

Darlington Children's Services

Self-Assessment 2023-24



Knowing ourselves and knowing our children,
young people and families



DARLINGTON
Borough Council

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Introduction and Overview

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Chris Bell
Assistant Director of Children's Services



James Stroyan
Group Director of People (DCS)

Darlington Context

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RELATIONAL PRACTICE UMBRELLA



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

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

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

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

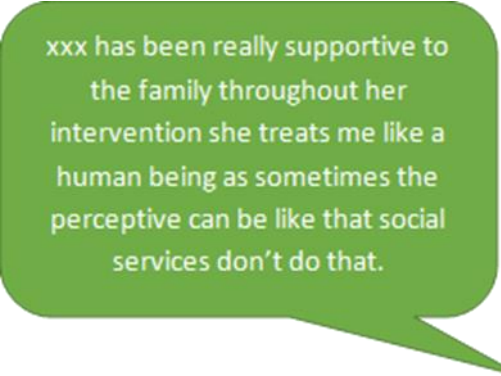
Family Feedback

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

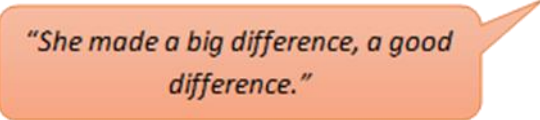
We have strengthened this further, by making Family Feedback a core aspect of our recently established annual Practice Weeks, utilizing staff from across the service to make contact with families which recently resulted in 72 people providing their feedback. What was overwhelmingly evident from this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

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

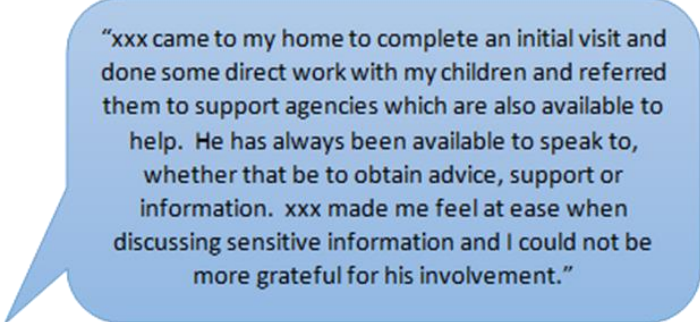
Many reflected that they had felt that they were supported and that their practitioner was there for them when they needed advice and guidance and that they were kind, empathetic, and easy to talk to. Further, many felt that the practitioner had put the time and effort in to build trusting working relationships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



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



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



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

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

Identifying and responding to children’s needs and appropriate thresholds

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Timeliness of EHAs (BSF) for 2020 - 24

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

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

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

Feedback from families supported the findings:

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

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

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

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

Numbers of children/families for 2020 – 24

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

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

Making good decisions and providing effective help

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

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

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

Assessment

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

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

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

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

Child in Need

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

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

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

Children in need of protection

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

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

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

Children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Management Oversight of Frontline Practice

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

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

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

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

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

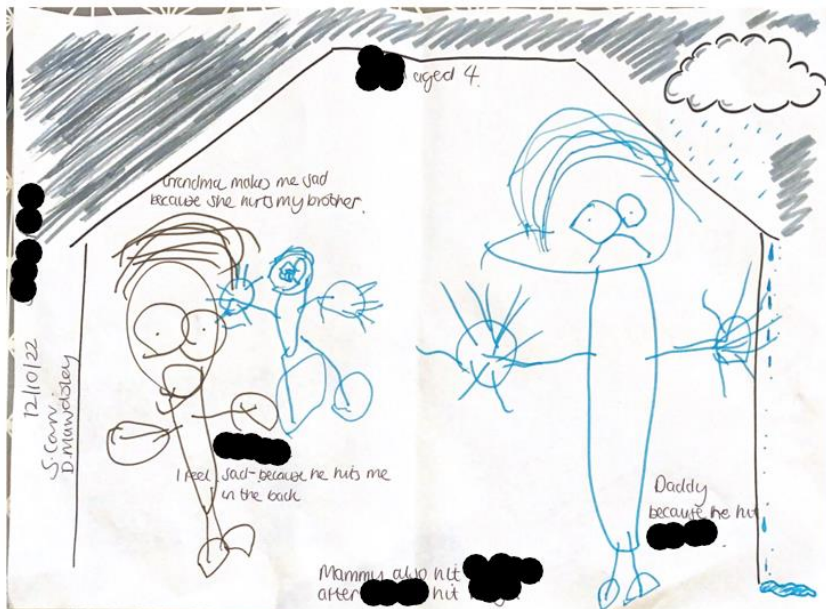
Our management structure lends itself to quality oversight of our teams with each Service Manager having clear roles and responsibilities. An example being one Service Manager is responsible for transition planning for children to adulthood and another is a lead for adoption. This enables consistent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

Participation and direct work with children and families

Olivia Winward 16.04.2024

Your Name: Olivia Winward	Important People in your life: mum, dad, Ebony, Harvey, Rhys, my cousins - Abigail + Noah.
Who is your social worker and how can you contact them? Hayley Smith TEL: 07985 848526	Who is on your helping hand? Draw a hand or around your hand and write the names of 5 people who you can talk to about your worries. (Hand-drawn diagram with names: dad, Tutor Miss Coban, Miss O'Sullivan, Ebony, Mum, Trusted adult)
What is your social worker and other people worried about? About what I told Miss O'Sullivan that I don't like it when my mum and dad argue. Hayley is worried about how this makes me feel. She is also worried about what I see and hear at home.	When I don't feel safe.... I will... ring Ebony on her mobile and ask her to pick me up. I want you... come and see me and talk to me.
When do you feel safe? When I am with mum and dad and they are not having arguments.	When do you want to happen? For them to stop the arguments and for us to all spend time as a family.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Children with disabilities

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

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children

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

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

Children from Gypsy, Roma and travelling families

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

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

Areas of Strength	Areas for Development
Assessments and risk assessments are strong, considering the child's history in context and clearly articulating risk	Improve the evidence of relational practice in all recording including direct work, the "voice of the child," in chronologies, children's records and plans
Our Weekly Referral Meeting – giving clear oversight, Strong Challenge and Strong Support	Proportionate and timely assessments, directed by management at allocation. Reviewed throughout the assessment process to prevent delay.
Relational Practice embedding across our whole service	Improving our understanding of reasons for "No further action" outcomes to assessment, particularly in relation to children and families who have been subject to section 47 investigations
Increasing level of Family Group Conferencing	Increase the use and understanding of contingency planning for children, including encouraging families to do so within their FGC
Robust oversight of legal and permanence tracking	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 for most families decisions made for children to come into care are timely, proportionate, and based upon a clear, recorded understanding of the issues and risks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Participation and direct work with children in care and care leavers

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

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

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

Helping and Protecting

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

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

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

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

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

Health

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Learning and Development

Attendance of Vulnerable Pupils

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

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

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

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

Fair Access and Elective Home Education

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

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

Stability and Permanence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Care leavers and transitions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Learning Culture

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

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

Staff and learner feedback on Xtra Space.

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.

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.

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.

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

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

Workforce

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Plans for Next 12 Months

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

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

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

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

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

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

Strengthening Families 2023-24

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



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



We'll always try and help families stay together



We'll always try and return children home

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

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