

Darlington Children's Services

Self-Assessment 2022



Knowing ourselves and knowing our children,
young people and families



DARLINGTON
Borough Council

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Introduction and Overview

Our busy and productive year has been in the context of the ongoing recovery from Covid-19 and the subsequent impact on our children, families and communities in Darlington. We are learning from the Pandemic, identifying and using experiences such as: closer partnerships, remote practice and innovative use of technology. We welcome a flexible return to the office and increased opportunity of face-to-face interaction.

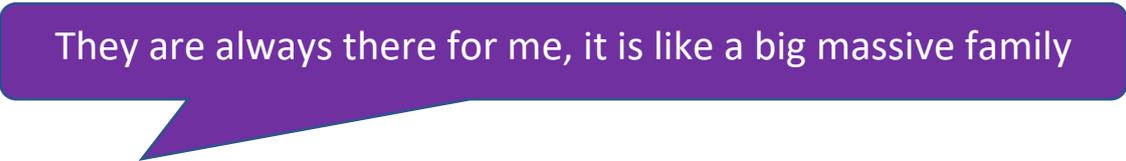
Darlington Children's Services continues an improvement journey with our Strengthening Families Programme as we work hard to embed and maintain relational practice across the service. We have seen the conclusion of our work with Leeds City Council and DfE on Strengthening Families but with additional corporate investment we are excited to be on the next stage of this journey. We are building on the progress made and have identified key priorities to improve outcomes for our children and families.

We have completed a restructure of Children's Services Senior Leadership Team (SLT) in early 2022 to support our key priorities. This has seen extra resource to support and oversee the Care Planning teams and a more streamlined focus for services for Children who are in our Care.

Darlington continues to understand performance well with regular, robust oversight and challenge from Senior Leaders and Elected Members. In practice clinics managers and leaders' evidence good knowledge and clear insight into what the performance data and intelligence tell us as well as demonstrating what they plan and do in response.

Progress has been made to make quality of practice as well understood as performance, through working to understand how our practice achieves outcomes and impacts for children, young people and families. The Weekly Review Meeting (WRM) continues to provide a high level of management oversight and challenge to decision making at the front door. Ensuring that our approach is relational and that we offer children and families the right service at the right time. Monthly Practice Review Meetings (MPRM) have also been initiated, with live audits of current practice undertaken by practitioners and managers, and with families where possible. This is helping us to better understand outcomes and the impact of the services we deliver.

In October 2021 a focused visit from OFSTED on the experiences and outcomes of Care Leavers led to some very positive feedback recognising several strengths. Inspectors particularly recognised the positive relationships between workers and young people, and the impact of these relationships on achieving good outcomes.



They are always there for me, it is like a big massive family

A young person's comment about Darlington's Leaving Care Team

We were also visited by the local Deep Dive Team as part of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in November 2021. The visit was to understand the strengths and challenges of our service and contribute towards the findings and recommendations of the national review.

"In Darlington we saw how their restorative practice model and improved front door had helped improve the service for children and families, earning well deserved great feedback from their partners."

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care

This feedback gives us confidence that our improvement journey is progressing well but reminds us not to be complacent, we need to continue to innovate, deliver and develop together.

Chris Bell

Assistant Director of Children's Services

James Stroyan

Group Director of People

Director of Children's Services

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

Relational Practice Model

We have implemented a Relational and Restorative Practice model in Darlington, and the quality and impact of our work is measured through the lens of the outcomes children and families achieve and the evidence of the strong relationships supporting these outcomes. We have developed a Relational Practice Umbrella which outlines the different methodologies that our teams can utilise to match the needs of the children, young people and families they are working with. The emphasis is on flexibility of approach, recognising children and families are individuals and one size does not fit all. As such we empower our practitioners to select the approach they deem most appropriate, within the parameters of our Relational Practice umbrella. Through this approach we support children, young people and families to recognise and build on their strengths, they co-produce and own their decisions and actions. We give high support (listening, encouraging and helping) and high challenge (setting limits and boundaries) to help and support children, young people and families make their own decisions. This helps identify and achieve results that are important to all of us. Our approach is about working together as a collective to recognise and help develop Relational Practice.

We truly believe that our relational approach brings positive outcomes and impact for children, young people and families.

RELATIONAL PRACTICE UMBRELLA



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.

Quality Assurance

The Process

Darlington's improvement journey is ongoing and in addition to constantly improving our day-to-day management oversight we have further invested in our approach to quality assurance. We have built on our strong understanding of performance data and created a framework that helps us to better understand the quality of our practice and what our services mean for children and families, in terms of outcomes and overall impact.

The Quality Assurance Framework sets out the service expectations of what good looks like and how we know the quality of practice. We hold a Weekly Review Meeting (WRM), which allows us to understand the quality of practice at the front door and our initial decision making. Monthly Practice Review Meetings (MPRM) facilitate live audits of current practice across the service using a re-designed audit tool which focuses on key features of social worker practice to assess the quality and impact of services and interventions for children and families.

As part of MPRM, leaders speak to the social worker and team manager, as well as the family to understand all the different perspectives and to reach a conclusion about the quality of practice and its impact, in a relational and restorative style. Strengths and areas for improvement are then feedback to teams and any learning or training actioned, ensuring a systematic closing of the loop.

The findings from the WRM and MPRM are then captured and assimilated within the Quality Improvement Group, led by the Head of Practice and Principal Social Worker. This ensures that good practice and areas for improvement are shared widely across the service.

The findings and actions are then overseen within Director and Assistant Director Practice sessions so that the impact of Quality Assurance and development work can be closely considered in the context of the strategic and corporate aims of the service.

What it is telling us

Findings from our activity and the resultant changes in practice are discussed throughout this document. Overall and in summary however, the framework is telling us that:

The quality of contact enquiries continues to improve and that professionals receive good quality advice and support from social workers. Children and family's situations at the point of contact are well understood and as a result they receive the right service at the right time.

During assessment and support, children and families receive good and outstanding services in most cases and that they are effectively safeguarded.

The 48 Practice Review Audits completed this year demonstrated most assessment and plans were good or outstanding, all showed that children and young people were not at risk. Feedback from families is often positive and affirms our improving relational practice, although at times this is not as evident as it could be in case recording.

Areas identified for improvement through the Practice Review Audits are: the consistency of good quality management oversight; strong analytical assessments; consistency in ensuring a thorough understanding of the child's lived experience, and the quality of plans.

Chronologies and genograms are improving in quality. The resulting impact for families has been that they experienced the completion of a more meaningful assessment and plan which better identifies and meets their needs through fully capturing and understanding their history.

In our Looked After Through Care service we have developed an approach of writing our case notes about young people **for** young people. This has resulted in case notes which are clear and concise but written in a relational way which better helps a young person to understand the nature and reason for services we are providing to them. This in turns allows young people to better understand their own story and support their recovery from trauma.

Some specific examples of changes to process and practice because of the increased focus on quality assurance include:

Policies and procedures in relation to sexually harmful behaviour between peers have been changed and strengthened.

Contact enquiries on anonymous referrals now include a full MASH enquiry.

Management oversight at the point of allocation has been strengthened, to ensure that the language is relational and recognises the needs of the child and family in a respectful and understanding way but also gives clear guidance to social workers to support focused and timely interventions with families. This helps to give social workers clarity and understanding and contributes to families being clear about the reason for services and the expected outcomes for them.

Family Feedback

Within our Quality Assurances processes, we increasingly seek families' views of the support they are or have received. This allows us to understand our impact and areas for development. Feedback ensures that families and children are spoken to independently from their social worker or practitioner. The focus of these conversations is to understand whether families understood our intervention and subsequent planning, whether they were involved in the process, and whether it made a difference. Key to these outcomes is ensuring there was an effective relationship between the worker and the family. The different methods we use will be described throughout the document and there are examples of feedback from children and families throughout.

No doubt that XXXX was respectful. Didn't feel judged and felt comfortable talking to XXXXX. More like talking to a friend than a professional.

XXXXX was very thorough, the children are still living with me 6 months on, XXXX was always very friendly

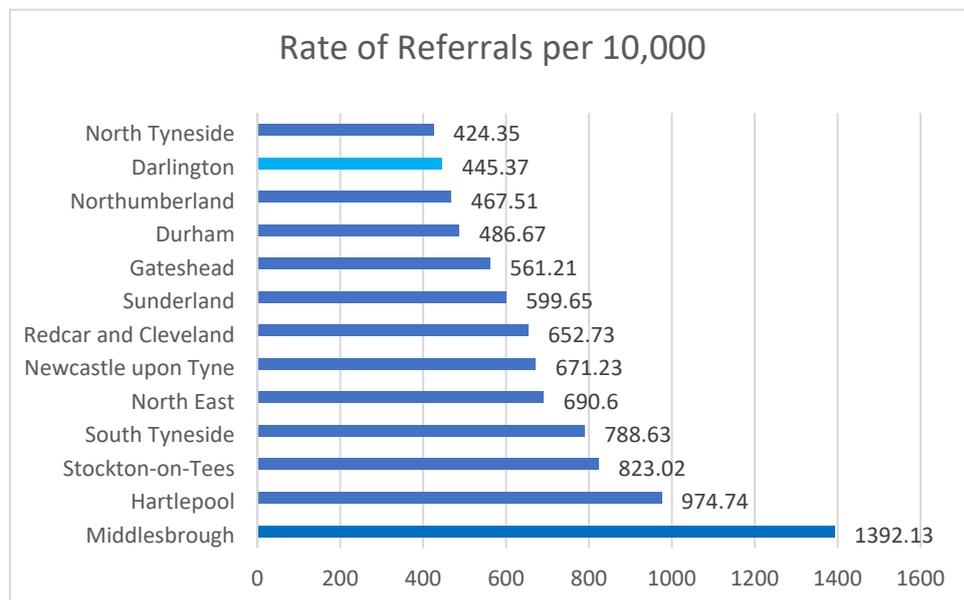
The Experiences and Progress of Children in Need of Help and Protection

Identifying and responding to children’s needs and appropriate thresholds

By re-modelling the Front Door in March 2020, we have brought about a change in the way concerns for children are considered and acted on. Now the referrer can speak directly to a social worker without delay using our designated telephone number. Careful, well-thought-out decisions are made in partnership with Children’s Initial Advice Team (CIAT), the referrer, and where possible families, to make sure the right service is provided at the right time using our relational practice framework, ensuring that children and families receive a proportionate response to address and support their identified needs.

During 2021-22 we have seen an increase in contacts of around 27%. Analysis suggests that this is linked to the pandemic; an increase in contacts relating to mental health; and violence. As well as this being linked to improvements to the Front Door, as partners feel empowered and supported to contact us to discuss their concerns and worries.

Since 2018/19 there has been a consistent reduction in referrals, with our rate per ten thousand population falling from 490.8 (in 2018/19) to 330.5 (in 2020/21), however due to increased contacts in 2021/22 this has increased to 447.4.



Local comparison illustrates our rate of referrals reduction and supports our view that families are being supported to solutions without a formal referral.

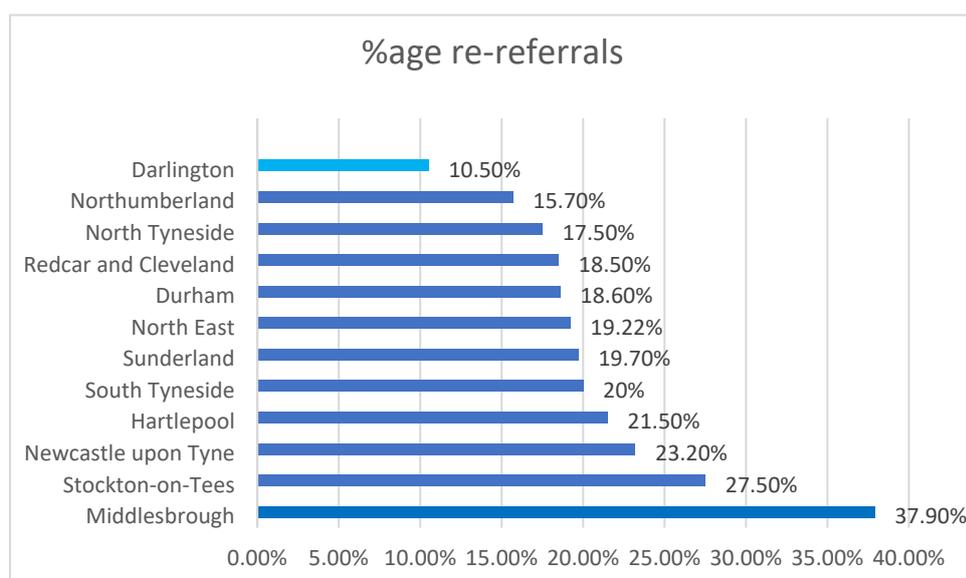
ADCS North East Regional Improvement Alliance quarter 4 2021/22

Contacts are completed in one working day with a few exceptions. Delays are primarily due to needing further details from the families / partners to ensure a fully informed decision is made, in cases such as this there is strong management oversight and driven by making the most informed decision which is in the best interest of the child.

After finding that the transfer point from CIAT into Assessment Teams could cause a delay in strategy meetings being initiated, the Front Door now identifies the need for the strategy meeting and arranges this to be held at the earliest convenience. Therefore children deemed to be at risk of harm on initial

contact progress to Social Care Assessment Teams without delay. Our safeguarding responses are scrutinised in a Weekly Review Meeting (WRM) to ensure appropriate and timely responses to children and families and their issues. This ensures that families do not experience a delay or a disproportionate response or service, helping them find the right help and support at the right time.

Despite the increase in contacts being referred into social care, we have seen a reduction in the percentage of those being re-referred, from 19.1% in 2020/21 to 10.5% in 2021/22. This gives us confidence that our interventions with families lead to sustained change.



Local comparison illustrates our rate of re referrals reducing below local levels.

ADCS North East Regional Improvement Alliance quarter 4 2021/22

The above is evidence of the hard work the

service has carried out during 2020/21 to ensure that families are in the best possible mindset with appropriate tools and knowledge to support themselves, resulting in fewer families needing to re-engage with our services.

I felt listened to and the Social Worker summarised my concerns and opinion back to me and also outlined the plan following my referral. Thank You

Response in CIAT satisfaction survey April 2022

Making good decisions and providing effective help

Consent is consistently considered and recorded throughout decision making processes. If consent is not gained a clear rationale is recorded as to why not and a strategy meeting is arranged. This helps ensure that families are included in the decision-making process proportionate to their needs.

MASH assessments only commence where there is a clear and evidenced rationale which is recorded. The MASH Assessment is used effectively particularly in relation to anonymous referrals, where information is historical, complex and harm deemed cumulative. Multi-agency information is also gathered at times to inform a step-up from Early Help services. This ensures that children are effectively safeguarded and supported to receive the proportionate service, recognising the need for safeguarding interventions where necessary.

Early help is considered for every family where needs are identified whether this be during multi-agency daily triage meetings, or during contact enquiries. An early help coordinator works with partner agencies to support the quality of any early help which is led externally. This allows families to receive early help services where this is most appropriate and encourages early help services to be led and coordinated by professionals already known to the family where appropriate, reducing the number of changes for families and reducing the need for them to “re-tell their story”.

Early intervention and targeted work with families is provided by the Building Stronger Families (BSF) Team. In 2021/22 839 Early Help Assessments commenced, of which 19.2% were started by an external agency. 832 children from 405 families closed to BSF in 2021/22 and 65.0% of the children from across 265 families made progress during this time resulting in either a step down to universal services or closure to BSF.

A newly created post for a domestic abuse worker as part of the Front Door in relation to our response to domestic abuse is now in place, they will work across services as needed. This will strengthen our collaborative understanding of and response to domestic abuse and provide a higher quality of service to families, recognising the intricacies and complexities of domestic abuse and how this affects families.

The open ‘Front Door’ is well accessed and utilised by internal and external partners, reflecting the positive impact of ‘information and advice’ that is offered. We are building on the belief a social care assessment is not always needed and professionals with existing relationships are often best placed to support children and families. CIAT’s vision is that ‘gatekeeping’ is not a positive response and ‘thresholds’ are not always effective. Safety of the child is first and foremost the priority; once established gaining the right service for a family is the priority. The referrer and an experienced social worker, together with the family make decisions with thorough and robust management support and oversight.

I was talked to and not down to, this made me feel at ease as I was worried at first about being judged. I have let off a lot of steam throughout the work.”

Parent about Building Stronger Families Worker

Pre-birth work has been strengthened with the creation of the Unborn Baby Tracker Meeting held monthly at the Front Door. This meeting brings together Children’s Services and Midwifery Services to consider any Unborn Baby that is open to Building Stronger Families (BSF). If it is deemed appropriate for a social care assessment to commence, then a step-up to social care is progressed no later than 18 weeks into the pregnancy to avoid any delay in safeguarding and care planning that might be necessary. We are working with colleagues in the region to strengthen our offer to Unborn Babies and their families as part of the regional response to the “Born into Care” findings.

Management Oversight of Frontline Practice

There is a solid grip and effective oversight of the Front Door in terms of practice and decision making. We have a committed, stable and experienced management team; and have built strong relationships with our partners.

Our weekly review meeting (WRM) is a well-embedded, highly effective forum where senior leaders and the quality team review contacts and referrals that come through the Front Door each week. The forum allows senior leaders to understand problems families are facing in the 'here and now' and helps gain an accurate picture of what children and families are experiencing. WRM is a safeguarding check point and integral to helping senior leaders know what practice is like and have oversight, and accountability, ensuring children are safeguarded with proportionate and appropriate response to risk and need. It helps us to identify any emerging issues in real time, and to take remedial actions to support practitioners and managers to address these. Senior leaders now provide better support those involved directly with the child, understanding and appreciating the hard work and commitment from the many professionals who are already, or may become, involved in working with our families.

We rely on great relationships with both internal and external partners. Some of our partners have attended our WRM to observe. They have found this useful in identifying good practice and highlighting areas they look to improve in their own organisations. For example, promoting relational practice across their services.

Practice Review Meetings allow us to understand that all our social workers receive regular reflective supervision from their team manager, with investment in supervision training and a revised supervision policy in place. However, there can be inconsistencies in always ensuring this is recorded onto the child's file in a timely manner. Work has been undertaken to amend our Supervision policy to develop a RAG rating system for the frequency of supervision of individual children, allowing managers to focus on high quality reflection and management guidance. Service managers, Team managers and Advanced practitioners have all attended development sessions on reflective, relational & restorative supervision. This is helping to ensure that children and families are receiving proactive, evidence-based services while avoiding drift and delay in care planning.

In addition to supervision, management oversight and grip is evident on most children's records. Management direction at allocation is reviewed as part of the WRM and is of good quality. When a contact is received on an open family the Team Manager or Advanced Practitioner routinely records their analysis of the information received and any required actions on the child's file.

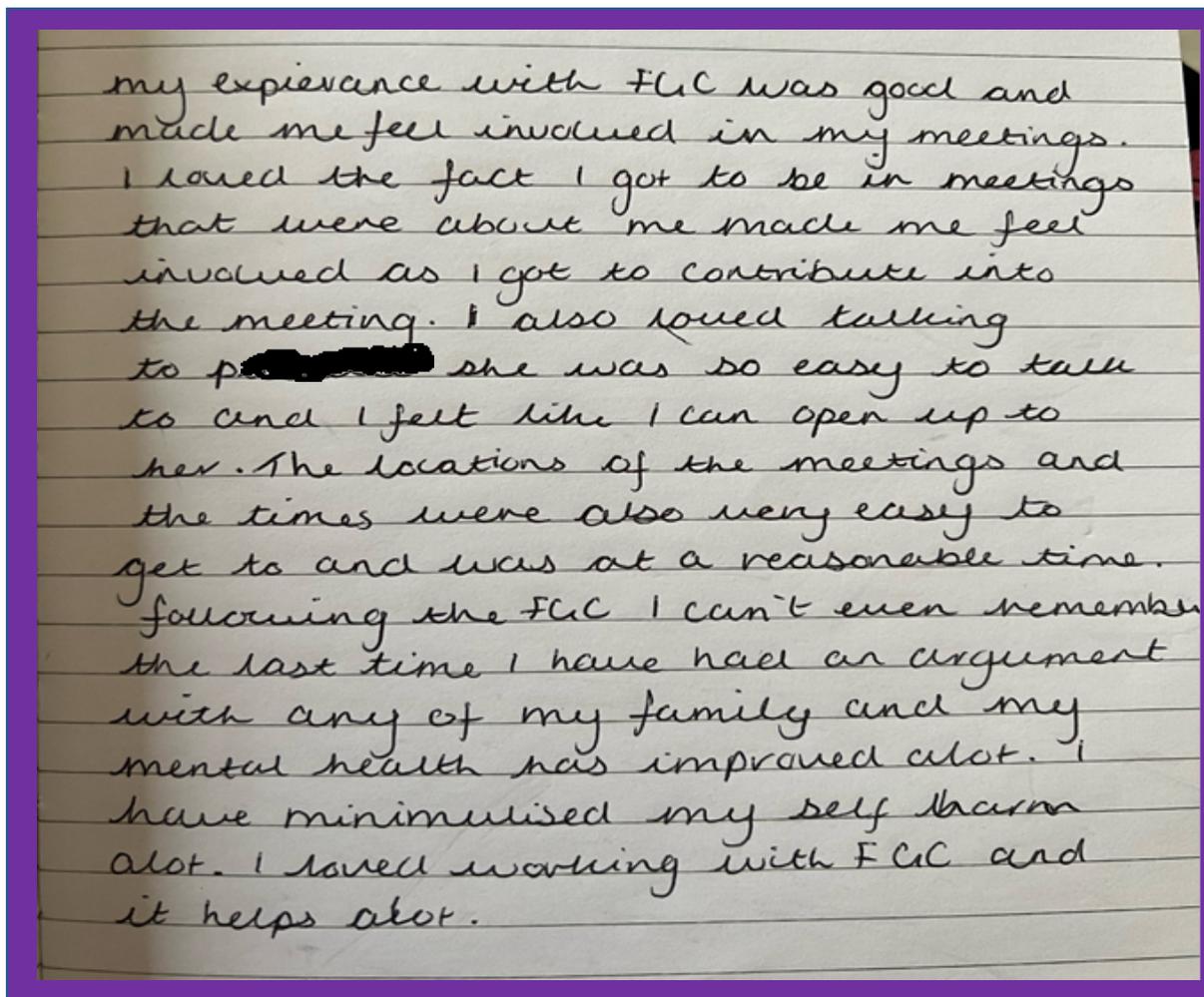
Participation and direct work with children and families

A key aspect of our Strengthening Families Program has been to embed family led decision making, via Family Group Conferencing (FGC), across the service. Families are consistently offered a Family Group Conference as part of their involvement with Children's Services.

Significant expansion to our FGC service has seen the number of FGCs held increase significantly from 25 in 2018/19 to 125 in 2020/21. When analysing the impact of Family Group Conferences we

have found that they were 94% successful in supporting children to return to family from care and 86% successful in avoiding or de-escalating a Child Protection plan.

An FGC duty worker is co-located with the Assessment and Safeguarding duty team, to promote increased understanding of the FGC process and to allow dynamic discussions regarding the appropriateness of Family Group Conferencing at the earliest opportunity. Recommendations for an FGC are routinely included in management direction at allocation and reviewed in supervision.



The views of a young person on their experience of Family Group Conferences (FGC)

There is still work to be done to ensure that the child's plan reflects the family plan from the FGC, and if it does not there are clearly recorded reasons for the deviation.

Social workers and family workers in the assessment and safeguarding teams regularly undertake direct work with children and families, however the recording of this work can be inconsistent. We are working to ensure that social workers reference and analyse the direct work that they undertake, ensuring this includes the child's voice and is completed in a timely way.

All the Assessment and Safeguarding, Children with Disabilities, and Looked After Through Care Social workers have received training and regular team updates on the use of the Mind of My Own (MOMO) app. The fostering team and foster carers are receiving MOMO training currently.

Our "edge of care" service, Keeping Families Together, were recognised nationally at the 2021 Social Work Awards, winning the Gold Award in the Team of the Year category

Direct work is central to their work and the excellent outcomes they achieve

Within Keeping Families Together (KFT) direct work with children has been completed 468 times over 2021/22 and 653 times with the parents. This has been a significant increase when compared to last year. A 39.3% increase with the children and a 79.4% increase with the parents.

3 months after a family has ceased Keeping Families Together, the Keeping in Touch (KIT) worker contacts the families to ask them to participate in a questionnaire with an overall satisfactory level regarding the programme.

In 2021/22, a 57.8% response to the questionnaire demonstrated: - 96.2% satisfied or very satisfied with involvement; 64.4% are on the same support plan after 3 months; 20% have closed to social care; 13.3% had their plan increased but did not come into care; and only 1 family came into care from this cohort within 3 months of working with KFT.

'The team is very supportive and have always told me not to give up on my dreams, they have supported me through my toughest times, and always makes me feel better, I do not know what I would do without the support from this team'

A young person's comment

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

At the Front Door we have specialist teams, SWITCH who work with children and young people with issues in relation to substance misuse and Missing and Exploited Team (MET). The Missing and Exploited Team has been recently created strengthened Darlington's response and commitment to 'Harm Away from Home' by offering a dedicated response. MET is working across all services, and external partners, to develop a shared vision for addressing the needs of children being exploited and prevention for others being harmed and drawn into criminal activity. This area of work is already proving successful with a focus on intervention, plans and action, changing the way in which we think and act.

Children who go missing from home are supported by a Missing from Home Worker, commissioned from Barnardo's. The worker offers a Return Home Interview (RHI) and engages the young person in

discussion around their missing episodes. This helps them to develop insight into the risks associated with going missing and identify strategies to prevent this happening again. The recommendations made by the worker are well thought out but do not always inform social care assessments and plans. They can remain as stand-alone vitally important pieces of work. Further work is being done to support workers to ensure that assessments are informed further by RHIs.

Managers in Assessment and Safeguarding (A&S) are working closely with colleagues in the Missing and Exploited team to improve and develop our adolescent safeguarding offer. This is to share best practice and support improvement of young person’s care planning, including further training and support for social workers as well as awareness raising sessions.

Excellent performance information. provided on a weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual basis, enables managers to be fully informed of the nature and timeliness of work completed. A key focus of the coming year is to ensure that performance is clearly linked to quality of practice.

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

Areas of Strength	Areas for Development
Improving in quality of management oversight being demonstrated on children’s files	Improve the evidence of relational practice in all recording including the “voice of the child”, in chronologies, case files and plans
Weekly Referral Meeting – giving clear oversight, Strong Challenge and Strong Support	Timely case assessment and recording, ensuring records are relational and reflect direct work.
Relational Practice embedding across Front Door and Building Stronger Families	Improve understanding of reasons for “No further action” outcomes to assessment
Increasing level of Family Group Conferencing	RAG rating the frequency of supervision of individual children, to improve recording
Robust oversight of legal and permanence tracking	Early Help Worker to work with social Workers in CAIT

“I feel the most supported I have ever felt, my family have really stepped up now and that’s thanks to her, I love her, and I’m glad I have her as my social worker”

Parent about Social Worker

The Experience and Progress in Care and Care Leavers

Making good decisions

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

Legal gateway meetings are held for all children where consideration is being given to commencing 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. 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.

Once a permanent plan 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. This ensure that any use of Section 20 for Children Looked After is appropriate and the rationale well evidenced; 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 and prevent drift and delay for children.

I would again like to express how impressed I have been with XXXXXX's work throughout her involvement. She has developed a lovely rapport with the children and has offered parents frank and proportionate guidance. Her communication is excellent and her written work is of outstanding quality. This was echoed by Her Honour Judge Mitchell who, in her Judgement, said she thought there was a 'very detailed and very thoughtful' supervision plan described as 'impressive'. She was clearly thankful for XXXXXX's hard work.

Discharge of Care Orders and reunification to parent's care or Placement with Parents regulation arrangements take place are carefully planned and managed. Looked After Through Care Team managers and the Family Group Conference Team manager meet on a regular basis to discuss any plans for reunification and return to parents care to ensure Family Group Conference is arranged to identify support from the wider family and networks.

Participation and direct work with children in care and care leavers

Children are regularly visited and seen alone by their social worker. This is a strength, as it gives children stability and helps them to feel valued. Social workers ensure that the views of children are regularly sought, they are incorporated into assessments and reviews, and inform their plans. Children report having good relationships with their social workers and IRO's. IRO's visit children at their homes and ensure that children are listened to.

She was lovely, the best social worker I have had and very understanding

Young Person's comment

Social workers engage children in direct work to help understand how they feel and what their views are.

Children are also encouraged to communicate via the "Mind of my Own" app. There is training for staff on the app and training for foster carers to support children use the app.

90.1% of statutory visits for children in care were completed in timescale in 2021-22. This is a slight decrease on the position in 2020-21 where 93.1% of visits were completed within timescale. This continues to be a focus for ongoing managerial monitoring

97.1% of children in care initial reviews and 99.6% of subsequent reviews were completed in timescales in 2021-22, which is a positive position.

Social workers are proud of the achievements of children, and we provide regular updates to Corporate Parenting Panel about achievements of cared for children and care leavers. The lead member for Children's Services is a very active part of the panel and has said they'll send a card to congratulate those children and young people whose achievements are shared with Corporate Parenting Panel.

Our Corporate Parenting Panel grows from strength to strength. Meetings continued over the Covid lockdown period via Microsoft Teams and since April 2022 meetings take place face to face. The relationship between young people and panel members continues to thrive and develop, young people are sharing their views and challenging the Service appropriately. Their views influence the plans of the service, for example through the Promises Tree and Care Leavers Covenant.

Children are supported by their carers and social workers to develop interests and hobbies, which helps to build self-esteem and confidence.

Throughout 2021-22 work has been ongoing with Blue Cabin, North Tyneside, and Gateshead Councils to develop a Creative Life Story model of practice. Children have engaged in "All about me", "More about me" and Therapeutic Life story work. Staff have had access to extensive training and resources. Funding was initially provided via the DfE What Works programme, we have secured additional funding for this valuable work to continue in 2022-23. 57 looked after children have

benefitted from this work to date and this has led to increased understanding of their history, key decisions made and help them move forward and recover.

The Children in Care Council (the Darlo Care Crew) ensures that children and young people can influence service development and practice. Young people attend Corporate Parenting Panel and share their views help influence change. Children value being able to participate on staff interview panels and have supported with the recruitment of the Assistant Director, Heads of Service, Team Managers and Social Workers.

Helping and Protecting

Children who go missing from care receive a comprehensive and timely response. Workers and managers monitor the timeliness and quality of all return home interviews effectively. When children are found, they are consistently offered a timely return home interview which helps to support them, to understand why they are going missing and work with the young person to reduce risk of them going missing again, helping to keep them safer.

.....given us great advice, listened ,kept us updated at all times, and have shown understanding and empathy particularly during the most stressful times. The Social Worker in particular has helped me personally, helping me to have belief in myself and very often putting things in perspective when I felt very overwhelmed and afraid. Their support has, without a doubt made a huge difference

A family member's comment

There is a very low incidence rate of missing from placement for children and young people placed with in-house, mainstream and connected persons foster carers. There are a higher number of missing episodes for children placed in residential care. Most children are settled, with a smaller number who have more frequent missing episodes. Targeted work has been completed by the children's homes managers and staff, in conjunction with the Missing and Exploited Team to improve services and responses to children who go missing.

The number of Children in Care who had missing episodes in 2021 / 2022 was 31 this is 18% of children who went missing. This is an increase 1 child but decreased from 19.7 % of the total 94.1 % children were offered a Return to Home Interview (RHI) with 79.1% children engaged in the interview.

Children and young people in care classified as being at risk of Sexual and Criminal Exploitation remains low (our numbers are 4 children at risk of sexual exploitation, 3 medium and 1 low and 1 child at risk of criminal exploitation classified as medium risk). These children and young people are well supported by Child Exploitation Group who drive multi agency plans to reduce risk. Children and young people who are victims or perpetrators of bullying are responded to by social workers

working with their individual need and an agreed approach to help understanding of the impact of bullying.

We have a very low number (1% approximately) of our cared for children open to the Youth Engagement and Justice Service. At year end only one young person was remanded to custody.

“The Box”, a local social media team, provide training and advice for children and young people in relation to online safety, support to carers regarding online safety and one to one bespoke support when needed.

Health

89.4% of Initial Health Assessments completed in 2021/22 were completed within 7 days.

90.5% of required health assessment reviews completed by end 2021/22 . Of the 18 children and young people who did not have a health review 7 of them (3.7%) are refusing to have one currently. We continue to emphasise the benefits of having a check-up

Some Darlington children in the process of being adopted have experienced slight delays in the process due to the Somerset judgement on adoption medicals. However, we are now in the position that all but 2 children will have had this resolved by the end of August. We have worked proactively with our Regional Adoption Agency to progress children, where appropriate, into foster to adopt arrangements in the meantime thus reducing any impact on the children and avoiding delays for them.

83.7% (159 / 190) of children due a dental check assessment by end of 2021/22 have had one completed. Of the 31 children who did not have a dental check 5 of them (2.6%) are refusing to have one currently. We continue to emphasise the benefits of having a check-up. This is up from 2020-21 which was much lower due to covid and the limited availability of dentists.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) are completed routinely, social workers then identify support appropriate to underlying emotional issues linked to trauma.

A psychological wellbeing practitioner is employed for one day per week to deliver support to care leavers. In 2021/2022 there has been a strong focus on group work and psychoeducation sessions with care leavers alongside 1:1 sessions. This has taken place face to face in community center buildings during covid-19 restrictions before returning to the care leaver base at Pease House in 2022. 8 young people have benefited from the psychoeducation and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) skills group work this year and 14 young people have been referred and supported via 1:1 sessions. Funding has been agreed for this service for a further 2 financial years, a recognition of and a real boost to this service.

Care leavers have a 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. 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.

In 2021-2022, 6 care leavers had a health passport completed and 2 young people decided not to engage in the process.

Learning and Development

Most children are making good progress in school and attendance is good with few exclusions.

In 2021-2022 there has been an average school attendance of 92.7% for looked after children. For primary school aged children, it is 96.3% and for secondary school aged children it is 89.7%".

Children in care are well supported in education by the Virtual School Head and Virtual School staff. The Virtual Head teacher has an ambitious vision and understanding of the support needs of cared for children and care leavers. Personal Educational Plans are produced within timescales and regularly reviewed and are of a good standard.

Attendance of Vulnerable Pupils

Attendance of vulnerable pupils in Darlington continues to be higher than the regional average. We have a Vulnerable Pupil Panel (VPP), a multi-agency network chaired by the Virtual School Head that brings together decision makers from all schools, the local authority, health, and police to ensure an appropriate borough-wide response for children identified vulnerable in education. This is a highly effective early intervention approach which aims to support children early in the life of any issues they face.

The latest published DfE data for the week of 31/03/2022 showed that the % of children with a social worker attending school in Darlington was 87.8% compared to the regional average of 83.8%.

For pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) the % of pupils attending school in Darlington for the week of 31/03/2022 was 90.1% compared to the regional average of 82.7%.

The proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals attending in this period was 87.4% compared to a regional average of 85.3%.

Fair Access and Elective Home Education

In Darlington the Fair Access process is managed within the VPP and a standing agenda item at each VPP meeting (held every three weeks) is Elective Home Education. The panel protocol encourages schools to expedite the re-admission of children who became electively home educated through the pandemic upon parental request, which is over and above the provisions of the in-year application process with a specific aim of re-integrating those who may have become electively home educated in haste.

The number of children registered as Electively Home Educated in April 2022 was 198, which was 12 less than the comparable figure in April 2021.

Darlington also has a full time Elective Home Education Advisor who provides advice to parents considering electively home educating their child, to support them in making an informed choice. The pandemic has undoubtedly caused some parents increased anxiety about school attendance and the EHE Advisor has been proactive in addressing these concerns.

Stability and Permanence

Children live in safe and secure placements. Wherever possible, children only move in line with their care plan. When children do move to another placement, careful planning takes place. We are continuing to increase the numbers of children in care who live with extended family members in well assessed and supported kinship care arrangements.

At year end 2021-22, 10.6% (29 of 273 children) had 3 or more placement moves in the previous 12 months. This is in line with our annual target of 10% but higher than the position at year end 2020-21 when it was 8%.

This will be an area of focus in the forthcoming year. It reflects the current pressure on sourcing appropriate placements for children, on occasions it means children may need to stay in a short-term “bridging” placement until the appropriate placement is sourced.

At year end 2021-22, 74% of children and young people in care, aged under 16 and looked after for 2.5 years (min) had been in their current placement continuously for at least 2 years. This is higher than the previous year – 72% and above our internal target of 68%. We are currently the third highest performing in the North East Region.

Only 6.6% of children in care are placed 20 miles or more away from home at year end March 2022. This is below our target of 10% and significantly lower than in March 2021 when it was 12%. Social workers and managers ensure that children are not disadvantaged by living outside of the Borough

Sufficiency remains a challenge for Darlington. Our Sufficiency Statement demonstrates a clear understanding of the needs of Darlington children and young people and outlines our priorities for service development.

There is a programme of incremental replacement of the existing three directly provided children’s homes and repurposing the existing residential accommodation to maximise the range and volume of directly provided Ofsted registered accommodation. The first new build children’s home is currently undergoing registration, and the previous accommodation is being repurposed into a short breaks service providing in reach, outreach and overnight accommodation. This will support prevention and escalation avoidance; will help to address bridging placements which will further improving placement stability.

A strong and effective partnership approach is in place between commissioners, operational colleagues and providers. This supports positive outcomes for children and young people and has been instrumental in achieving higher levels of long-term placement stability than our comparators. We have been successful in developing bespoke arrangements with local providers including a bed reservation arrangement in a new step down to fostering residential care home, and with IFAs

whereby they provide advance notice when a new foster carer is recruited in Darlington or a child is leaving a placement in Darlington.

We take a proactive approach through our external placements meeting where all external placements are reviewed to ensure continued appropriateness and positive outcomes for the child/young person.

Low incidence complex care needs remain a significant sufficiency challenge, and Darlington is proactively involved in subregional work with health colleagues to develop a joint service focused on positive behaviour and trauma informed support.

We currently have a bespoke transition to adulthood placement (court ordered with DOLS) for a young person with extremely complex learning difficulties and mental health needs. They are currently being supported in their own accommodation with care provided through a CQC provider commissioned by health colleagues. Robust arrangements are in place for this young person to move back to the Darlington area by November.

Children maintain meaningful relationships with their foster carers into adulthood through “Staying Put” arrangements. At the end of March 2022 there were 9 young people in Staying Put arrangements with their previous Darlington Borough Council Foster Carer, and 3 young people with their IFA carer. This is an increase of one young person since March 2021

When placements are under pressure, placement stability meetings take place at the earliest opportunity and support is offered to help maintain the placement. Where appropriate children and young people can have planned respite care, giving their main carer some time out to recharge. Foster carers are encouraged to develop good support networks, so that they feel supported by their own families and friends. The Principle Social worker and Head of service for fostering have planned a training schedule to strengthen the fostering offer and to consider how best to support permanency for children.

In Autumn 2022 we will be launching a Fostering Network Mockingbird constellation, where a “hub” foster carer will support a constellation of 6 other foster carers and develop a community of foster carers and children which will enhance placement stability and reduce changes of placement for children.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) are welcomed and are well supported by the Looked After Through Care Team. Following referral via the National Transfer Scheme, suitable accommodation is identified, enabling young people to begin to feel safe. Children are provided with access to an interpreter and legal advice to support their status applications. They are given opportunities to learn English, practise their religion and to develop their friendship networks with connections to neighbouring local authorities.

Care leavers and transitions

In October 2021 Darlington Children’s Services received a focused visit in this area. Ofsted noted that the service had highly skilled, and effective workers who support care leavers extremely well. Ofsted also noted that the Team is led by a knowledgeable and determined team manager who provides consistently good support and supervision. The report highlighted that young people are benefiting

from long-standing, trusting relationships with workers who are emotionally invested in them and recognised the strong corporate parenting support, influence and investment.

The team have continued to work hard to ensure that care leavers up to the age of 25 years have been well supported in their understanding of finances, accommodation, education, and employment. This has been demonstrated in strong transition and pathway planning.

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.

Leaving Care Offer

This is a comprehensive local offer, combined with a plethora of creative and generous opportunities from the wider council and its partners, and is contributing to the positive outcomes for care leavers. This offer has further been strengthened in 2022 when Darlington Borough Council made the commitment to sign the Care leaver Covenant and is now actively working with private businesses in the local area to support in continuing with the positive outcome for care leavers in Darlington.

Care leavers regularly engage with their PA and other staff within the team.

We are 'in touch' with 100% of our care leavers

The care leaver base is a hive of activity from cookery classes, mother and baby groups, budgeting workshops, drops ins, leaving care forums and access to the 'leaving care larder' Care leavers are offered lots of opportunities for to new things and socialising through regular day trips.

The team has strong working relationships with the Job Centre in Darlington and in 2022 the joint protocol was updated and strengthen to ensure that they receive an enhanced service. 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).

From the 75 % of care leavers that are in Education, Employment or Training, 6 were at university, and 3 were in apprenticeships. A further 6 care leavers will be progressing to Higher Education in September 2022.

For those not in Education, Training and Employment the team hold a monthly NEET reduction group comprising of Personal Advisor's, the virtual school, Keeping In Touch Workers, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and training providers with the focus on get those young people re-engaged with some form of education training and employment.

Opportunities are improving in the Darlington Borough Council '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. This is the 3rd young person to have been given this opportunity since the programme was launched. We currently have a care leaver employed within the Looked After Throughcare Team on a

Participation Apprenticeship, again this is the 3rd care leaver who has benefitted from this role within the team since the role was created.

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 Mental Health Nurse on a weekly basis with no waiting times. 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 remains stable, with 8 in Staying Put arrangements, with an additional 2 care leavers who have remaining living with former foster carers post 21 under a private arrangement and a further 2 in Supported Lodgings at the end of June 2022. 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. This Taster Flat support has been further enhanced in April 2022 with additional floating support commissioned. 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.

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

Areas of Strength	Areas for Development
A focused visit by OFSTED in Nov 2021 praised Darlington's support for Care Leavers	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires to be further developed
Children are supported to attend their review meetings and can access advocacy	The number of children participating in their reviews has reduced slightly in 2021-22
Excellent opportunities for Employment, Education and Training on leaving Care.	Placement moves of 3 or more placements has increased due to limited availability of placements.

	Delivering Cedars Emergency and Respite Provision
Children are regularly visited and seen alone by their social worker	Launching a Fostering Network Mockingbird constellation
Long term placement stability	

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

Corporately, Children's Services are recognised as a key strategic priority and are well supported as such. There is strong political leadership from the Lead Member who is very engaged with not just the service, but with service users and the wider community. They have a clear vision of how services need to be delivered to support a vision for health and prosperity in 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 are a service that knows ourselves well, both in terms of our strengths and the areas that we want to develop further. We understand the impact of Covid on our communities and how that is driving some increased demand for some services, but we also understand the impact on the workforce and how recruitment and retention into the profession continues to be a real challenge.

Our strategic direction continues to be informed by our Strengthening Families Program, which we are building on following our successful 2-year partnership with Leeds City Council. The Program has allowed us to build a Relational and Restorative culture where as Leaders we provide a high support and high challenge approach. This gives front line workers and managers an environment to provide outstanding services. As with any element of cultural transformation further work remains to be done to embed change and improve but we are confident that we have developed solid foundations to build on.

Senior Leaders have a good level of oversight of front-line practice. Performance is understood, scrutinised and challenged on a continual basis. Regular sessions provide assurance that leaders know their services in terms of both strengths and challenges; and are proactively addressing issues. Knowledge of performance is supported by clear oversight of practice with Weekly Review Meetings allowing the Senior Leadership Team to capture live practice in terms of our response to contacts and referrals as well as understanding decision making, the rationale and evidence for this. Monthly Practice Review sessions are held which allow Senior Managers to look in depth at children's case files and engage in restorative discussions with workers and managers about the quality of practice. The focus of these activities is about the quality of practice, evidence of relational practice and ultimately what the outcomes are for children and their families.

Senior Leaders also understand and have strong management grip over pathways and processes for children and young people and this helps drive effective outcomes and timely planning. There is a Public Law Outline Tracking Panel and Permanence Tracking Panel which meets regular and oversees planning to ensure that children's plans are progressed in a timely and effective way.

Senior Leaders understand the role of partnership working and maintain excellent working relationships at a strategic level. A MASH Operational Group is well established and attended and provides the opportunity for multi-agency audit, scrutiny and challenge and recognises good practice

in partnership working. This has driven several recent practice changes, for example changes in relation to our response to children who go missing and children who are at risk of exploitation, recognising the links and overlaps between these two groups and ensuring that they are not considered in isolation.

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.

Learning Culture

We keep the voices of children and young people at the centre of our decision making and service delivery and ensure they regularly contribute to our overall learning. We routinely include children and young people as part of our recruitment panels for new posts into the service, with our young people devising their own questions and giving considered feedback about their views on what attributes are important for our staff to have. Through our well-established Corporate Parenting Panel, our young people have contributed to our “Promises Tree” which sets out what they are entitled to from our services and we have recently launched a Care Leavers Covenant, in consultation with our young people, to maximise their opportunities.

We continue to build upon the foundations we have laid for relational and restorative practice to underpin all of our involvements and the services provided, by building a culture of learning and understanding our practice model.

To achieve this, investment has been made to expand our Senior Leadership Team so they have the capacity to develop their own knowledge and understanding of our Practice Model, the impact on their own practice and on wider services. Through delivering support and training to the SLT, senior leaders will become increasingly confident in the Practice Model and thus be better placed to support and develop their teams and services.

We have a comprehensive learning and development offer for our staff and the development of our “Darlington Xtra Microsite” is a further step to making training, learning and development contemporary and accessible for our teams. This will in turn enhance the knowledge and skills of our practitioners and enable them to provide consistent high quality services to children and their families.

This year has seen us join in partnership with Newcastle University to offer research internships to members of staff as part of the Experts in Practice program. This has resulted in individuals being supported to complete research 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.

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.

There are challenges in terms of stability of the wider workforce, which mirror the challenges being seen regionally and nationally. Our vacancy rate is 8.4%, which compares favourably with the previous year (11.9%) and with the national average (16.7%). Our agency rates are 10.6% which compares favourably with the previous year (21.2%) and with the national average (15.5%). 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.

The impact of some of the workforce challenges led to a short period of disruption to the allocation of children and families for casework, although this has been resolved. During that period there was a high level of management oversight to ensure that risks were carefully managed and impacts on families understood. We continue to see an increase in demand which means that in some parts of the service caseloads have increased and we are closely monitoring and supporting workers with this. An enhanced recruitment and retention support package has been put in place and Assistant Director led engagement sessions have taken place to understand front line practitioners experiences, their wishes and feelings and to work proactively with them to maintain Darlington as a positive place to work.

In addition we continue to invest in and recognise the worth of our frontline workers and managers. We have a comprehensive in house training offer and are also supporting our front line managers with regular sessions focused on relational practice, with a focus on management oversight and supervision. This gives Team managers the reflective space to discuss, but also the practical tools and skills to provide high quality management oversight, which understands the child and family and their plan and drives the progression of their plans.

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 are currently piloting an agile working programme which 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 is being carefully monitored to understand the impact on the workforce as well as the children and families we support. It will inform a formal review and decision about working patterns in the longer term, with the primary aim of maintaining high quality and effective services for children and their families.

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

Areas of Strength	Areas for Development
Strong supportive and challenging leadership including from elected members	Development of better ways to work with the Voice of Children, young people and families
A single improvement plan under Strengthening Families building upon strengths at Front Door and in FGC service	Continued implementation of improvements under Strengthening Families
Relational Practice modeled by leadership team	Embedding relational practice across Children's Services and wider.
Strong workforce development with training and support continuously developing	Recruitment and retention, of both qualified and unqualified workers to reduce caseloads.
Very strong Care Leaver Offer	The implementation of hybrid working while maintaining high quality and effective service

What are our plans for the next 12 months?

Following the successful implementation of the Strengthening Families Program we share significant progress in our use of relational practice but there remains work to be done to fully embed relational and restorative practice across the whole service. With the end of involvement of Leeds, we have developed the next stage of the Strengthening Families Plan to build on progress and to rise to meet current and future challenges.

The Plan has 5 key priorities for the coming year,

1 Restorative Culture – empowering the leadership team to embed restorative practice

The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) will lead the use of restorative approaches across all of Children’s Services practice, both internally and externally

Outcome

A restorative culture creates an environment where restorative practice can flourish. Children, young people and families tell us they are “worked with”, that they co-produce their plans and services which show desired outcomes and how to achieve them.

Impact

Children, young people and families are safe, are worked with and thrive in Darlington

2 Developing and delivering in house training

Our workforce development team will continue developing an in-house training offer which covers our Strengthening Families approach. This will support senior managers as practice leaders to deliver training to respective service areas

Outcome

A workforce trained and regularly refreshed in relational and restorative practice. Families are at the centre of services receiving “high support and high challenge” interventions that maximises their chances of making sustainable decisions.

Impact

Children, young people and families supported by Darlington Children’s Services have a positive experience, achieving positive and lasting change.

3 Increasing the use of Family Group Conferencing (FGC)

We will increase the use of Family Group Conferencing (FGC), targeted work will take place with frontline teams and services to improve access to and awareness of FGC

Outcome

Increased use of FGC will build on and maximise family’s role in decision making. It will facilitate children, young people and families to develop their own plan, to draw effectively on their wider network of support and to put a plan in place to support a sustainable change.

Impact

Children, young people and families are in control of achieving a positive and lasting change they seek.

4 Increasing in-house Foster Carer capacity

A revised fostering marketing strategy is in place, with the support of the Corporate Parenting Panel, to maximise opportunities to recruit foster carers that meet the needs of our most vulnerable children and young people.

Outcome

Children and young people will access to greater placement choice.
More effective placement matching and increased placement stability.

Impact

Children and young people experience of care in Darlington is stable and positive.

5 Delivering Cedars Emergency and Respite Provision

This emergency and respite provision will be a fully registered home able to care for our most vulnerable children and young people when in need of emergency support or respite.

Outcome

A Darlington based emergency and respite service will provide safe and nurturing environment for children and young people in crisis that maximises their chances of recovering from challenge and trauma they have experienced.

Impact

A reduction of the impact of trauma and less risk of repeated cycles of moving and placement change for children and young people in Darlington.

The full programme plan is available on request.