

# Darlington Children's Services

## Self-Assessment 2023



Knowing ourselves and knowing our children,  
young people and families



**DARLINGTON**  
Borough Council

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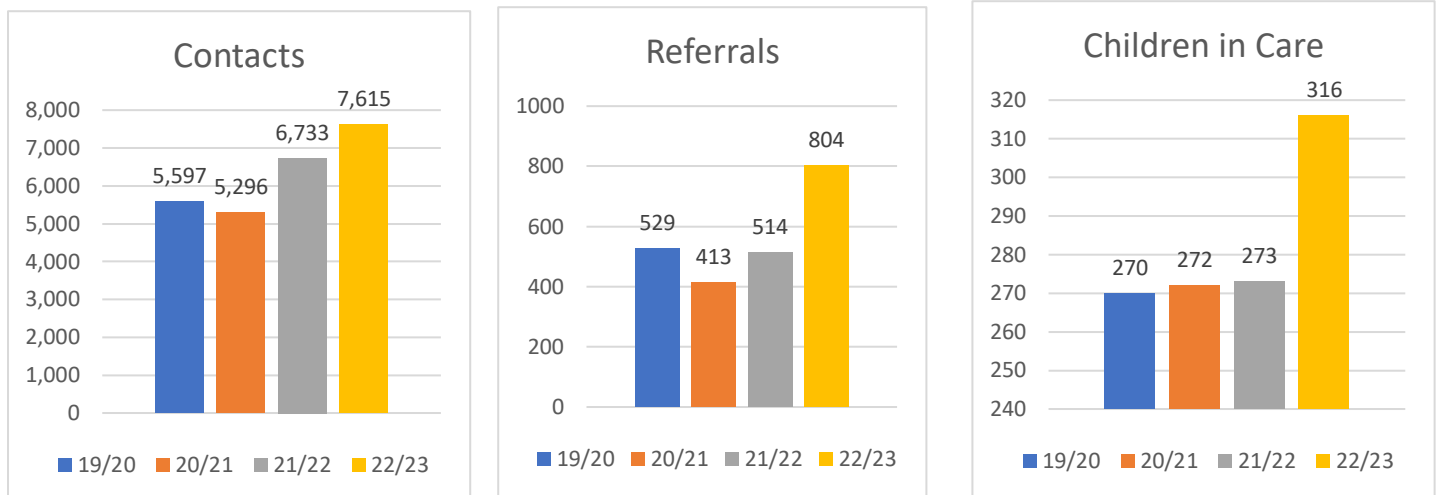
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## Introduction and Overview

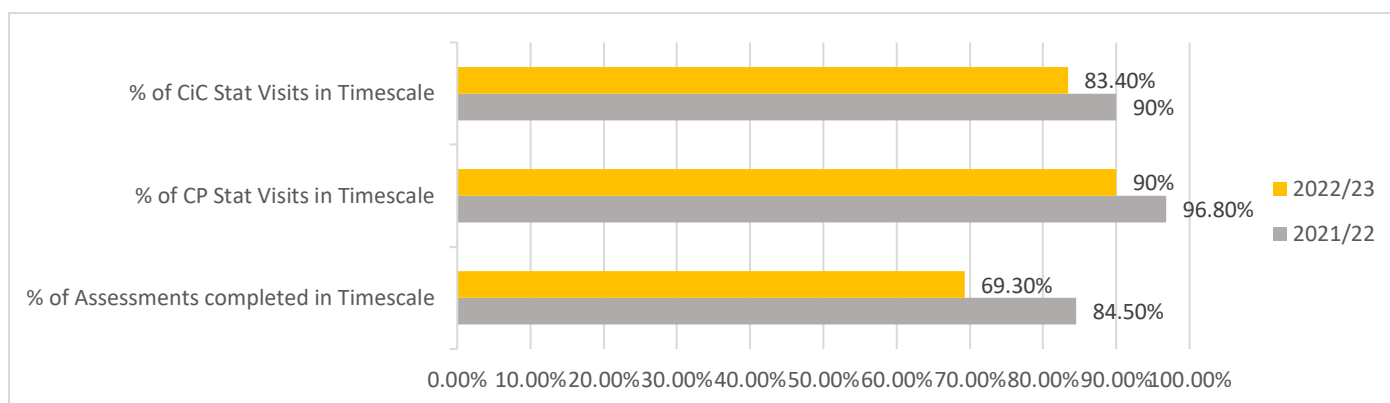
The past year has been a positive and proud one with the findings of the Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS) in October 2022 recognising the significant work that has been undertaken to improve outcomes for Children and Families in Darlington since the previous full Inspection, 2018. OFSTED’s report reaffirms our belief that in Darlington we have a culture based upon strong foundations of Relational and Restorative Practice that leads to the best outcomes for Children and Families.

*“The development of creative relational approaches to practice are modelled to staff through each layer of management. This is cultivating a culture of learning and an environment where good social work is thriving.”*

The strong findings (Good with Outstanding elements) of the ILACS and associate evidenced is all the more impressive when considered in the context of some of the significant challenges that we have faced over the past year. We have experienced significant and sustained increases in demand for services .



The increases to demand have placed significant pressures on services and the workforce: recruitment and retention has also presented us with challenges. The significant increases in demand, and rise of workloads, has seen a detrimental impact on performance timeliness, as illustrated below.



Our oversight of performance and management grip has continued to be strong. This scrutiny and oversight have assured us that, despite the decline in timeliness the quality of our social work and the impact of our services on our children and families has continued to be positive. This is measured through our quality assurance activity which will be discussed later in the report.

Last year we identified 5 Key Priorities, which are set out below with the progress achieved.

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

External training was commissioned and has been completed with the Leadership team to consolidate and expand their knowledge and confidence in restorative leadership. This will lead to further development for Team Managers and Advanced Practitioners in Restorative Leadership in the coming year. By using this leadership style, we will further model the “relationship-based approaches” that front line workers build with children and families.

**2. Developing and delivering in-house training**

Training and development is seen as an integral element of building and supporting our workforce across Children’s Services. Over the past year we have created a culture of quality and ownership that empowers staff to fully embrace our ‘High Support and High Challenge’ ethos here in Darlington. Our continuous professional development process reflects an Evidence Based Practice approach that is rooted in what local and national policy tells us, what our staff tell us, and what children, young people and families tell us. Our training and development programme is innovative, creative, informed and relational, giving us the flexibility to be both proactive and reactive to the needs of the workforce.

**Some examples of in-house training projects include:**

**Darlington Academy** – promoting and facilitating our progression and destination model for staff, volunteers, students/learners and our local communities.

**Staff Forums** – regular whole directorate/whole service opportunities to hear from staff teams and partner organisations, communicate key updates and develop cross sector working.

**Xtra Space** - development of a staff support facility, where staff can engage in xtra case discussion, have xtra space to learn and have xtra support from peers, leaders and managers.

**Relational and Restorative Practice** – delivery of well-informed relational practice training and bespoke support to staff and multi-agency partners across the borough.

**Darlington Xtra** – a multi-agency website supporting the training, development, recruitment and retention of staff in the Health and Social Care Sector.

**Experts in Practice** – a unique research project in partnership with Newcastle University, where staff develop as researchers in a specific designated area of practice.

### **3. Increasing the use of Family Group Conferencing (FGC)**

The use of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is central to our principle of having the family at the centre of planning and service delivery. Over the past year we have completed 115 FGCs, which is an increase from 92 the previous year.

### **4. Increasing in-house Foster Carer capacity**

Recruitment of foster carers has remained a priority but also a significant challenge, 6 new mainstream foster carer families were recruited during 2022/23.

### **5. Delivering Cedars Emergency and Respite Provision**

Much work has been done with Regulatory colleagues to realise our ambition of a new emergency and short break setting to enhance our offer for Children and Young people on the edge of care. Our new home CEDARS was Registered on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

We have reflected upon our very positive outcome in last year ILACS but are not complacent and remain committed in our drive to improve continuously and provide the best possible outcomes for Children and Families, which are reflected in the Strategic aims for the coming year which will be addressed later in the report.



Chris Bell

Assistant Director of Children's Services



James Stroyan

Group Director of People (DCS)

## Darlington Context

The past year has seen significant increases in the demand for services for Children and Families, with increases seen in the number of contacts received at the Front Door and the number of referrals for Social Work Assessments. The increase in demand has also been seen in our Early Help Services.

	Number of Referrals	Contacts to Referral Conversion	Rate of Referrals per 10,000	Rate of Assessments per 10,000	Number of Early Help Assessments
2020/21	413	8.9%	330.5	308.2	623
2021/22	514	8.7%	448.0	356.1	839
2022/23	902	16.6%	713.6	645.5	1650

	Rate of Child Protection Plans per 10,000	Rate of Child in Care per 10,000
2020/21	38.4	120.0
2021/22	53.0	123.0
2022/23	51.3	142.3

This increase in demand has continued in 2023/2024, with quarter 1 seeing a 13% increase in contacts received when compared to quarter 1 2022/2023. Similarly, referrals have continued to increase as have assessments.

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

Our services are currently working in the context of significant and sustained increases for demand for services, with increasing numbers of children and families requiring support. We have maintained regular and robust performance management and oversight to understand the impact that these increases have had on service delivery and to also understand what is driving these changes.

Through Performance Management we have developed a clear understanding that the timeliness of our actions has declined, for example in relation to the completion of assessments, which were 69.3% and the timeliness of recording of statutory visits, 90% for Children on a CP Plan and 83.4% for Cared for Children. However, we have used our Quality assurance functions to clarify the impact on services and these reassure us that social workers are making effective and proportionate decisions and interventions with families, but in some circumstances, they are struggling to complete and record these interventions in a consistently timely manner.

In addition to the regular performance management, we have maintained the Weekly Review Meeting which analyses, through the lens of quality and impact, the decisions made at the front door and at the point of case allocation. This is continuing to provide a high level of oversight into practice, in real time, and help us understand the impact of our decision making upon children and families. Through this work we have identified an increasing contact to referral conversion rate and an increasing number of "No Further Action" Assessments, with 59.4% of Assessments concluding with no further action, an increase from 46.4% the previous year. A focused piece of work is underway to understand this change and to reflect in practice improvements in the coming year.

We continue to hold regular Practice Reviews, which is a collaborative approach to audit and understanding quality and impact. We have reflected upon findings from the ILACS about the benefit of family engagement and involvement in the process and have amended our processes to seek greater input from families in our audit process.

Our Practice Review audits are providing reassurance about the quality of services and the positive impact on families, in the context of the impact on timeliness performance as described. For the audits completed in 2023, it was found that 76% of Assessments and Analysis were Outstanding or Good, 70% of Plans were Outstanding or Good, 78% were found to have an overall intervention that was Outstanding or Good and 88% led to an Outstanding or Good outcome when considered in the context of the reason for the referral.

The Practice Reviews also found 75% of case files showing Outstanding or Good evidence of relational practice but did highlight that only 59% showed evidence of Outstanding or Good Management Oversight, which is consistent with some of the action plans identified following ILACS and is a key focus for the coming year.

Improvement are now being focused on ensuring that audits are collaborative and reflective. In addition, ensuring that feedback is given to practitioners and managers and that this incorporates clear actions plans for improvement is being incorporated into the audit process.

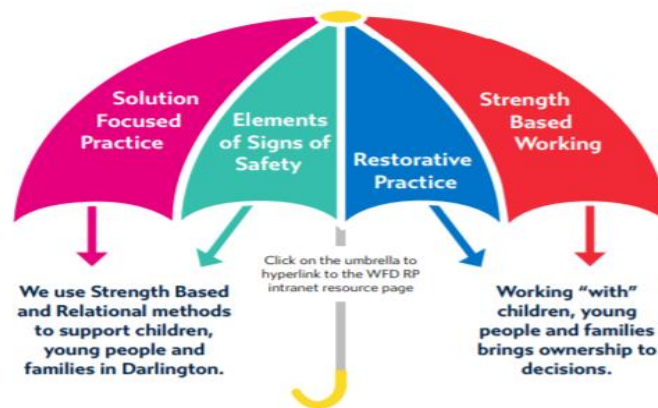
A new Practice Development Group was launched in June 2023, which replaced the activity and focus of the Quality Improvement Group. These meetings are chaired by the Assistant Director and the purpose is to understand the key practice themes emerging from our Quality Assurance activity. In particular the Monthly Practice Reviews and Weekly Review Meetings and to identify actions, share best practice and to address any thematic issues within practice, as gathered through quality assurance.

This Practice Development Group includes Heads of Service/Service Managers as well as Quality Assurance Leads, the Principal Social Worker, the Relational and Restorative Practice Lead and colleagues from the Performance team. This membership ensures that leaders are crucial to the ongoing development of our practice, and the culture that underpins our this, and they are essential to the effectiveness of the group moving forward and ensuring that it has a real impact. The group will have strong links into the Assistant Director clinics so that we gain a real sense of crossover and cohesion between performance and quality.

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

The overall focus in terms of quality centres around our Relational and Restorative Practice model and the evidence not only of the key elements of our Practice Umbrella being utilised but also on the impact of the interventions on children and families.

### 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.



## Family Feedback

We have further developed our Quality Assurance Processes to strengthen our overall assessment of quality.

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

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

some family feedback

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

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

### Identifying and responding to children's needs and appropriate thresholds

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

The increase in the number of contacts and the presenting issues are elements of helping to gain a picture of what life is like for a child and their family in Darlington, however this is only a small part of the bigger picture. We know that the increase has come about due to a variety of factors, e.g. the model introduced in 2020 that promotes conversation and stronger relationships with partners is about a conversation where the focus is not about meeting a defined threshold and viewing the

service as a ‘gateway’ to statutory services but rather a discussion and working together to gain the right outcome. This approach promotes ‘contacts’ being made. Societal factors have also played a huge part in the number of contacts received, as well as referrals to social care, however some of the factors that contributed to referrals to social care were present two years ago, yet the conversion rate doubled in 2022/23 (see table below), compared to the two previous years. Whilst the pandemic and issues such as poverty and mental health certainly need to be given weight in relation to any rationale for such an increase, we need to look at adapting the way we work and look more to our partners to help provide a more proportionate response to meet the needs of our children and their families in a way that during lockdown had not always been achieved.

	Number of Referrals	Contacts to Referral Conversion	Rate of Referrals per 10,000
2019/20	529	12.8%	440.8
2020/21	413	8.9%	330.5
2021/22	514	8.7%	448.0
2022/23	902	16.6%	713.6

Our referral rate per 10,000 has seen a sharp increase in 2022/23, for the last 5 reporting years we have been consistently below all benchmarking measures but the North-East rate of referrals at the end of 2022/23 (664.8) is 3.2% higher than in 2021/22. The regional rate of referrals was 4.2% higher than in pre-Covid 2019/20 (638.2). Darlington sits at 4<sup>th</sup> highest out of the 12 authorities for 2022/23, although physically we have received the least number of referrals. 7 of the 12 authorities have seen an increase compared with 2019/20.

Darlington has the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest percentage of referrals being received from the Police, with only Durham above us. Both areas are covered by Durham Constabulary. A review is being carried out to establish what we might be doing differently to other local authorities, and whether this is another driver in the increase in referrals to social care.

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

It is evident that the success of the Front Door has improved relationships with partners and that continued success is reliant on this partnership. However, we have seen a decrease in external led early help and reduced involvement from universal services taking on Early Help Assessments and targeted work. This year we will draw on our strong partnerships to refresh our approach and the model used at the Front Door, this will revitalize the way in which we work. We will include partners in our vision to share the load and empower them to work with us to ensure that the right service at the right time is being provided; this should be the least intrusive and most proportionate.

In response to the above the Front Door team have invested in re-training the team in the conversational approach and relational methodology to better understand and implement the

model in the context of the increasing challenges to children and their families and the capacity and complexity issues faced by partner agencies.

We see the formulating of our Strategic Early Help Board as pivotal in setting the scene for how we want to work moving forward, with our strong Front Door service we will always ensure that first and foremost children are safe but wherever possible we will always make sure early intervention, whether this be provided by way of universal services, single external/internal agency or our Building Stronger Families team reaches families in a way that means families are strong, resilient, empowered and that any future harm and the need for statutory intervention is reduced.

We have seen an increase in re-referrals, 17.7% compared to 10.9% the previous year, and in response there is a monthly deep dive activity focused on each re-referral to establish the rationale and establish findings with an analytical and action-based approach taken. The deep dive is led by the Service Manager at the Children's Front Door but is an activity that includes other relevant members of SLT to ensure that findings are linked to learning in practice and focuses on decision making. Re-referrals with the same presenting issue are analysed in terms of the timescale within which they have been re-referred and analysis of patterns for individual teams and workers has also proved useful for targeted work around development and improvements in practice and management oversight and decision making. The previous C and F is also quality assured to check the purpose of assessment and content to ensure that the presenting issue was addressed. Any areas that were not addressed are highlighted between CIAT and A and S. Allocation to the previous worker is attempted in every re-referral as those established relationships are already there and this prevents the family having to repeat their story and journey.

## Making good decisions and providing effective help

A key element of our "Right Service at the Right time" approach is our strong Early Help offer via Building Stronger Families. In last year's ILACS it was noted that

*"Children and their families benefit from a well-designed early help offer. Children benefit from a wide range of interventions from the 'Building Stronger Families' early help service. Workers build effective relationships with children and families and have a wide range of experience and skills."*

Throughout 2022/23 there were 1,650 Early Help Assessments (EHA) started, 13.5% (223) of which were initiated by external agencies. This is an increase on 2021/22 (839 EHA's) but with a decrease on the proportion of externally started EHA's (19.2%). Recognition of the decrease in external EHAs, together with an increase in work in Building Stronger Families has brought this area of work into sharp focus and a clear understanding of where we are, together with working theories on why, are able to be well articulated by SLT, as well as the teams. Importantly, action is in place to address this, and it is very much a whole service approach to ensure that the right service is provided to families and at times this is via Universal services and lead professionals from external agencies. Prior to the pandemic partners were more likely to instigate and lead on EHAs but throughout the pandemic this became less likely, in part it can be understood as schools were not operating in the same way, health professionals were not engaging with families in the same way and other agencies

were working remotely, lessening the opportunity for these pieces of work to be identified as appropriate for families, and lessening the opportunities for discussions to take place between partners and families. The Front Door Service fell into a pattern whereby the outcome of a contact enquiry often considered only three options, 1, Building Stronger Families, 2 social care or 3 providing advice and recording the information. A lack of consideration for Universal services or external EHAs meant the discussions were not held with partners and this contributed to lower numbers. Due to this the Front Door Service and Building Stronger Families are now working together to ensure they continually question what the right service is, widening the options and working with partners to explore options. The development of the Early Help and Prevention Strategic Board will assist greatly with this, as will the Early Help Strategy currently being devised.

In 2022/23 there have been 879 individual children and 179 individual adults confirmed as receiving direct work by a BSF worker. They have conducted a total of 2,016 sessions with them this reporting year. The BSF workers have also worked with children open to social care with a total of 283 sessions. Our vision for joined up working as one service works well in these situations and we are working hard to improve on this further by looking at moving to a locality based offer for Early Help that fits with the locality based work carried out in social care team, this will assist with relational working with partners, families and across services and teams.

For children and families require statutory support, we have continued to see an increase in the number of referrals during 2023, with a 50% increase on 2022 numbers. This has also translated into an increase in assessments, strategy meetings and section 47 enquiries started. There is an actual and percentage decrease in the number of strategies concluding with a request for ICPC and a decrease in children becoming subject to a child protection plan.

*“When children need protection, strategy meetings take place swiftly and these are well attended by partner agencies. Information-sharing is detailed, and decision-making is appropriate”*

*“Resultant child protection enquiries are thorough, with a clear assessment of risk, followed by appropriate actions to safeguard children.”*

The conversion rate from strategy meeting to Section 47 inquiry, and onto ICPC is monitored the management team. Any significant deviations from historic or geographic norms are scrutinised to ensure that changes are positive for families. In order to strengthen oversight further, managers receive a report on the reasons for the outcomes of section 47 investigations. Scrutiny of these outcomes will feed into the quality improvement work that is ongoing for strategy meetings. The intention of the work is to ensure that we work with families at the lowest appropriate level and are not subjecting families to intrusive assessments or interventions that are not necessary.

Regional data indicates that Darlington’s section 47 investigations are not only above the regional rate but have increased by 38.3% on pre-Covid figures. This is the second highest increase in the region. Conversely the numbers of children progressing to an ICPC are lower than the regional rate and have reduced by 15.5% from pre-covid figures.

In response to the outlying data and performance in this area we have been successful in securing some support via the Sector Led Improvement small supports funds for some focused peer challenge around our approach to strategy and section 47s and this will report back later this year and be incorporated into our practice development.

Where children are subject to a child protection plan, the length of time spent on a plan is closely monitored. With work ongoing to reduce the number of children being on a child protection plan for less than 6 months and, conversely, more than 2 years. All children who become subject to child protection procedures for a second or subsequent time are reviewed by senior managers.

Assessment numbers have also increased with the increase in referrals with 1,461 assessments being completed in 2022/23. The equates to a near doubling of the rate per 10,000 child population to 645.5. While children and families assessments remain of good quality, with the quality and audit findings indicating the “the direction on assessments has continued to improve with evidence of some good quality analysis”; the timeliness of assessment completion has been impacted. Only 18.7% of assessments were completed in less than 25 working days in 2022/23, with 30.7 % taking over the timescale of 45 working days. An action plan has been put in place to offer social workers an agreed amount of overtime each month to complete tasks and support from managers across the service to identify and facilitate case closures and transfers.

*“Assessments provide evidence of how historical factors about children, and their families, are taken into account and how they are fully analysed to understand families’ strengths and risks. Social workers seek to understand the context in which children are living, the strengths of the family and their protective factors, as well as the risks children might be facing. When appropriate, the voice of the child is clear, and it informs assessments. The early and appropriate identification of the needs of unborn babies has been enhanced by increased management oversight and through well-embedded tracking and monitoring mechanisms.”*

## 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.

*“Practice review meetings provide a detailed insight into the quality of social work practice and have informed senior leaders’ understanding about the quality of service and they help in identifying the challenges to the service. Inspection of Darlington local authority children’s services 10 October to 21 October 2022 10 Leaders undertake regular case file audits to ensure that they are focused on the quality of social work practice.”*

*“While most social workers report that they find supervision helpful and an opportunity for reflection and task-setting, written supervision records do not always reflect the richness of discussions and often contain actions that are process-driven.”*

However, there remain some inconsistencies in 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. Changes have been made to the recording system and piloted with selected teams. This remains a focus for improvement and was referenced in the most recent Focused Visit by Ofsted. 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.

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. Further work is required to improve management direction throughout our involvement with our families, ensuring that plans are progressed effectively and that social workers are supported in the decision making, again this was referenced in the most recent Focused Visit.

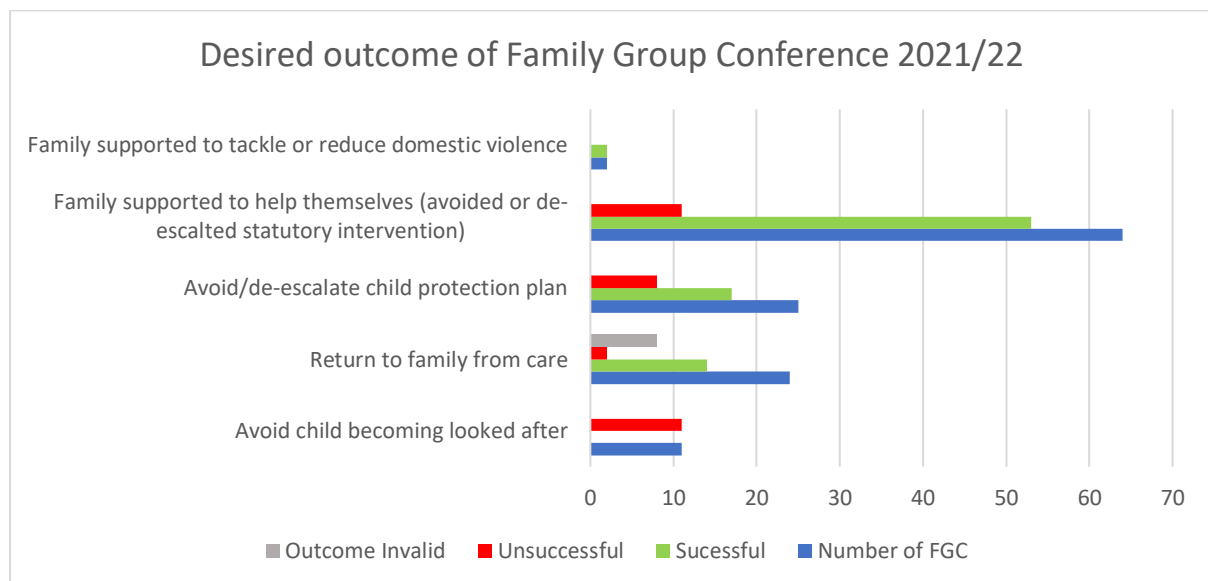
*“Well-developed senior manager-led panel arrangements are providing effective oversight of children’s plans. This provides direction and guidance to managers and social workers in their work with children and families and is helping to reduce drift and delay.”*

## Participation and direct work with children and families

*“A relationship-based model of assessment and care planning is being developed and is embedding in social work practice. A strong emphasis is placed on workers building trusting relationships with children, their families and support networks. This is evident in some very effective early help interventions, child in need and child protection services. Workers maximise the use of local strengths and resources, including parents, extended family, family friends and community networks. Relationship-building is at the core of the current service design and is developing in service delivery.”*

The development of our Family Group Conference offer is key to further improving the participation of children and families in the co-production of plans and delivery of services. 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.

115 Family Group Conferences were held in 2022/23, an increase from 92 the previous year and 56 reviews were held, an increase from 49 the previous year. We review 12 months after the FGC it’s effectiveness so we can see the long-term benefits of FGC. The below data shows the impact of 2021/2022 FGC’s when reviewed in April 2023.



Note - We will review 2022/2023 FGC’s in April 2024.

In relation to the lack of successful in preventing children becoming looked after we identified, following a deep dive audit, that these referrals were coming into FGC too late meaning we didn't have a chance to work with the family to prevent an escalation. This has been the focus of our work over the last 12 months, we are now seeing referrals come at an earlier stage, which should ensure we see an improvement in this area.

Social workers and family workers in the assessment and safeguarding teams regularly undertake direct work with children and families, however the timely recording of this work needs to be strengthened.

### 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. We were able to offer 84.6% of RHI within 72 hours, an improvement from 75.8% the previous year, and were able to engage 59.1% of young people with an RHI, an improvement from 51.2% the previous year.

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.

We are currently supporting 13 children and young people who identify their ethnicity as Gypsy Romany Traveller, and tailor our approaches in accordance with their cultural values and beliefs.

Our Children with Disabilities Service is now fully integrated and co-located with our locality assessment and safeguarding teams. Providing a specialist service to those children and families who require their direct support, as well as acting as a resource for the wider social work team,



often coming alongside colleagues from A&S to advise and support with children and young people whose needs may be complex but unassessed.

*“Social workers complete good-quality assessments with disabled children and their families. This informs appropriate service and support delivery, including good-quality short-break provision and access to direct payments. Children are visited frequently, and their wishes are heard, acted on and understood by social workers who have well-established relationships with them and their families.”*

### Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

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

# The Experience and Progress in Care and Care Leavers

## Making good decisions

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

Numbers of Children in Care has increased, with 322 Children in Care at the end of 2022/23, compared to 273 the previous year. It is recognised that this increase is within the context of significant increases in referrals for statutory support for children and families.

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.

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

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

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

A review of the wording of our 'Letter before proceedings' is being undertaken by the management team with support from our legal colleagues. The aim of this review is to make the LBP more

accessible in terms of readability and more relational in language, thus improving understanding and engagement from parents. Children and their families are held at the centre of our planning for children; and exploration of family placement options via FGC and viability assessments is the first consideration for a child being removed from parental care.

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

Once a 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. They consider the appropriateness of any use of Section 20 for Children Looked After and the rationale; and that where Care Orders are in place they are regularly reviewed with clear actions and timescales. Permanence Tracking panel meetings also take place with relevant operational managers and the Principal Solicitor to ensure a focus on permanence planning, with the view to prevent drift and delay for children.

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

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

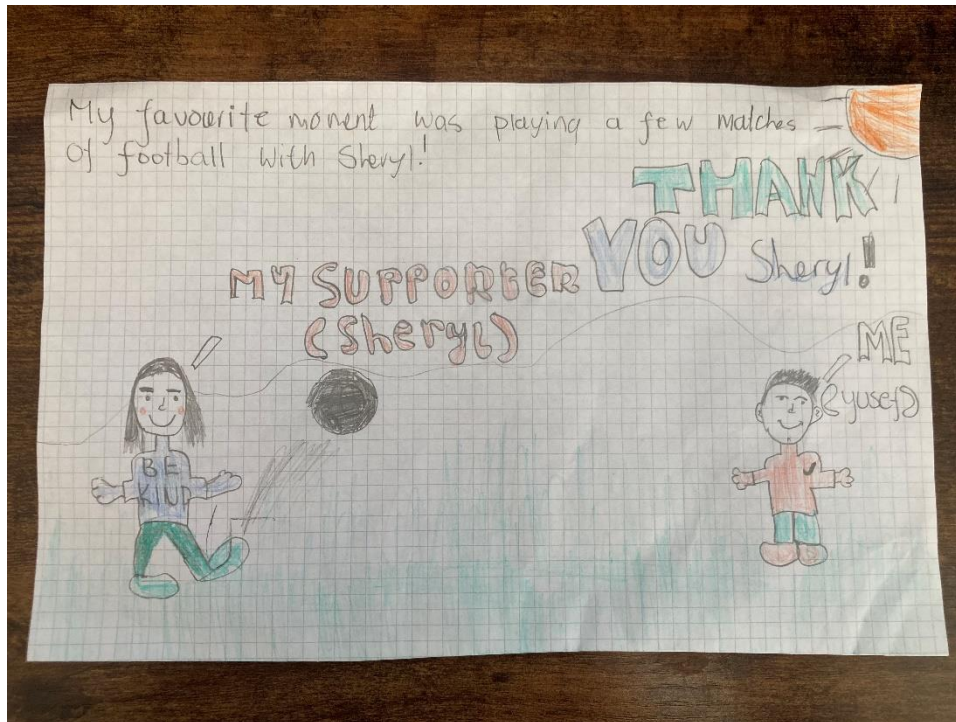
*A strong emphasis is placed on securing legal permanence for children through the making of special guardianship orders. Special guardianship is seen as an immensely important permanence option for children. The preparation, advice and support which are provided for special guardians is matched to the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

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

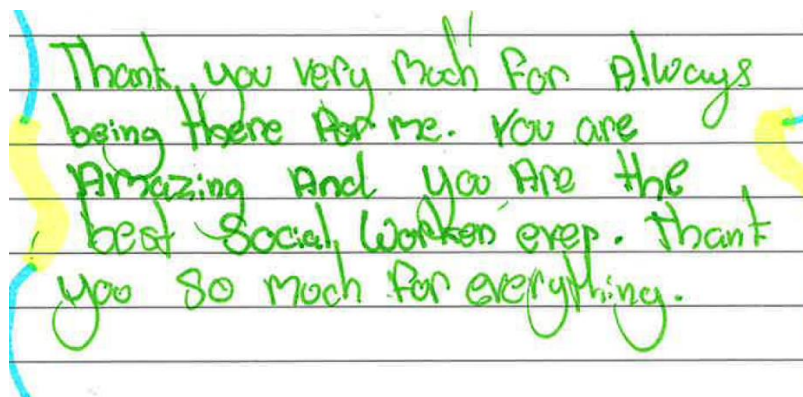
We are undertaking collaborative audits with Cafcass to understand why we are seeing an increase in Care Orders at home with parents. This will lead into wider development work across the service including collaborative focus groups with Cafcass and social care to explore and address this. We have completed audits of all Care Orders at home in February 2023 to explore some of the themes which include helping our Social Workers understand the wider impact of Care Orders at home, the law in relation to this and how to better use Supervision Orders. We plan to see a reduction in this over the year.

### 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.



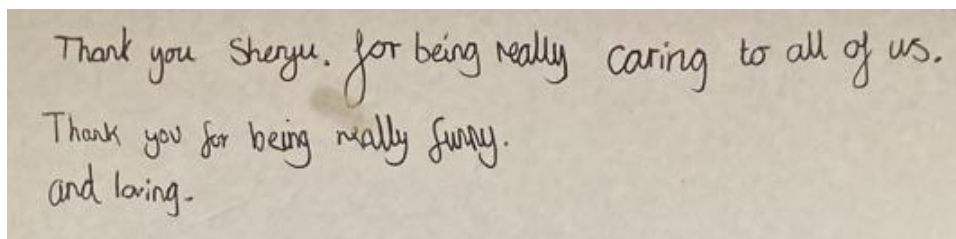
Social workers engage children in direct work to help understand how they feel and what their views are.



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 to use the app.

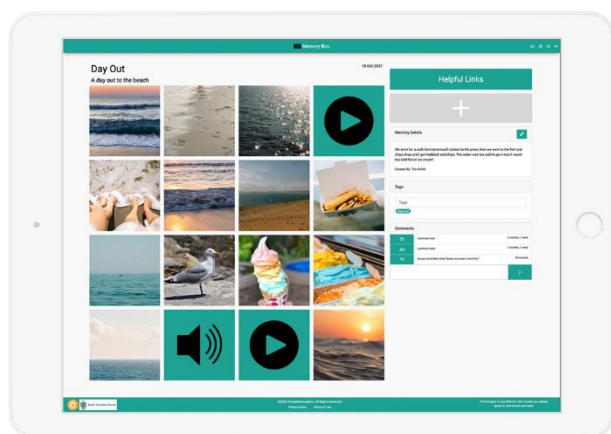
3286 statutory visits for Children in Care (CIC) were carried out during 22/23, 83.4% (2741) were within timescale.

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.



Our Corporate Parenting Panel grows from strength to strength. Young people attend Corporate Parenting Panel and share their views to help influence change. These 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.

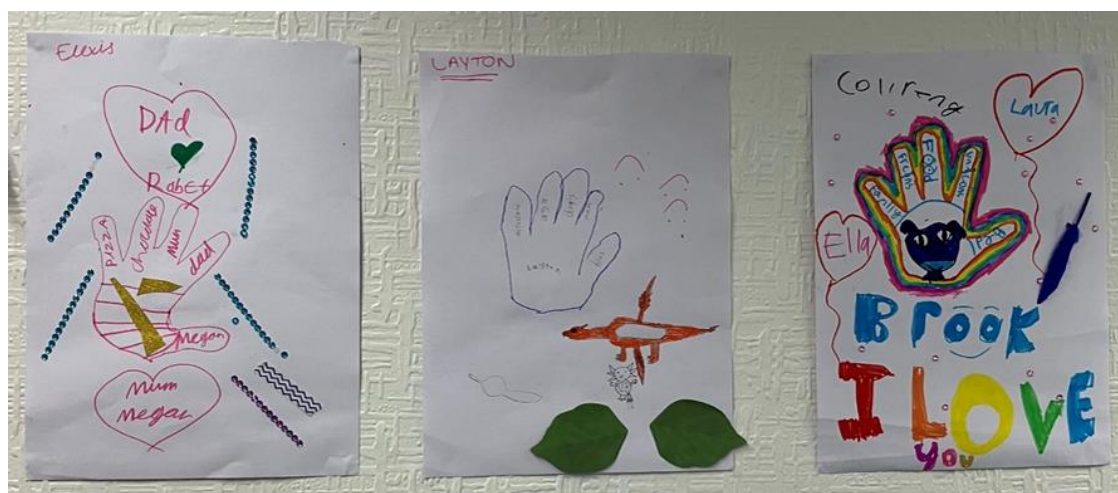
Throughout 2022-2023 work has been ongoing with Blue Cabin, North Tyneside, and Gateshead Councils to develop a Creative Life Story model of practice. Children have engaged in "All about me", "More about me" and Therapeutic Life story work. Staff have had access to extensive training and resources. Funding was initially provided via the DfE "What Works" programme, we have secured additional funding for this valuable work to continue in 2022-2023. 65 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 funding will include music sessions for foster carers and babies.



We are in the process of securing a virtual memory box to assist in our delivery of life story work. This will be a confidentially secure virtual space which parents, children, carers, teachers and social workers can all feed in to by storing memories, photographs and video/audio recordings. These can also all be printed and captured in a hard copy.

The Children in Care Council (the Darlo Care Crew) ensures that children and young people can influence service development and practice. Our Darlo Care Crew recently looked at what the Promise Tree meant to them.





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.

We have an active Care Leavers Forum who contribute to service development. They have recently been involved in developing a poster/leaflet explaining 'Staying Close' and came up with a proposed name of 'Here 4 You' which is currently under wider consultation with the young people.

Children and young people are currently involved in developing a new name for the Looked After Through Care team.

## Helping and Protecting

### Missing and Exploited

Our work with children who go missing and who are vulnerable to exploitation, or who are being exploited is evolving and improving at pace. A review of the Missing and Exploited Operational Meeting is underway to ensure this is the most effective arena for sharing information and that action planning is in place.

A deep dive review of C and F assessments has helped us understand that that harm away from home is not always a feature within the assessment and a working group is being established to work across all teams to improve this area of practice.

## Health

72.4% of Initial Health Assessments completed in 2022/23 were requested within 7 days, this is a drop of almost 10% from 2022/23. Managers attend a fortnightly tracking meeting with colleagues from both relevant health trusts, alongside DBC colleagues from our Performance and Business Support teams to identify and address any delay. Performance colleagues have attended a workshop run by Health partners to explore any issues further. Feedback received from our health colleagues has been positive

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 with Young People

Delays in adoption medicals related to the Somerset judgment have now all been addressed. Further issues with delay (due to sickness absence of our medical advisor) were identified and quickly addressed by appointing additional medical advisors for Darlington. This also builds resilience into the process for the future. We have worked proactively with our Regional Adoption Agency to progress children, where appropriate, into foster to adopt arrangements, thus avoiding delays for them.

*Adoption is considered for those children unable to live with their birth parents. Timely decisions are informed by comprehensive social work assessments to match adopters to children effectively. Detailed child permanence reports provide information to support children in understanding the reason for their plan. Adopters report that they receive effective training and support to prepare them to adopt their child. Life-story work, including later life letters for children, are sensitively completed to a very high standard by social workers who use creative tools with children to inform their life-story work.*

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.

Development is underway to focus our therapeutic offer for children and young people. There are three therapeutic practitioners who will now support all children who have a social worker. The offer is being developed to include a thinking space for foster carers, regular support for children's homes, PACE training and DDP therapy.

From September 2023 all care leavers have access to 'Ask Jan' which is a support offer designed specifically for care experienced young people. Ask Jan Membership includes ALL of the following services:

- A 24-hour counselling helpline with access to a BACP accredited counsellor
- Up to 8 face to face counselling sessions if assessed and agreed by the counsellor
- Personal finance advice – mortgages, pensions, insurance, debt, and savings

- Nutrition, exercise, stress and wellbeing advice
- Specialist advice helplines including housing, legal and citizens advice 8am to 8pm
- Access to an enhanced wellbeing App My Possible Self
- Cognitive behavioural therapy – available online or via the App
- Discounts and special offers on days out and activities with The Max Card
- Access to all other Rees Foundation projects

## Learning and Development

### Attendance of Vulnerable Pupils

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

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

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

### Fair Access and Elective Home Education

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

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



## Stability and Permanence

Where a decision is made that a child needs to come into care there is a focus on identifying the most appropriate family member who could provide care and a viability assessment is undertaken, to provide the basis for a regulation 24 placement. The fostering team become involved to commence the connected care fostering assessment, and to supervise and support the carer. On occasions more than one family member will be identified and assessed, to assist in determining the most suitable family member to provide care. When children are with fully approved connected foster carers and subject of care orders there is an ongoing focus on achieving permanence via an alternative legal order including SGO or CAO. This focus is maintained via case supervision, LAC reviews, Permanence Planning Panels and the Permanence Tracking Panel.

In January 2022 we had 14% of our children in care within Kinship placements, and this is 17% as of June 2023 and including children placed with parents we currently have 34% of our children in care living with family members compared to 26% in January 2022

For those children who are in mainstream foster care placements, there is a focus on achieving a long-term fostering match to secure permanence, and Children and Families assessments are undertaken to identify the child's needs and establish whether the foster carer can meet need. If the placement is positive and the carer can meet long term need to adulthood and potentially into Staying Put arrangements a long-term matching report will be produced and presented to the Fostering Panel for their consideration. Development is underway for a training session to be delivered in partnership with care experienced young people to strengthen what it means to be long-term matched and to think about the long-term challenges that may present in later years for children. This has been identified as part of our ongoing focus on improving stability for our children.

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.

The last year has seen significant challenges to placement sufficiency, which in turn has led to deterioration in placement stability. We have seen our short-term placement instability rise to 13.7% from 11% the previous year, and our long-term stability deteriorate to 58.7% from 74% the previous year. This is a priority area of focus in the forthcoming year. Analysis of all children who have experienced instability has been undertaken and this has identified clear themes. To improve this, training is being developed with lived experience trainers in relation to caring for looked after teenagers.

Sourcing placements for children is a continuing challenge and for some children they may need to stay in short term 'bridging' placement until an appropriate placement is sourced.

At this time, we have one child who is in an unregulated placement. This young person has complex mental health needs which mean finding a placement who can 'match' him with other young people

is challenging. This young person's plan is reviewed weekly, risk assessed and there is a high level of oversight.

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. One of the children's homes has moved to a new build property, 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. 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 placement tracker 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 registered provider commissioned by health colleagues.

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.

In November 2022 we launched a Fostering Network Mockingbird constellation, where a “hub” foster carer supports 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. This is working well and carers involved have spoken positively about the support it has brought them.

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.

As of April 2023, we have supported and found age-appropriate accommodation for 17 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. This has been a fantastic achievement and would not have been possible without a support from colleagues across commissioning, Virtual Head of School team, Looked after through care and Leaving care colleagues. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children have access to a drop-in specifically for them and a Duke of Edinburgh awards scheme supported by our Youth Justice team.

### Care leavers and transitions

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

There 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 was 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. There are regular activities for care leavers to come together.



Thank you for an amazing day, I actually felt like I fitted in for once and I felt normal, it was amazing experience, such lovely memories

Quote from a young person

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).

For those not in Education, Training and Employment (NEET) 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 7 in Staying Put arrangements. 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.

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



what they would like to see change in the future.

In July 2023 we successfully saw being care experienced made a protected characteristic in Darlington and this makes Darlington just the third council in the region to make this move. Four care experienced young people spoke directly at the council meeting about the discrimination they face and

## Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

<b><u>Areas of Strength</u></b>	<b><u>Areas for Development</u></b>
Excellent and aspirational support for care leavers including the addition of 'Staying Close'	Children are experiencing instability in relation to their placements which is linked to placement sufficiency
Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children are well supported, have access to an interpreter and tailored activities to meet their needs	Embedding Staying Close and evaluating its effectiveness
The Mockingbird constellation is working well and supporting foster carer retention.	Focus on ensuring children placed at home are only subject to a Care Order only for as long as necessary and their plans are progressed in line with their needs
Children are known and understood by their social worker and/or Personal Advisor and they are engaging in their plans.	Develop the therapeutic offer for children with a clear programme of intervention and support
Participation of young people is embedded at all levels with a strong Corporate Parenting panel and engagement in interviews/service development.	

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Learning Culture

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

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

*I previously found it difficult to see how we link models to practice, and work in Xtra Space made it very easy today to understand. The support materials, handouts and explanations were great.*

Staff and learner feedback on Xtra Space

*It helped to form links between Children's Services and Adult Services. This made me feel more able to contact colleagues across the directorate if we are co-working a family.*

*I learn by doing and the facilitator created a safe space to give examples to help me understand how the theory is put into practice.*

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

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

## Workforce

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

There continues to be challenges in terms of stability of the wider workforce, which mirror the challenges being seen regionally and nationally. Our vacancy rate (March 2023) is 14.27% which shows an increase on the previous year (8.4%) and is consistent with an increase in the national average (21%). Our agency rates are 15% which is an increase on the previous year and similarly



reflects an increase in the national average (17.6%). Recruitment remains a key priority with ongoing targeted activity, and the vacancy rate for June shows a decrease to 11.4%.

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 the significant increases in demand for services and the recruitment and retention challenges has created some workforce challenges. We have experienced caseloads higher than we would have liked at times, exceeding our preferred capped number of 22. Where caseloads have been higher, management grip and oversight has been consistent and strong, and the impact of children and families has been well understood. Workers continue to be positive about working for Darlington and recognise that there are national challenges in the workforce at present. Where caseloads have exceeded our preferred levels, overtime payments have been provided to workers to recognise the impact of this upon them and their workload.

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

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

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

### Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

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

## What are our plans for the next 12 months?

After a busy and productive year our overall aim for the next year is to continue to develop our relational approach in a way that supports us to respond to the challenging demands that we are anticipating will continue from the previous year.

- We intend to respond to the increases in need and demand through a whole service approach – reviewing and refreshing our approaches and methodology at the Front Door, in Early Help, within our Assessment and Safeguarding and our Looked After Teams.
- We will retain a strong focus on recruitment and retention of skilled practitioners, building upon our strong support offer for staff and further embracing innovative approaches to recruitment to maximise the skills and expertise of our workforce
- Further develop our placement sufficiency through planned and focused engagement with Corporate and Political leaders to develop and enhance our cohort of in-house placements for those children who require our Care
- Engage with national improvement and development work through our involvement in the Regional Fostering Pathfinder work

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

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