



Darlington Children's Services

Self-Assessment 2024-25



DARLINGTON
Borough Council

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Introduction and Overview

This document reflects the journey of Darlington Borough Council's Children's Services within 2024-25, 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 has coincided with the Area SEND Inspection in November 2024, whereby the overall findings found that outcomes are not consistent, but some areas of real strength were identified, including;

"most children and young people receive timely and effective support from early help or children's social care. Their voices are clearly incorporated into their social care assessments and this informs children and young people's plans. Children and young people's social care plans are child-centred and identify multidisciplinary actions to improve the child's lived experience."

Area SEND Inspection, November 2024

Our ongoing progress is within the context of the outcome and findings of our other most recent Inspection findings, with our last ILACS which took place in October 2022 finding 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 and reaffirming 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.

October 2023 also saw a Focused Visit to consider arrangements for Children in Need and Children subject of a Protection Plan. 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, December 2023

"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



In the context of this the past year has seen the service have a continued and relentless focus on ongoing development and improvement of services to Children and Families, with an intense focus on maintaining workforce stability, improving performance and quality of practice, and subsequently outcomes for Children and Families.

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 2024-25 had 3 key Principles, underpinned by our 5 Strategic Priorities;

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 2024/25 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 key service developments have taken place within a context of continued high levels of 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,
Children's Services



James Stroyan
Executive 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 46% increase overall in contacts since the new Front Door arrangements were embedded in 2020. Whilst this trend was predicted and to be expected following our move in 2020 to a relational, conversational style, the complexity of need in referrals has also increased, and so, the contact to referral conversion rate increasing. The past year has seen the result of focused and targeted work at the Front Door to expand upon the Early Help offer to result in fewer children requiring referrals to social care. This is reflected below which highlights that whilst the number of contacts has increased by 5.5%, the number of referrals has reduced by almost 30%.

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Contacts (children)	8,182	9,910	10,736	11,324	11,948
Referrals (children)	748	1,014	1,613	1,374	962
Conversion %	9.1	10.2	15.0	12.1	8

The changes to numbers of social care referrals is the result of focused work across services. There has been a continual emphasis placed on providing the "Right Service at the Right Time", this has been complemented by a relentless focus on quality and outcomes of assessments to reduce the number of No Further Action (NFA) assessments and re-referrals. This has allowed statutory services to focus on the right interventions and with a reduced number of children requiring statutory interventions through Child Protection Plans or coming in to our Care. This has resulted in the numbers of children subject to Child Protection Plans reducing by almost 24% and Children in Care reducing by over 11%, when compared with the previous year. During the same period, Early Help Assessments increased by 5% and Externally Led Early Help Assessments increased by 16%.

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Child Protection Plans	87	120	116	146	111
Children in Care	272	273	322	300	265
Early Help Assessments	253	411	490	423	443
External EH Assessments	93	73	125	125	145

These factors have resulted in reduced caseloads for workers, with average caseloads below 18 for all case holding social work teams. This subsequently had a positive impact upon a number of key areas of performance with Child and Family Assessment timeliness increasing to 89.4%, compared with 62.7% in 2024. We have also overseen reductions in the rate of "No Further Action" Assessments, down to 49% from 58% and a reduction in re-referrals to 12.9% from 23.1%. This fits strongly with our ethos of ensuring that families receive the right support at the right time.

Alongside the monitoring of performance, we have continued to develop our quality assurance functions and processes, with a focus on increasing the levels of collaboration in quality assurance, both with practitioners and with children and families. The analysis of our quality assurance activity and the impact upon children and families is detailed later in the report. We have a good understanding of the areas of challenge within the service and practice; we work proactively with the service to understand and develop these.

Our approach to missing, and the links to exploitation, has been an area of focus with our percentage of RTHIs offered reduced to 74.3% from 87% and the number completed reduced to 51.4% from 76.9%. In response we have commissioned an independent review of our response to children who are missing or at risk of exploitation and a new delivery model for these services is being developed and implemented over the coming year.

Placement stability for Children in Care has continued to be a significant challenge over the past year. Our response to the placement stability and sufficiency challenges has been a further focus on the development and maintenance of our own in-house resources. Over the past 3 years we have continued to develop new children’s homes, with our own homes increasing from 4 homes to 6 homes and an increased focus on foster carer recruitment has seen the number of new carers recruited over the past year, with 11 new carers recruited during 2024/25 compared with 5 in 2023 and 7 in 2022. This will take some time to fully impact upon placement stability and whilst some improvements in short-term stability have been observed, further improvement is needed leading to impact being felt in terms of long-term stability.

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
ST Stability (% with 3+ moves)	11.0	13.7	17.0	13.3
LT Stability (placement >2yr for age 16yr)	74.0	58.7	61.1	53.3



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

We have retained a clear focus on continuous improvement over the past year, working closely with practitioners and managers to ensure that families receive an appropriate and proportionate service, and that workloads are manageable. This has seen a greater emphasis on Early Help leading to reductions in statutory workloads, as well as drive and focus on improving performance.

We have maintained regular and robust performance management and oversight to understand the impact that these changes have had on service delivery and on the quality of practice in Darlington.

Through performance management we developed a clear understanding that the timeliness of our actions has improved:

- assessment timeliness improving from 62.7% to 89.4% within 45 days and with increasing numbers being completed proportionately and earlier in the assessment period.
- improvement in timeliness of statutory visits, with CP visits improving from 90% to 95% and Children in Care from 81% to 83%.
- improvements on impacts with the number of “no further action” outcomes to assessments reducing from 58% to 49% and the number of re-referrals reducing from 23% to under 13%.

In addition to regular performance management, we have maintained the Weekly Referral Meeting (WRM), which analyses, through the lens of quality and impact, the decisions made at the front door and at the point of case allocation. This continues to provide a high level of oversight into practice, in real time, and helps us understand the impact of our decision making upon children and families. The Weekly Referral Meeting is multifaceted, it allows 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 both prompt and proportionate. This has been particularly valuable as we have seen “contact to referral” conversion reduce and the number of families stepping up from Early Help to Social Care has reduced from 16% to 12%. WRM provides clear oversight of decision making and gives assurance that decisions for more families to receive Early Help are justified, proportionate and in keeping with families’ needs.

We undertake regular Practice Review Audits in a collaborative approach to audit with the allocated social worker, to provide a space for understanding quality and impact and immediate learning. We have amended our processes and seek greater input and involvement from families in our audit process, alongside reflective discussion with the allocated social worker and their management.

Our Practice Review Audits have demonstrated an overall improvement in the quality of practice across 2024-2025. We rate audits Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement and Inadequate. Whilst we continued to find 79% of case files Good or Outstanding in 2025, the same as 2024, we found that of those 12% were Outstanding and 67% Good, compared with 6% Outstanding and 73% Good the previous year. We also found only 3% of case files being Inadequate, reduced from 7% the previous year. The greater proportion of audits finding practice to be Outstanding (12%) and the reduction in findings of Inadequate (3%) gives us evidence and assurance that incremental improvements in quality continue to be made.

A deep dive audit into the Quality of Management Oversight and Supervision was undertaken which identified that further support was needed to strengthen this area. This led to a focused practice session being arranged for Team Managers and Advanced Practitioners to improve consistency in supervision quality and frequency. In addition, a 'senior management' oversight case note was introduced to capture Service Manager and Head of Service management direction. The Weekly Review Meeting has seen improved management oversight at the point of assessment's being allocated which enables clearer direction to be provided to social workers. This impact of this work will remain under review during Practice Review and Quality Assurance activity.

We have also maintained our commitment to implementing 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. We recently held a Practice week with a focus on Domestic Abuse, which involved 52 Practice Conversations, 18 Observations of Practice, 54 Parents and Carers contacted for feedback and 30 Children and Young Peoples' surveys being returned.

The findings highlighted strong relational practice, with practitioners demonstrating empathy, effective communication, and a clear understanding of the impact of domestic abuse. Children and families reported feeling respected, supported, and empowered, with many praising the dedication and compassion of their social workers. Practice Conversations and Observations of Practice revealed strengths in direct work, planning, and multiagency collaboration, though areas for development were noted in consistency of recording, use of advocacy, and supervision quality. Feedback from the workforce reflected a positive culture of support and professional confidence. The overview report concluded with a commitment to continuous improvement through actionable recommendations which are reviewed and progressed through our Practice Development Group.

Our Practice Development Group meets regularly; its purpose is to identify actions, share best practice and to address any thematic issues within practice, emerging from our Quality Assurance and Performance activity; including Practice Review Audits, Weekly Review Meetings. The group also has strong links with the Assistant Director Practice Clinics so that we gain a real sense of crossover and cohesion between performance and quality. It is chaired by the Head of Practice and Quality (PSW) and includes Heads of Service, Service Managers, Quality Assurance Leads, the Relational and Restorative Practice Lead, colleagues from the Performance Team and Workforce Development. This membership ensures clear leadership to the ongoing development of our practice, and the culture that underpins Children's services. The leadership team is essential to the effectiveness of the group ensuring that it is moving forward and has a real impact, ensuring learning can be acted upon to drive continuing practice improvement.

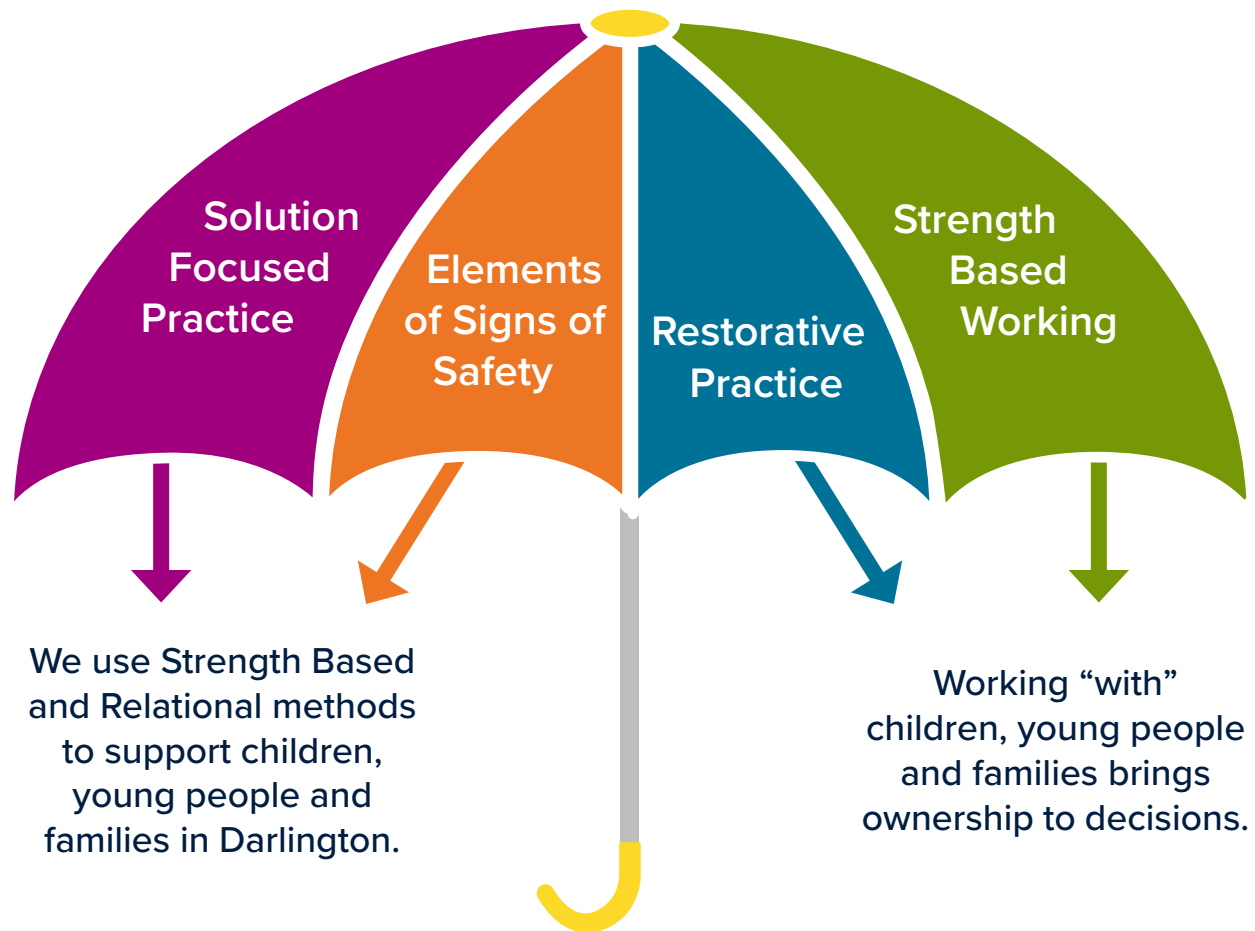
The group has so far identified themed audits around re-referrals, no further action assessments and further development and support around reflective management oversight to be key priorities.

The overall focus across our Quality Assurance activities is our Relational and Restorative Practice model. We assess not only the use of key elements within our Practice Umbrella, but also the impact of these interventions on children and families.

The use of Relational and Restorative Practice is evident in feedback from children, young people, parents, and carers; in case file reviews showing improved outcomes; and in reflections from our workforce.



RELATIONAL PRACTICE UMBRELLA



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

Family Feedback

Through our Practice Review Audits feedback is sought from families by auditors. 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, and to draw out trends and themes over time. Family Feedback is also a core aspect of our annual Practice Weeks, utilizing staff from across the service to contact children and families to seek their views and feedback.

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
- they were also able to share their views and speak openly
- their wishes and feelings were supported
- their practitioner was there for them when they needed advice and guidance
- practitioners were kind, empathetic, and easy to talk to
- the practitioner had put the time and effort in to build trusting working relationships with them and their children.

"She's absolutely fantastic she's like my own family. She's there for us, she knows how to take me as I can be melodramatic and she knows how to bring me down. She has always made a difference, couldn't sing her praises enough. She's always been there. I've had some bad experiences over the years and XXX has always been there to save the day and she's the reason I haven't lost faith in the system"

"She helped me in so many ways it is unbelievable. We came here with nothing, and it was near to Christmas. I was stressing about it all. We had no curtains no bedding and so on. She organised everything, came in with some food and Christmas gifts which was beautiful. I also struggled with my confidence, and she made me stop, think, and clear my path of thoughts. She has done so much more than her job which she is clearly passionate about. She has been a rock. I don't know how Proof we would have survived without her."

'They helped me to move on and be safe. They were very good provided a lot of support and made a difference'

The social worker had a positive effect on my daughter's development; she helped her to be more"

'The social worker is great and easy to talk to. She is friendly, lovely and gives good advice'

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. Whilst these numbers are the highest regionally, we continue to believe this is central to effective and positive communication across the partnership. Nevertheless this places a great deal of pressure on the service and an ongoing understanding of what is driving the activity is essential; knowing ourselves and knowing our families had never been so important.

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Safeguarding concern (contacts)	4,428	5,347	5,730	5,993	6,170
Non-Safeguarding concern (contacts)	868	1,386	2,003	1,693	1,291

We know that the ongoing increase in contacts has come about due to two significant factors.

One is that the model introduced in 2020 promotes conversation and stronger relationships with partners. 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 sits well with the relational framework that Darlington has created; families and the workforce benefit from this.

The second is the increasing levels of need and complexity of need, some of which have been brought about by the Covid pandemic and the medium to long term impact on communities.

A significant focus at the Front Door over the past year has involved challenging ourselves, and challenging together as a partnership, to respond most effectively to the needs of children and families. Through the focused work we have seen increases to the number of families being supported via Early Help, both internally through our Building Stronger Families Team and through externally led Early Help Assessments via partners. This has led to reductions in numbers of social care referrals, and ultimately Children subject to Child Protection and Children in Care. The Weekly Referral meeting has provided management oversight and assurance that these decisions are safe and proportionate. The improved performance in relation to Step Ups from Early Help, Re-referrals and NFA assessments further supports the appropriateness of the decision making.

There continues to be challenges in terms of the high number of contacts received from Police colleagues, in the context of the low number that translate into referrals or the need to identify services. Joint working has been carried out to understand the drivers and challenges of this approach but this has not yet led to significant changes and the challenges remain. This is a continued area of strategic focus for the coming year.

The reductions in numbers of children being referred to statutory services and increases in numbers of children receiving Early Help support is in keeping with our ethos of ensuring that children and families receive the right support at the right time.

Analysis of the data confirms an ongoing consistency in terms of the primary drivers for the demand for services. The primary issues 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 has never been more the case than with pending service wide reforms on the horizon.

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. Our partnership ethos of the “right service at the right time” extends to our approach to Early Help Assessments and a big focus has been on increasing the number of externally led Early Help Assessments for families. The table below shows a 16% increase in the number of externally led Early Help Assessments, which is very positive. This has contributed overall to increases in the number of children receiving Early Help support, preventing the need for statutory services.

	2023/24	2024/25
Children open to BSF	423	443
Children open to an External EH Lead	125	145

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 and through evaluation and feedback from families, the voice of the family is assisting with qualitative information being gained, understood and contributing to improvements and this developing service area.

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

The timeliness of the completion of EHAs has been an area of focus over the past few years. Data tells us that assessments are not being completed swiftly; however, we regularly discuss how the timeline of families we work with in the non-statutory ‘early help’ space is often one that means more time is needed to build relationships during assessment, we recognise there is rarely one presenting issue, this brings with it further complexity. “Our families teach us a lot, and we listen.”

Our families have often told us that at the point of contact they aren’t always ready to voluntarily ‘open up’. So, we make contact with them quickly but then listen to how they would like their assessment to be carried out; maintaining a relationship with them throughout, encouraging commencement of meaningful assessment, all of which takes time. Alongside this we understand how in recent years we have seen the point at which families reach the service has changed, families often reach our service at a point of crisis, needing a different approach. Practitioners are entering their worlds with a high level of support approach; trying to problem solve, manage conflict, poor mental health and various other challenges our families face. Ensuring their wellbeing and building trust takes priority so immediate barriers to meaningful assessment are identified and tackled, then once there is a period of settlement the practitioner can commence the assessment in earnest. These important factors increase the time it takes to complete a meaningful assessment. During the assessment period help and support is continuously offered and all that takes place during this phase informs the overall assessment and plan from the outset.

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Step Up to Statutory Services	20.3%	19.7%	16.1%	12.2%
All intervention completed and no further support	16.5%	22%	29.1%	31.2%

In 2024 we introduced a new EHA document, this utilised the 10 headlines that were set by the government's Supporting Families Outcome Framework. The assessment document is supported by a range of tools, including a Family Wheel, aimed to help identify which areas the families need support in; it utilises scaling to help measure progress. Staff are also actively encouraged to use a chronology and complete family's journeys within the assessment, bringing focus to root causes.

The family plan element of the assessment has also been updated, it continues with the headlines, ensuring all worries transfer into actions, there is a focus on understanding why support is needed, keeping the plan SMART, and reflecting on what the impact has been. The updated assessment and plan also bring focus to partners being included in EHA's and gathering information from them to inform the family plan. In the 24/25 year, we started to see work with families reaching point of closure in a timelier way, with exit plans for families and a good understanding of how progress will be sustained.



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 and a dedicated Children with Disabilities Team 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 Assessment and Safeguarding 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.

A significant focus in 2024/25 has been upon the quality and timeliness of Child & Family Assessments and understanding the impact and outcomes on children and families better. This work has led to real improvements in the timeliness of assessments, with 89.4% of Child & Family Assessments completed within 45 working days, an improvement from 62% and 70% in the previous two years. Additional management check points have been put into place and the focus of the coming year will be to increase the number of assessments which can proportionately be completed at earlier checkpoints, as too many assessments are still only being completed at the 45-day point.

The analysis of impact has seen positive improvements this year with the number of "No Further Action" (NFA) assessments reducing to 49%, compared with 58% the previous year. The number of re-referrals has reduced to 12.9% from 23% the previous year. This gives assurance that assessments are meaningful, identify the key issues and most importantly ensure that robust and sustainable plans are put in place to effectively support families. When there are re-referrals, monthly deep dive activity has been 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 Senior leadership Team (SLT) to ensure that findings are linked to learning in practice and focuses on 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

925 children had a Child & Family Assessment completed in 2024/2025. This is a reduction when compared to 2023/24 (1,554) and 2022/2023 (1,461). 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 of improvement following significant focus and intervention. Assessment timeliness is now 89.4%, which is a significantly improved position when compared with 2023/2024 (62.7%) and 2022/23 (70%). Despite this a focus for the coming year will be to increase the proportion of assessments completed at earlier checkpoints, to ensure that families are receiving assessments which are timely and proportionate to their needs.

We have also seen improvements in terms of the impact of assessment over the past year with a reduction in both the number of assessments concluding with no further action (49% from 58%) and a reduction in the number of re-referrals (12.9% from 23.1%). 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

256 children were an open Child in Need (CiN) at the end of March 2025. This is a decrease compared to the end of March 2024 (324) and consistent with lower numbers of referrals for social care during 2024/25, compared with previous years.

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.

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 346 strategy discussions in 2024/2025, which is a reduction of 34% when compared with the number of strategy discussion held in 2023/24 (527). This reduction level correlates closely to the reduced number of referrals for social care, which would indicate a consistent proportion of children receiving social care support are considered in need of protection. These led to 277 Section 47 investigations being initiated, which is a conversion of 78.9%, however of these Section 47's only 33.5% proceeded to an Initial Child Protection Conference. The conversion rate is low in comparison to comparators, however is consistent with our conversion numbers previously in 2023/24 (32%) and 2022/23 (26%). An independent review was commissioned through the Sector Led improvement process to consider practice and decision making regarding this part of the protection process and did not raise any key concerns or actions. This continues to be a focus of internal challenge and scrutiny of practice and decision making.

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). 148 families had an FGC in 2024/2025 which is an increase of 26% when compared to figures for 2023/24 (117) and 2022/23 (115). This has led to some extremely positive outcomes for families and contributed to reductions in Children in Care and subject of Protection Plans.

Children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan

111 children were subject to a Child Protection (CP) Plan at the end of March 2025, this is a reduction on the previous year but in line with the reductions in referrals and numbers of Children in Need proportionately. When comparing this to our neighbouring authorities, our rate for CP remains below the regional rate.

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’.

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 0-2%, 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.

Category of Abuse	National 2024	DBC 2025
Neglect	49%	59%
Emotional	40%	34%
Physical	6%	6%
Sexual	3%	0%
Multiple	2%	Not used

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 2024-25 was 23.6%, an increase on previous years, despite improved re-referral rates. This remains slightly better than the National average of 24% and regional average 25% (most recent published data) but focused work is to be undertaken to understand the rises and address them.

Statutory visits for Children on a Child Protection Plan has been the result of focused work over the past year and this has led to improvements in performance with 94.5% of statutory visits being completed in timescales, compared with 90% in 2023/24 and 2022/23.

Timeliness of ICPC continues to be a significant challenge with only 76.9% of ICPCs being held in timescale, further deteriorating from 2023/24 (79.5%) and consistent with 2022/23 (76.4%). Focused work has been done to identify effective pathways and to promote effective communication but challenges still persist. A further focused piece of work is planned and regular reviews are taking place of those children where the ICPC is held out of timescales to understand the impact of the delay.

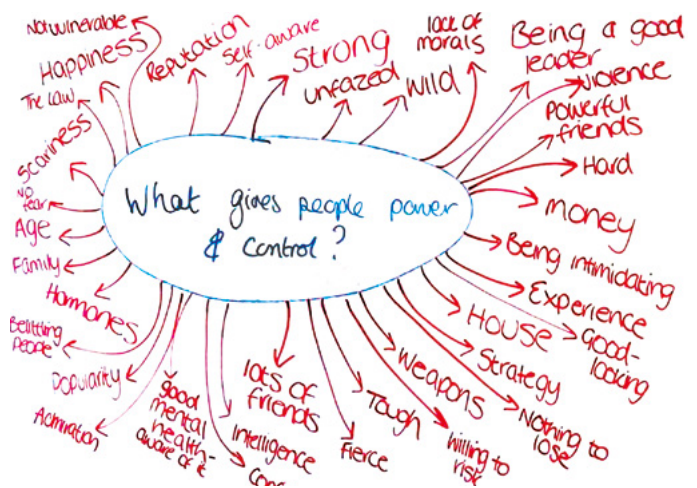
A formulation approach 're-think' is now taking place when children are approaching 2 years subject to a Child Protection Plan. This enables the social worker, team manager, IRO and partners to come together and consider ways to progress planning for children and avoid further delay. This is currently being embedded.

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. Through Quality Assurance and monitoring we are aware of a small number of Children whose CP Plans have been in place for too long, with neither a de-escalation or escalation in their plans and the plan is to complete some focused deep dive review on these Children and families in the coming year.

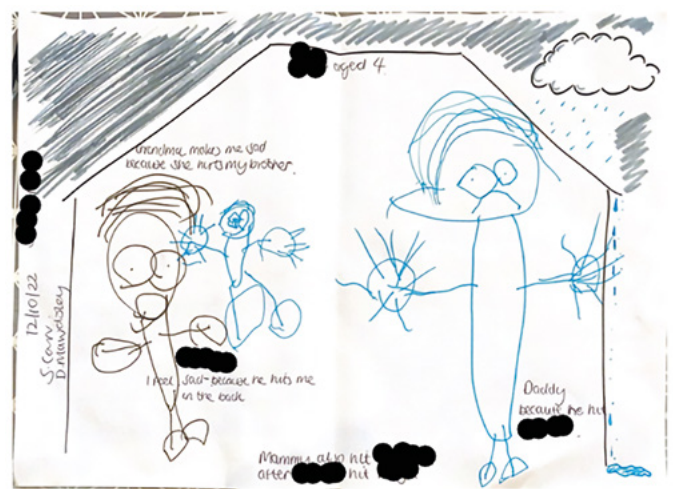
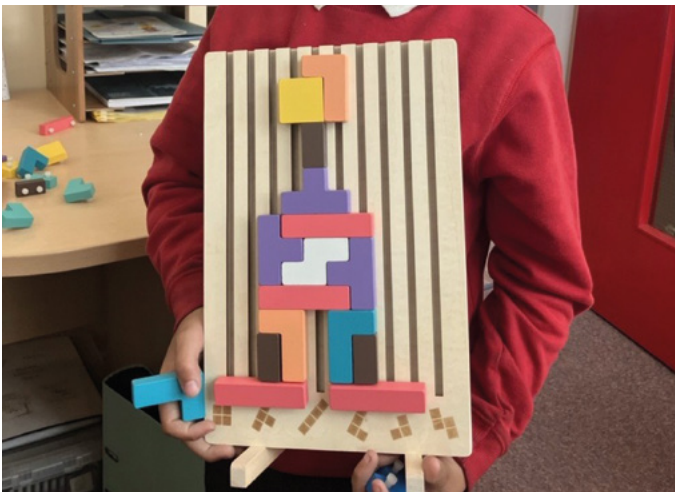
Participation and direct work with children and families

A variety of direct work tools are used to engage children and understand their lived experiences. An area of focus 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.

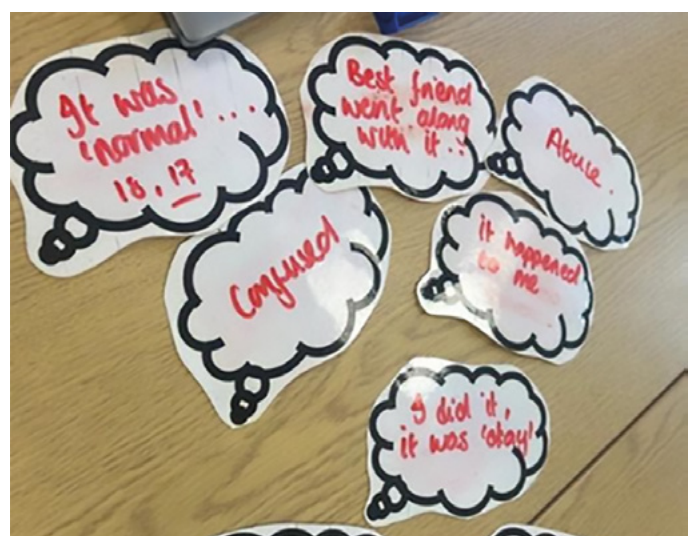


Direct work impacts directly on outcomes for children. The above direct work was used to understand two young children's experiences at home where concerns about domestic abuse and physical abuse were present. The direct work with the children coupled with multi-agency concerns enabled the social worker to make an application for the children to be placed outside of parental care and they were subsequently placed for adoption.

We have also very recently launched our Engagement Toolkit to further support and strengthen direct work, bringing together a wealth of tools mapped to children and young people's journeys to support practitioners with creative approaches.



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. We have this year invested 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

A strategic priority has been our focus on those young people who are missing and/or exploited, recognising this as a key vulnerability area. These children are identified in the first instance via the Children's Front Door and this action is supported by a Daily Missing Meeting to ensure all missing episodes are considered and any risk associated with these episodes, for example, exploitation, is carefully analysed and appropriate responses agreed.

This work is complemented by 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. The Strategic Child Exploitation Group (CEG) is held quarterly and is a joint meeting with Durham County Council. The quarterly Regional Harm Away from Home meeting means that learning across the region is shared and joint approaches between authorities are 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, it assists further with the gathering of intelligence and to inform mapping.

A Child Exploitation Worker and a Missing from Home Worker are commissioned, via Barnardo's, as part of the Front Door Service. Performance in relation to the response to children who go missing has declined over the past year, with only 74.3% of Return to Home Interviews being offered within 72 hours, and only 51.4% being completed within 72 hours. This compares with offer rates of 87% (2023/24) and 84% (2022/23) with completion rates of 76.9% (2023/24) and 59.1% (2022/23). With the worsening performance an independent review of the response to those missing was commissioned. The findings of this review have led to changes in the delivery of this service; these are being embedded in the coming year.

The actual number of missing episodes has reduced over the past year with 272 incidents involving 81 children, compared with 423 incidents involving 122 children the previous year. The reduced missing episodes have been achieved following focused work, especially our own Children's Homes, to understand the risks and factors involved with children going missing and appropriate responses tailored to these.

Data is carefully analysed, month/quarter/annually, with the number of missing episodes 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, as well as the response in terms of engagement in the Return Home Interview (RHI) and the timescale within which this is held. Importantly the quality of these RHIs is now audited with learning and outcomes shared with teams and the service.

Improvement is needed in relation to data gathered regarding children at risk of/being exploited, this is an issue both regionally and nationally. It has been highlighted that the data in this area of social care still requires development to create the picture of exploitation. Currently 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. Gathering more sophisticated and accurate data is necessary to support the prevention of harm in relation to exploitation and assist with ensuring an appropriate response is provided.

Following a review undertaken by Barnardos the strategic and operational responsibility for children at risk of or experiencing exploitation was moved to the Care Planning part of the service. A review of the exploitation policy which will be presented at the strategic child exploitation group in September 2025 for implementation. A weekly thinking space for practitioners is to be introduced to support practice and a programme of additional training on exploitation including the use of a matrix to assess risk.

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, this offers clear direction to practitioners. This is complimented at our Weekly Referral 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 individual child's needs. Children who are subject to Child Protection Plans or in our care in short term placements are supervised monthly with children subject to Child in Need Plans or long-term matched children in our care having up to 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 where possible, 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. These Practice Review Audits enable practitioners to have time to discuss the family they are working with and reflectively explore strengths and areas for development.

Learning from Practice Review Audits has also led to the completion of a themed audit of supervision and the development of an action plan to roll out a practice session to all managers to provide refresher learning and development on effective reflective supervision. We have also introduced a Senior Management Oversight case note function so that additional management oversight can be captured and understood.

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.

Children with disabilities

We have a dedicated team who support children with disabilities. This team is responsible for assessing children's needs and eligibility and providing specific support linked to a child's disability needs. 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 a child in need, child in need of protection or as a child in our care. We have strengthened our offer for children undergoing a statutory assessment of special education needs by employing a dedicated social worker to complete social care advice where children do not have an allocated social worker. This was in response to our internal audits of social care advice as well as our SEND Inspection. During the SEND inspection we have ensured the CWD lozenge on LCS is used more widely to enable us to understand better our children's needs.

We have had one family subject to a Child Protection Plan active to the Children with Disabilities team, they have remained active to this team as whilst safeguarding concerns have become apparent, they were a family receiving a paid service due to the children's disabilities. 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.

There are examples of children who are active to the Assessment and Safeguarding Service because their overriding need is one of safeguarding, receiving a co-worker from the Children with Disabilities team to assess the child's specific needs arising from their disability and eligibility for paid services to ensure children receive the right support at the right time. This ensures that children receive a priority response from both areas of the service seamlessly and was highlighted in a recent practice audit as an area of excellent practice.

We continue to focus on strengthening our transition to adulthood. We continue to have a transition to adulthood tracker and forum which is jointly held between children's and adult services to ensure children transition seamlessly. A preparing for adulthood procedure has been prepared and is being progressed and ensures that all children receive an appropriate transition but ensuring children whose needs aren't disability related is an area of ongoing focus.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children

We have continued to engage 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 the 31st March 2025, we had 22 Unaccompanied young people in our care, this was an increase from 18 in our care as of 31st March 2024. Our UASC population accounts for 8.3% of our Children in Care population, compared to 6% in March 2024.

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 Traveler Education and Attainment Service. They offer support to families with access to education 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 also specializes in supporting travelling families.

Young Carers

Our approach to assessment is to ensure that within the voice of the child we are considering their caring responsibility and subsequent needs at young carers. Where young carers have identified needs, we have a commissioned service via Family Action, and currently 53 referrals for children and young people have been made. We know that levels of vulnerability and complexity of need have increased, we have recognised that this means the extent to which children and young people may be taking on caring roles and responsibilities will also increase.

Children's Services, as part of a wider People Group Directorate, have the Commitment to Carers Strategy, which include a specific objective around Young Carers. There is a Carers Strategy Steering Group, which Children's Services are part of.

Private Fostering

In Darlington, during the 2024–2025 period, two children were identified as being in private fostering arrangements. These cases were managed in line with statutory requirements, ensuring that the children's welfare was prioritised and monitored effectively. Looking ahead, we are committed to undertaking focussed work to review and strengthen how we promote awareness of private fostering across our communities and among professionals. This will include evaluating current communication strategies and training offers to ensure that private fostering arrangements are recognised early, enabling timely intervention and safeguarding of children if required.

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

Areas of Strength	Areas for Development
Our Weekly Referral Meeting – giving clear oversight, Strong Challenge and Strong Support	Timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences
Quality and Impact of Assessments	Consistency of management oversight across Service
Relational Practice embedding across our whole service, with increased focus on children's records being written to them	Increase use of proportionate and time limited assessments
Robust oversight of legal and permanence tracking	The voice of Children and their families
Established, dynamic and responsive Edge of Care Support offer from Keeping Families Together service to support children to remain with their families	Review of longer-term Child Protection Plans
Revised pre-birth procedure to ensure that families who need a social work assessment are supported earlier in their pregnancy to ensure considered planning and provide support to prevent babies being born into care where possible	Ongoing partnership work (with police)

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.

Our approach to have two decision making panels and panels, a Practice Solutions Panel and a Complex Needs Panel focuses on high-cost support needs where funding is shared, for example with Health. Both panels are multi-disciplinary with 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 ensures a range of expertise and knowledge available to find the best solutions and follow through support.

Numbers of Children in Care has steadily decreased this year, with 265 Children in Care at the end of 2024/25, compared with 300 at the end of 2023/24 and 311 at the end of 2022/23. The use of these panels to consider creative and supportive solutions to families to prevent children coming into care has seen a significant reduction to children entering care, with only 62 entering care over the past year, compared with 121 in 2023/24 and 149 in 2022/23. Focused work to progress plans for children in care has seen 95 children safely leave our care over the past year. These reducing numbers of Children in Care allows increased focus on those children in most need in our Care.

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."

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.

Following a review of the wording of our 'Letter before proceedings' being undertaken by the Senior Leadership Team with support from our legal colleagues, a revised letter is now more relational in language ensuring it is more accessible in terms of readability, thus improving understanding and engagement from parents. This new letter is embedded and informs the subsequent processes whereby children and their families are held at the centre of our planning for children. Exploration of family placement options via FGC and Viability Assessments is the first consideration for a child being removed from parental care. Our reductions in Children entering care correlates with significant increases in the number of Family Group Conference facilitated over the past year, with 148 completed, a 26% increase on the previous year. Our focus and support to kinship arrangements for children has ensured that our proportion of Children in Care placed with connected carers has increased to 20%, compared to 15.3% in 2023/24 and 15.8% in 2022/23.

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 provide effective oversight of children's plans. Giving direction and guidance to managers and social workers in their work with children and families, this 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 (LATC) 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.

Participation and direct work with children in care and care leavers

We continue to build activities and groups for children and young people to get involved with, including Younger Children in Care, peer mentor youth sessions, 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.

There is a care leaver representative 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. It is an environment where healthy challenge is welcome.

Our aspiration is to work with our Care Experienced Young People and our Participation team to review our Corporate Parenting arrangements over the coming year to ensure that the group continues to be child centred and focused on the issues that most matter to and impact upon Children in Our Care.

Helping and Protecting

Multi agency work involving our Front Door and our residential homes has continued to be effective in reducing missing episodes with 71 missing episodes reported this year, part of an ongoing reduction compared to 141 in 2023/24 and 271 in 2022/23. 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 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

92.3% of required health assessment reviews due by 31 March 2025 were completed, with only 0.5% of young people refusing to attend. This maintains our performance consistently over 90% with ongoing engagement sought within Looked After Review and Corporate Parenting Panel to consider what barriers exist and how the performance can be further improved upon. 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 are passionate about promoting and supporting good mental health for our care leavers. Young people's mental health is prioritised and promoted through support and referrals from social workers, personal advisors, and Staying Close personal advisors. Our local offer includes access to independent emotional wellbeing support, counselling, and practical advice through commissioned services and partnerships. We ensure care leavers are supported to access mental health services, including NHS and voluntary sector provision, and we work closely with professionals to identify and respond to individual needs. We continue to explore innovative ways to enhance our mental health offer, ensuring it is accessible, trauma-informed, and responsive to the lived experiences of care-experienced young people.

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. This 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 also 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 continue to be above national and regional averages, with the exception of the secondary suspension rate where it is lower than the regional 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. All Darlington schools share live attendance data through the Liquid Logic EYES system. 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 below national average attendance for all pupils. When disadvantaged groups are compared Darlington is -0.2% better than national average. Similarly, Darlington is slightly above national average for Persistently absent disadvantaged pupils and below national average for Severely Persistently absent disadvantaged pupils.

Fair Access and Elective Home Education

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

There is a full-time EHE Advisor who work with schools and families who are considering EHE. A significant proportion of Darlington's EHE pupils are from our GRT community. The GRT community are supported with an education service. There has been a rise in the number of Electively Home Educated pupils since the pandemic. The authority has taken steps to mitigate this rise through the introduction of an Inclusion Charter which has been co-produced with school leaders and adopted by all schools in Darlington.

Stability and Permanence

We have maintained a clear focus on placement stability and permanence while understanding the dynamic between placement sufficiency and placement stability. We have continued to focus on the development and expansion of our Children's Homes and now have increased from 4 homes to 6 homes over a 3-year period. We have worked to embed relational practices across our homes and this has resulted in 5 of our 6 homes being graded as Good following OFSTED inspection.

CEDARS is our in-reach, outreach, and overnight service. It provides planned short breaks and has extended from a weekend service to operating 7 days a week. The service also offers a responsive and flexible approach to placements under pressure, when appropriate. Children were placed, with CEDARS, in emergency scenarios as an alternative to unregulated arrangements. This has resulted in some challenges, including the Inspection process. CEDARS is currently rated an Inadequate. However, a new Registered Manager was appointed and is recently in post. They are working proactively on an improvement plan for the home.

Overall, 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 generally. 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.

The past year has also seen development progress with our fostering service. Following consultation and engagement with carers a new foster carer offer was launched in April 2024 and this has resulted in improved foster carer recruitment, with 11 new carers approved during 2024/25, compared to 5 in 2023/24 and 7 in 2022/23.



We have also focused on retention of carers and have continued to see 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.

We are part of the Foster North East regional pathfinder and use the learning regional to keep ensuring that our fostering service continues to develop.

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.

Despite this we continue to be challenged in relation to placement stability, and the impact of the work we have completed is yet to fully impact positively on this. We have continued to experience challenges and deterioration in placement stability; of children in care during 2024-25, 13.3% had three or more separate placements, above our local target of 10%. Of children under 16 who have been in care two and a half years or more, only 53.3% had been in their current placement for two years or more, again, below our local target of 68%. Placement stability meetings are held to prevent placement changes and breakdowns, and a strategic group is established to analyse learning and influence planning for children. This combined with the improvements to placement sufficiency will, it is hoped, positively influence placement stability in the coming year.

As of 31 March 2025, 20% of our children in care were placed within Kinship arrangements, an increase from 15% in 2024 and 2023. This is the result of the focused work we have carried out to support kinship carers and to identify them early in the planning process, through increased use of Family Group Conferencing.

‘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 maintained improvements in support to kinship carers, including them in carer support groups and our second Mockingbird constellation. 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 have also embedded our peer mentoring scheme, adding invaluable offers of support available to looked after children and young people, and giving care experienced young people the opportunity to use their experiences positively and in paid work. The peer mentoring scheme has developed significantly and is providing a wide range of support to Young People. We have eleven care experienced mentors offering peer mentor support to one hundred children and young people aged five and over. We have recently appointed an additional 10 new mentors who are in the process of recruitment checks. 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. They have also engaged well in wider voice of young people work and activities.

Care leavers and transitions

As of 31st March 2025, we had 169 Care Leavers, of who 150 were relevant, former relevant or qualifying care leavers. We proactively keep in touch with our care leavers up to the age of 21 by visiting them once at least 8 weeks and whenever they move into new accommodation. As well as staying in touch between visits by other means. The level of keeping in touch is agreed between the young person and their PA, it is outlined in their Pathway Plan.

The majority of our 21–25-year-old care leavers choose to remain open having regular visits and at least 6 monthly Pathway Plan reviews. For those who decline the support we respect this decision and continue to make periodic attempts to remain in contact until they turn 25 and advise that PA support is available. We have an "always here" approach for any care leaver beyond the age of 25, whether that's for advice and guidance or just a chat.

We have seen some decreases in outcome for Care Leavers over the past year. Suitable accommodation has reduced to 96.7% for 19-21 years olds, and 95.7% for 22–25-year-olds, compared to 98.4% and 97.9% respectively the previous year. More significant reductions have been seen in relation to Education, Employment and Training with 41% of 19-21 NEET and 38.3% of 22.25 NEET, compared with 22.6% and 14.6% the previous year. The service has reflected on some of the changing needs of our Young People, with a number of young people who were in extremely challenging situations prior to leaving care and who have subsequently struggled to identify appropriate EET opportunities. There has also been some local challenges in relation to availability and accessibility of different EET options. The service are committed to improving outcomes and is undertaking deep dive audit work with the Quality Assurance team to understand the context of our offer and services and impact on Care Leavers in light of the changes in performance data.

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 Frontline's 'Team of the Year' award 2024.

Staying Close continues to strengthen the support offered to young people preparing to leave care. The project has secured an additional year of funding from the Department for Education, recognising the vital role it plays in helping young people transition from care to independent living.

Currently, we are supporting 25 young people—a number that remains steady as individuals complete their support journey and achieve their personal goals. Since April 2023, the project has supported a total of 40 young people. Through close collaboration with the taper flat registered manager, semi-independent accommodation providers, and housing services, we have successfully transitioned 20 young people into more independent living arrangements.

Feedback from both young people and professionals continues to be overwhelmingly positive. One professional shared:

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.

"Her passion and drive for her role shines through! I've worked with many YPAs over the years, and she truly stands out—she's a credit to your team!"

We maintain strong and consistent relationships with our care leavers, ensuring they feel connected, supported, and valued. There are regular opportunities for young people to come together through social activities, peer support, and engagement events. Recent highlights include celebrating Refugee Week with a shared meal, participating in a national leaving care football tournament in Wolverhampton, and attending a cricket match.

We also facilitate meaningful dialogue between care leavers and decision-makers. A recent Q&A session with Darlington MP Loa McEvoy gave care leavers the opportunity to raise questions and share concerns directly. This has now become a regular six-monthly event, strengthening young people's voice and influence.

Our Staying Close Personal Advisors continue to champion practical support. One advisor successfully secured a 90% reduction in water rates, a breakthrough that, when fully rolled out, will benefit care leavers nationally. In addition, the Director of Resources Group has agreed a reciprocal arrangement across the 12 North East Local Authorities to fund council tax payments for care leavers. Free bus travel across the Tees Valley is also on track to be introduced in the autumn, further enhancing independence and access to opportunities.

Areas of Strength and Areas for Development

Areas of Strength	Areas for Development
Placement Stability in In-House Children's Homes	Embedding Psychological Support, develop an integrated model for residential and fostering teams.
Embedding Relational Practice	Increasing In-House Placement Options for Teenagers
Celebrating Young People's Achievements	Improving Educational Consistency for Looked After Children, we aim to reduce delays in completing Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and improve their overall quality.
Enhanced Support for Care Leavers	Expanding Placement Sufficiency, we will increase capacity and target recruitment and retention strategies.
Peer Mentor Programme	Implementing Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) Training for residential staff, fostering social workers, foster carers, and social workers for children looked after.

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

The service has continued to receive consistently strong support Corporately and Strategically over the past year, with financial and practical support available corporately to address the most significant challenges within the service, relating to placement sufficiency. The Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Children and Young People remain committed and fully engaged with the priorities of the Service and complement the support we have continued to receive from the Chief Executive and Corporate Directors. A new Chief Executive was appointed in recent months and has been very engaged with the service and our priorities.

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. The past year has seen a Local Area SEND Inspection and the CQC Inspection of Adults Services, both of which raised a number of areas of strength, both for the wider People group and for Children's Services. This builds upon and provides further assurance following on from the Children's Services ILACS in 2022 and the Focused Visit in 2023.

Despite the positive progress identified, we are not complacent and are hugely ambitious for our services. We have reflected on areas identified for development, particularly in relation to our response to children who are missing and in relation to outcomes for our Care Leavers. We have reviewed these services and commissioned some external input to better understand practice and impact and to improve outcomes.

We continue to utilise our Restorative Leadership work to support Team Managers to improve management oversight and the level of reflection within supervision. We have also refreshed our "Xtra Space" offer which is a dynamic approach to peer support, training and reflection to enhance the offer to front line workers.

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 a strategic plan for 2024-2027, which can be seen below:

Strengthening Families Plan 2024-2027

Our Priorities	Great social work practice	Family help & child protection	A better experience for children	Enabling great social work practice
Strategic Objectives	We have a shared, restorative working culture with a strong team ethos, clear roles and responsibilities and the accountability to meet them.	Families get the right help at the right time, and we are responsive to their needs.	We will embed and sustain Staying Close & Peer Mentoring support for children and young people	Where possible looked after children live in a Darlington placement whether this is in house fostering, residential or with connected carers.
	Children and young people are involved in shaping our services.	We prevent children coming into care with a Family First, multi-agency approach promoting children staying at home with parent(s).	Better placement stability for children in care.	Children in foster care live with one of our foster carers and our foster carers stay with us, encouraging others to foster for Darlington.
	We have more reflective discussions to help find solutions.	Where staying at home isn't possible, children are looked after by someone in their wider family or friends' network.	We understand and meet the needs of children and young people.	We create more time to spend with children and families.
	We have a well developed and co-ordinated approach to practice "experts" and good networks of support.	We will change our approach to 'intentionally homeless', introducing preventative multi-agency support and a 'Pathway Out of Homelessness'.		Our workforce is well equipped and effective.
	We have strong progression pathways, 'grow our own' talent and have an environment where workers want to work and stay in Darlington.			

We are working as a Leadership Team to understand how the Strengthening Families Plan aligns with the wider social care reforms and ensuring that our approach to reforms complements our ongoing improvement and planning via Strengthening Families.

Learning Culture

The ongoing development of a learning culture across the service continues to be a service priority. Over the past year we have continued with the Experts in Practice program, which supported a further 4 practitioners to develop their knowledge and skills in 3 key priority areas; Anti-racist practice, Autism and Preparation for Adulthood. This builds upon the areas of specialism from the previous year which was Harm Away from Home, Trauma Informed Practice and Creative Life Story Work. The aim of this is to allow individual workers to undertake learning and research 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.

The program has been extremely beneficial in terms of allowing practitioners to progress in an area of specialism that a traditional route to progression would not allow, while also allowing learning and development to be shared in the wider service. At our service wide Staff Conference this year, all of the workshops on the day were delivered by our own Experts in Practice. The scheme has also brought in external funding which has allowed for the commissioning of bespoke external training, for example funding the delivery of “Parent Assess” training over the past year.

We have also refreshed 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 uses our own internal staff in a Peer Support/Mentoring capacity, facilitating and delivering briefing and training sessions. It also offers a bespoke confidential space for staff to ask questions; talk about areas they may be finding difficult; and have ‘Xtra Space’ to reflect and learn.

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

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. 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.

Our Staff Training and Development Plan continues to be shaped by robust training needs analysis, seeking collaborative feedback from our workforce as well as being shaped by local, regional and national guidance and practice trends.

Our Practice Development Group also allows us to regularly bring together learning from quality assurance, compliments, complaints and other practice insights in a way that allows us to develop learning across the service to ensure we are closing the loop.

Workforce

We continue to have a stable and experienced Leadership Team, led by a Director of Children Services and Lead Member who are both invested in and understand the service aims and priorities. We have a stable and experienced Senior Leadership Team with the Assistant Director and Head of Service posts filled with permanent and suitably experienced leaders, with experience of and commitment to Darlington.



Following the implementation of strategies to increase our workforce retention and our recruitment we have experienced some positive workforce stability. Our vacancy rate (March 2025) remains low at 5%, which compares favorably to rates pre Covid. Whilst we have seen an increase in staff turnover (17.7% compared with 9.8% the previous year) this remains lower than in the previous years and the analysis tells us that very few of our turnover is workers leaving but is more a reflection of workers moving into more specialist or more senior roles. Our agency rates have also reduced during this time, they are currently 12%, compared to 15% in the previous 2 years. This remains a key focus for the coming year with the aim of further reductions in the use of agency workers.

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 Social Work workforce into employment in Darlington.

Our positive achievements in relation to the workforce combined with changes in demand for statutory services have created a stable year in relation to workloads. Caseloads for case holding social workers are considered weekly by Service Managers and monthly in Assistant Director performance clinics. The data shows that the average caseloads across all case holding social work teams has remained below 18 over the course of the year. Where there have been some exceptions to this, higher levels of monitoring and supervision have been in place, as well as specific action plans to mitigate any risk.

An enhanced recruitment and retention support package has remained in place for front line workers and Assistant Director engagement sessions have taken place to understand front line practitioners’ experiences, their wishes and feelings, and to work proactively with them to maintain Darlington as a positive place to work. We have completed 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 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. This equally invites the opportunity for front line workers to engage, contribute and shape the direction of the service. Workers continue to be positive and proud when discussing working for Darlington.

Having completed an agile (home/office) working pilot programme which led to a confirmed agile working offer for all staff, this way of working is now fully embedded. This offer seeks to empower and enable front line practitioners to fully embrace a hybrid approach to working. It 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

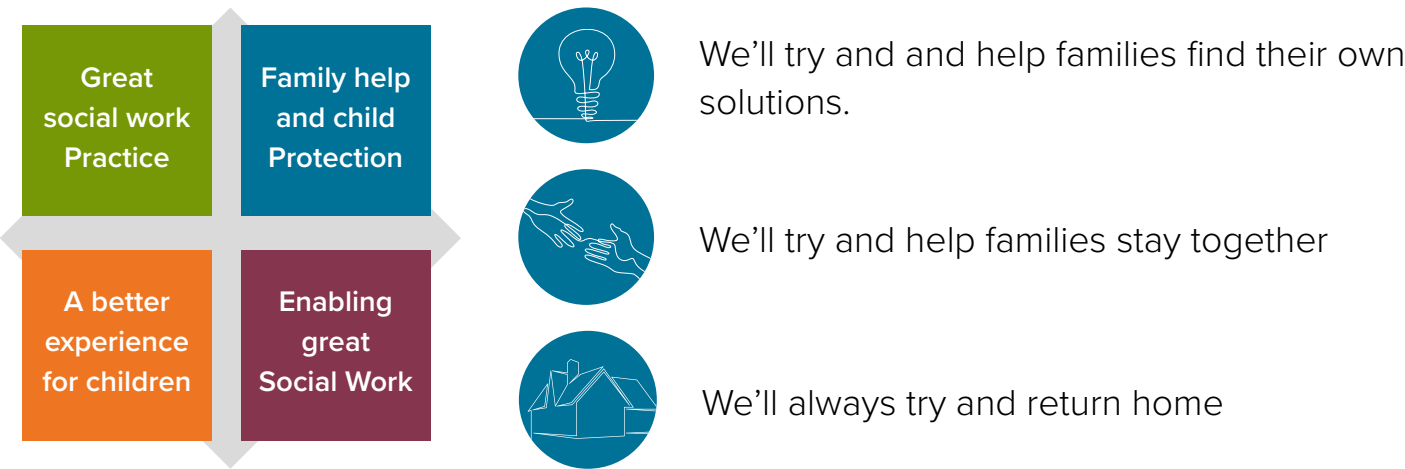
The past year has seen us consolidate our practice and performance in some areas, with some noted improvements and development and has also identified some areas of focus where we aim for further development. We remain committed to our Relational Practice approach, believing that this not only achieved the best outcomes for our workforce, but also for the impact and outcomes of the support and intervention carried out with children and families.

The plan for the coming year is very much one of scoping and shaping our readiness, both as a Children’s Service and as a partnership to embrace the changes required within the Families First Reforms. With this approach we will aim to prioritise building upon the existing elements of the service that are working well, but to develop and innovate to further improve the quality and impact of practice. Our approach will continue to be driven by our Strengthening Families and overriding relational and restorative ethos.

Specific service developments being embedded over the coming year including:

- Implementation of Partnership Board to realize the changes required as part of the social care reforms
- Development and re-design of our services for children who are missing and/or at risk of exploitation
- Increases to foster carer recruitment following the revision of foster carer offer
- Continued prioritization of Family Group Conferences and Peer Mentoring
- Care Leaver outcomes

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



Leadership and Management

We will also seek to drive and improve greater visibility of leadership across the service, building on the strong foundations already in place that ensure leaders are accessible, responsive, and connected to frontline practice. Creating further opportunities to strengthen this connection, through increased presence, engagement, and visibility, will reinforce a shared sense of purpose, support reflective practice, and maintain a clear line of sight to the experiences of our workforce in line with our relational practice model.

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	Whole workforce and partnership engagement to embrace and embed Families First reform changes.
Strong, stable and consistent Leadership Team	Placement Sufficiency Plans being developed to seek to expand and develop in house resources for Children in Care
Continued stability in Workforce	Retained focus on recruitment and retention of staff



DARLINGTON
Borough Council