions with carers and taking the music bag with them to continue music making in the adoptive home.

Health

90.7% of required health assessment reviews due by 31 March 2024 were completed, with 1.3% of young people refusing to attend. We continue to progress timely assessments and emphasize the benefits of young people having regular check-ups.

Care leavers are supported to understand their health history and receive a health passport completed by a looked after nurse when they leave care.

We're passionate about promoting and supporting good mental health; our care leavers continue to 'Ask Jan', an independent 24/7 mental health and wellbeing support service providing advice, guidance, counselling, online wellbeing content, life coaching and legal advice.

A mental health nurse is based in the team one day a week who can provide therapeutic interventions for low mood, depression and anxiety without the need to join a waiting list, which has reduced the need for referral to Tier 4 mental health services for most young people.

We regularly host wellbeing activities and events such as walks, drop ins and chats to support care leavers and, aware of the difficulties Christmas can bring for people, we make sure every care leaver has a place to go on Christmas Day, including making referrals to The Big Christmas Dinner.

We believe in the strong link between physical and mental health, both for the positive impact exercise has on mood but also because it is an important way for young people to socialise, so all our care leavers have access to gym membership which allows them to take a friend.

One of our Personal Advisor's is a trained mental health first aider, and our plan is to extend this training to all Personal Advisors over the next twelve months.

We have a Personal Advisor who is C-Card trained and able to dispense contraception and, following a review of our local offer, we plan to invest in developing our end-to-end sexual health support from consent through contraception, pregnancy, pre-birth and beyond.

Learning and Development

Attendance of Vulnerable Pupils

Suspensions for pupils in both primary and secondary phases are above national average. The Local Authority has taken a pro-active multi-agency response to school attendance. Working alongside a DFE advisor, focussed work has been undertaken to identify and address key issues impacting attendance. Recently the Local Authority has installed liquid Logic EYES and all local schools have agreed to supply live attendance feeds. The system integrates with the social care MIS.

The Educational Psychology Service has provided schools with a toolkit to support children with EBSA. The Virtual School has supported social care colleagues in promoting the attendance of children with a social worker.

These actions have had a positive impact and though absence levels are above the pre-pandemic levels, Darlington is slightly above national average attendance for all pupils. When disadvantaged groups are compared Darlington is 0.7% better than national average which is significant for this cohort. Similarly, Darlington is in line with national average or better than national average for Persistent and Severely Persistently absent disadvantaged pupils.

We look forward to receiving and analysing the national data in Autumn 2024 to understand the impact of our work.

Fair Access and Elective Home Education

Fair Access in Darlington is undertaken by the multi-agency Vulnerable Pupil Panel. A small number of children are considered through fair access each year, with the vast majority of pupils securing places through normal admissions procedures.

There is a full-time EHE Advisor who work with schools and families who are considering EHE. A significant proportion of Darlington's EHE pupils are from our GRT community. The GRT community are supported with an education service.

Stability and Permanence

We invested more leadership time and direction in our residential children's homes after some difficult inspection findings across most of them in 2022 and are now confident they provide safe, stable and supportive environments for our young people. Through more visible leadership, tailored relational practice development for staff and better communication, our homes are working well together, sharing practice and exploring ideas for the often-challenging situations they navigate with young people in their care. The positive impact of this approach is apparent in the home surroundings, observed by independent visitors in their monitoring and reflected in inspection findings which have been good across all domains in contrast to three of four homes requiring improvement or being found inadequate in 2022. We want to keep building on this progress moving forward, using the wealth of information available about our homes more intelligently and developing shared learning opportunities, peer support and effective challenge.

During 2023-24, our Head of Looked After and Resources worked closely with Commissioning colleagues to tackle well documented placement sufficiency challenges, driving forward a business case to invest in internal services so that we can become more self-sufficient and able to offer most looked after children and young people a placement in Darlington, with a Darlington carer or home.

After successfully securing financial investment of £1.5m per year over four years and significant support from corporate and political stakeholders, we have implemented changes to our fostering offer; extended the operating hours of CEDARS residential service to 7 days a week; doubled the number of taster flats available to support transition to independence and started work to repurpose accommodation to a residential home with additional therapeutic support that will meet an identified gap in provision for younger children who have a care plan of stepping down to foster care or returning home.

We have seen a positive impact from implementing Mockingbird in Darlington and have recently introduced our second constellation, so more carers and children benefit from this support network. Our 2 constellations support 14 households of 20 carers and 23 children.

CEDARS, our in-reach, outreach, and overnight service, provides planned short breaks and emergency provision has extended from a weekend service to operating 7 days a week, so we can be more responsive and flexible to help placements under pressure where this option is appropriate.

We have developed our therapeutic offer for children, increasing resources and restructuring the service to provide a structured programme of intervention and support so that there is a clear journey through therapeutic intervention. The team have commenced delivering PACE parenting training to in house carers and connected carers. This will be further supported by opportunities for carers to attend a “thinking space” to discuss therapeutic support and seek advice and guidance on implementing the training.

We successfully embedded Staying Close as part of our leaving care offer, stabilising transition to independence and helping young people achieve positive outcomes at this important stage in their lives, in addition to supporting placement sufficiency by moving young people on from residential care.

As of 31 March 2024, 15.3% of our children in care were placed within Kinship arrangements, 3.3% with kinship carers in an unregulated placement and 11% placed with parents, therefore a total of 29.6% of our children in care were living with parents or wider family members compared to 32% the previous year. We have, however, also seen an increase in the number of children ceasing to be in care due to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) or Child Arrangement Order (CAO) being granted to a relative and the number of children returned home has doubled on previous years.

‘Family First’ is one of our guiding principles and we are determined to do all we can to make sure children remain at home with their parents where they can, or within their wider family network when this is not possible.

Over the past year we’ve improved our support to kinship carers, including them in carer support groups and our second Mockingbird constellation, and they now benefit from more financial support through the increase in our Age-Related Child Allowance introduced as part of the new fostering offer.

We know we need to improve the timeliness and experience of our assessment process and do more to make this solution a reality for more children and families, which is why it is a goal in our strategic priorities for 2024-27.

We have continued to experience challenges and deterioration in placement stability; of children in care during 2023-24, 17% had three or more separate placements, higher than the previous year and

above our local target of 10%. Of children under 16 who have been in care two and a half years or more, 61.1% had been in their current placement for two years or more, again, below our local target of 68%. This will be a focus over the next year, with the introduction of solutions panel, CEDARS in house and outreach, therapeutic parenting training and support as well as respite payments to our mainstream carers we aim to achieve greater placement stability for children in our care.

This year has also seen us successfully secure funding to implement Family Finding with Lifelong Links and a peer mentoring scheme, adding two valuable avenues of support available to looked after children and young people, and giving care experienced young people the opportunity to use their experiences positively and paid work.

Our Family Finding model uses Family Rights Group's Lifelong Links to work with children to help them learn more about important relationships in their lives and where appropriate, get in touch with these people or reconnect with those they have lost contact with. We have wrapped therapeutic support around the Lifelong Links work to support young people as they experience this journey and to provide immediate, individual therapeutic support where the process surfaces or may surface trauma for a young person. We currently have seventeen young people on their family finding journey and a further seven supported through Lifelong Links resources we have in our Staying Close Offer.

We have thirteen care experienced mentors offering peer mentor support to fifty-eight children and young people aged five and over. We offer short and long-term peer mentor arrangements; our mentors are carefully matched to children who might want the support to help them through a particular situation they are experiencing or as someone they can trust if they have low support networks generally. Our peer mentors are enthusiastic and motivated to support young people they see experiencing situations and feelings they have previously and have also engaged well in wider voice of young people work and activities.

Understanding the child and young person's experience of all three Department for Education funded projects is key to evaluating the impact of this support and to inform how we could maintain them after external funding ends. At bid stage we intended to do this through a combination of using Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires and general feedback, but we found the former doesn't fit well with capturing the value of the journey for young people and the latter needs a method of collection that will appeal to and engage young people. We identified options to address these issues, exploring them as a project team to agree what would work across the schemes and with young people for their views about what would be meaningful for them and engaging to use. Collectively we agreed on Triangle's Outcome Stars as an established, outcome-based tool for measuring change in a way that is engaging for young people; our project practitioners have completed the training, and we are excited to start using this for real insight into the difference these schemes are making to young people's lives.

Care leavers and transitions

As of 31 March 2024, we had 188 care leavers, of whom 143 were relevant, former relevant or qualifying care leavers. As of 31 March 2024, we were in touch with 100% of care leavers (in comparison 93% nationally in England 2022-23); 80% of these aged 19-21 were in Education, Employment or Training (compared to 52% in the North East and 55% in England in 2022-23), 8% were in higher education and 97% of our care leavers were in suitable accommodation.

Young people are encouraged to remain in care at least until their 18th birthday and to remain with their previous carers beyond this where it is appropriate and in their best interests. Currently, 9 care

leavers are in Staying Put arrangements with their former foster carers highlighting the strong and stable relationships developed between foster carers and young people in their care. We encourage young people to maintain links with their Personal Advisor until they are 25 years old.

We have a strong local leaving care offer, led and developed by care leavers in conjunction with statutory, voluntary, and business partners. Our dedicated team of personal advisors build positive, trusting relationships with young people, offering an appropriate level of support and advice to young people during their transition to adulthood. The care leaver base is a hive of activity with cookery classes, mother and baby groups, budgeting workshops, drops ins, leaving care forums and access to the 'leaving care larder'; we also offer an Independence Programme in conjunction with Adult Learning and Skills. We provide a range of social and recreational opportunities for young people to feel part of the community and create and maintain positive relationships, including concerts, theatre trips, well-being walks and day trips further afield. We have a specific UASC offer and are currently developing a bespoke offer for care leavers who are parents and care leavers in custody. All care leavers have access to free Wi-Fi and calls with the National Databank SIM cards to help them remain connected with personal and professional relationships in their lives.

Children who are looked after and care leavers are helped to understand their rights, entitlements, and responsibilities in a variety of ways, including being provided with a QR code for the local offer to allow for quick easy access. In 2022, Darlington Borough Council made the commitment to sign the Care Leaver Covenant and we are now actively working with private businesses in the local area to proactively support positive outcomes for care leavers in Darlington. In July 2023, care experience was made a Protected Characteristic in Darlington Borough Council.

We highlighted implementation of 'Staying Close,' an enhanced support package for young people leaving care from residential homes as a key area for development in our last report, which has been delivered and is running successfully. We mobilised this at pace and with the relentless support of the Children's Strategic Commissioning Manager also gained internal and external support to make sure we have a variety of accommodation options available for young people taking part in the programme. We still have work to do, although we made some progress with longer term accommodation for young people to move on to, housing stock is limited, and demand is high, so this is an area we need to keep the focus on. A huge amount has been achieved in a relatively short period of time with this project, much of it down to the passion and commitment of practitioners involved, which has been recognised externally by them being awarded Frontine's 'Team of the Year' award.

Some care leavers also benefit from additional support through our successful bids for Staying Close (for young people leaving residential care), Lifelong links (open to all care leavers) and the Peer Mentoring scheme, which provides both employment opportunities and additional support for young people.

Support into adulthood is well supported and young people are referred to our Transition to Adult Services Panel at 16 and a transition assessment takes place depending on need well before adulthood.

In May 2023 we secured funding from the DfE for 'Staying Close'. Our young people have identified they'd like this to be called 'Here for You'. This will enhance our existing offer for young people leaving care with dedicated Personal Advisors who work across 7 days, access to Lifelong Links and 24-hour mental health support.

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

Areas of Strength	Areas for Development
<p>Excellent and aspirational support for care leavers including the addition of 'Staying Close'</p>	<p>Understanding the child and young person's experience of all three Department for Education funded projects</p>
<p>We have built on our partnership with Blue Cabin, introducing music-making activities for care-experienced young children to help with attachment and support relationship building</p>	<p>Greater visibility of therapeutic service and improved understanding of impact of models and approaches which support children in our care.</p>
<p>A strong focus on improving placement stability and sufficiency with an enhance financial offer for foster carers, extension of CEDARS operating hours, repurposing children's homes and increased taster flats.</p>	<p>Improve the timeliness and experience of Fostering assessments and timeliness of annual reviews.</p>
<p>Our five children's homes have seen improvement in Ofsted inspections with all homes now graded as good.</p>	<p>Implement Fostering Friendly organisation policy internally as well as with external business within the borough of Darlington.</p>
<p>Numbers of Children in Care has decreased alongside alignment of decision-making panels ensuring we make the best use of available resources to support children and families.</p>	

The Impact of Leaders on Social Work Practice and Children and Families

The service has continued to receive strong support Corporately and Strategically over the past year, despite some significant changes in the Leadership. A newly elected Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Children and Young People are now in place and are very well engaged with the priorities of the Service and complement the support we have continued to receive from the Chief Executive and Corporate Directors.

We continue to encourage and embrace a High Support, High Challenge approach within Children's Scrutiny and Corporate Parenting Panel, with the items and topics focused on improving outcomes and having the most positive impact on residents of the Borough.

As Senior Leaders we continue to have the highest aspirations for our children, young people and families. As part of a People's Directorate, led by a Director for Children and Adults, we recognise the benefits of a whole family approach and our Relational Practice model drives the work we do with Children and their families. We have this year completed Restorative Leadership training with the Senior Leadership Team, with the intention of this providing the platform to provide to support our Team Managers to further develop their own relational practice and thus empowering front line

workers to mirror this approach with their families. It was extremely pleasing and satisfying to see that this approach was being seen during 2022’s ILACS and the Focused Visit in 2023.

Despite the positive progress OFSTED have identified, we are not complacent and are hugely ambitious for our services. We have reflected on areas identified for development, particularly in relation to Management Oversight and our approach to Strategy Meetings and Section 47 Enquiries. We are utilising our Restorative Leadership work to support Team Managers to improve management oversight and the level of reflection within supervision. We have also developed “Xtra Space” which is a dynamic approach to peer support, training and reflection to enhance the offer to front line workers. When looking at our approaches to Strategy Meetings and Section 47 Enquiries we recognise that performance data has us as outliers. We were successful in securing a Sector Led Improvement small bid to focus on an analysis of our practice in this area and provide some critical oversight and challenge.

Whilst we completed the DfE Supported Strengthening Families Programme some time ago, the impact of its principles on our practice and plans for development continue to be significant. We are currently in the next phase of our Strengthening Families Plan and through this process have built upon the previous progress to develop the following:

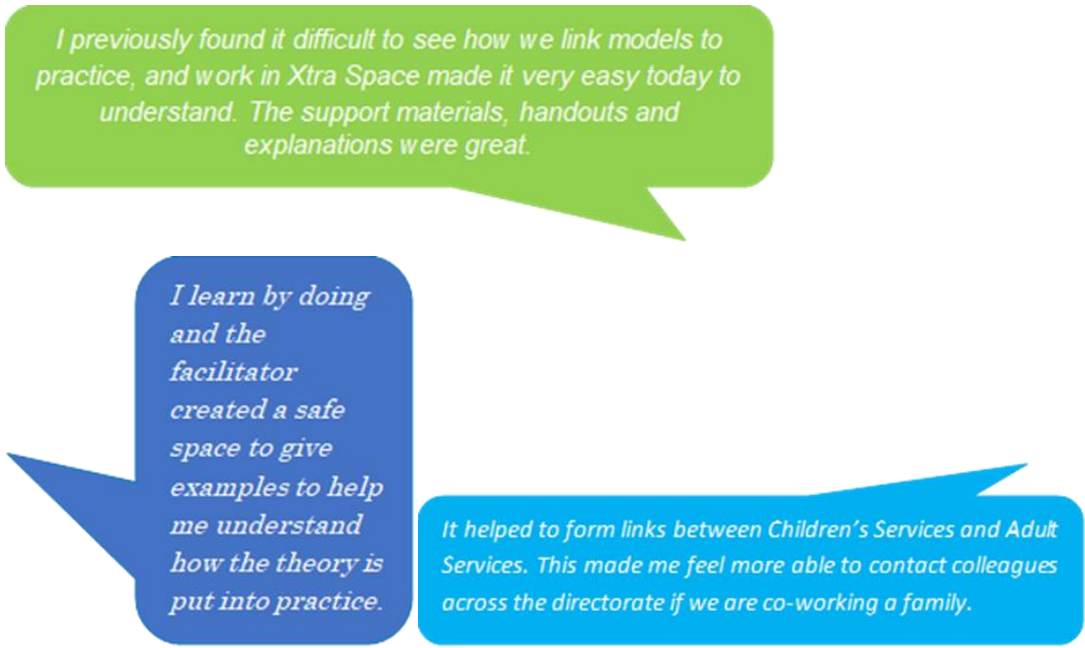
Strengthening Families 2023 -24	
Principles	Strategic Priorities
Great Social Work Practice	Embed a Restorative Culture
	Grow how we learn and improve
Family First	More Solutions through FGC
Business Efficient	Better Capability to Support Children
	Best Use of resources

Learning Culture

As described within our Strategic Priorities, the development of the learning culture across the service is a key priority for the coming year. Over the past year we have continued with the Experts in Practice program, which supported 3 practitioners to develop their knowledge and skills in 3 key priority areas; Harm Away from Home, Trauma Informed Practice and Creative Life Story Work. The aim of this is to allow individual workers to develop their skills, knowledge and practice and to share their learning with the wider workforce to build our overall knowledge and skills in these areas.

We have also developed Xtra Space over the past year, which is a drop in learning, development and peer support facility to complement the direct supervision and management oversight that front line workers receive. Coordinated by our Workforce Development Team, Xtra Space utilises our own internal staff in a Peer Support/Mentoring capacity, facilitating and delivering briefing and training sessions, while offering bespoke confidential space for staff to ask questions, talk about areas they may be finding difficult and have ‘Xtra Space’ to reflect and learn.

Staff and learner feedback on Xtra Space.



We will continue to enhance the concept of Xtra Space across the service to support staff development.

We have commissioned Restorative Leadership Training to all Senior Leadership Team members, to provide the skills and knowledge to lead practice and development in their respective service areas.

Workforce

We continue to have a stable and experienced Leadership Team, led by a Director of Children Services and Lead Member who are invested in and understand the service aims and priorities.

At the start of the year there continued to be challenges in terms of stability of the wider workforce, which mirrored the challenges being seen regionally and nationally. However, over the course of the year we have implemented a number of strategies to increase our workforce retention and also increase our recruitment. This has a significant impact with our vacancy rate (March 2024) at 2.2% compared with the previous year (7.4%). Our agency rates remain at 15% despite this, which is unchanged on the previous year. Analysis of the use of agency workers shows that generally agency workers are now being used to support with additional demand for services rather than to support vacancies and this will be reflected in the workforce plan for the coming year.

We continue to invest in "growing our own" and invest in our Academy model accordingly, with our Workforce Development Team coordinating ASYE/Apprenticeship/Student/Step Up to Social Work programmes across the borough, which has supported more than 45% of the current Directorate workforce into employment in Darlington.

Whilst at the start of the year we were experiencing caseloads higher than we would have liked at times, with an average caseload of 23.2, exceeding our preferred aim of 18 - 22. Where caseloads were higher, management grip and oversight has been consistent and strong, and the impact on children and families has been well understood. Through our workforce stability we work we have improved workforce recruitment and retention and have been able to see the average caseload reduce to 18.2 as of March 2024.

Workers continue to be positive about working for Darlington and recognise that there are national challenges in the workforce at present. Where caseloads have exceeded our preferred levels, overtime payments have been provided to workers to recognise the impact of this upon them and their workload.

An enhanced recruitment and retention support package has remained in place for front line workers and Assistant Director led engagement sessions have taken place to understand front line practitioner's experiences, their wishes and feelings and to work proactively with them to maintain Darlington as a positive place to work. We have completed bespoke, in person recruitment events to allow prospective new workers to understand the benefits and strengths of working in Darlington.

Regular Staff and Leadership Forums are facilitated, which provides a visibility of senior leaders and allows the vision and strategic aims of the service to be clearly shared and understood by the rest of the service but equally invites the opportunity for front line workers to engage and contribute and this shape the direction of the service.

We have now completed an agile working pilot programme which has led to a confirmed agile working offer for all staff. This offer seeks to empower and enable front line practitioners to fully embrace a hybrid approach to working. This supports access to office and peer-based working environment when needed but allows this to be mixed with home working as is most appropriate. This continues to be carefully monitored to understand the impact on the workforce as well as the children and families we support.

Plans for Next 12 Months

The past year has seen us review and develop services in the context of sustained increases in demand for services, which has been done as a whole service approach, through reviewing and refreshing our approaches and methodology at the Front Door, in Early Help, within our Assessment and Safeguarding and our Looked After Teams. This has led to some positive developments in demand management and combined with improvements in the workforce lowered caseloads for workers.

The plan for the coming year is very much one of building upon this process to further improve and develop the quality and impact on practice whilst also improving key performance areas, such as assessment timeliness and placement stability.

There are a number of service developments being embedded over the coming year including:

- Implementation of a Strategic Early Help Board to oversee our approach to Early Help Assessments and increase the number of external EHA's, and thus ensuring families receive the right service at the right time from a professional best known to them
- Increases to foster carer recruitment following the revision of foster carer offer
- Development of the Life Long Links Project
- Implementation of Care Experienced Peer Mentoring for Children in Care

These approaches and development will be underpinned by our Strengthening Families Programme and in accordance with our Strategic Priorities

Strengthening Families 2023 -24	
Principles	Strategic Priorities
Great Social Work Practice	Embed a Restorative Culture
	Grow how we learn and improve
Family First	More Solutions through FGC
Business Efficient	Better Capability to Support Children
	Best Use of resources

Strengthening Families 2023-24

Our principles								
Great social work practice so children are safe and families supported to find their own solutions			Family first helping them stay together and, where that isn't possible, working with families to return children home			Business efficient making the best use of the resources we have		
Strategic Priorities 2023-24								
Embed a restorative culture			More solutions through Family Group Conferencing (FGC)			Better capability to support children		
Key work	Outcomes	Measures	Key work	Outcomes	Measures	Key work	Outcomes	Measures
Strengthen leadership / build on management relationships across services.	One Service; restorative and relational practice.	We work together connecting across cross functional boundaries; Our practice model is understood & is how we work in Darlington.	Work with services to further increase engagement with Family Group Conferencing to enable solutions for families	More families are supported to find their own solutions.	We engage families earlier and they progress to FGC where one is offered.	Repurpose of accommodation to Cedars emergency / short term break accommodation.	Placement stability, positive financial impact.	Emergency placement costs; placement stability; less children becoming looked after.
Implement new approach to practice supervision.		Practice supervision is effective, influencing great social work practice to improve the lives of families.			Families achieve the planned outcomes of their FGC.	Introduce 'Staying Close' for young people leaving residential care.	Care leavers transition to independence successfully.	Improved indicators across education, emp. or trng; independent living; health and wellbeing.
Review how we capture & use the voice of children & families to develop services.		We listen to the views of children and families, working with them and involving them in service changes / development.			Families are less likely to step up through services and / or be re-referred to services after being supported through FGC.	Introduce the new supported accommodation regulations / quality standards.	Legislative compliance with new supported accommodation regulations.	Young people are accommodated in registered supported accommodation.
Review forms in LCS / how we record case information.		Processes enable our relational practice model.				Improve our support offer to in house carers.	Better placement capability; positive financial impact.	Better recruitment process; more in house carers recruited; better carer retention; more in house placements; lower placement costs.
Review locality model & continue to develop this approach to work with families.	Families get the right help at the right time.	Resources organised to respond to service demand; Assessments completed on time; Smooth case transfer process.				Improve carer recruitment process; Regional Recruitment and Retention pilot.		
Review our Front Door, including how we engage partner agencies.		More Early Help assessments, less referrals to social care. (Q4 onwards).						
Grow how we learn and improve						Best use of resources		
Key work	Outcomes	Measures	Key work	Outcomes	Measures	Key work	Outcomes	Measures
Develop our restorative practice umbrella of knowledge, skills & practice learning.	A learning & improvement environment that promotes & embeds our practice model.	Accessible development offer promoting restorative practice meeting the needs of all audiences (students, practitioners, new employees, enabling functions, internal & external partners); Good practice is recognised and celebrated.	Pilot use of Family Group Conferencing in schools.	Schools equipped to help families resolve problems at the outset, reducing likelihood of escalation.	Less families need support from Children's Services. Other measures under discussion	Review how we work service wide / role of panels.	Families get the right help at the right time.	Measures to accurately reflect financial impact under discussion
			Implementation of adapted Family Group Conferencing in 'Life Long Links'	Care leavers make positive connections with family & extended network.		Review Business Support requirements service delivery.	Service meets needs in the blended working environment & IT maximised.	To be finalised - Revised Service Level Agreement; reduction in off system processes / associated business risks.
Review our approach to service quality.		To be developed with new Principal Social Worker / Head of Quality.				Placement sufficiency / creative alternatives.	Better placement sufficiency; positive financial impact.	More placement options available; more in house placements; lower placement costs.
						Children's Social Care Framework & Dashboard.	Monitor & report performance to national outcome indicators.	To be confirmed - in consultation phase.



We'll always try and help families find their own solutions



We'll always try and help families stay together



We'll always try and return children home

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

Areas of Strength	Areas for Development
Relational and Restorative culture well embedded within Senior Leadership Team and strong evidence in wider service	Further development of the Quality Assurance process to ensure that audits are collaborative and that they identify clear action plans for improvement.
Strong, stable and consistent Leadership Team	Placement Sufficiency Plans being developed to seek to expand and develop in house resources for Children in Care
Increased stability in Workforce	Retained focus on recruitment and retention of staff

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28 OCTOBER 2024**

**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24
CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE CHAIR ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This Annual report includes an overview of the work undertaken by Independent Reviewing Officers, who, in Darlington, provide independent reviewing and associated functions in relation to:
 - Children who are Looked After.
 - Children who are the subject of Supervision Orders.
 - Children who are the subject of Child Protection Conferences and / or multi-agency Child Protection Plans.

Summary

2. The report provides an overview of performance, activity, and areas for development.
 - (a) Part 1 is the Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2023/24. The production of this report is a requirement under the statutory guidance. This covers the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer which is a defined role that relates to Children Looked After. This statutory function is set out in the IRO Handbook (2010), and links to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance (2011).
 - (b) Part 2 is the Child Protection Conference Chair Annual Report 2023/24. This covers the role of the conference chair in relation to children who are in need of safeguarding. The statutory requirements are set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children (December 2023), which stipulates that the chair of a Child Protection Conference needs to be accountable to the Director of Children's Services, and should be a professional, independent of operational and / or line management responsibilities for the case.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that Members note the content of this annual report.

Chris Bell
Assistant Director of Children's Services

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report

Martin Graham: Extension 6703 - Service Manager Independent Review & Safeguarding Partnership

Council Plan	This report contributes to the Council Plan in particular by maximising the potential of our young people and supporting the most vulnerable in the borough.
S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for Crime and Disorder
Health and Wellbeing	This report has no direct implications to the Health and Well Being of residents of Darlington.
Tackling Climate Change	There are no issues relating to diversity which this report needs to address.
Addressing inequalities	There are no issues relating to inequalities which this report needs to address.
Wards Affected	The impact of the report on any individual Ward is considered to be minimal
Groups Affected	The impact of the report on any individual group is considered to be minimal
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend a change to the budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
Efficient and effective use of resources	This report has no impact on the Council's Efficiency Programme.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report will assist in advising on matters that impact on Looked After Children.

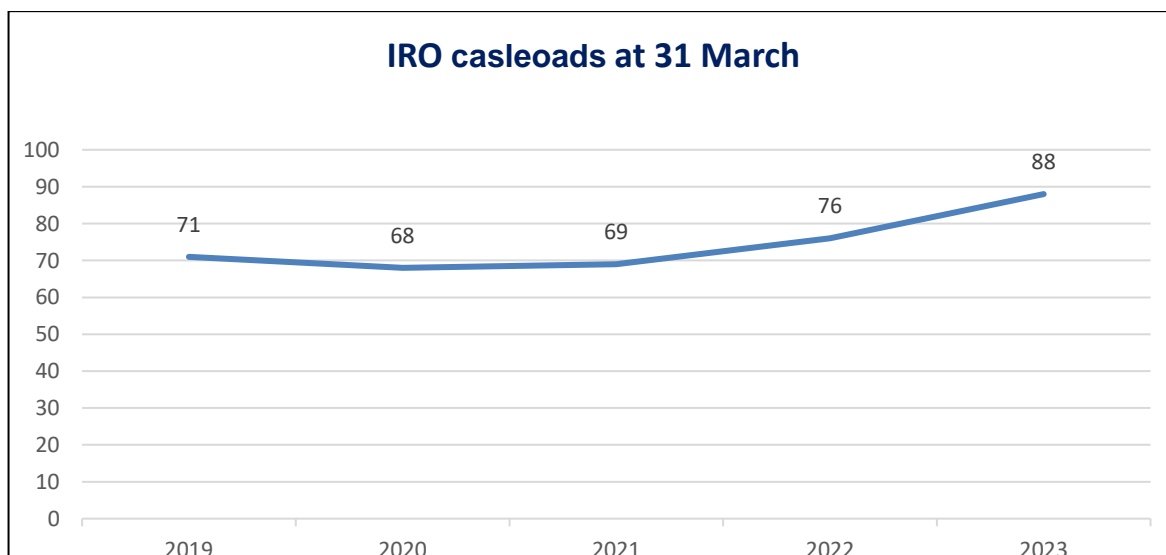
MAIN REPORT

Role of independent Reviewing Officers

4. The Independent Reviewing Officers are committed to achieving the best outcomes for children and young people in Darlington.
5. The Service is responsible for the following statutory functions:
 - Child Protection Conferences.
 - Child Looked After Reviews.
 - Annual Foster Carer Reviews.
 - Adoption Reviews.
 - Disruption Meetings.
 - Reviews of children placed in Secure Accommodation.
 - Supervision Order Reviews (new task this year).
6. All Independent Reviewing Officers are registered with Social Work England and have completed the required annual Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and evidenced this as part of their continued registration as Social Work practitioners.

Staffing Levels and caseloads

7. The Service Manager for Independent Review and Safeguarding Partnership is responsible for the operational management of the service.
8. The IRO team consist of 5.0 FTE Independent Reviewing Officers. This year the team have been supported by an additional 1.5 (FTE) agency posts due to an increase in workloads, a long-term absence, and subsequent vacancy, so there have been 5.5 (FTE) IROs in post. In addition, there is a 0.4 (FTE) post for Annual Foster Carer Reviews.
9. The statutory guidance in the IRO Handbook (2010) recommends that caseloads for Independent Reviewing Officer need to be between 50 and 70 children.
10. Annual Foster Carer Reviews were undertaken by an agency IRO at the start of the year, and since October, via a fixed term contract. This ensures independence and avoids any conflict of interest with the other IROs who review the children.
11. Over the last 12 months, the size of caseloads for Independent Reviewing Officers in Darlington has risen from an average of 76 to 88 children, however, there have been significant periods in the year where this was higher.
12. All Children Looked After and children subject to Child Protection Plans are allocated to an IRO with the intention that this will remain until the child is no longer requiring this service.



13. There is a statutory requirement in the IRO Handbook to ensure sufficient administrative support to Independent Reviewing Officers in relation to Looked After Reviews. Administrative support is provided in relation to Child Protection Conferences, Children Looked After, and Supervision Order Reviews. There is currently no administrative support in place for Annual Foster Carer Reviews.

Progress on targets set for 2023/24

Target	Progress	Comment
1 To increase the number of children who attend their Child Looked After Review as opposed to sending their views to the meeting.	Achieved	The rate for children attending their review (age 4 and above) was 42%, up from 37%
2 Ensuring the Independent Reviewing Officer footprint continues to be an area of focus. This needs to be evident on the child’s record.	Achieved	IRO contacts and midway reviews by IROs are regularly undertaken and recorded by IROs for children who are Looked After.
3 To secure suitable accommodation that will facilitate a hybrid model for Child Protection Conferences, that allows for agency representatives to contribute virtually, while allowing Social Workers, and families to attend a meeting in person with the Child Protection Conference Chair.	Not achieved	Update: In early June 2024, accommodation for the team was agreed by Chief Officers and required modifications are due to commence.
4 To work in partnership with Social Workers, Advanced Practitioners and Team Managers to encourage the uptake of advocacy services for children & young people who are the subject of Child Protection Conferences.	Ongoing	This is a long-term project that remains a task for the team in their day-to-day function.(See paragraphs 57 - 58).

Next steps for 2024/25

14. The following are scheduled for action in 2024/25.

- To Review the structure of the team to ensure that the number of permanent posts are sufficient to fulfil statutory functions.
- To manage the transition from home-based to agile working when there is an identified central base for the team and meetings.
- As Child Protection Chairs, to develop a mid-way review programme similar to that for Children Looked After, for those who are the subject of Child Protection Plans.

Comparator Data

15. Please note that in the following reports, the most recent published national and regional data is as of 31 March 2023.

16. The new comparator figures for 31 March 2024 will be published in the autumn.

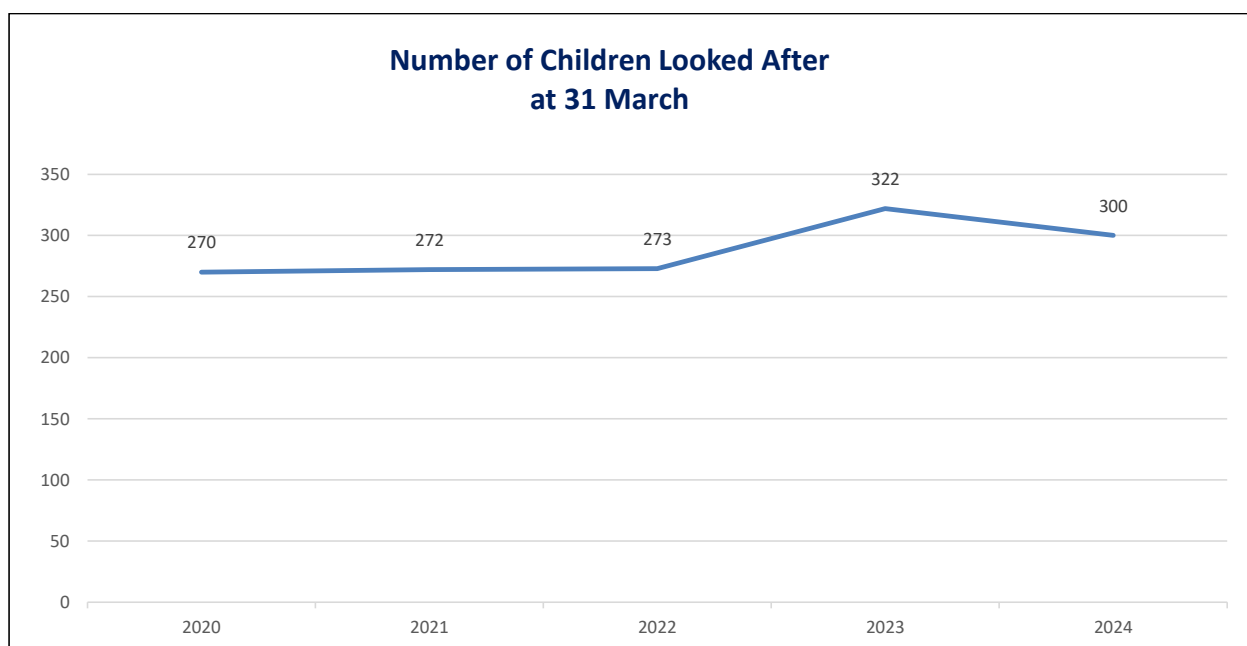
Part 1: INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

Statutory Framework

17. The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) has a statutory responsibility in relation to Children Looked After. This is set out within the statutory framework of the IRO Handbook (2010) which is linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance (2011). The responsibility of the Independent Reviewing Officer includes both the management of Child Looked After Reviews and an overview of the child's case including regular monitoring and follow-up between the Reviews. The Independent Reviewing Officer has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Children Looked After (CLA) and for challenging drift and delay.

Children Looked After

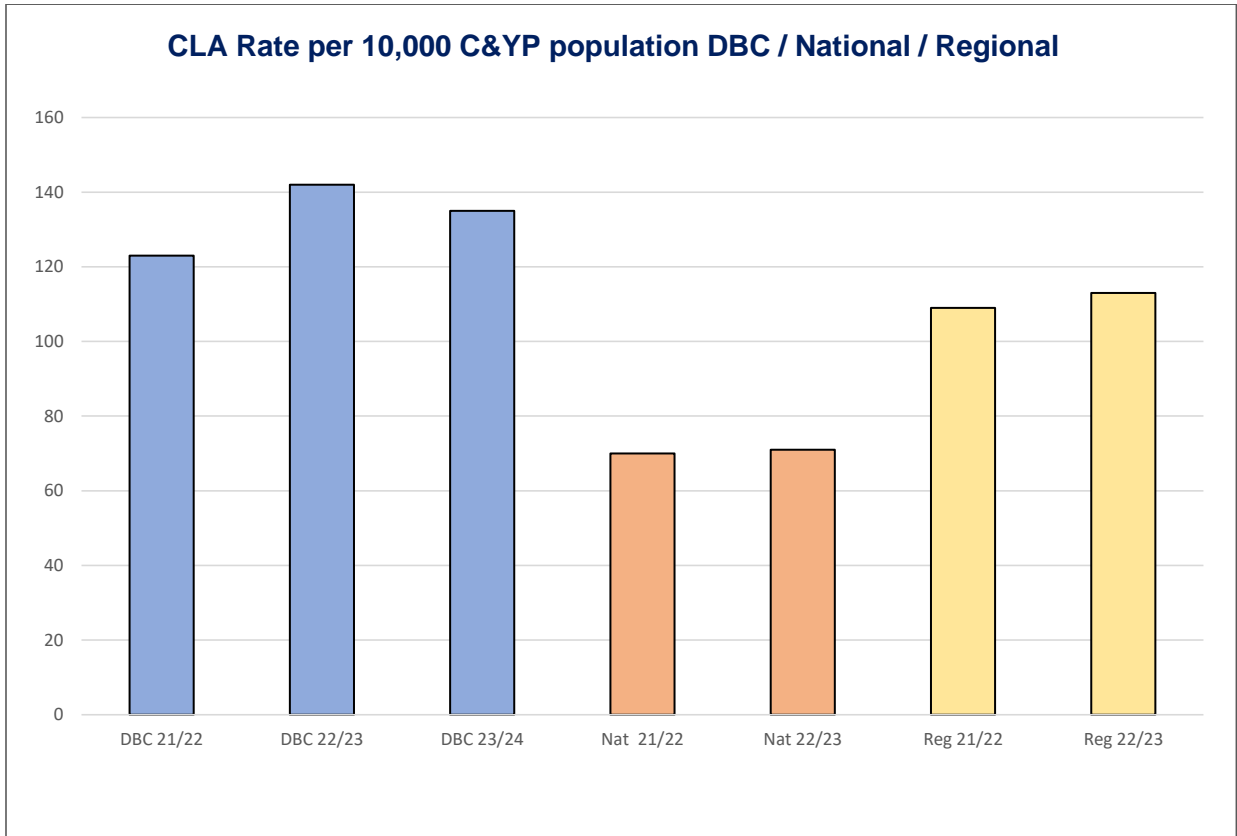
18. At end of March 2024, there were 300 Children Looked After in Darlington, a decrease from the previous year (322). The chart below shows the number of Children Looked After over the last five years.



19. The rate of Looked After Children in Darlington has remained high; there was a significant increase during 2018, since then, the position is not necessarily as stable as it appears as there can be fluctuations in the year. For example, the number went above 300 for four months in 2020. In the first part of 2023-24 the figure continued to increase in line with the trend seen last year and peaked at 368 in mid-September. Since then, it has steadily reduced.

Rate per 10,000

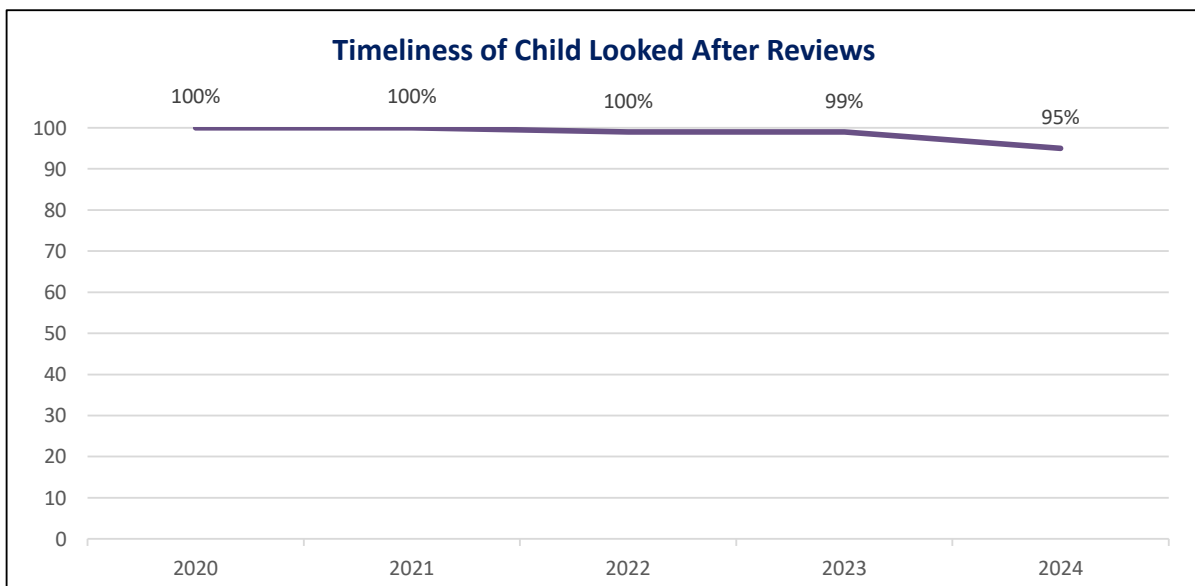
20. The table below is expressed as the rate per 10,000, which allows benchmarking with other councils (the most recent published data on National (England) and Regional (north-east) authorities).



21. At the end of March 2024, 300 children were looked after by Darlington a rate of 135 per 10,000, a decrease since 2022-23.

22. Although there has been a decrease in Darlington, we continue to have a significantly higher rate of Children Looked After than National and Regional averages. The most recent published data is as of 31 March 2023 and there was a national increase in Children Looked After over the year.

Looked After Review Timescales



23. The above chart shows that during 2023-24, performance in relation to the percentage of Children’s reviews completed within statutory timescales was 95%. The drop is linked to reallocations due to a long-term absence and increased workload.

Children’s Participation

24. Children and young people’s participation is based on one of the following methods:

- Attending their Review and speaking on their own behalf.
- Attending, but having another person speak for them.
- Not attending but providing their views in a written form or other medium.
- Not attending but briefing an advocate to represent their views.

25. Children’s participation in their Looked After Review looks at those children over the age of 4 years who participate in their statutory review through attending or other form of contribution (i.e., via advocate or written submission). At the end of this reporting year, 842 individual Looked After Reviews were held, which is slightly lower than last year at 883.

C&YP Participation in Reviews (over the age of 4 years)	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Participated	96%	94%	93%	91%	94%

26. When a child becomes Looked After, their Independent Reviewing Officer will contact them, if aged 4 or over, and arrange to meet them prior to their Child Looked After Review. Since Covid and the roll out of agile working, these have been a mixture of virtual and increasingly, face to face contacts.

27. The IRO Handbook recommends the Independent Reviewing Officer meets with the child / young person within their placement, prior to their meeting or as part of the review process. Despite an increase in Independent Reviewing Officer caseloads in the year, contact with young people between reviews has been maintained.

28. Independent Reviewing Officers record on the Liquid Logic case management system when they visit, have a virtual meeting via Microsoft Teams, telephone, text conversation, or other form communication, with a child or young person.

Permanence Planning and Adoption

29. At the second Child Looked After Review scheduled within four months of a child or young person becoming Looked After, the Permanence Plan should be agreed. The Independent Reviewing Officer will then actively monitor the care planning process to minimize any drift or delay. In 2023/24, all children had their permanency plan discussed at their four-month review.

30. Additional Children Looked After Reviews are required when the decision is taken that a child is to be adopted. When a child becomes the subject of a Placement Order, an Adoption Review is required. For children moving into an adoption placement, additional reviews are held within 28 days and at three months, regardless of when the last looked after review was held. It is therefore possible for individual children to have up to four Looked After Reviews within a twelve-month period.

Dispute Resolution Process

31. One of the key functions of the Independent Reviewing Officer is to resolve problems arising out of the Care Planning process. The Dispute Resolution process reinforces the authority of the Independent Reviewing Officer and their accountability for decisions made at reviews. Independent Reviewing Officers will refer to the process when they feel that is appropriate to follow up on recommendations that have not been actioned, or where the implementation of a Care Plan is delayed. Independent Reviewing Officers will in the first instance use informal negotiation to resolve issues, and only where this is not successful will a formal challenge be made by instigating the Dispute Resolution Process.
32. There continues to be good evidence of the 'IRO footprint' in children's records. They appropriately challenge Social Workers and Team Managers to help progress plans and reduce delay for children. Evidence of Independent Reviewing Officer involvement in cases is checked via audits and through supervision.

Annual Foster Carer Reviews

33. Local Authorities are required by Regulation 29 (The Fostering Services Regulations 2001) to review the approval of foster carers at least once a year. Ofsted commented that it was good practice to have someone other than a children's Independent Reviewing Officer undertaking this role due to conflicts of interest. In early 2023 the role was temporarily covered by an agency post followed by a one-year contract that started in October. There was a gap between the two appointments. A business case will be put forward to retain the position.
34. All Darlington Borough Foster Carers and Connected Carers should receive an Annual Foster Carer Review. In the year (2023-24) 61 carers required an annual review and 49 (80%) of reviews were completed.
 - Two annual reviews were not completed in the year due to Foster Carers being on hold while work was undertaken.
 - The outstanding 10 reviews from the previous year were completed in the first quarter of 2024/25.
 - In addition, there were 11 new carers, approved in the year, who were not yet due their annual Review. These reviews are scheduled for 2024/25.

35. In the year, all recommendations made were for Foster Carer re-approval. Sometime the recommendation will be to change their terms of approval to reflect the foster carers circumstances, or increased level of confidence and skill. No recommendations were in relation to de-registration. If there had been any significant changes to circumstances, or concerns raised at the Annual Review, these would be referred to the Children’s Placement Service Panel.

Annual Foster Carer Reviews (as of 31 March)	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Foster Carers	51	55	45	45
Connected Carers	19	20	16	16
Total number of carers	70	75	61	61
Percentage completed in year	95%	86%	84%	80%

Secure Reviews

36. In the year, no young person was subject to a Secure Accommodation Order that required a Secure Accommodation Review.

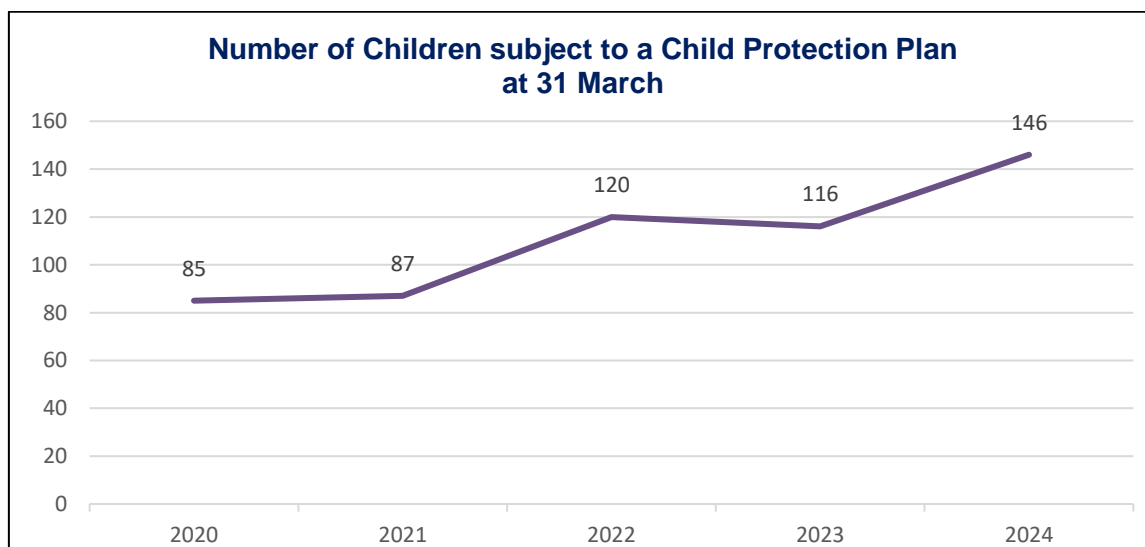
Part 2: CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

Statutory Framework

37. The statutory requirements for individual services to safeguard and promote the welfare of children are set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children, A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (December 2023).
38. Working Together stipulates that the chair of a Child Protection Conference needs to be accountable to the Director of Children's Services, and should be a practitioner, independent of operational and / or line management responsibilities for the case. In Darlington, this function is undertaken by Independent Reviewing Officers.

Number of Children subject to Child Protection Plans

39. At the end March 2024, 146 children were subject to a Child Protection Plan, a rate of 65.6 per 10,000 children under the age of 18 years. This is a higher position than last year when the figure stood at 116 (a rate of 52.1 per 10,000). The table below shows the number of Children subject to Child Protection Plans over 5 years (at year end).



40. This rate is roughly in line with north-east region (64.8), but higher than the National average at 31 March 2023. During the previous year nationally, the rate increased (42.1 to 43.2).

Child Protection by Category

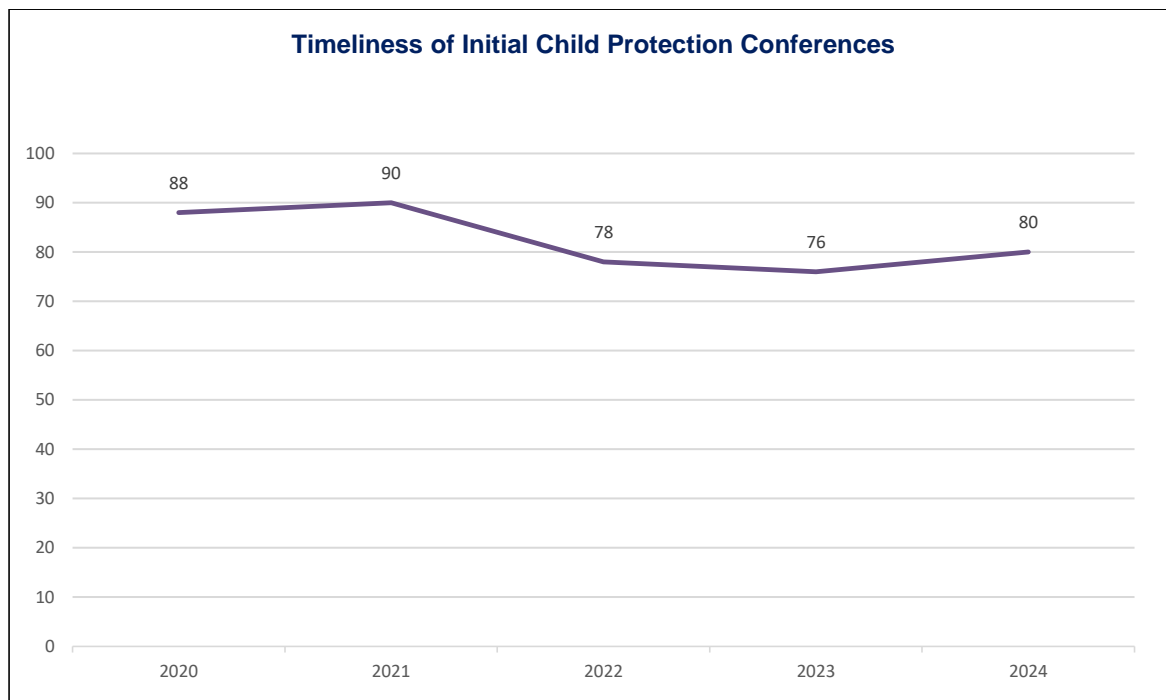
41. In the table, please note that percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. In line with national guidance, Darlington does not use multiple categories, but as this continues to be used by some authorities, it is still reported on nationally.

Category of Abuse	National 2023	DBC 2024
Neglect	49%	62%
Emotional	37%	32%
Physical	7%	7 %
Sexual	4%	0%
Multiple	2%	Not used

42. The highest proportion of children, where the risk is either Neglect or Emotional Abuse, is similar to the national position. The rate for Physical Abuse is in line with the national position. For more than half of the year the rate for sexual abuse ranged from 1-4%, but the end of year figure was 0%. Due to the relatively small size of the population in the borough, local percentages relating to categories can be impacted by one or two families either becoming, or ceasing, to be subject to a Child Protection Plan.

Child Protection Activity

43. Over the year, 119 Initial Child Protection Conferences or Transfer Conferences (where a child who is subject to a protection plan in another local authority moves to Darlington) were held [combined total of 229 children]. In addition, 174 Child Protection Review Conferences were held [where 364 children were discussed]. There can be more than one Child Protection Conference for a child in the year.
44. The corresponding figures for the previous year were 85 Initial Child Protection Conferences [178 children] and 156 Child Protection Review Conferences [210 children]. Over the year 166 Children had Child Protection Plans removed and 196 new Plans were made.
45. In the year, the proportion of children subject to Initial Child Protection Conferences who were not made subject to a Child Protection Plan was 14.4%, roughly in line with the figures for the previous two years; [13.5% & 18.6%,]. Although it is appropriate for some children to be considered at an Initial Child Protection Conference where no Child Protection Plan is made, it is important that children and families are not subjected to this process unnecessarily.
46. In Darlington this year, there were five children with a disability who were subject to a Child Protection Plan, the figure was 2 the previous year. This information is not currently part of the nationally published data, so no comparison is available.



47. The chart above tracks the percentage of Initial Child Protection Conferences held within 15 working days of the multi-agency Strategy Meeting that agreed the section 47 enquiry.

48. For the year to 31 March 2024, 171 (80%) of children were subject to an Initial Child Protection Conference (this excludes transfer conferences) held within 15 working days of the Strategy Meeting. Performance this year has improved and is roughly in line with the most recent regional [81%] and national [78%], benchmark figures.

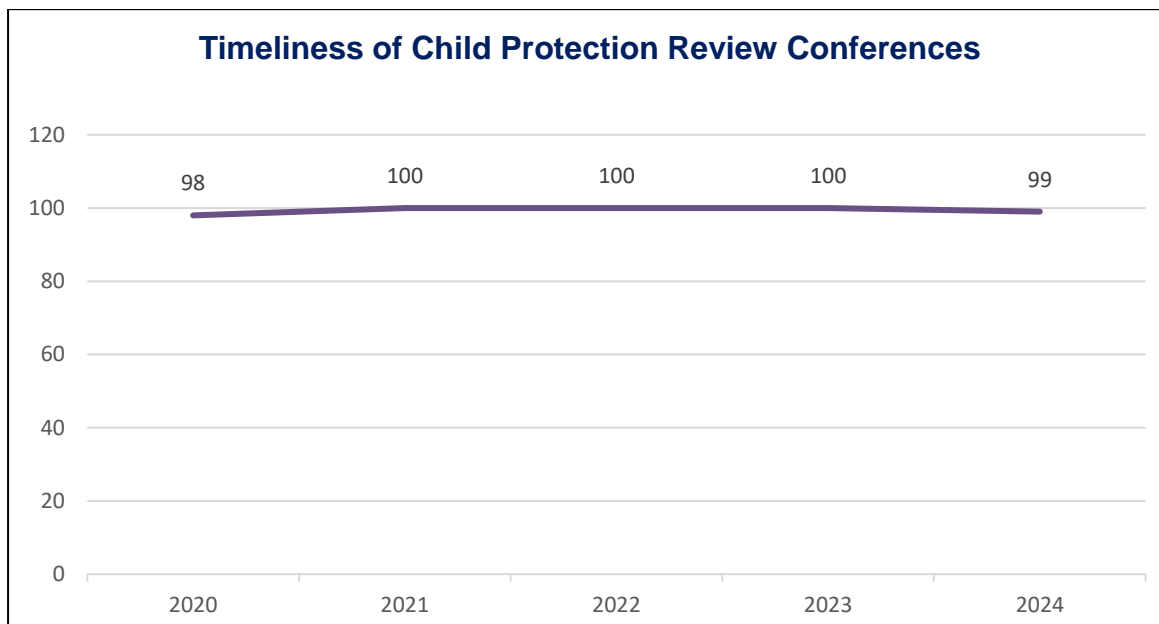
49. 20 Initial Child Protection Conference were delayed for the following reasons:

- a) Delay in the conference being requested by Social Work Team (95%)
- b) Delayed allowing for attendance of family members (5%)

It should be noted that seven of the children involved were unborn babies.

50. In each case an interim plan was in place to ensure that the children were safeguarded. Last year this was similar, with 19 Initial Child Protection Conferences being held outside the required 15 days.

51. The Working Together guidance requires that the first review should be within three months of the Initial Child Protection Conference, and thereafter at intervals of no more than six months.



52. The above chart tracks the percentage of Child Protection cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a higher percentage, ideally 100%.

53. For the year to 31 March 2024, 99% of children had their Child Protection Review Conference within timescales. One meeting was rearranged to ensure that key agencies were able to attend. Again, performance in this area remains higher than Regional [87%] and National [88%] figures (most recent published data).

Family attendance at Conference

54. Family involvement in the conference process tends to be consistent.

Year	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
ICPCs / parent	92%	92%	94%	93%	93%
CPRCs / parent	89%	95%	91%	91%	92%

55. Over the year, no parents were excluded from attending child protection conferences.

56. A draft Child Protection Plan is produced following each Initial Child Protection Conference and is available to professionals and family members for the first Core Group which is held within 10 working days of the conference.

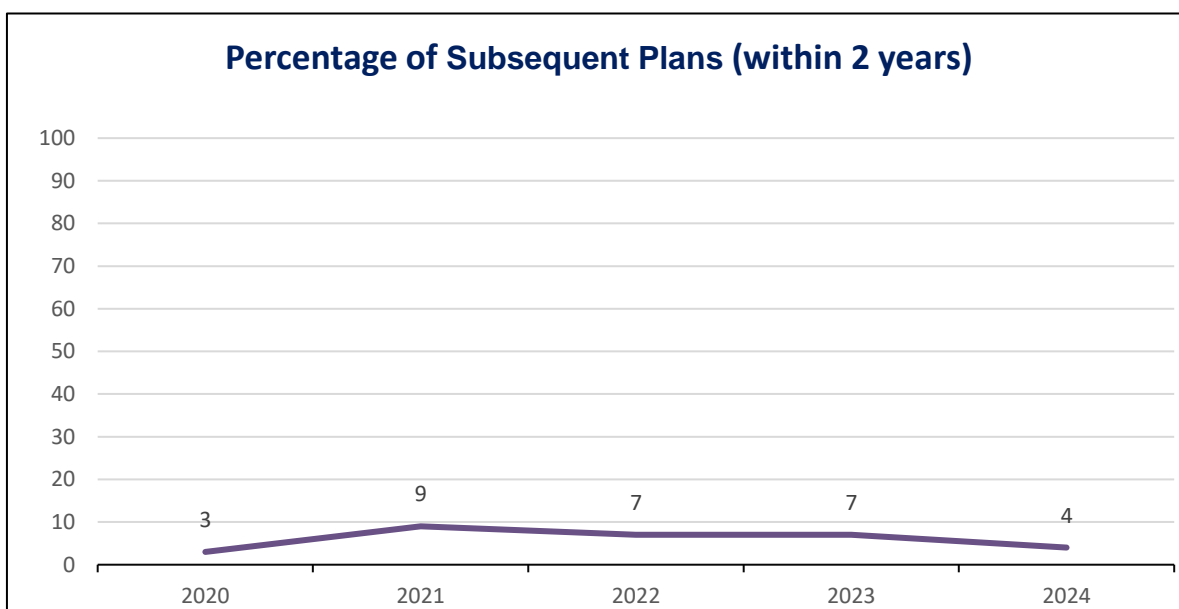
57. The Unit is committed to promoting independent advocacy for children and young people. The Council has a contract with the National Youth Advocacy Service which provides an independent and confidential service.

Children’s Views at CP Conference				
Year	Consultation Document	NYAS	In person	Total
2022/23	8	18	7	33
2023/24	8	16	13	37

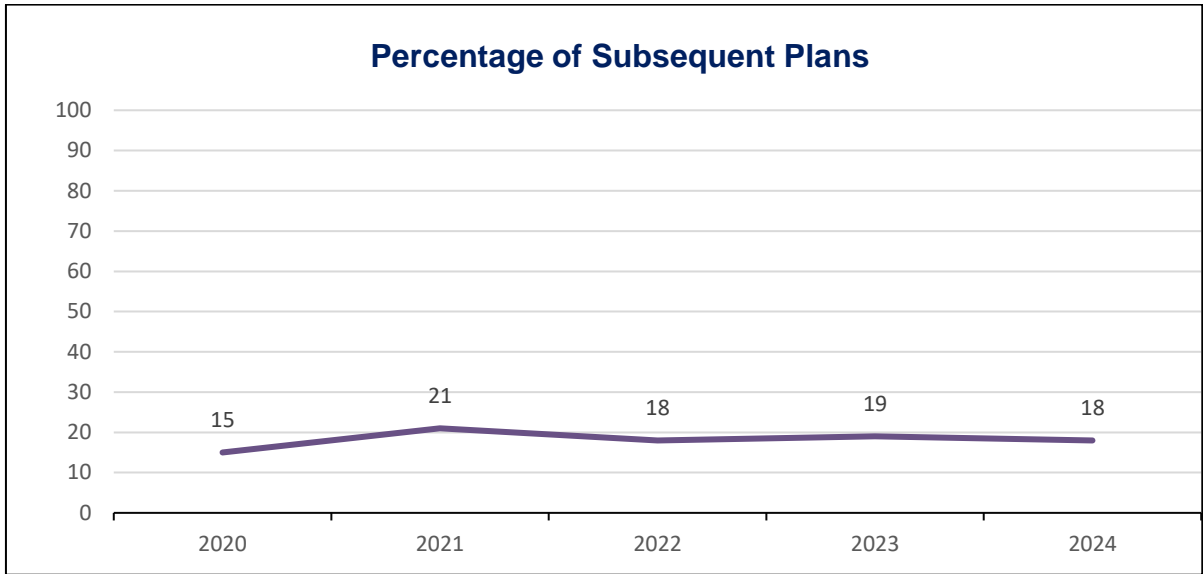
58. If the young person is not in attendance at the Child Protection Conference, the Independent Reviewing Officer should ensure that there is an agreed action for the Core Group regarding how the advocacy role will be communicated to the child or young person.

Second or Subsequent Plans

59. The chart below shows the percentage of children becoming the subject of Child Protection Plans for a second or subsequent time (within 24 months).

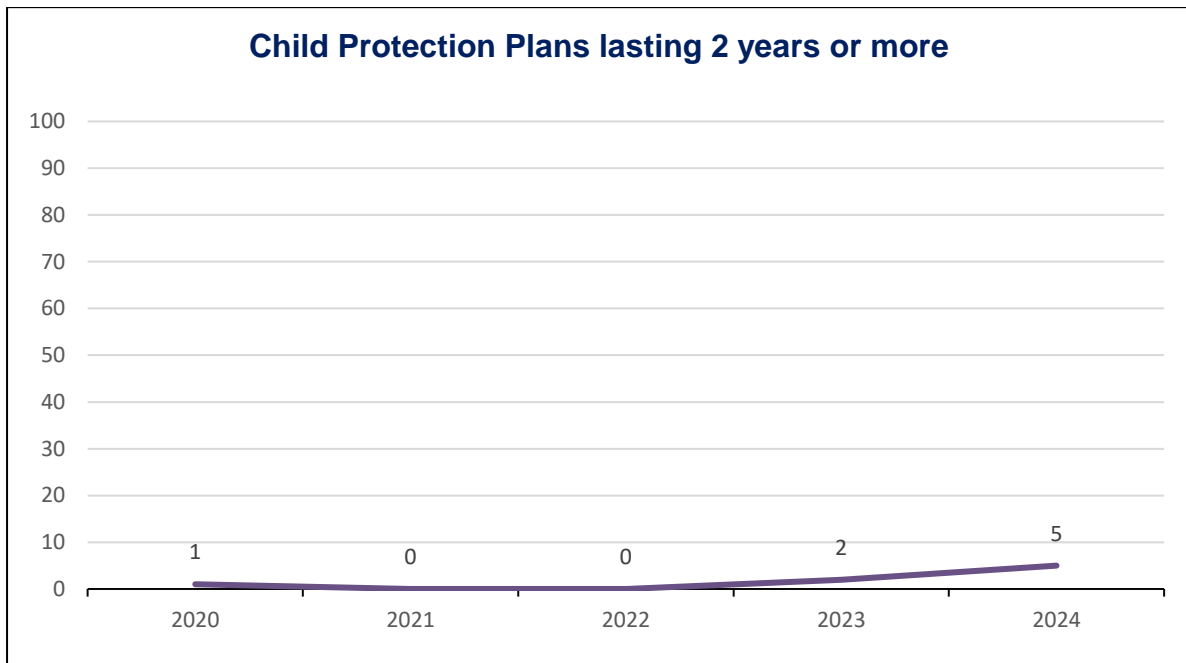


60. The purpose of this indicator is to monitor whether a Child Protection Plan leads to lasting improvement in a child's safety and overall well-being. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a lower figure. However, it is acknowledged that a second or subsequent Child Protection Plan will sometimes be necessary to deal with adverse changes to the child’s circumstances.



61. National benchmarked data is based on a second or subsequent plan being agreed at any time after a previous plan. Our rate for 2023-24 was 18%, a similar position to the previous 2 years. This is slightly better than the National average of 24% and regional average 25% (most recent published data).

Length of Child Protection Plan



62. The above chart tracks the number of children who had been the subject of a Child Protection Plan continuously for two years or longer against the number of children ceasing to be the subject of a Child Protection Plan during the year, expressed as percentage.

63. Professionals should be working towards specified outcomes which, if implemented effectively, should lead to most children not needing to be the subject of a Child Protection Plan for longer than two years. It is however recognised that some children will need Child Protection Plans for longer. Good performance is therefore typified by a lower percentage.

64. The percentage of Child Protection Plans ceasing where the plan had lasted more than two years in Darlington [4.6%] is similar to the regional average [1.7%] and national [3.9%] (most recent published data).

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**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28 OCTOBER 2024**

WORK PROGRAMME 2024-2025

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To consider the work programme items scheduled to be considered by this Scrutiny Committee during the 2024/25 Municipal Year and to consider any additional areas which Members would like to suggest should be included.

Summary

2. Members are requested to consider the attached draft work programme (**Appendix 1**) for the remainder of the Municipal Year, which has been prepared based on Officers recommendations and recommendations previously agreed by this Scrutiny Committee.
3. Once the work programme has been approved by this Scrutiny Committee, any additional areas of work which Members wish to add to the agreed work programme will require the completion of a quad of aims in accordance with the previously approved procedure (**Appendix 2**).

Recommendations

4. It is recommended that:-
 - a) It is recommended that Members note the current status of the Work Programme and consider any additional areas of work they would like to include.
 - b) Members' views are requested.

**Luke Swinhoe
Assistant Director Law and Governance**

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Author: Paul Dalton

Council Plan	The report contributes to the Council Plan in a number of ways through the involvement of Members in contributing to the delivery of the Plan. The work of the Scrutiny Committee supports the 'Children and Young People' priority, supporting the best start in life, realising potential and raising aspirations.
Addressing inequalities	There are no issues relating to diversity which this report needs to address.

Tackling Climate Change	There are no issues which this report needs to address.
Efficient and effective use of resources	This report has no impact on the Council's Efficiency Programme.
Health and Wellbeing	This report has no direct implications to the Health and Well Being of residents of Darlington.
S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for Crime and Disorder.
Wards Affected	The impact of the report on any individual Ward is considered to be minimal.
Groups Affected	The impact of the report on any individual Group is considered to be minimal.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

5. The format of the proposed work programme has been reviewed to enable Members of this Scrutiny Committee to provide a rigorous and informed challenge to the areas for discussion.
6. The Council Plan was adopted on 18th July 2024, and outlines Darlington Borough Council's long-term ambitions for Darlington and priorities for action over the next three years. It gives strategic direction to the Council and Council services, defining priorities, identifying key actions, and shaping delivery.
7. The Council Plan identifies six priorities, including 'Children and Young People', which aims to support the best start in life, realising potential and raising aspirations. Eight key deliverables are identified as part of this priority.

Forward Plan and Additional Items

8. Once the Work Programme has been agreed by this Scrutiny Committee, any Member seeking to add a new item to the work programme will need to complete a Quad of Aims.
9. A copy of the index of the Forward Plan has been attached at **Appendix 3** for information.

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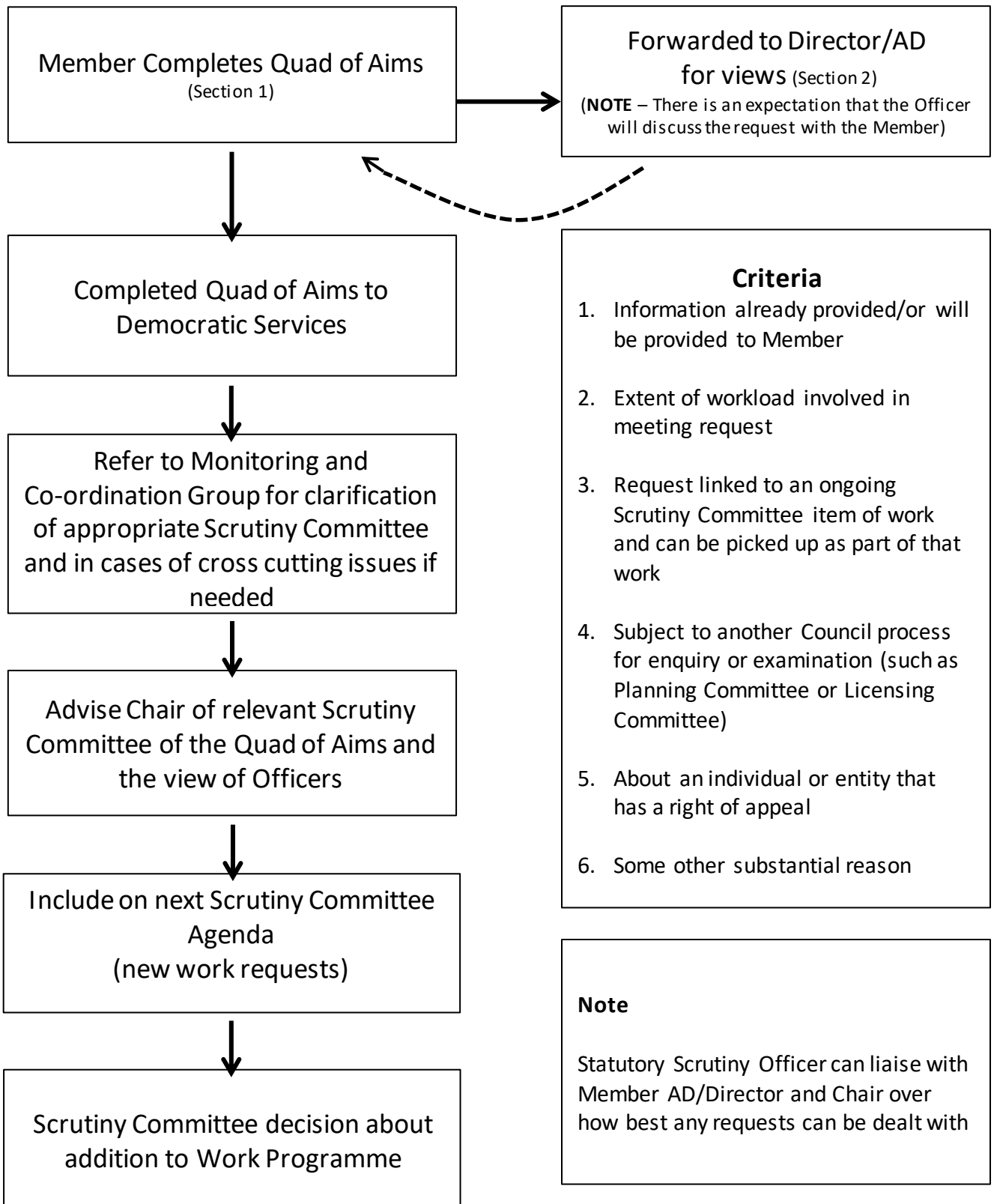
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25

Topic	Timescale	Lead Officer/ Organisation Involved	Link to PMF (metrics)	Scrutiny's Role / Notes
Children and Young People Public Health Overview	TBD	Ken Ross	PBH 009 PBH 013c PBH 016 PBH 018 PBH 020 PBH 021 PBH 054	Annual Monitoring
Performance Indicators Quarter 1 2024/25	28/10/2024	Sharon Raine	Agreed set of indicators	To receive quarterly monitoring reports and undertake any further detailed work into particular outcomes if necessary.
Refreshed Children and Young Peoples Plan	28/10/2024	Christine Shields		To update Members on the refreshed Children and Young Peoples Plan.
Children's Services Self-Assessment - Overview	28/10/2024	Chris Bell		To provide Scrutiny with the Annual Self- Assessment for Children's Services so that constructive 'critical friend' challenge takes place to drive improvement in public services
Learning and Skills Service Annual Report	28/10/2024	Paul Richardson		Annual Report to demonstrate challenge
Adoption Tees Valley Annual Report 2023/24	28/10/2024	Vicky Davidson-Boyd, Service Manager, Adoption Tees Valley		Annual monitoring
Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2023/24	28/10/2024	Martin Graham	CSC201	To examine the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer produced by the Children's Safeguarding Unit.
Medium Term Financial plan	06/01/2025	Brett Nielsen		

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25

Topic	Timescale	Lead Officer/ Organisation Involved	Link to PMF (metrics)	Scrutiny's Role / Notes
Local Designated Officer Annual Report	06/01/2025	Martin Graham		To examine the Annual Report and assure Members that allegations made against staff who work with children are reported and how they are actioned
SEND Policy Review	06/01/2025	Tony Murphy		
Transport Review	06/01/2025			
Transitional Service Update	06/01/2025	Tony Murphy		
Performance Indicators Quarter 2 2024/25	03/03/2025	Sharon Raine	Agreed set of indicators	To receive quarterly monitoring reports and undertake any further detailed work into particular outcomes if necessary
Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report	03/03/2025	Ann Baxter, Independent Chair		Annual monitoring
Autism Review	03/03/2025			
Calm in Communities	07/04/2025			
Children and Young People - Website Content	07/04/2025			
Home Education	07/04/2025	Dianne Gage, Inclusion Lead		

PROCESS FOR ADDING AN ITEM TO SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S PREVIOUSLY APPROVED WORK PROGRAMME



QUAD OF AIMS (MEMBERS' REQUEST FOR ITEM TO BE CONSIDERED BY SCRUTINY)

SECTION 1 TO BE COMPLETED BY MEMBERS

NOTE – This document should only be completed if there is a clearly defined and significant outcome from any potential further work. This document should **not** be completed as a request for or understanding of information.

REASON FOR REQUEST?	RESOURCE (WHAT OFFICER SUPPORT WOULD YOU REQUIRE?)
PROCESS (HOW CAN SCRUTINY ACHIEVE THE ANTICIPATED OUTCOME?)	HOW WILL THE OUTCOME MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Signed Councillor

Date

SECTION 2 TO BE COMPLETED BY DIRECTORS/ASSISTANT DIRECTORS
(NOTE – There is an expectation that Officers will discuss the request with the Member)

	Criteria
1. (a) Is the information available elsewhere? Yes No If yes, please indicate where the information can be found (attach if possible and return with this document to Democratic Services)	1. Information already provided/or will be provided to Member
(b) Have you already provided the information to the Member or will you shortly be doing so?	2. Extent of workload involved in meeting request
2. If the request is included in the Scrutiny Committee work programme what are the likely workload implications for you/your staff?	3. Request linked to an ongoing Scrutiny Committee item of work and can be picked up as part of that work
3. Can the request be included in an ongoing Scrutiny Committee item of work and picked up as part of that?	4. Subject to another Council process for enquiry or examination (such as Planning Committee or Licensing Committee)
4. Is there another Council process for enquiry or examination about the matter currently underway?	5. About an individual or entity that has a right of appeal
5. Has the individual or entity some other right of appeal?	6. Some other substantial reason
6. Is there any substantial reason (other than the above) why you feel it should not be included on the work programme ?	

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Signed **Position** **Date**

**DARLINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
FORWARD PLAN**



DARLINGTON

Borough Council

**FORWARD PLAN
FOR THE PERIOD: 2 OCTOBER 2024 - 28 FEBRUARY 2025**

Title	Decision Maker and Date
Offset Strategy	Cabinet 8 Oct 2024
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Strategy 2025/29	Cabinet 8 Oct 2024
Schedule of Transactions	Cabinet 8 Oct 2024
Annual Procurement Plan Update	Cabinet 5 Nov 2024
Children and Young People's Plan	Cabinet 5 Nov 2024
Council Tax Support - Scheme Approval 2025/26	Cabinet 5 Nov 2024
Environment Act 2021 - Waste Management Arrangements	Council 28 Nov 2024
	Cabinet 5 Nov 2024
Household Support Fund 2025	Cabinet 5 Nov 2024
Housing Services Tenant Engagement and Involvement Strategy 2024/29	Cabinet 5 Nov 2024
Project Position Statement and Capital Programme Monitoring - Quarter 2	Cabinet 5 Nov 2024
Revenue Budget Monitoring - Quarter 2	Cabinet 5 Nov 2024
Skerningham Masterplan Consideration	Cabinet 5 Nov 2024
Updated Local Development Scheme (LDS) 2024/27	Cabinet 5 Nov 2024
Council Plan Performance Reporting Update	Cabinet 3 Dec 2024
Housing Revenue Account - Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/27 to 2028/29	Cabinet 3 Dec 2024
Land at Coniscliffe Road, Darlington	Cabinet 3 Dec 2024
Land at Faverdale - Burtree Garden Village - Proposed Infrastructure Development Agreement (IDA)	Cabinet 3 Dec 2024

**DARLINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
FORWARD PLAN**

Mid Year Prudential Indicators and Treasury Management Monitoring Report 2024/25	Cabinet 3 Dec 2024
Proposed Middleton St George Conservation Area - Consultation	Cabinet 3 Dec 2024
Review of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)	Cabinet 3 Dec 2024
Strategic Asset Plan	Cabinet 3 Dec 2024
Maintained Schools Capital Programme - Summer 2025	Cabinet 7 Jan 2025
Woodland Road Waiting Restrictions	Cabinet 7 Jan 2025
Capital Strategy	Cabinet 4 Feb 2025
Customer Services Strategy 2025/30	Cabinet 4 Feb 2025
Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30	Cabinet 4 Feb 2025
Housing Revenue Account - Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/27 to 2028/29	Cabinet 4 Feb 2025
Review of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)	Council 27 Mar 2025 Cabinet 4 Feb 2025
Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2025/30	Cabinet 4 Feb 2025
Project Position Statement and Capital Programme Monitoring - Quarter 3	Cabinet 4 Feb 2025
Prudential Indicators and Treasury Management Strategy 2025/26	Cabinet 4 Feb 2025
Revenue Budget Monitoring - Quarter 3	Cabinet 4 Feb 2025
Schools Admissions 2025/26	Cabinet 4 Feb 2025
Adult Social Care Transport Policy 2024	Cabinet
Annual Statement of Accounts 2022/23	Cabinet