

COUNCIL
20 JULY 2023

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PORTFOLIO

1. This is my first Overview report to Council since being appointed to the Children and Young People Portfolio by Councillor Harker. It is a huge responsibility, and as someone who has worked in children's social care for the past 30 years, I am honoured to have been chosen. Since assuming the role, however, the scale of the task faced by this Local Authority in multiple areas within the portfolio has become clear to me. To a great extent, this reflects national patterns of significant underfunding since 2010, and a failure by Westminster to get a grip of systemic problems affecting both education and social care. There are also particular local factors for Darlington Children's Services however, including significant growth in demand across the Department. The new Administration's emerging response to these challenges is set out in this report.
2. On a positive note, it has been a pleasure to meet so many committed professionals, foster carers, partner agencies and of course children and young people since beginning my work. I would also like to pay tribute to Jon Clarke, who as the previous portfolio holder led Children's Services to gain the Good Ofsted assessment for Children's Services. Together with my Cabinet colleagues, I will work hard to pursue excellence in everything we do.
3. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Children and Young People Portfolio.

Early Intervention and Front Door

4. Together with Councillor Hilary Allen as Chair of Scrutiny, I attended the North East Lead Members Network, co-ordinated by the Local Government Association (LGA). We considered a report which set out the relative statistics for Children's Services Departments in 2022/23, as against previous years.
5. There were some sobering figures for Darlington. There has been a significant increase in contacts received into the Children's Initial Advice Team (CIAT) with 8,393 received in 2022/23 compared with 6,733 received in 2021/22. This increase is the fourth highest in the region. In relation to referrals, Darlington had the largest rise in the region, compared to both 2021/22 (+62.8%) and 2019/20 (+64.6%). It is imperative that we understand what is driving these figures, and I hope to be able to report further on this issue at future Council meetings.
6. Despite this increase of work, timescales and quality of work continues to improve and it is evident that the management team and experienced social work team devised when the Front Door re-modelled in 2020 have withstood the increased pressure now faced post-covid. Vulnerability that was evident prior to the re-modelling has been replaced with strength, consistently good performance, expert practice and consistently robust management oversight from the point of contact to outcome.

7. Feedback is sought from every person who contacts CIAT and the results over 12 months provide excellent evidence in relation to the service received. 100% of those surveyed said their wishes and views were listened to; 100% felt that their expectations were met with regard to respect and politeness, and 94.6% felt that the call will have an impact on the child or young person.
8. The 4Kids project is now embedded into the Front Door, settling well and playing an integral role within daily multi-agency triage where domestic violence is the presenting issue.
9. The Missing and Exploited Team continues to perform well and support a whole service approach and response to children who go missing and are at risk of exploitation. Over the past 12 months there has been an increase in episodes of children going missing, however a decrease in the amount of children this involves. The Missing From Home (MFH) Worker has increased completion of Return Home Interviews from 75.8% in 2021/22 to 84.6% in 2022/23. The additional Early Help Worker who joined CIAT earlier in the year has completed joint work with the MFH Worker in order to strengthen our response to children who go missing when the MFH Worker is on leave, this being a vulnerability identified during 2021/22.

Building Stronger Families Service

10. Early help assessment figures remain high, with the team leading on the majority of these (over 70%), supporting families with a range of complex needs across the whole town. From the regional data mentioned above, Darlington in 2022/23 was again an outlier, with the largest increase of Single Assessments completed (685.3, +92.4%). This places considerable pressure on social workers and their managers.
11. A number of targeted and universal groups are delivered from McNay Street and spoke sites; there has been an impact on this delivery due to the head of steam developments, meaning that groups have had to close for 2 weeks due to dangerous access routes, however, this has been mainly resolved following a meeting with them, with barriers being put in place and paths cleared.
12. A summer programme is now being developed, to offer summer activities to children of all ages whilst schools are shut. There will also be some parenting workshops and programmes in place, tailored to meet needs. There is a planned activity day in the summer with First Words Together, which is a programme targeting speech and language following the pandemic.

Young People's Engagement and Justice Service

13. The Turnaround programme is up and running and we have received slightly more funding than originally anticipated and this is allowing us to turn the originally planned 0.5 post into a full time role, an internal advert for this secondment has been circulated. A longstanding supervising officer has moved to another authority, their role has been advertised and interviews are at the end of June. We are also in the process of advertising for a vacant reparation and activity worker post.

14. We are nearing expedition time for our Duke of Edinburgh Groups; this year we have ran 3 distinct groups, our standard young person group which started with 6 young people but has unfortunately struggled with commitment and attendance; this group is being amalgamated with our unaccompanied asylum seeker group which has 9 young people registered and finally we have a vulnerable/victim(s) group which has 5 in attendance.
15. In relation to the Turnaround programme we met our first quarter engagement targets without opening the pathway for young people receiving community resolutions. This pathway is now up and running and we are anticipating that we will exceed our proposed target number of young people and families engaged.
16. KPI's - Our case management system provider has been the first approved by the YJB for data newly proposed data recording.
17. The North East has been picked as a pilot area for alterations to the Intensive Supervision & Surveillance (ISS) requirement of Youth Rehabilitation Orders, this includes two main changes, firstly tracking capabilities of electronic monitoring devices and secondly an increase in the maximum length of an ISS requirement to 12 months.
18. The area is also a pilot for implementation of new initiatives for dealing with Anti-Social Behaviour and we are in the primary stages of how this is going to be worked for young people.

Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities

19. There has been a significant and sustained increase in need for children and families over the past year, which has led to sustained increases in workload across the Assessment and Care Planning service, with some specific areas highlighted below.
 - (a) 1,615 children were referred in 2022/23; this is an increase for 2021/22 from 1,009 and more than double the referrals received in 2020/21 (747). The primary presenting issue at referral for under 5s was domestic violence, for school age children physical and sexual abuse were more prevalent.
 - (b) 1,461 Children and family assessments were completed in 2022/23. Again this is an increase on the previous year (2021/22,806) and more than double the year before (2020/21 692). This has caused our rate of assessments per 10,000 population under 18 to significantly increase accordingly (645:10,000). The increase in assessments is due to the significant increase in referrals.
 - (c) 797 children were supported through a Child in Need (CiN) plan during 2022/23. This is a decrease from the 2020/21 when 839 children were supported through a Child in Need plan, but an increase from 2021/22 (788). Most authorities saw a reduction in numbers of CIN, with only Darlington (+10.7%), Northumberland (+4%) and North Tyneside (+0.9%) increasing.
 - (d) In contrast to other metrics CIN numbers have remained relatively static over the last 4 years. Our CIN plans are proportionate and timely interventions with 71% lasting less than one year (53.5% ceasing within 6 months).

- (e) An increase in the number of strategy discussions undertaken (363 2021/22 – 478 2022/23) alongside an increase in the percentage of strategy meetings that have been outcome as 'no further action' has prompted some further scrutiny of our process. An inhouse deep dive of strategies and section 47 enquiries has been undertaken, however no clear factors were identified. A funding bid for peer review of this process has been submitted to help us understand our decision making better and reduce the number of families who are assessed unnecessarily.
- (f) 116 children were subject to a Child Protection plan at the end of March 2023. This is comparable to the 120 children who were subject to Child Protection Plan at the end of March 2022. This is a sustained (if small) increase since 2019/20, although Darlington still have a rate per 10,000 below our statistical neighbours and the national rate.
- (g) 126 children from 86 families came into care in 2022/23 as a result of court proceedings undertaken by the local authority. An additional 18 young people came into our care after being accepted by the Home Office as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. The primary presenting reasons for children coming into our care were neglect, and drug and/or alcohol misuse. Upon entering care 47 of the 126 children were able to remain in the care of the immediate or extended family, with our support.
- (h) Looking at the regional figures, in the North East Hartlepool has the highest rate of Children Cared For (161.4) and Northumberland has the lowest (78). Darlington had the largest increase compared to 2021/22 (+20%) followed by Redcar and Cleveland (19.7%). Middlesbrough (-19.7%) had seen the largest reduction in their rate of CLA compared with pre-Covid 2019/20
- (i) Our commitment to family placements is evidenced by the 39 children who ceased to be in our care due to a Special Guardianship Order or Child Arrangements Order being the outcome of their care proceedings.
- (j) We are now fully compliant with the recent Somerset Judgement in relation to adoption plans, and as a result of this the number of children in our care ceasing care as they have been adopted was 17 in 2022/23, a significant increase from the 11 children placed for adoption in 2019/20
- (k) The reconfiguration of the Life Stages Service is now complete. The team has been split into a 0-17 Children's Team and an 18+ Adults Team, each aligned to the relevant service area. The Children's team is now much more closely aligned to the other Safeguarding, Assessment & Care Planning teams.
- (l) Arrangements for transferring young people from our Children with Disabilities team to Adult Social care are increasing well embedded through the TASC panel process and young people are starting their preparation for adulthood at an earlier stage.
- (m) The Locality model of working for the Assessment and Safeguarding teams is now in place and functioning well. The team managers have begun to develop links with their local Secondary schools. A review undertaken after the 4-month pilot has

enabled us to make some small adjustments to ensure that the workload is equally distributed across the 5 teams.

- (n) The Assessment and Safeguarding teams now have a dedicated office space within the town hall, and duty colleagues from Children with Disabilities and the Family Group Conferencing team are co-located with them. This has helped to support team morale through a very busy year.

Looked After and Care Leaver statistics

- 20. 322 children were looked after by Darlington Borough Council on 2 December 2022, 15 were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). This is an increase in the position at year end March 2022 when 273 children were looked after, 3 of whom were UASC. Although we have been able to find placements for the UASC young people this is becoming increasingly difficult, with several young people placed outside of Darlington. This is impacting on the capacity of the Looked After Through Care team to manage caseloads. As unaccompanied children reach 18 (currently 5 young people) they remain open to the leaving care service and Darlington becomes eligible for further unaccompanied children. I will be reporting to future Council meetings regarding UASC young people, and whether the level of support that Darlington receives from central Government is adequate to meet their often complex needs. I also want to comment on the number of UASC young people coming to Darlington when compared to other North East Local Authorities.
- 21. All 184 care leavers between 16 – 25 years have access to a personal advisor for support, advice, and guidance. The Looked After Through Care Service is in touch with all care leavers. 96.3 per cent of our care leavers aged 19-21 were in suitable accommodation, this was due to 2 young people being in custody, and 79.6 per cent of care leavers were in education, training or employment at the end of March 2023.

Looked After Resources including Fostering, Residential, Keeping Families Together and Family Group Conference

Fostering and Supported Lodgings

- 22. On 3rd July 2023, I attended a consultation with Darlington's foster carers in the Dolphin Centre. Officers have been working to re-establish good communication with our foster carers after the dislocation of Covid, and this meeting was part of that process. Evidence makes clear that children and young people who are looked after by Darlington's foster carers and in our residential homes tend to experience longer and more stable placements than those offered by external agencies – it is vital that we support our foster carers who deliver a caring and dedicated service.
- 23. Since 11 January 2023 we have worked with support from Blue Cabin on a music project for toddlers titled "This is the Place". The project is aimed at supporting foster carers and pre-school children to engage in making music together to help develop skills and relationships. Blue Cabin is in a phase of evaluation which we are awaiting. Foster Carers have fed back the sessions have allowed them to build relationships with fellow carers which in turn has opened their support group. Carers also report the sessions have

supported babies and toddlers to regulate and build attachment through music. Carers have continued to use the songs and music therapy outside of the sessions.

24. Mockingbird was officially Lunched on 30th January with a reflective event held at the Hippodrome. Feedback from carers at launch was “in joining Mockingbird, this is the best decision we have made, I feel supported from Hub Carer and fellow carers and now have a support group which I wished I had years ago”. All carers and children meet once per month for a social event and separate coffee morning are attended around the social event.
25. Our 26-week course on “Trauma informed Care” continues to be well attended by Foster Carers who are reflecting on behaviours of our young people and are better placed to separate behaviour from the young person. Following training sessions, the trainer, Kath Price, is delivering Trauma-informed supervision to carers individually to support the implementation of the theories and models discussed with the training sessions.
26. A further Expression of Interest to the Youth Music Catalyser fund is submitted for a joint partnership between Darlington, this is The Place and Redcar & Cleveland for a 3-year period 2024-2027. This bid is for a total budget of £295k to continue to offer weekly music session to toddlers and young people, offer each young person a bag including instruments and music to use outside of the sessions and offer music sessions to our wider care for children during school holidays. We will be notified as to whether we have progressed to the next stage of the application process by Friday 30th June.
27. Our Fostering Service have commenced migration over to Liquid Logic; currently we have a live pathway for our mainstream carers with work ongoing to migrate Connected care onto Liquid Logic. In doing so, Liquid Logic will more greatly support with Quality Assurance and offer greater management oversight of timings of carers journey from initial enquiry through to panel approval.

Residential Services

28. All of our children’s home’s, Eldon Street, Dunrobin and Hilling Crescent, are at full capacity with 3 children placed in each home. We supported 6 planned admissions into our homes during last year. We are awaiting Ofsted sign off for Lancaster Close to be registered as a children’s home, our young people and staff from Eldon will move over to Lancaster Close. At the point of moving, Eldon will repurpose into CEDARS which will offer short breaks and emergency provision for our young people from Friday to Monday am. Harewood Hill Lodge provides short break care for Children with additional needs and had 74% of beds occupied with 68 nights utilised by children from other authorities which generates income. Our overall bed occupancy was affected due to an outbreak of bed bugs which required a whole home heat treatment. This reduced the number of children attending short breaks.
29. Harewood Hill Lodge was inspected by Ofsted on 22 and 23 November 2022 and maintained their grading of Good. No assurance visits have taken place.
30. Gilling was inspected by Ofsted on 12 and 13 May 2023 and gained the grading of Requires improvement to be Good. An assurance inspection on 8 March 2023 identified no safeguarding concerns, we do not receive gradings on assurance inspection.

31. Dunrobin was inspected by Ofsted on 29 and 30 November and has gained the grading of Requires improvement to be Good which is an improvement on the grading of inadequate from their last inspection. The outstanding compliance notices have been addressed and removed from the home. No assurance visits have taken place. Ofsted have complimented the team on the improvements to the home.
32. Eldon was inspected by Ofsted on 23 March 2022 and has gained the grading of Requires Improvement to be good. An assurance inspection on 7 March 2023 identified no safeguarding concerns.
33. A task and finish group are established to support an improvement plan across the homes, and to ensure developments are consistent across all children's homes. Work is ongoing with Quality Assurance and Performance colleagues to support performance across all our homes and capture learning and development from inspections.
34. Eldon Street, Dunrobin and Gilling staff have all attended introduction to Dyadic Development Psychotherapy training delivered by Leon Crook and Alan Welsh. Monthly support sessions are diarised to support staff to reflect on interactions with our young people and implement the basics of PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy). Alongside this work, training is being delivered to all homes focusing on relational practice, and supporting strength-based case notes which are recorded to the young person.

Keeping Families Together

35. A KFT worker was successful in application for a 2-year post within our Youth Justice Service. We have moved this post into Family Group Conference to support with Capacity.
36. For three months of the year, 4 x social workers from the team left to support Assessment and Safeguarding colleagues, leaving 4 support workers. This impacted home visits, direct work and reviews went out of timescale.
37. Keeping Families Together supported 83 children from 39 families over the year, evidencing positive direct work and family engagement. 420 children were seen through 242 home visits and direct work was carried out through 241 direct work session with children and 130 with adults.
38. From reviewing families closed to the service 8 children from the 83 supported entered into our care. 64.1 % of families closed completing all identified work, 10.3 % of families withdrew consent (4), and 5.1 % closed due another reason.
39. On 3-month review post-closure, 94.4% of family questionnaires graded satisfactory / very satisfied, 64.1 % of children's care plan remained the same (child did not enter care), 20.5% the risk decreased or closed to children's statutory services, 7.7 % care plan increased but not taken into care and 7.7% care plan increased and taken into care.

Family Group Conferencing

40. The team were successful in winning Team of The Year Award and the Frontline National awards. Faith Hirst and Lois Colquhoun attended an award ceremony in London and received the award on behalf of the team.
41. Positive work was seen throughout the year including delivering Family Group Conference training to children's workforce and partner agencies, redesigned website, engagement with adult feedback group, and redesign of leaflets for children, adults and professional.
42. The team increased the number of conferences held with 236 episodes open supporting 115 FGC's (an increase on 92 last year), 56 reviews (increase on 49 last year) and 11 Emergency Network meetings.
43. 241 families were closed to the team during the year, with 3 children entering care. 111 families closed with all support and interventions complete; the increase of 1 post taken from Keeping Families Together will be used to trial utilising Family Group Conference at an earlier stage of families struggles. Meetings have been held with head teachers at Corporation Road school and Mount Pleasant. We are waiting for recruitment checks to be complete for the FGC facilitator to commence in post and this trial will start. This week we have received request form both schools individually for FGC support.
44. Support will be focused in the coming weeks on offering FGC training to all assessment and safeguarding social workers as well as support to our front door colleagues to support earlier discussion with families and prior to transfer to Building Stronger Families or Assessment and safeguarding Colleagues

Education

45. The Department for Education (DfE) as part of its wider SEND reforms, has initiated the 'Safety Valve' intervention programme. The DfE recognises that over recent years, pressures on high needs budgets have contributed to many local authorities accruing deficits on their Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). The DfE states that the right response to tackling this is a multi-faceted approach, which looks to the heart of the issues, taking in the significant increases in high needs funding that have been provided nationally; reform from the upcoming cross government SEND review; and targeted intervention for the local authorities who have struggled the most.
46. Darlington entered into an agreement in March 2023. We are going into our first full year of the Safety Valve agreement from a position of relative strength as the High Needs Block achieved a balance at the end of the 2022/23 financial year. The High Needs Block of circa £18.7m in 2022/23 had a year-end underspend position of £109,382.
47. Sponsor events have been held for trusts interested in running the Special Free School. The application windows closes on 31st August with a final decision being made by the Secretary of State in January 2024.

Youth Unemployment

48. The Darlington 18-24 year old claimant count fell from 7.7% (580 young people) in March 2023 to 7.5% (565 young people) in April 2023. This compares with the North-East average which only dropped 0.1% from 6.2% to 6.1% and the national average which remained static at 4.9%.

49. The figures for the Tees Valley were as follows:

(a) Hartlepool	9.6%
(b) Middlesbrough	8.7%
(c) Redcar and Cleveland	8.2%
(d) Stockton -on-Tees	7.7%
(e) Darlington	7.5%

Youth Employment Initiative (YEI)

50. The DWP/ESF external funding for the YEI programmes ends on 31 July 2023. However, funding was put in the MTFP to continue this programme until 31 March 2024. Beyond that there is currently no funding available to continue this programme. Since that start of the programme at the end of May 2016 up to the end of May 2023 the programme had supported 1,347 16-29 year olds. Of the 1,347 participants to date 1,290 (95.8%) of those have progressed into employment or training and 767 (56.9%) of those who started the programme were still in those destinations six months later.

Children's Commissioning and Contracts

51. New supported accommodation regulations are coming into effect on 28th October 2023. From this date it will be unlawful for any 16- or 17-year-old Care Leaver or Looked After Child to be placed in accommodation which is not registered with and regulated by Ofsted. This will require the following Darlington based services to become registered:

- (a) The Tees Valley YMCA, for the provision of accommodation and outreach support to young people aged 16+.
- (b) Foundation, for the provision of families accommodation and outreach support.
- (c) Keys Group, for the provision of Care Leaver shared supported accommodation.
- (d) Darlington Borough Council Children's Services for the provision of taster flats for Care Leavers and Supported Lodgings.

52. Darlington has received new burdens funding from the DFE valued at £25k per quarter for 2 years (commencing April 2023) to progress and embed these new regulatory requirements. The funding will be utilised to support with initial and recurrent registration costs along with workforce and training costs. A working group has been established with operational children's social care colleagues to undertake the required preparatory work and oversee the registration progress of all providers of supported accommodation services with Darlington young people in placement which require registration.

53. Darlington's bid to DFE for Staying Close funding has been successful, with £465,924 having been awarded for the period April 2023 to March 2025. The funding facilitates an enhanced support packages comprising both practical and emotional support for young people leaving care. In Darlington the funding will also provide an increase in Personal Advisor capacity for care leavers and enable the commissioning of a Lifelong links co-ordinator and tailored emotional health and wellbeing support.
54. Darlington is leading a collaborative quotation process with Middlesbrough Borough Council and Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council for the provision of a SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) mediation service. The provision of an independent SEND mediation service is a statutory requirement for local authorities. It is less formal way to resolve disagreements for children and young people who are progressing through the EHCP (Education Health and Care Plan) process than a tribunal process. The new contract is expected to commence in January 2024.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

55. The Statutory Safeguarding Partners met in February and were provided with an update from Sub-Group Chairs, reports provide an overview of the key priorities and tasks for each of the groups, details of activity that is ongoing or has been achieved along with the key themes coming through. In March the Partners considered a Notifiable Incident Referral and agreed the case met the criteria for notification to the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. The Partnership convened a Rapid Review Panel to discuss the case and the decision was made to undertake a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review.
56. The Multi-agency Safeguarding Partnership Group met in March, the group discussed working with Challenging Families/Communities and Organised Crime Groups to help understand the potential risks and challenges posed to frontline staff. There are often safeguarding issues and hierarchical structures with individuals who are suffering and being exploited, safeguarding issues can often be inter-generalised within families. It is an area to be challenged by the Partnership and a longer term project to address how agencies can better work together.

Climate Change

57. Children's Services Senior Leadership Team remains committed to supporting the Climate Change agenda. Martin Graham, Service Manager is the Children's Services Climate Change champion and continues to attend and engage with the Council steering group for Climate change as well as engaging our own workforce on climate change contributions. The service continues to adapt to agile working in a way that makes positive, sustainable changes such as reducing use of paper and reduced work travelling."

Councillor Nick Wallis
Children and Young People Portfolio