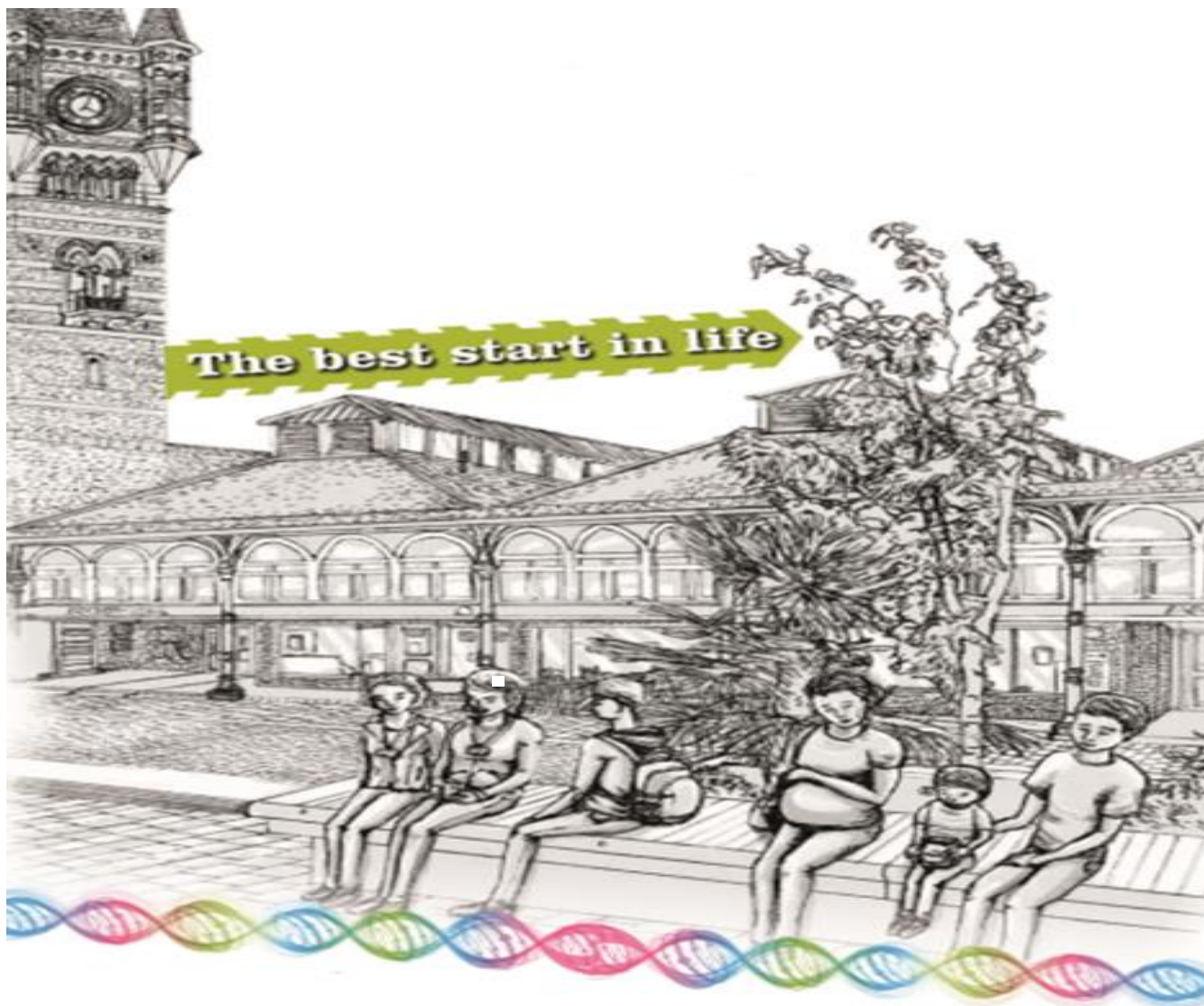


Children's Services

Knowing Ourselves Knowing Our Children



Self Assessment Overview report (Data year end 2020/21)



DARLINGTON
Borough Council

Governance of the self-assessment
Yearend data and annual report to Scrutiny in
August

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Introduction

Darlington Children’s services received an Ofsted Focus Visit in February 2019, that noted our strengths, areas for development and improvements made since our judgement of ‘requires improvement to be good’ in 2018, which confirmed our view that we are making progress in ensuring children and families working with us, achieve positive outcomes.

Our Strengthening Families Programme Board has been instrumental in driving through improvements and encourages forward and progressive thinking. We benefit from corporate and political commitment to this work and are confident in our success of sustaining the model.

Our ‘Front Door’ has been redesigned to streamline the number of transfer points that occurred from the Access Team to the safeguarding teams. The Children’s Initial Advice Team (CIAT) a new integrated service which went live in March 2020. It provides information and advice to members of the public and professionals, act as the screening route for all telephone contacts and ensures appropriate referrals

are passed through to Safeguarding and Assessment. The percentage of cases concluded through information and guidance has increased from 53.2% in 2019/20 to 73.2% in 2020/21. Having direct conversations with social workers at the front door, helps partners become more effective and confident in their decision making. Children and families are now more likely to receive the most appropriate intervention at first contact which has reduced the number of re-referrals.

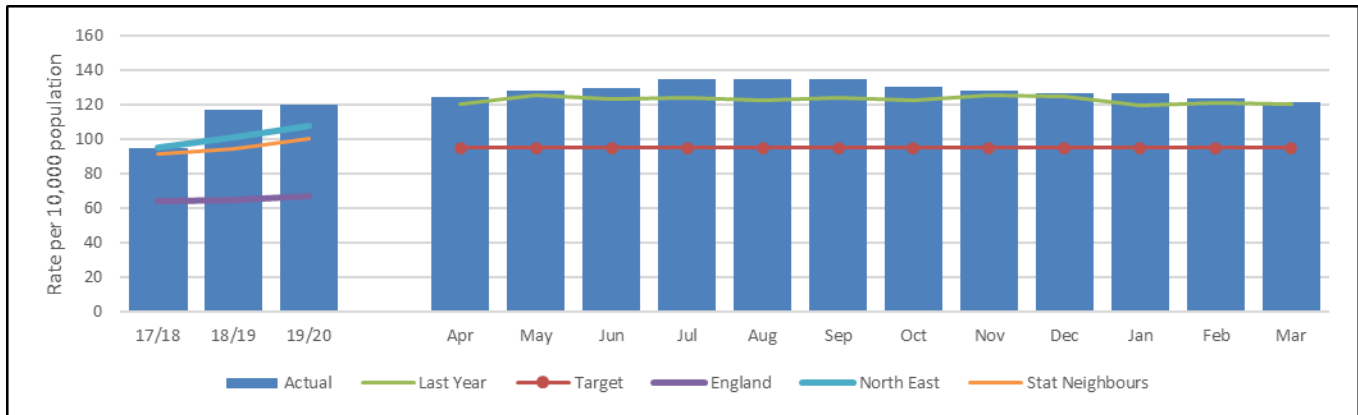
Our children in care numbers (272 at year end) currently remain higher than our statistical neighbours as below.

Our vision is for every child to have “The Best Start in Life” which is articulated in our Council Plan 2020-2023.

“The Best Start in Life” focuses on ensuring that every child in Darlington has the best start in life so that our children and young people can grow and flourish. There are some groups of children who require enhanced and targeted support to achieve their full potential.

Our priorities are to support the most vulnerable by providing care and support when needed • working with people to build on their strengths to maximise their potential • working with partners and to

maximise the potential of our young people by working with partners to maximise educational achievement • working to remove barriers to young people reaching their potential • working at a Tees Valley level to match jobs with skills and training.



As we implement **Relational Practice** in all services, we are beginning to see signs of better outcomes and a reduction in numbers. Over the last year children are less likely to become looked after and placement with extended family more readily found for children who do require to live outside their parents’ care. We are encouraging a ‘**think family first**’ approach in Darlington to ensure that children

remain in the care of their family and in cultural backgrounds. Working with parents to build on their strengths and values to keep their families together; where it is safe to do so. Confidence in care planning of children is growing as relationships between practitioners and parents and family members becomes stronger.

Quality Assurance
and Improvement
It's everyone's
Business.....



Our learning culture for our continued improvement journey would ordinarily access peer support via the regional Sector Led Improvement and Partners in Practice. However, since the start of the pandemic normal routes of support have been replaced by regional collaboration appropriate to virtual methods. Our quality assurance framework has been revised and updated with a real emphasis on the quality of practice. This has been informed by four stages: plan, do, check, and act. The framework sets out roles and responsibilities, so staff are clear

about expectations on improving practice as part of business as usual. The framework sets out what goods looks like for children, young people, and families of Darlington. It details how we measure and analyse the quality of the practice through: observations; active audit activity; feedback from families and thematic dip sampling. We have evolved our practice and learning panel to reflect our journey with the development of the Quality Improvement Group (QIG). This is to create a real learning culture where we're able to reflect on our practice and share learning. We want to learn from families with a much stronger focus on the feedback from families enabling us to build on what they find positive within our service delivery and approach.

We have an emphasis on using data and quality monitoring to drive performance. Improvements and areas requiring deep dive reviews are now driven by team managers and service managers who report their findings into monthly practice clinics. In clinics with senior leaders, including the Principal Social Worker and the Director of Children's Services (quarterly), both support and challenge occur ensuring data and quality is analysed, owned, and understood by all managers.

The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) group provide the governance for scrutiny and challenge regarding our Early Help/Neglect Strategy. The Community Safety Partnership Board provide governance and oversight of domestic abuse, with a County Durham and Darlington Executive Group (DASVEG) providing direction for services. The Darlington multi-agency delivery plan, which supports The County Durham and Darlington Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Plan has been strengthened to ensure a collective approach and coordination of actions. The strategic and operational governance of children who are at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation is robust, with the Child Exploitation Group reporting into the Safeguarding Partnership.

In September 2020 the existing Assistant Director for Adult Services took on an acting role of both Director of Children's and Adult Services this became permanent in February 2021. Given the internal appointment, the transition was streamlined. The newly appointed Director is extremely familiar with the Safeguarding Agenda, the culture and vision of Children's Services and strategic plans for Education and Skills.

The Lead Member, Managing Director and Director of Children's Services continue to influence and drive several key board meetings, ensuring continued political and corporate oversight and scrutiny.

Areas of Strength

Strategic direction and commitment to invest in children's services
 Improved consistency of good practice, including direct work shaping assessments and plans
 Robust response to Covid ensuring children remain safe
 Embedded relational practice in all service areas ensuring positive and sustained relationships with families
 Good multi-agency response for children experiencing organised harm outside the family
 Strong oversight of children electively home educated
 Strong relationships with Schools
 Good work acknowledged in Court
 Stable workforce, retention remains good

Areas of Priority

The voice of our families is evidenced in our work and their feedback is used to improve our services
 Increase use of safe family arrangements to reduce the need for children to be cared for in regulated/commissioned placements meaning they can remain within their family network
 Work with partners to improve responses to childhood adversities and poverty
 Continued work with education partners to improve outcomes at KS4
 Increase sufficiency in placement choice for children in care, particularly foster care
 Develop an apprenticeship offer for Children in care and Care leavers

Response to Covid

The pandemic has presented challenges for us in 2020 however, adopting a proactive approach in early 2020 led to establishing a Covid Safeguarding Partnership Group (CSPG), the introduction of Multi – Agency Operational Procedures for the wider children's workforce, enabling statutory and non-statutory organisations to have clear roles, responsibilities and expectations and the development of two vulnerable risk registers, monitoring the risks and safety of children open to Children's Social care and children subject to Education, Health and Care plans.

The procedures outlined multi-agency collaboration in the completion of safeguarding children covid risk assessments, visiting expectations and safe systems of work. The procedures have been regularly updated in line with changes in government guidance, legislative flexibilities and individual organisation service delivery.

Schools have provided an excellent response during the pandemic with 100% remaining open, inclusive of opening over the easter 2020 bank holidays to allow vulnerable children and children of front-line workers to attend.

Following the announcement to the pandemic in March 2020, all children services employees were required to work from home. This presented logistical challenges in respect of staff having home working equipment and robust IT systems supporting a smooth transition from an office environment to a working from home. Employees were supported through internal operating procedures, regular management oversight, supervision and support from HR. This included mental well-being seminars, training and access to counselling services which has been invaluable in ensuring staff health,

workforce capacity and strong work ethic. This enabled business continuity with only minor impact on service delivery.

Initial anxieties regarding PPE were noted however robust links with Public Health colleagues ensured that staff were fully equipped by early May. Although high risk vulnerable children and families had always been visited, universally face to face visits commenced and have remained to date except for some children with a disability.

Children's voice

During January and March 2021 Children's Scrutiny established a review group to examine the effects of the pandemic on the children and young people living in Darlington. Two virtual events were held to examine the current picture, identify good practice and if there are any gaps in service; and to make suggestions or recommendations to the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Darlington Partnership and/or Cabinet for improvement.

Some children and young people reported they felt that family relationships had improved and that they had used the lockdown to engage in creative, new activities. In contrast some others reported to have been struggling to access IT and/or had experienced cyber bullying. They were consuming more fizzy drinks, chocolate and energy drinks and were feeling stressed or anxious and some reported sleeping problems and depression. Some young people voiced concern at being unfairly blamed for breaking Covid rules and jeopardizing the health of older people.

Mental health issues were a major concern among our children and young people, and they highlighted this as a priority, although they recognized that online services had been made available in Darlington.

Children and Young People were unclear as to where they could find information about activities and events specifically designed for their age groups and felt there were not enough positive activities universally available for them in their local communities or in the town centre.

The report and recommendations of the review group were fully accepted and endorsed by Cabinet in May and will ensure that issues impacting on children and young people will remain high on the Council's agenda. Young people identified

- Cyber bullying,
- IT difficulties
- Poor healthy eating/lifestyle choices
- Children's mental health for all partners/charities/schools to work collaboratively on service delivery
- Improve life chances for children
- Improve career opportunities for young people
- Look at better communication for young people so they are informed of services in the borough

Working with children and families

Children residing in our internal residential homes

have been amazing and in the main they have adhered to all the restrictions put in place by government. One young person had to move due to their own safety in the first lockdown. Staff have been eager to ensure the young people's mental health is maintained to a high standard and have encouraged them to walk and take regular exercise during the day. We have maintained sufficient workforce capacity enabling the homes to function effectively. Reg 44 visits have been undertaken virtually and are continuing to report on high levels of care in place for our young people.

Foster carers have been supportive in ensuring that contact with families is maintained through WhatsApp and various video technology as they recognise the importance of children seeing their families. Placement stability remains high because of this positive attitude. In year 2020/21, 71.9% 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 better than our statistical neighbours (69.3%), regional (69.0%) and national average (68.0%).

Children have been seen and relationships built with children's practitioners from Early Help, YOS and children's social care throughout the pandemic, albeit during the first few month's families were reluctant to have staff visit their homes resulting in early help service delivery being offered to a much smaller group of families and social workers providing virtual visits to the majority of children and doorstep and garden visits with the most vulnerable.

The introduction of the covid risk assessments helped identify children who were most vulnerable and who needed visits.

Harewood Hill, respite provision provided a discreet bespoke package of support to those most vulnerable with a disability. It developed staff and children into bubbles ensuring children were safeguarded and reducing the chance of cross infection.

Teesside Combined Family Court provided a reduced timetable of hearings for the first six months of the pandemic, hearing only high risk and emergency cases which resulted in reduced numbers of children's hearings for discharges of care orders, adoption orders. Since the Courts has reopened fully they have taken measures to provide additional court offices therefore ensuring more hearings can take place and as a result our children are starting to return home to family in a measured and steady pace.

Once risk assessments and safe systems of work had been developed with Health and safety and Public Health colleagues, the Supervised Contact service resumed facilitation of contacts between children and their families. Parents were extremely supportive in the way in which we put our procedures in place and were able to work with us to ensure that everybody was safe while visits took place.

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

Strategic management

As senior leaders we are ambitious for our children and families. We have a clear vision and areas of priority, enabling us to promote and maximise the potential of our children and young people. We pride ourselves in knowing our children well and by also being aware of ourselves well we know our strengths and areas requiring continued focus. We effectively target the support we offer to children and their families using our Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), which ensures that we also know our communities well and can identify vulnerable groups at ward level. Safeguarding Partners are involved in joint work with the Community Safety Partnership to be assured that services are co-ordinated and accessible, for example for Gypsy, Roma, and Travelling (GRT) families, to share information and establish clear contact routes for partners working with families.

Our overall strategic direction, which acknowledges a strength in partnership working, of giving children and young people the Best Start in Life is driven by our Health and Wellbeing Board (HWBB), which is also our Children's Trust. Robust governance arrangements demonstrate clear lines of accountability, challenge and communication between the HWBB and other key groups such as Scrutiny Committees, the Corporate Parenting Panel, the Safeguarding Partnership and the Children and Young People Plan Steering Group. Knowing the quality of practice is continuing to improve, ensures that services are managed well, and we are realistic about what is needed. We continue to have effective political and corporate support with continued commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people across the Borough.

Safeguarding Partnership arrangements are in place with a strong supportive Independent Scrutineer providing and enabling professional challenge, and commitment from all partners to ensure our respective safeguarding work is robust. Our Strategic MAPPA Board is chaired by the Chief Superintendent for Safeguarding and Neighbourhood Command and is well attended by all organisations, including local prison services and Safeguarding Partners.

Our role as Corporate Parent is strong and is taken seriously by members of the Corporate Parenting Panel, the wider Council and lead member. The Corporate Parenting Panel is co-chaired by members from our Children in Care Council (Darlo Care Crew) who directly support the Panel in measuring and monitoring the effectiveness and quality of Corporate Parenting in Darlington. Children and Young People in the Darlo Care Crew have been influential in developing formal and informal meetings to ensure their voices are heard listened to and acted upon. They have also developed the "Promises Tree", which outlines our corporate parental responsibility.

Strategic managers have a good sense of children benefitting from improved timely management decisions, and children and their families are sustaining and maintaining relationships with their social workers and as a result, receive a sustained consistency of approach to their care planning pathway and achieve better outcomes.

We are committed to ensuring that practitioners feel valued, knowing that good practice is recognised while we continue to be aware of and are responsive to the negative impact of high caseloads on quality of practice. The **'think family first'** approach is being driven and a strong steer in relation to restorative practices are being welcomed by our workforce as they are committed to reducing risk and preventing escalation of children becoming subject to child protection plans or coming into care.

Learning Culture

Our journey is based on sound building block which we have seen evolving from initial focus on compliance and performance targets to improving quality of practice, which continually sits alongside more recent improvements in relational and strengths-based practice with children and families. The next phase is to improve our restorative relationships by commissioned and collaborative joint working practices enabling colleagues from CSC, Health Education, Police and others to provide services together.

Our workforce is well trained, committed and engaged and is supported with a wide range of development through our extensive training programme, leadership and staff Forums, which are well informed by information from complaints, quality assurance, audit activity, data and performance. Practitioners at all levels actively participate in developing our vision and purpose, and work on key priorities and areas of service development. Children, young people and families influence ongoing service improvement and development through engagement and feedback via commissioning, quality monitoring, complaints and compliments. Examples include; parental support in developing safe working practices and risk assessments for Contact Arrangements with children in care, following the initial lock down restrictions in March 2020 and parental consultation on Special Guardianship information and pathways within Early Help Services where children are experiencing autism and learning disabilities.

We have refreshed and updated our Workforce Development Strategy and continue to deliver a strong social care training offer, which now includes training in restorative practice and introduction into management. Practice Educators are valued and invested in, resulting in students reporting a positive experience of their placement in Darlington, and many applying for permanent posts.

Workforce

Our stable senior management team is cohesive, visible and in touch with staff through modems such as Microsoft teams and WhatsApp. Practitioners are well supported, with our culture in restorative approach of high support high challenge, to further empower them and their managers to be responsible and accountable. Workforce surveys on the impact on working from home in the pandemic, report positives such as improved work life balance, and efficiencies, and negatives where staff report; social isolation, increase in poor mental health and anxiety issues. The local authority has responded well to the findings with additional counselling support, wellbeing sessions and access to mental health consultants put in place to achieve positive outcomes for the staff.

Our workforce remains stable enabling children and their families to develop long term relationships with their social workers, IROs and other practitioners. Staff turnover (15.9) SW vacancy (12.5) and agency (18.4) rates as of end March 2021. (all up slightly from 2019 but reduced from 2018). We continue to be responsive to pressures on the workforce by creating another safeguarding and assessment team from existing capacity enabling a manageable number of direct reports for team managers so that caseloads remain at a manageable level (18 for SW 10 for ASYE) and each practitioner receives improved reflective supervision. ASYE's are supported by a designated ASYE co-ordinator,

Feedback from staff training includes:
"The training I've done so far has helped in the way I communicate with children, young people and their families. Although it's early days I'm working more 'with' families, rather than 'for' them, by looking at their strengths more."
"I was aware of ACE's before the training, but I feel this has given me an understanding of mindfulness of trauma in children. I have researched and use appropriate questions raised in the training and work with individuals and families to understand where they are coming from."

providing weekly and monthly 1-1 adding additional value to supervision undertaken by team managers. Our new 'Darlington Academy' means we can 'grow our own', and we have two staff completing the social work apprenticeship. Highly experienced and skilled staff remain committed to Darlington and work to improve our marketing and recruitment is underway, ensuring that we remain competitive within the social care market. Due to more agile working practices throughout the UK, we have recognised a potential decrease in agency workers able to cover maternity and long-term sickness and work has commenced to improve our regional MOU to be competitive on our offer against neighbouring regions.

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

Following family feedback, we have improved relational practices and our approach in responding more quickly to children and families which has led to an increase in families agreeing to our involvement and taking up our services at the earliest stage (57.2% 159 families received services within 5 working days). We have been able to listen to family and children's needs and work together to provide the right level of support required. We have worked to improve the quality of early help assessments and plans, with SMART methodology being used to identify risk and set clear goals. Plans are developed in relational language that is clearly understood by all involved, outlining what is required, by when and by whom. We are working to ensure the quality of plans are consistent for all children.

Our Family Information service and online directory helps children, professionals and partners know where to go for information and advice. Families are more receptive to us working *with* them rather than services being offered *to* them and, by maintaining an approach where children remain within the family network, this is helping shape and develop strong trusting relationships with families. Families are beginning to see that practitioners are thinking 'family first' by developing family and friend networks, with the introduction of family group conferences

Early Help services support children and their families, 72.3% are recorded as having seen a positive impact following Early Help Support in a recent survey. Families are integral to understanding their progress and by using scaling methods they can see the level of their improvements. Children who are not experiencing improvements in their family situation are stepped up to statutory services appropriately, with each child and family being considered at our transfer panel.

Young children develop well and are ready for education and where necessary are supported with targeted speech and language input. Our early help offer helps children maintain progress within school and within their family as they are supported by effective programmes. For older children who are demonstrating emerging academic, attendance or behaviour need, they are considered within our multi-agency Vulnerable Pupil Panel (VPP), who establish a plan to keep them in school, inclusive of managed moves to other schools, if required.

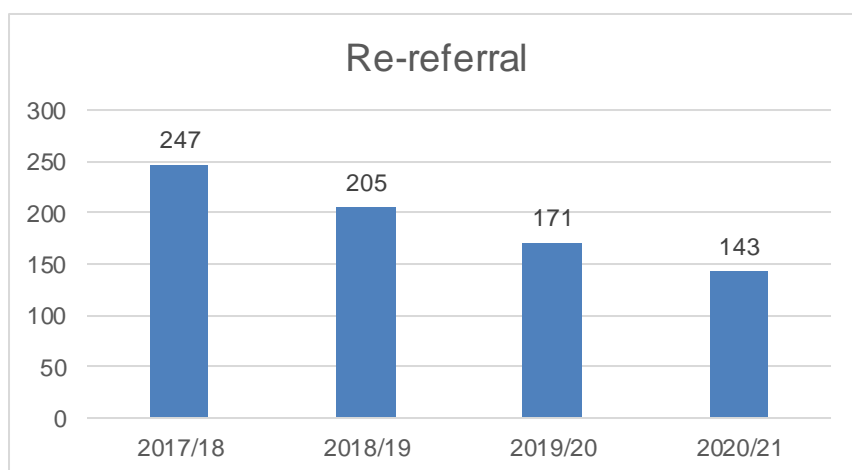
We have a strong multi-agency approach to children who go missing, or are at risk of harm/exploitation outside the family home which means they are identified quickly and receive a return home interview (94.2% of Return Home Interviews are conducted within 72hrs in 2021) from a dedicated officer who, with parents, carers and practitioners, helps coordinate information relating to risks using the harm matrix tool within and out with the child's family, locations and community to determine what level of

support is required. Parents are supported to understand why their child goes missing so they may help to reduce the episodes for their child. In January 2021, we started to see a slight increase in younger children 11 & 12yrs being reported. An urgent analysis initiated by the covid critical safeguarding partnership group showed that the responses from children were them wanting to be out with friends and not wanting to return home at the scheduled time set. We continue to monitor the age range of the children presenting as missing and we have not seen a repeat in those so young since January.

Children most vulnerable to CSE receive proactive multi-agency support from a range of workers in the Educate and Raise Awareness of Sexual Exploitation Team (ERASE).

Identifying and responding to children’s needs and appropriate thresholds

The Front Door was restructured in March 2020 enabling all contact information to be screened centrally via the Children’s Initial Advice Team (CIAT). Partner agencies and members of the public engage in conversations about children whom they are worried about with experienced social workers so that decision making for next steps is agreed and action taken so that children receive the right service at the right time. Having direct conversations with social workers at the front door, helps partners become more effective and confident in their decision making, ultimately reducing the number of re-referrals. Domestic violence and family dysfunction continue to be the main reasons for re-referral in 19/20 and 20/21. 20/21



has seen a decrease in re-referrals for physical abuse but an increase in adult on adult conflicts.

Through the Children’s Initial Advice Team children and families benefit from reduced delay in allocation and fewer social workers are involved during the assessment pathway. Across 2020/21 86.4% of children and family assessments are completed within 45 working days, this is above national average of 83.1% recorded in 2020. We promote quality in the information gathered and robust analysis ensures the best possible plan enabling positive outcomes for the child and family. We have clarity in parents giving consent for assessments to be completed.

We have very few young people 16-17 years old (who present as homeless and those who do are supported to access a range of accommodation and community-based support, through our Positive Pathway Support offer, following a children and family assessment.

Children and families are supported outside of office hours by our Emergency Duty Team (EDT) and robust, information sharing between them and CIAT ensures that families who are in need receive continuation of timely and effective support.

Hi I would like to provide a compliment about S, social worker I would just like to say how helpful and friendly she is and to thank her for her help and support towards me and my children S, always acted in an appropriate and professional manner and was always suggesting ways to help us as a family and help us access services and help for my daughter and as a result helped us to move forward so again I would just like to say thank you kind regards Parent'

Making good decisions and providing effective help

The introduction of a weekly review meeting comprising representatives from the senior leadership team, quality assurance and performance provides scrutiny and challenge with regard to quality of information, rationale and decision making from transfer of referral through to strategy outcomes for children. This live audit of practice has evidenced that children are kept safe from harm through timely, appropriate and effective childcare planning arrangements. Children are seen quickly and are almost always seen alone with their views informing decision making. Risks to children are managed through increased improvement in safety planning and we have good mechanisms for establishing multi-agency

collaboration, action and decision making in emergency circumstances that we are moving to embed in working pathways for all children. An example recently has been with regard to a young person with autism and learning disabilities in need of a placement to meet her needs. Commissioners from CCG, TWVE, Local authority and practitioners, including police working together to enact a robust plan and review s117 plan.

We have a high number of strategy meetings and are conducting a whole service review looking at children subject to a strategy and their journey in children's social care involvement to understand how practice deals with issues of non-consent, ongoing domestic abuse and where children make disclosure of significant harm.

Strategy meetings are well attended with appropriate input from agencies, identifying concerns, actions and timescales needed to safeguard children, and they demonstrate effective use of analysis that informs decision making. We have strong performance in ensuring there is no drift and delay for children requiring a child protection plan with 94.4% of ICPC's, held within 15 working days of the strategy meeting at year end, 2021. We know that our rates of children being escalated to Initial Child Protection Conference are sometimes low, however regular monitoring determines whether the outcomes are appropriate. The low numbers are therefore reflective in the overall number of children subject to a child protection plan which conversely results in an increase rate of children having a second/subsequent plan. This inevitable change is in line with the practice under the strengthening families programme and we monitor this robustly to ensure the change is within a managed process.

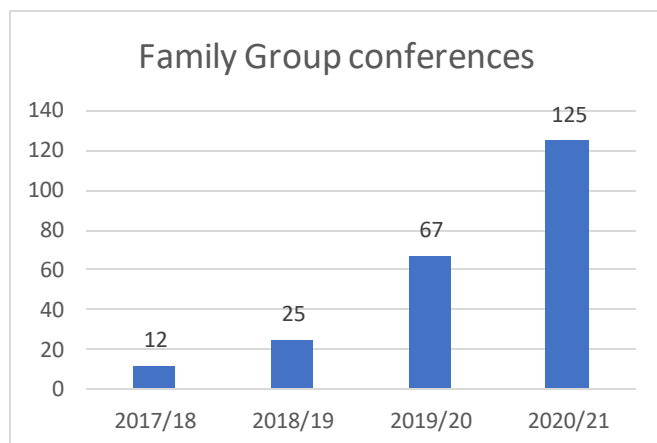
Improved communication and practice with midwifery services and the CIAT results in risks to unborn children being identified earlier and assessed in a timely manner. Parents have plans and actions in place prior to birth and although covid has led to some women presenting late for booking, this much improved pathway has led to some increased use of parent and baby placements to help us assess whether baby can remain within the care of their parents.

LADO referrals have reduced (18% reduction since 19/20), due to work undertaken in 2019 with a particular school on the use of restraint practices and covid with the need to socially distance, limiting the use of hands-on restraint. Physical abuse remains the highest factor of reports and, in most cases, when referrals are made, organisations receive prompt and effective action from the Local Authority's Designated Officer (LADO).

A recent audit of children’s records showed that practitioners need more awareness in relation to MAPPA meetings, to fully understand that the meetings can assist with risk assessments on individuals which can inform/be amalgamated into their own assessments. Training has been rolled out to improve understanding and increase referrals into the MAPPA process.

Children and young people have reported that use of technology has made their practitioners are more accessible. Throughout the last year our staff have increased in confidence and creative use of technology i.e. WhatsApp/video calls allowing social workers to sustain positive working relationships and make a real difference to children and their families.

Parents and carers are supported to have a clear understanding of what they can do to improve outcomes for their children through our increased use of Family Group Conferences. The offer of a conference is given to all families at the point of referral. The joined-up planning with members of their family network ensures a sustainability of support that will be evident long after the statutory intervention ceases. Managers and practitioners are increasingly more reflective during planning meetings and supervisions which has led to improved planning for children, therefore reducing drift and delay in children receiving services to meet their needs.



Most children and their families receive an assessment which is child focused and records the child’s lived experience. Assessments are well written with the child’s historical information, chronologies, views of relevant family members and contain research-based analysis which informs future planning. We have a focus in gaining Input from absent males so their voice can be heard and informs care planning.

We have worked hard to hear our Children’s voices, especially in the last year and have conducted surveys and an impact review, facilitated by the Chair of Scrutiny on how they have coped during the pandemic.

Direct work continues to improve through practitioners using rapport techniques and tools to engage and capture their views. Consistent recording of this and how it influences planning and decision making for the child, continues to be an area of focus for us.

The quality and consistency of children in need plans has improved although this remains a focus for us. We have ensured that plans are purposeful, and outcome focused. Clarity in language helps all involved have good understanding of what is expected. Children receive regular and timely visits (92.2% in timescales) and their plans are reviewed regularly, (95.2% within timescales). We have clear documentation as to the rationale for escalation into Public Law Outline (PLO)/Child Protection processes which has been strengthened enabling this to be understood by parents.

Our relational practice approach to holding ICPC and Review Conferences has been impacted by the pandemic although we have been able to facilitate them with both parents and children participating via mobile technology. 92.3% of parents attended the ICPC with 10 children during 20/21 and 95.2% of

parents attended the review conference with 6 children. Children and young people are encouraged to attend and share their views and can do so with the support of an advocate. Social worker reports submitted for conferences are timely and of good quality, and multi-agency involvement is good within the meetings.

The quality of Child Protection Plans continues to improve, better plans are driven by experienced practitioners in multi-agency forums and better attended core groups reviewing the plan for the child, setting clear and realistic timescales. The plan ensures that children, young people and family members know what to do and which services to engage with to effect change to their home situation. Outcomes for children are good and we have low repeat Child Protection Plans.

Management oversight of frontline practice

We continue to maintain a stable front line and senior management team along with an experienced and skilled workforce which has enabled the embedding relational practice within our services to the benefit of children and their families and promote effective relationships between managers and practitioners.

Our Strengthening Families Programme Board has oversight of the transformational plan, driving through improvements and changes in restorative culture and practice. We have been able to benefit from commitment from the Managing Director and the Lead Member who are both champions of the programme offering challenge and scrutiny where required.

We have had a consistent drive and focus on quality of practice and therefore are aware of performance measures that have been mostly impacted by this change in practice such as, Contacts progressing to referral and family assessments which extend beyond the 45 working day timescale. The oversight given to these areas within the weekly referral meeting and practice and develop meetings from managers ensures there is no drift and delay in care planning or in services provided to the child.

We have continued to maintain focus on reducing risks to children by services being put in place at the right time, with permanence planning and pre-proceedings being timely. Managers are promoting a 'think family first' approach with practitioners to ensure consistency across the whole service.

Children experience effective care planning that is driven by Independent Reviewing Officers, who build and sustain positive relationships with children through actively listening, and oversight of the child's progress between review meetings. Plans progress with little delay through IROs appropriately championing plans for children and their needs.

Managers consider the demands of the individual children and those of the allocated social worker to ensure the best relationships can be formed with the children and their families to gain the best outcome. Managers are more able to identify themes of good practice and areas of focus and are confident in addressing poor practice.

They are self-reflective and accountable for their own practice, which is being further enhanced through our positive engagement with the NAAS programme. This is providing beneficial information on key skills demonstrated by the staff and teams, as well as identifying areas of focus for future training to ensure that all aspects of child development, theory and research is being applied when meeting the

needs of the children. Although the programme had been suspended due to Covid, we have exceeded our agreed DFE target of between 20% to 30% of the children's workforce having completed the assessment as 35% have successfully completed the assessment to date. We are in the process of recommencing the programme once in place.

Participation and direct work with children and families

Most children and families are benefitting from social workers building rapport and sustaining relationships with each other. Social Workers know their children well and children report feeling confident and safe. Children experience less changes in Social Worker and this is increasingly resulting in more meaningful relationships. Children are seen and most are seen alone, which makes them feel involved throughout their journey with us. The child's voice is evident and is captured well through use of tools and positive engagement techniques, demonstrating effective communication with the children.

A recent audit of children who experience domestic abuse, demonstrated that whilst the assessments were robust and services were provided effectively and timely, more understanding was needed around coercive control and the impact of this on family members. A full review of our training offer has enabled us to develop podcasts and on-line training both internally and with safeguarding partners.

Through 2020 support for children with ADHD was provided by early help practitioners, social workers TWVE and a number of third sector provision accessible within education settings such as the Listening Post, who also supported children with anxiety issues. In addition, although we had low referrals, Humankind supported young people with drug and alcohol issues. Emotion cards and the use of the Mind of My Own app has helped us capture the views and wishes of children. Our therapeutic workers provide 1-1 support to help children understand their lived experiences and provide strategies to help with this, however challenges can remain when children require more specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health support.

Feedback from Police; 'Can I say that I was really impressed with the professionalism of social worker H at both child's house and also at the address of X in this afternoon's joint visit. I felt H presented as very open, personable and interested when she spoke with child. Equally at X's address H was honest, direct, professional and very resilient in giving what was uncomfortable

Children and Young People requiring an advocate are supported to access this. Children report good relationships with their advocate who effectively represent children's views clearly at meetings. There have been no complaints regarding any advocate practice. We have increasing take up from children requesting advocates.

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

Feedback from young people:

"Working with them (ERASE) means that I have the same life as other teenagers my age, which is all that I wanted – a normal life".

Feedback from parents:

"I like the support from Early Help, it is helping my daughter's behaviour, which is getting better. I understand I need to be patient and I am now more confident" (parent following 1-1 session with early help worker)

"She was fantastic. She gave me strength to end my relationship with my abusive partner and realise my child and I are worth more"

We know we respond quickly and effectively when children are in immediate and acute risk situations. Good attendance at multi-agency meetings and improvements in our safety planning, enables children to feel safe and that immediate action helps their situation, reducing risk.

ICPC – 19/20 – 56.1% of invites attended,
86.2% of reports received.

20/21 – 58.5% of invites attended,
87.2% of reports received.

RCPC – 19/20 – 40.5% of invites attended,
87.6% of reports received.

20/21 – 50.0% of invites attended,
90.3% of reports received

Through the continued opening of schools, we were able to maintain communications and support via *Operation Encompass* for child. Women and families supported by the

refuge, receive bespoke help tailored to their circumstances and adult victims and children witnessing domestic abuse access outreach support service, and Social workers are experienced and refer into Checkpoint, a Police led multi-agency approach to deescalate and deter from criminal proceedings in cases where domestic abuse is prevalent.

Our 4Kids programme launched in December 2020. A joint programme between the Local Authority, Police and the Police, Crime and Victims' Commissioner to improve outcomes, aimed at reducing the negative impact of drugs and also the number of Children Looked After. Initial feedback is demonstrating positive action and outcomes from the programme.

In 2020 our commissioned substance misuse team SWITCH, transitioned in house. This has enabled a whole service review, effectively reducing long-term treatment plans to more robust and timely interventions that suit need and provide positive outcomes for young people. The service is effective in its approach and is incorporated within the front door and early help service

Partnership working between social workers, Public Health and health visitors was further enhanced throughout a particular time in 2020 in response to a slight increase in children presenting with injuries at A&E. This enabled the children's workforce to promote consistent messaging regarding ICON programme and trips and hazards in the home, developed by TWVE to drastically reduce the risks to children and stress within the home environment.

Children with a disability have been those most impacted by reductions in face-to-face contact taking place, mainly due to families wishing to limit the number of visitors to the home. Carers, PAs and health colleagues have been prioritised although, through the completion of covid risk assessments, children most at risk have received face to face contact, where necessary. Our Transition to Adult Social Care (TASC) panel has continued to oversee young people moving into adulthood benefitting from co-designed packages of support that are tailored to meet needs whilst improving independence.

Children in Private Fostering arrangements continue to be low with 33.5% of the children in care in March 2020 in a private fostering arrangement compared to 36.7% in the previous year. Individuals have timely assessments and are visited regularly by qualified social workers.

Safeguarding Partners have continued to have oversight and updates on the support offered to children who are Electively Home Education (EHE) (123 children) and from Gypsy Roma Travelling families, through the work of the Critical Safeguarding Partnership Group, set up at the outset of the pandemic. Attendance at school of children and young people with an EHCP have continued to be above the national average and have benefited as a result, having resumed to more normal practices within the school settings.

We continue to have low levels of young people at risk of radicalisation, or who experience honour-based violence or female genital mutilation (FGM) however our multi-agency response to children who do experience these issues receive appropriate response and services to meet their need, and where risk is deemed high, immediate action/safety plans are put in place to make them safe.

The Experience and Progress of Children in Care and Care Leavers

Making good decisions

Children and young people report having good relationships with their social workers who are skilled and experienced with good knowledge of legal frameworks and care planning arrangements. Children are safeguarded from situations of harm, as social workers and managers recognise risk and threshold and act appropriately to safeguard the child, however, our improving approach to 'think family first' enables more children to remain living at home with their families or extended family networks. Parents and carers have a better understanding of what they need to do to ensure that their children are safeguarded, through family network meetings/family group conferencing and improved clarity in Letter Before Proceedings.

Feedback from Court; the Guardian has made a point on this case of stating that the Local Authority have been very impressive in their case management on this matter and have pulled out all the stops!

We continue to exercise positive practice in relation to care proceedings, ensuring children's plans are progressed timely, with extensions being agreed between all parties. The quality of our written work with the child, parents and carers voices evidenced throughout good quality Court documents and robust case management is often commended upon by the judiciary and CAFCASS.

One barrister wrote of a social worker giving evidence in court:

“her evidence was absolutely brilliant – she left no one in doubt that she has an absolute command of the facts of the case, and of her assessments. Despite hours of questions, the advocates got absolutely nowhere with her, she was in short, the sort of witness we as barristers dread! She has clearly worked hard on this case and it really showed in her evidence, as other advocates in the case

We have routinely commended our foster carers and connected carers who have provided excellent care to children and young people through the most difficult of circumstances and as a direct result has enabled children to have better placement stability with more children remaining in placements long term. Carers have continued to be creative in facilitating contact between children and their families via media methods such as WhatsApp and Zoom, which families have really appreciated.

Children in our residential homes have responded exceptionally well to the restrictions in place over the last year. Missing episodes have reduced and the staff within the homes have encouraged young people to be supported with indoor activities. Young people have been able to maintain contacts with their families wherever possible. Only recently on one occasion have the homes been called upon to help in an emergency situation for a young person and although the end destination was not within one of the units, they have correctly offered professional challenge with regard to the decisions made over the easter period. Apart from this issue the homes have maintained total protection for the young people in their care, inclusive of the children who have been placed more recently.

In early 2020 the Court made the decision to hold emergency hearings only which impacted on children being able to leave care in a timely manner. This change in practice had affected our overall looked after children numbers although we have throughout the year continued to promote reunification and discharges of care orders through thoughtful, balanced and appropriately risk assessed care planning, enabling children to return safely to their parents with support from dedicated workers resulting in our Children in Care numbers effectively reducing.

Participation and direct work with children in care and care leavers

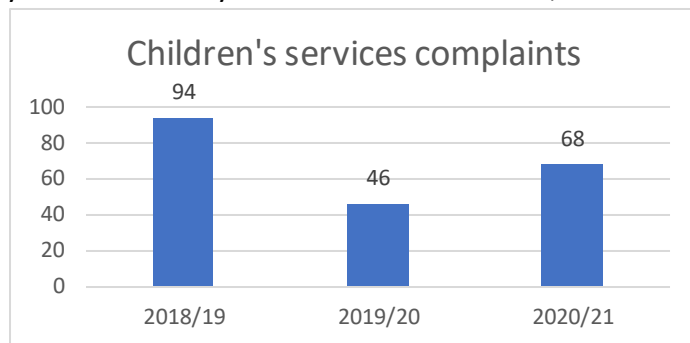
Feedback from Judge; “Miss KI would like to commend you on the excellent piece of work you have completed, this was incredible and incredibly helpful. You have developed an amazing insight into this case and completed a thorough piece of work which has made the situation very clear to me what life is like through these children’s eyes”

Our children in care and care leavers have continued to report they have good and trusting relationships with their Social Workers, Personal Advisers and IROs, who know them well and have maintained contact with them through technologies such as WhatsApp and Zoom. Children have benefitted from the virtual calls with most reporting they have renewed and timely access to their social workers and IROs. (93.1% of statutory visits and 99.4% of reviews within timescale) Although all children aged 4yrs are encouraged to attend their reviews, initial indications are that the increased contact with practitioners between reviews, especially IROs, is impacting on the attendance which is showing a slight

decrease (93.8% of children and young people, aged over 4 years, contributed to their review).

There has been significant work undertaken to help children and young people understand their histories and their complex relationships largely based around training with Richard Rose throughout 2019. We have since been selected to work with Blue Cabin, Gateshead and South Tyneside to develop a Creative Life Story Work model for our children. This project is being funded by What Works and will take place through 2021. All about Me/More about Me and Therapeutic Life Story work already commenced with young people, practitioners and an artist with more training scheduled throughout the coming year.

Children tell us they feel valued and can influence services as they voice their views more confidently and easily. Care Leavers are aware of their rights, they know how they can access their records, how to complain, and how to get an advocate. Children’s complaints have reduced over the last year, although IRO’s ensure that each child understands, and is given information on, how they can make a complaint and encourage take up of an advocate or independent visitor (if appropriate). They tell us that they feel fully involved in service developments such as the Local Offer, and that they value their involvement in staff interview panels.



The Darlo Care Crew and the Leaving Care Forum are central to the Corporate Parenting Panel, which has continued to take place virtually since March 2020, with young people instrumental in driving the redesign and subsequent review of our ‘Promises Tree’.

Helping and protecting

Feedback from Family Court Advisor about two social workers; I have spoken to mother, nana and child today as part of my enquiries. I just wanted to share (I have mum's permission to do so) that nana has told me that you have both been amazing and she cannot fault the support she has received. She said that both child and her were thrown into this situation and it has been a massive learning curve for them both, but she doesn't know what she would have done if it was not for you both. She really could not praise you enough. Upon speaking to child, it is clear that she adores her nanny and wants to remain living there. She was so positive about her maternal family, but clear in her views about her mother and how let down and angry she feels. It sounds like you have built fantastic relationships with child and MGM. Child certainly feels safe and able to share her views'

Children in care have responded well to all restrictions in place over the last year which meant until December 2020, missing episodes were significantly reduced in number. The number of Children in Care who had missing episodes in 2020/21 was 30 which represented 19.7% of children who went missing across the year. 84.8% of the Return to Home Interviews took place within 72 hours.

Children in care classified as being at risk of CSE is low are well supported by Child Exploitation Group (CEG) who drive multi-agency places to reduce risk and Children who are victims or perpetrators of bullying are responded to by social workers around their individual need, with an agreed approach to help them understand the impact of bullying.

We have had low numbers of children in care, currently active to Youth Engagement and Justice Service (formally known as YOS) who are remanded into custody and for those who are, (5.1%, (3) young people at year end) we have robust collaboration and coordinated care planning between our and Children’s Social Care. We have recently identified there is more work needed in collaboration between CSC, CCG, and TWVE for children who are diagnosed with autism, learning disabilities assessed as having capacity, yet their behaviours will often lead them onto assault and aggression, with them ultimately being placed in custody.

Health

Children in care are reported as being healthy. Children in Care and Care Leavers can access therapeutic service and Psychological Well-Being Practitioner Nurse who provide flexible and creative interventions delivering outcomes determined at their own pace resulting in issues they experience being identified quickly to prevent escalation. Throughout the last year we have been able to ensure that our children who come into care, have received their initial health assessment within 20 days and for those in care

for more than 12 months (91.2%) received a Health review. We do not have many older young people who refuse and for those that do, the LAC nurse encourages creative ways to ensure health scrutiny takes place.

Pre covid we had increasing numbers of children attending a dentist, Covid restrictions saw this reduce although emergency and dental realignment appointments took place. Consideration was initially given to have children attend private dentists but as Covid restrictions reduce more children are starting to be seen, 57.2% by the end of the year.

Care leavers benefit by receiving their full health passport enabling them to have control over their own medical history and health information. They are supported to have a full understanding of their health status since birth through access to full health information when they are 18, which a high proportion have. At the point of becoming 'eligible' for leaving care services all care leavers are offered and encouraged to consent to a health passport during their first pathway plan needs assessment. The health passport format and process in Darlington was developed with young people in conjunction with the LAC nurses. Each health passport is shared with the young person by the LAC nurse ensuring if young people have any questions about it, they can be answered by a health professional. Currently there are 57 eligible care leavers all have been offered a health passport.

Learning and employment

Children in care are well supported in education by a highly qualified and well-trained Virtual School staff and designated teacher team. Most children in care attend mainstream schools graded good or better. Attendance is good and exclusions are infrequent. The majority are making good progress in school.

The Education Strategy Group has been meeting weekly throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Feedback from parents or carers of children in care:
"thank you for helping XX reach his full potential and education aspirations. We find you enthusiastic in all areas. XX loves your visits and his written cards, he also likes the time you take in looking in his bedroom at his possessions and new electrics. He knows and values your interest in his wellbeing"

Services have continued throughout this period to maintain statutory work and ongoing workstreams as well as responding to the changing situation. In many cases additional network meetings have been convened virtually to ensure that colleagues are kept informed about the latest guidance and developments and are able to share good practice (eg SENCO Network, Vulnerable Pupil Panel, Exams Officers, School Leadership Group, Mental Health Leads Network, Early Years Leads Network, NQTs, PVI Network).

Weekly health clinics with the Head of Education and Inclusion and Public Health Principal have been offered to all schools, colleges and early years settings. These sessions have been very well received and providers tell us that they have found them very useful. The Educational Psychology Service has developed and provided resources for education colleagues on mental health issues, the recovery curriculum and critical incident management.

Information, advice and guidance is provided for children previously looked after via well trained Designated Teachers and liaison with Adoption Tees Valley's Education Officer.

Stability and permanence

Placement stability is a critical outcome for our children in care, and we ensure that social workers work closely with carers and residential workers on sustainability plans and wherever possible sibling children are placed together supported by a Siblings Together or Apart assessment. Most children (71.9%) remain safe and settled in their placement for 2 years or more, and we have our best performance in the last three years whereby only 8.1% of children in care have had 3 or more placement moves in the last 12 months, below 11.1% in 2019/20.

We supported our children in maintaining contact with their families via virtual methods and families were extremely supportive in helping carers maintain stability for their children. Parents were very welcoming of regular communications and discussions with senior managers enabling safe working practices, risk assessments and PPE to be in place to make all safe for the contacts to take place. Regular communications from the Tees Valley Local authorities into the family court enabled consistency in approach and clarity when Judges were summarising directives for contacts during proceedings.

Both internal and external residential placements are of good quality and are commissioned through a collaborative North East wide framework contract, with Tees Valley Local Authorities also holding a local based residential care and IFA framework. Children are receiving excellent care and any issues within a provision are dealt with swiftly and robustly.

Children benefit from excellent permanence planning, with 100% of plans being in place at the second review, inclusive of twin or triple tracking if the matter is in Court with all decisions based on a sibling together or apart assessment to ensure impact on the child is minimal. We have improved our pathways and information for families of children with a Care Order and live with a relative, to progress them swiftly to a Special Guardianship or Child Order in line with the children's personal circumstances. Delay in care planning is minimised as potential drift is identified early through a monthly Performance Tracking Panel chaired by the Head of Service.

We have increased the number of fostering panels in the last year enabling us to continue to match children, where appropriate, with their long-term carer/s, enabling children to form attachments and clearly identify with their own family or foster family as they know they are not going to be moved. Children experience foster care placements that are of a high standard, with carers promoting safe care/placements and who are improving their own training needs. Children report positive feedback on the care they receive.

We are increasingly utilising foster to adopt placements for young babies and children where the child's permanence plan is highly likely to result in adoption to minimise the number of homes children live in. The use of foster to adopt placements are highly effective as the young child will experience minimal moves prior to an Adoption Order being granted, rather than needing to be moved to adoptive parents once an adoption match has been identified the child will already be living with their prospective adopters. This minimises the trauma and disruption in attachments to various care givers experienced by the child.

If we have been unable to progress a child's permanence plan to adoption, the matter is returned to Court in a timely fashion to seek a revocation of the child's Placement Order and for alternative permanence planning to be achieved often via long-term fostering.

Our approach to adoption support demonstrates the positive impact this has on children and their families as the adoption disruption rate is low, meaning that children are supported to remain with their adoptive family.”

Care leavers and transitions

Care leavers up to the age of 25yrs

have been impacted by the pandemic and the team have worked hard to ensure that all of them are supported in their understanding of finances, accommodation, education, and employment. Care leavers who were living independently with no additional support other than their leaving Care PA were considered individually as to whether they would require on-going ‘face to face’ support from their PA or could receive ‘virtual support’, however it was acknowledged that individual circumstances could change quickly and a need to amend the form of contact may be required going forward. Care Leavers are well informed about their entitlements, they know their rights. Care leavers feel valued due to their being integral in-service development, such as the Leaving Care Offer. A dedicated Care Leaver page is on the Council’s website. <https://www.darlington.gov.uk/education-and-learning/childrens-social-care/leaving-care-and-the-local-offer/our-local-offer-to-care-leavers/>

They engaged in regular contact with their PA and other staff. Usually, the care leaver base is always a hub of activities from cookery classes, mother and baby groups, budgeting workshops, leaving care forums and access to the leaving care larder. However, during the first week of ‘lockdown’ staff ensured all care leavers were aware that Pease House would not be open for access and alternative arrangements were put in place. The weekly food delivery provided by Fareshare was re-directed to Kings Church Food Bank, and arrangements were made for all care leavers that required this support to be registered with this provision. Support to the young people was provided by the Children Support Officers who had been re-deployed from their role as Contact Supervisors to assist the Personal Advisors (PA’s) with the distribution of the food hampers to care leavers.

We were very pleased that one of our PAs won the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF) **“PA of the Year Award”** 2020, from over 120 potential nominating Local Authorities.

PA’s ensured that all their care leavers could be contacted, therefore a small number of mobile phones (3) were purchased for those who did not have access to one and they kept in touch with all young people more frequently than the statutory requirements (8 weekly), which for some young people, meant daily contact.

Ordinarily care leavers benefit from dedicated work coaches within the job centre, giving them increased support and opportunities (such as peer mentoring, marketplace events with training providers) however, following the onset of the pandemic, our weekly job club has continued to be delivered ‘virtually’ which has led to a number of care leavers securing employment, mainly in the care sector via Careline.

A total of 29 requests were made for Government Laptops and 10 requests for 4g dongles for care leavers which were distributed in July 2020 with the purpose of ensuring care leavers had access online training and education opportunities and support with their studies. For young people who were not attached to a training provider or college, the

73.5% are in Education, Employment or Training, 10 were at university, and 3 were in apprenticeships. A further 10 had achieved higher education qualifications.

devices were not as effective as we had hoped, as they were not linked to enable access to their Universal Credit Journal or help them liaise with their work coach and/or apply for jobs. This was a priority for us and resulted in many requiring more virtual contact to ensure they did not go into financial hardship or be subject to more stress than necessary; creative and bespoke packages are commissioned where Care Leavers had not previously engaged in other options.

Feedback from a care leaver

"This service helps me feel I can have confidence and self believe in myself. Also has been very helpful in all ways including my wellbeing"

Opportunities are improving in the 'family business' and within the business sector with a range of options increasing for Care Leavers to choose.

We are delighted that one of our care leavers has been successful in securing one of the care leaver internships at the DfE in Darlington.

Those at University can access supported lodgings and staying put arrangements should they require to remain in placement. This sustainability in placement allows the young people to concentrate on studies rather than living arrangements for those young people who are living outside of LA provision, PA Support is active with them offering 1-1 advice and guidance to our leavers.

Care leavers wellbeing is supported through access to a Psychological Well-being Practitioner on a weekly basis with no waiting times, albeit 'virtually' over the phone and video calls. During Covid-19 the Psychological Well-being Practitioner has provided a flexible appointment system with support taking place on weekends and evenings to suit the individual needs of the young people. This has reduced the need to make a referral for tier 4 mental health services for most young people.

Care leavers all receive a copy of their birth certificate whilst they are in care, have support in obtaining their National Insurance Number when they reach the age of 16, and can be provided with a passport and support to secure a driving licence.

Care leavers are prepared for their transition to adulthood as they experience a smooth transition into independent living due to effective pathway planning. Their personal views are central to the planning and are well reflected. Individual risks are clearly identified, their needs are understood, and support is provided to reduce risks. They are supported to think about their choices and to keep safe. If a care leaver is in crisis, they are supported with increased access to their PA, through visits, which at time are daily to minimise risk and help to address the issue.

Care leavers are supported to remain with their foster-carers in Staying Put arrangements post-18, and numbers doing so continues to increase, with 10 in Staying Put arrangements, with a further 4 in Supported Lodgings at the end December 2020 and there are a further 5 Staying Put arrangements planned within the next month. They have a good housing offer, with a range of accommodation options, and sufficient choice and availability, resulting in very minimal waiting for accommodation. "Taster flats" in use are close to home meaning that support with the transition to independence is high. All care leavers live in suitable accommodation, with none in in bed and breakfast accommodation, and only those in custody being classed as being in unsuitable accommodation.