

Children's Social Care Self Assessment 2022-23

August 2023



Introduction

I am very pleased to be part of introducing this annual self-assessment with the privilege of becoming the permanent Executive Director of Childrens Services earlier in the year, having undertaken the interim role jointly with Graham Reiter since the departure of Cath McEvoy-Carr the previous DCS.

Our vision for Northumberland children's social care is to be a service where meeting the needs of children, young people and families is the focus so that they get the best out of life. Our leadership pledge highlights our commitment to challenge ourselves relentlessly to achieve continuous improvement in the quality and effectiveness of our services for children, young people, and their families. This annual self-assessment is a key feature of pulling together the range of ways in which we understand the quality of our practice and ensure that we put in place actions to further develop and continuously improve our services. We have coordinated the findings of our quality of practice work, used key performance information and more broadly encapsulated the findings and developments of our continuous improvement plan and linked strategies in the relevant sections of this self-assessment.

Within each of the sections, we have identified what we have done well, what we could do better, detailed the key evidence of the impact in that area of work and then highlighted actions to take forward in the continuous improvement plan for 2023-2024. This will also include areas of development arising from national direction and at the time of writing, a key driver is the government's response to the Independent Review of Childrens Social Care, Stable Homes Built on Love.

We do see, through the range of ways in which we understand the quality of our practice, the dedication and commitment of our workforce who are our most valuable resource and continue to deliver effective services despite the significant and ongoing challenges that are faced.



Executive Director of Children, Young People and Education



Graham Reiter
Director of Children's Social Care, Young People and Families

Our evaluation of the top 4 improvement priorities 2022/23

Strategic Leadership:	
Leadership resources	Leadership and management cover maintained despite several senior manager changes, and capacity increased with a new Head of Quality Assurance post.
Early Help	One of 14 Trailblazers to develop Family Hubs further and faster. Brought all our externally commissioned services in house to increase flexibility and integrating our Family Hubs, Supporting Families and Healthy Relationships approaches to maximise effectiveness. Early Help education team working well with schools.
SEND	Gained growth funding to develop an in-house short break service and implemented a resource panel to oversee the allocation of short break resources.
Corporate Parenting	Remains a lead member priority, further enhanced with the leader of the Council becoming CPAG chair. Work on the Promises has developed across the Council and with the private sector who have committed to providing support and EET for children in care and care leavers. New DFE-funded children's home planned to open in late summer/Autumn 2023 which will enhance our placement sufficiency. Leading regional work on care leaver's covenant.
Partnerships	Effectively integrated the children's and adults safeguarding partnerships to provide appropriate assurance, oversight and development of those respective areas but also maximise opportunities for learning and development. Successfully maintained the additional health service funding to support external placements.
National Developments	Stable Homes, Built on Love: We are participating in the Data and Digital Children's voices project, PLO data capture and Regional Fostering pathfinders. Established more flexible commissioning arrangements to maximise the available Supported Accommodation provision and working with providers in preparation for registration and inspection of those services.
Virtual School responsibilities	Good progress made in fulfilling the extended duty to promote the education of children with a social worker. Our model has been cited as good practice by the DFE and case file audits show evidence of impact. The Head of the Virtual School is leading the county's attendance strategy which incorporates our effective CME procedure and associated multi agency tracking panel.
Financial	Slight underspend in 2022/23 due to vacancies. Successfully gained growth funding for short breaks, education welfare and schools safeguarding capacity for 2023-24.
Workforce:	
Strategy	Workforce strategy updated to reflect key priorities; dashboard further developed to monitor trends.
Service Developments	Embedding of NEWST, Pre-birth and Early Help education teams with positive impact. Reorganised our children's centre and Early Help service - our Family Hub development was externally commended.
Recruitment and retention	Success of our social work academy affirmed by Skills for Care review. Finalised admin restructure to provide more consistent support across the social care service and appropriately increased the use of Social Work Support Assistants to support social workers.
Staff feedback	Staff feel well supported with good access to managers and effective learning tools. Practice Days evidence that staff know their children well, aim high, and work collaboratively.
Benchmarking	Better than national average for staff turnover, absence, vacancies, and use of agency staff
Placement, Sufficiency, stability, and support:	
Sufficiency	All LA-run homes rated are rated Good or better; new build unit will add further capacity and LA foster care capacity has increased. This remains an area for further improvement, though.
Stability	This is challenging and the above developments respond to that. More of our cared for children are placed close to the family home than previously. Mid-year school moves have reduced.
Support	Good impact of the NEWST team reported in March 2023. Virtual School and Fostering service work well to secure appropriate placements that support learning and well-being.
Improving social care practice:	
Framework	The Quality of Practice Framework went live in March 2023, bringing all its elements together to inform our evaluation of continuous improvement.
Model	The SofS model is used well by managers to evaluate their teams' impact.
Scrutiny	Focused Visit was positive about arrangements for planning for and achieving permanence. Practice Days see improved direct work with families.

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

1.1 What have we done well in the last year?

While there have been some changes in the senior leadership team in the year, with colleagues gaining promotion to posts in neighbouring authorities, we have worked hard to maintain consistent support and leadership from the senior team. Leadership and management cover across the services was maintained through the current management team and three of the four posts have been filled through successful internal applicants, with one external candidate due to join later in summer. As part of the corporate restructure, we have been successful in enhancing the senior management capacity across children's services with an additional Head of Service post.

We have effectively and safely continued to deliver wider direct services over the last year, maintaining the virtual elements which have enhanced direct work, while supporting a hybrid and flexible model of working for office-based staff in line with business need.

Following the Ofsted Focused Visit, which took place in July 2022, the detail of the positive findings and our response to the recommendations is detailed in the section on Children Looked After.

Early Help and Prevention: Northumberland are one of 75 local authorities leading the implementation of Family Hubs and we have been selected as one of 14 Trailblazers to develop this further and faster. We have brought all our externally commissioned services in house to increase flexibility and worked to integrate our Family Hubs, Supporting Families and Healthy Relationships approaches to maximise effectiveness and integration.



The services were visited by Dame Andrea Leadsom in May 2023 who was extremely impressed by the work and the developments. Further to this, Northumberland has been accepted as one of six local areas to participate in a national Thematic Review to be undertaken by Ofsted and CQC in August 2023 to inform future practice and regulation of Family Hubs. (See section on Early Help for evidence of impact and how we know).

We have developed and implemented our Early Help Education support team which is based with our First Contact early help team to enhance links and support

with schools (see section below for more detail).

We have developed and embedded our social work pre-birth team in one of our Family Hubs with the evaluation of the first year undertaken in August 2023, highlighting outcomes that are extremely positive.

Northumberland Youth Justice service was subject to an HMIP inspection in April 2023 and the overall judgement was Good with three areas being judged Outstanding.

SEND: We have continued to develop our systems, processes, and services for children with SEND and their families. We were successful in gaining growth funding, despite significant

financial pressures, to develop an in-house short break service. We have also implemented a resource panel to oversee the allocation of short break resources.

Corporate Parenting: Corporate Parenting continues to be a lead member priority, and this will be further enhanced with the leader of the council taking on the role of chair of the Corporate Parenting Advisory Group (CPAG) from summer 2023. Training has been delivered to elected members and services across the council have engaged enthusiastically as corporate parents, identifying realistic actions and are able to evidence actions they have taken to fulfil their Promises. The private sector has been well engaged through the Northumberland Line project and Tharsus (based in Blyth) who have committed to providing support and education/training/employment for looked after children and care leavers.

We were successful in gaining DfE (Department for Education) capital funding to support the build of a children's home which we have progressed, with the home planned to open in late summer/Autumn 2023 which will enhance our placement sufficiency.

Northumberland is leading regional developments of the Care Leavers Covenant with the North East and North Cumbria ICB (Integrated Care Board), and North East Raising Aspirations Partnership of 5 regional universities.

Partnership: We have successfully integrated the children's and adults safeguarding partnerships in Northumberland over the year, with streamlined and revised structures and processes in place, including specific development of independent scrutiny and enhanced business support. This will ensure appropriate assurance, oversight and development of those respective areas but also maximise opportunities for learning and development across children's and adults. The DfE have seen and are using our work, particularly around independent scrutiny, to inform national developments.

More specifically, the NCASP (Northumberland Children and Adults Safeguarding Partnership) developments have evolved the engagement of schools and education providers into a Safer in Education sub-group that is developing and overseeing the role of education providers in keeping children safe to learn in the post-pandemic context of high numbers of children still not in school, and safeguarding children in education with increasingly complex needs.

As well as leading support for the implementation of the care leavers covenant with the ICB, we have successfully maintained the additional health service funding to support external placements in Northumberland for this year which had previously been agreed with the CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group).

NEWST (Northumberland Emotional Well-being Support Team) has been successfully embedded in our social work services and we are currently planning for its primary focus to support our placement stability going forward.

National Developments



Stable Homes, Built on Love: Northumberland are participating in the following pathfinder work coming out of the government paper:

- Data and Digital: Children’s Voices Project in conjunction with North Tyneside: to look at creative and streamlined ways of capturing the voice, views, and experiences of children and to reduce bureaucracy for front line staff. This is due to launch in June 23.
- PLO data work: Northumberland have contributed to this national work.
- Regional Fostering Pathfinder: Northumberland are participating in the NE regional pathfinder on fostering, preparation currently taking place with launch planned for September 23.

Supported Accommodation: We have put in place more flexible commissioning arrangements to maximise the available provision and we are working with and supporting Supported Accommodation providers in preparation for registration and inspection of those services.

Virtual School responsibilities: Good progress has been made in fulfilling the Virtual School Headteacher’s extended duty to promote the education of children with a social worker. The initial project plan has evolved into a ‘business as usual’ approach, and our innovative Virtual School model was showcased by the DfE as a model of good practice in a national webinar in 2022. There is evidence of impact in case file audits, a performance monitoring framework is being implemented, and the development of accessible training and resources for schools and social workers continues.

The Virtual School Headteacher is providing leadership for the local authority’s response to new statutory attendance requirements. Northumberland’s DfE Attendance Adviser has supported with the development of an attendance strategy which will begin implementation in September 2023, with a broader universal offer for schools and families from a strengthened Education Welfare service. The strategy incorporates our children missing education procedure (a policy of NCASP) which has been adapted post-pandemic to target specific groups of children at a monthly multi-agency tracking panel.

Financial: Children’s Social Care overall had a slight underspend at the year-end 22/23 but this was primarily to do with underspend on staffing due to vacancies. We successfully gained specific growth funding for short breaks, education welfare and Schools safeguarding capacity

to take forward into 2023/24. There are increased pressures and challenges in the current year 2023/4.

1.2 What could we do better?

While we are pleased that we are progressing with the build of one children's home, we have been unable to progress another with a planned purchase of a property falling though due to factors beyond our control.

While there has been progress in respect of Corporate Parenting detailed above, we need to do more to streamline the approach across the council, and to further develop impact measures.

School attendance has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, although there have been many improvements for individual schools and individual stories of success.

1.3 What impact has this had and how do we know?

The inability to progress another children's home has impacted on Northumberland, currently, being able to increase capacity for the care of children within the County.

School attendance continues to be a challenging area both nationally and here in Northumberland. In the 2021/2022 DfE data release, Northumberland had a summer term absence rate of 7.9%. In the Autumn term 22/23, this had dropped to 7.4%. This was lower and therefore better than the England and North East rate (7.5% and 7.9%). Special schools are a particular hotspot, where Northumberland's absence rate remains higher than the comparators.

1.4 What are we going to do next to support continuous improvement?

We have gained agreement to use the remaining capital funding for a children's home to develop a range of small units linked to existing Childrens Homes for which we will apply for re-registration of those Homes. This will increase choice and flexibility, particularly for young people with more complex needs and emergency provision.

We will develop an in-house short break service with the allocated growth funding.

More broadly, we will undertake further scoping of the social care and accommodation needs for disabled children in Northumberland, including responding to the recently published national paper on Safeguarding Children with Complex Needs in Residential Care. We will also consider the emerging challenges of appropriate housing and adaptations for families with disabled children

We will undertake an analysis of our work in response to the DA Commissioners response to the Stable Homes report.

We will implement an attendance strategy and use data to deploy strengthened attendance improvement support to the schools and families that need it the most.

We will continue to work with partners to further coordinate and streamline wider partnership governance.

QUALITY OF PRACTICE AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

1.5 What have we done well in the last year?

Key to achieving our vision, are effective performance management and quality of practice activities which underpin our continuous improvement and our ongoing development as a learning organisation. The focus and depth of our quality of practice is driven in the work of QPAG (Quality of Practice Activity Group) where all quality of practice findings are presented, improving how the learning from quality of practice work reaches front line staff in a meaningful and embedded way by enhancing the communication flow to all staff.

We have finalised, signed off and launched our Quality of Practice Framework which has been communicated to the workforce. The Framework clearly outlines how we determine how well we know ourselves and focuses on development of the quality and effectiveness of practice and oversight while maintaining the necessary monitoring of compliance [QofP framework March 2023.pdf](#)

As part of working under the auspices of Signs of Safety, Northumberland have developed five Meaningful Measures to look at quality of practice and impact, developing the use of data and quality of practice findings in Performance Clinics, so that we understand what difference we are making to the children, young people, and families in Northumberland.

Meaningful Measure 1	Keeping children safe, supported, and improving their lives.
Meaningful Measure 2	Making sure we are working with children, parents, important family and friends so that they are fully involved in developing plans that are clear about who will do what and when.
Meaningful Measure 3	Making sure that children are living safely and securely as soon as possible.
Meaningful Measure 4	Making sure families and staff from all services work with each other to make things better for children.
Meaningful Measure 5	Offer the right training and supervision to improve confidence, skills, and knowledge of workers.

1.6 What could we do better?

Further embed the understanding of Quality of Practice work and the application of Meaningful Measures with the whole workforce.

Enhance systematic collation and use of feedback.

1.7 What impact has this had and how do we know?

The five meaningful measures are used in performance clinics, and dashboards continue to be developed to better reflect the impact of working with children, young people and families and what difference this makes to their lives. From the quality of practice activity that has been undertaken between May 2022 and April 2023 (6 practice days, 2 quarterly early help findings, 3 standard audits and 6 themed audits [three of which was multi agency] to date all of which have

been presented to QPAG), the salient points have been highlighted under each of the meaningful measure headings, and these are outlined in the impact sections within the practice sections.

Through the creation of automated IRO (Independent Reviewing Officers) monitoring has allowed the Senior IRO to oversee when CLA (Children Looked After) / CP plans are last monitored by the IRO which has ensured that the footprint of the IRO is consistently evident within case files. This has also been evidenced in Practice Day findings.

A combination of detailed client-level reporting and thorough monitoring by team managers has meant that a strong focus on keeping in touch with care leavers has been retained despite staff and managerial changes, resulting in higher than national average numbers of care leavers being in touch.

Ongoing development of the Legal dashboard with exceptions has helped us to establish robust data recording and allow us to more accurately track both pre-proceedings and care proceedings as well as the conversion rates and are a good basis for legal tracking meetings.

The creation of an analyst post within the Virtual School has meant that there are more resources to streamline systems, make the data more accessible and improve the confidence of the Headteacher to be able to evaluate what the data is telling us.

Collaborative work with Liquidlogic and Information Services has resulted in the past six months seeing the major issue of ICS (Integrated Childrens Systems) and EHM (Early Help Module) system downtime being reduced by 76% which has had a positive impact on activity by the workforce.

Overall Summary of Practice

Overall, there has been evidence of continuing improvement in the quality of practice seen across services in Northumberland. The consistency of recording and use of tools has also improved but requires ongoing focus to ensure this is maintained. The embedding of use of Meaningful Measures and the use in performance clinics to demonstrate and celebrate areas of good practice highlights increased qualitative information evidencing the impact of the workforce on good outcomes for children and young people. Activity around quality of practice demonstrates that we know our children well and that we strive to be motivated and committed to make a difference in families' lives. The move to the quality of practice being supported by QPAG has continued to focus on improvement in practice and what this means for children and their families.

All quality of practice activity outlines relevant recommendations, in striving for continuous improvement, and reports are shared with all staff across the service. These recommendations form a skeleton of a plan to build actions upon which should be reviewed as part of future performance meetings for relevant parts of the service and actions should be added to locality action logs for reviewing. This process is currently in its embryonic stages and needs further development.

1.8 What are we going to do next to support continuous improvement?

Roll out Single View software to support with the Supporting Families PBR Claim; the software will also provide workers with a holistic picture of the issues affecting families.

Tap into the Council's new data strategy which will reduce siloed datasets and introduce new elements of data matching for needs analysis and contextual information.

Further embed the rationale and importance of our Quality of Practice approaches through the Quality of Practice Framework with all staff, including the more systematic gathering and collation of feedback

Further work is required around the 'closing of the loop' following any quality of practice activity.

WORKFORCE STABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

1.9 What have we done well in the last year?

Our workforce is our most valuable asset, and we continue to prioritise and invest in the recruitment, retention, and development of our staff. We recognise that the best possible service can only be delivered to children and their families if we attract, maintain and upskill high calibre staff.

The management of the changes in our senior team have been detailed in the previous section Our workforce strategy and action plan has been updated to reflect key priorities: Recruitment, Retention, Practice and Continual Development and Quality assurance and these are used to underpin a workforce action plan which is overseen by a workforce steering group. The group includes representatives from HR (Human Resources), Social Care, performance, Learning and Organisational Development, and communications to drive forward the initiatives in relation to the workforce.

A staff survey and Retro Board with staff was complete in 2022 an action fed into the Workforce Action Plan. Some key results from the staff survey are as follows: 76% look forward to going to work, 87% feel trusted to do their job, 91% are satisfied with the support from their immediate management and 96% feel their role makes a difference to residents.

We have created a Pre-Birth Team, based in the Family Hub, alongside multi-agency colleagues and our PAMS workers. The work undertaken by the team is viewed positively, particularly the engagement with fathers and we are engaging with Newcastle University to evaluate this area of work. We have enhanced the training of staff to use Parent Assess. An evaluation report of the first year will be shared at QPAG in August 2023.

The Northumberland Emotional Wellbeing Support Team (NEWST) continue to work alongside early help and social care colleagues in Northumberland. The evaluation report of March 2023 found 99% of social workers said that consultation and support were beneficial and led to improvements in the care plan and work. Dyadic Developmental Practice, Psychotherapy and Parenting (DDP) Level 1 training has been delivered to managers and will be delivered to front

line staff in January 2024. A temporary Speech and Language post has been made permanent. The focus for NEWST within the next year will be with our Family Placement Service supporting the workforce and foster carers around placement stability.

We have continued to refine our recruitment processes for our residential staff although the wider challenges are equally applicable to this part of the workforce. We have enhanced the capacity for covering night shifts within our homes in response to regulatory inspection findings.

The role and function of business support staff, who are so crucial to the delivery of efficient services has been reviewed and we have a new structure in place with senior business support. This has resulted in a more comprehensive, consistent, and coordinated support across the teams and includes effective contributions to recruitment processes.

Whilst we have experienced challenges recruiting experienced Social Workers reflecting the regional and national picture, we have increased the use of Social Work Support Assistants to support Social Workers which has shown to be beneficial to teams and families.

Our use of agency Social Workers is lower than the previous year (6.2% cf 7.8%) and the national average (17.6%).

We continue to undertake a range of work around recruitment and retention including:

- Continuing to develop work around recruitment in a range of ways, including have our induction share point, and a recruitment landing page.
- We have increased the number of Social Work apprentices, 5 qualify this year, 5 start their Social Work apprenticeship in September 2023 and we are looking to increase this further in summer 2024.
- Increase the number of Practice Educators in 2023-2025 and the number of mentors for our apprentices.
- We are also developing a Social Work Support Assistant pathway (and for non-SW qualified Early Help staff) linked to talent spotting and potential career progression

Our ASYE Academy continues to be successful and was evaluated positively by The Skills for Care Council. The reviewers felt that the programme in Northumberland was well embedded identifying the following strengths:

- The programme was seen as well valued and supported across the organisation and this was supporting recruitment and retention within Northumberland.
- The programme was inclusive and promotes equality and diversity.
- Assessors and the PSW (Principal Social Worker) involved on the programme are well respected and are supportive, knowledgeable, and committed to Northumberland.
- Newly qualified social workers are using critical reflection within the portfolio to support with registrations with Social Work England.

We are currently undertaking further developments of the ASYE academy to ensure that staff are well supported and make a successful transition to the service teams.



The current ASYE cohort, February 2023, meeting the senior management team as part of their induction.

1.10 What could we do better?

Recruitment and retention of qualified, skilled staff continues to present a challenge to Northumberland in common with other Local Authorities, regionally and nationally. We want to continue to develop our approaches to this to be as innovative and creative as possible, broadening our reach wherever possible.

Social care workforce turnover is higher than we would like it to be (15.9% but is lower than the national figure of 17.1%) and we are considering a range of retention incentives to stabilise staff recruitment and retention.

We would like to improve retention of staff within our residential homes to support the planned increase in in-house capacity

1.11 What impact has this had and how do we know?

The impact of the workforce challenges are key lines of enquiry within Practice Days where this gives the workers the opportunity to identify what it is like working at an operational level and an opportunity to determine what, if any, impact there is on children and young people if they have had changes in workers. To date, findings in these areas have provided assurances that despite these pressures, there is continued consistent management oversight and commitment not only to the workforce but also to the children, young people and the families in Northumberland.

SC graduated from the ASYE Academy and is now a social worker in the north of the county. He said: ***“Since coming to Northumberland and getting a place at the Academy, everyone is very supportive and the managers all really rallied around you.”***

Meaningful Measure 5 – Offer the right training and supervision to improve confidence, skills, and knowledge of workers

Supervision is offered to workers on a regular basis and Team Managers are skilled in the undertaking of supervision and the robust recording of supervision using the Signs of Safety

methodology which drives the plan for the child and their family. Data incorporated into dashboards ensure that timely oversight of cases are recorded. There continues to be some learning identified in this area with regards to consistency and the use of timescales to better focus the worker. A Signs of Safety template has been piloted for recording of supervision sessions to support greater consistency. Overall staff report feeling well supported and able to approach managers and senior managers.

Practice days have returned to face to face. The evidence is outstanding that staff know their children well, strive for good outcomes for them and that they are working collaboratively. Pieces of direct work with children highlight the child's voice and understanding of their circumstances and 'learning from complaints and compliments' contributes to the wider understanding of the quality of our practice in Northumberland.

Staff have access to a wide range of learning materials including Community Care Inform, Talking Toolkit, good practice examples and Tri x as well as access to statutory and mandatory training and specific training in more specialist areas. New staff are offered a comprehensive induction and despite vacancy rates across the Service, quality of practice activity has continued to identify positive practice in all areas.

Feedback from exit interviews provides information about why staff have decided to move and one of the key messages from this information is in respect of career opportunities and grading which we are exploring to provide an improved and more attractive offer.

Staff tell us through the corporate staff survey and the Principal Social workers survey that they are satisfied with the terms, conditions, culture, and working environment in Northumberland, and they feel supported and are impressed with the training and development offer. Data from the national workforce return tells us that sickness reduced from 3.9% in 2021/22 to 1.9% in 2022/23 which is better than the national average of 3.5%.

1.12 What are we going to do next to support continuous improvement?

We know our workforce well, we seek their views, and we feel confident in the academy model to replenish the workforce with high calibre newly qualified social work staff. We also know that we need to focus on:

Review is to be undertaken of the Academy as this has been in place now for four years and as we are a learning organisation, we would look to making any necessary adjustments.

Revisiting the career pathway and grading structure to retain staff who wish to progress professionally.

Sustaining the SoS (Signs of Safety) training offer, reinforcing the role of practice champions, and embedding the SoS skill matrix into supervision and appraisal.

Broaden and re-energise our recruitment campaign through Community Care forum to attract a more diverse range of experienced applicants.

We are supporting Advance Practitioners to complete the managers Frontline training and Team Managers to complete the Pathways Programme.

A survey and rationalisation of our Childrens Centre buildings and a move towards co-location of key partners / workforce, particularly in health and education, to provide a 'one stop shop' approach for families accessing information and support in the family hubs.

We will continue to refine and develop our recruitment and retention practices in our residential homes.

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

2. HELP AND PROTECTION

EARLY HELP AND PREVENTION

2.1 What have we done well in the last year?

The receipt and management of early help requests through the Front Door is effective, adding value to the wider early help offer. This ensures that the right service (including the offer from universal services) is negotiated in the best interests of the child and family.

The oversight of our Family Hubs development is detailed in the Strategic Leadership section above. Throughout 2022/23, significant work and developments have taken place to maximise the opportunities of Family Hub national developments and associated funding. This work included a rationalisation of buildings to facilitate co-location of health practitioners and to provide a 'one stop shop' approach for families accessing information and support.



We have moved a large number of commissioned staff into the local authority (TUPE) and subsequently restructured our services to ensure a coherent, consistent, and fit for service approach and structure across all age ranges (0-19/25) across all our localities. This includes a new model of Young Peoples Support which reflects the service's focus on prevention and whole family working and has been developed on a multi-agency basis involving the voluntary and community sector (VCS) as a key partner.

We have further strengthened our partnership and integration, working with midwifery, health visiting, primary mental health and EOTAS (Education Other Than at School) co-located within our larger buildings.

Early Help staff have a good understanding of step-up arrangements and practice indicates that this is completed in a timely and well-informed manner, ensuring that parents/carers are included in the next steps.

Northumberland's Youth Justice service was subject an HMIP inspection in April 2023 with an overall judgment of Good with 3 areas being judged Outstanding.



2.2 What could we do better?

There are various needs assessments, data collection processes, maturity matrix and other recording requirements requested by Government departments across the Early Help services. Some data sharing agreements have stalled this year, particularly with health services such as midwifery. Work is ongoing to ensure a smarter, leaner, and rapid process with these departments, but also locally with the ICB, Trusts and other providers.

Recommendations from the HMIP inspection - Northumberland Youth Justice Service should:

- Ensure robust contingency plans are in place for all children that address their safety and wellbeing, and risk of harm to others.
- Improve the quality of court work assessment, planning, service delivery, and reviewing to keep children safe and manage the risk of harm they present to others.

The Northumberland Youth Justice Service Management Board should:

- Ensure that the voice of children and their parents and carers is more robustly heard and utilised at strategic decision-making level.
- Forensically analyse and segment out-of-court data, use findings to identify what works well, and utilise this to influence strategic and operational practice.

2.3 What impact has this had and how do we know?

Meaningful Measure 1- keeping children safe, supported, and improving their lives

Practice day findings evidence strong child-centred practice across all areas of social care and the majority of assessments and plans in early help are robust ensuring children's needs are understood and that there is multi-agency contribution.

Meaningful Measure 2- Making sure we are working with children, parents, important family, and friends so that they are fully involved in developing plans that are clear about who will do what and when

The high volume of Early Help Support requests indicate it is a service that is known about by families and professionals, is well used and effective, given that a very low percentage (14%) are subsequently stepped up to the social work service. This indicates the value of early help work and delivering the right service at the right time to children and families. This will continue with the ongoing development of Family Hubs.

Meaningful Measure 4 – Making sure families and staff from all services work with each other to make things better for children

Fewer children and young people continue to enter the Criminal Justice system than was the case four years ago with rates reducing and lower than the national, regional and force area.

The number of first-time entrants to the criminal justice system has reduced significantly because of the increased use of out of court disposals, as well as the impact of the pandemic lockdowns and at 89 per 100k, is significantly below and therefore better than the national average of 148.

The overall trend for re-offending is that far fewer children and young people are re-offending than was the case five years ago. The re-offending rate in Northumberland is typically lower than the national, regional and force area rate (usually around 20-30% compared to 30-40%).

Chief Inspector of Probation, Justin Russell said ***“Northumberland YJS is going the extra mile to help children under their supervision to change their behaviour, recognise the impact they are having on victims of crime and deter them away from reoffending. While some improvements can be made, we saw a service that is enthusiastic about giving children the opportunity to move away from a life of crime and get back into the community.”***

Our performance schedule which includes Practice Days, Audit Activity and Meaningful Measures Performance Clinics ensure that the quality of practice in utilising the Signs of Safety practice model is strong and helps us to set priorities alongside our partners and communities.

Our performance data tells us that:

- Suitable EET for our Youth Justice cohort was typically 76% to 80% in 2021 and is now consistently 89% or above.
- There were 989 Parenting Support calls undertaken in 2022/23. More recent data shows us that 60% of the families that have been provided with parenting support were no longer in need of an Early Help Assessment at closure. Evidence that families are getting the right service at the right level at the right time.
- We have targeted distinct areas in the County to increase sustained engagement of 0–2-year-olds at Children’s Centres, from 22% in 2021/22 to 35% in 2022/23.
- The proportion of early help cases closing where the outcomes were successful has increased significantly since 2019/20, from 57% to 74% in 2022/23.

- A requirement of the Trailblazer status was to have our digital and published '[Start for Life](#)' offer launched by March 2023. This was achieved and allows us to share our success with other Local Authorities. So far 5 authorities have approached us requesting peer support. As of June 2023, we are well on the way to achieving the deliverables set out in the bid.



2.4 What are we going to do next to support continuous improvement?

A review of the Early Help offer and interventions will focus on and move consistently towards robust Evidence Based (EB) Programmes which will involve multi agency partners e.g., midwifery trained and delivering Newborn Behavioural Observation and health visiting delivering Gro-Brain. A training plan will be developed jointly with partners.

During the pandemic, our strong parental involvement strategy suffered. We will develop Parent / Carer Panels in all localities to encourage a strong voice to inform and develop services alongside our communities. FH (Family Hubs) funding will support the development of a community engagement team (5 posts) to push this agenda and work with the wider VCS, linking to our Northumberland Communities' Together service.

We want to improve sustained engagement further still and working with health services to further support the engagement of families at the point of our birth registration appointments that have taken place in our Family Hubs for a long time.

We will implement the recommendations of the HMIP inspection of our Youth Justice service detailed above.

SAFEGUARDING / FRONT DOOR

2.5 What have we done well in the last year?

Front Door

We have established Strategic and Operational multi-agency MASH groups which meet on a regular basis and discuss progress and future aspirations. There is good management oversight at the Front Door and in the satellite duty arrangements in the North and West of the County, (due to the vast geographical area of the County) which are further supported by an additional team manager post.

The Multi-agency MASH is working well and has progressed towards most agencies now being present in the office therefore achieving more efficient information sharing, discussion and

decision making. Strategy meetings are timely, 94% in timescale, with a clear rationale for those going out of timescale to consider key information.

The triage of the CCN's works well with multi-agency colleagues and the quality of the triage decisions has improved, are more qualitative and a greater focus is centred around the analysis. There is a good understanding of the application of thresholds and the multi-agency thresholds document has been reviewed and updated in 2023. Although our re-referrals have slightly increased since 2022 (from 16% to 17%), an audit was undertaken which showed that the vast majority of these cases were re-referred for different reasons.

While the overall number of child protection cases is monitored, our quality of practice work has evidenced that decision making is appropriate in these cases and is clearly overseen by senior management who ratify the decision for cases to progress to an Initial Child Protection Conference.

Education welfare have increased capacity in the team to offer additional support to children and young people who are struggling to attend school. This year the EWSO's have worked with 120 children and young people including 51 who have social work involvement, 9 Early Help involvement and 14 cared for children.

In October 2022, the Education Early Help Assessments team went live, this is a team of one Senior and 6 Education Early Help Assessment workers who work alongside social care staff in the Front Door. The team supports the use of Early Help Assessments in and by schools to fully understand the family's needs and then co-ordinate a multi-agency plan with the families to address them. Therefore greater use of this by education providers will improve the outcomes for children and young people at an early help level and in many cases prevent the escalation to higher tier services.

Safeguarding

In May 2022, we held a multi-agency summit with regards to Neglect. The day encompassed some national and regional level data being shared and explored; guest speakers were invited to give their personal experience of being children who had suffered from neglect and the key partner agencies were tasked with production of a service-led plan around next steps following the attendance at the summit. It was agreed that this would be overseen by the partnership.

Our Initial Child Protection Conferences held within timescale are at 89%, which is a slight increase on last year, and this figure is higher than the national average. 99% of Child Protection Plans are reviewed within timescale and this figure again is much higher than the national average. This highlights the importance that we place on ensuring our children are safeguarded and our timely reviews ensure that any changes are captured and actioned in a timely manner.

We have re-launched the Domestic Abuse champion offer, refreshing our group and providing an afternoon of face-to-face training, setting up monthly champion meetings and support channels to ensure the role of the champion is maximised, encouraging all champions to undertake the training offer and be familiar with the processes around referrals and recording. Champions are

part of the wider North of Tyne Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Champions network and therefore also have access to networking sessions and training and updates during the year, kept up to date on legislation and resources.

We have trained our Northumberland Families First, edge of care service in Family Group Conferencing, alongside our principal social worker. This will ensure that there is efficient and effective management of referrals and outlining of timescales for pieces of specific work so that these can be completed in line with the child's timescale. The Team Manager from the service sits on our Legal Gateway Panel where referrals can be explored in a timely manner to prevent delay in any legal processes.

We have commissioned specialised external Contextual Safeguarding Training, which has been delivered firstly to all Senior Managers, Team Managers and has been rolled out to frontline and partner agency staff. We have started working on a process/procedure for a multi-agency approach for cases whereby contextualised safeguarding has been identified, and rather than proceeding down the child protection process if this is felt unnecessary, however this is in its embryonic stages.

The Pre-birth team is now well established and located in the Family Hub and a multi-agency pre-birth Team Meeting is set up to monitor progress of the team. We are also engaging with Newcastle University regarding research around engaging with fathers.

We now have two workers trained in Parent Assess Plus and have also undertaken Train the Trainer so we can train others in Northumberland. This provides a more comprehensive assessment and includes additional risk factors to better understand a child's circumstances. The workers also continue to complete PAMs assessments.

Northumberland have been involved with the PLO re-launch where we were involved with the Local Family Justice Board where sessions have been undertaken with staff and as a result, we have revised our Legal Gateway paperwork and guidance. Key messages from these sessions have centred around the 26-week timescale, avoidance of specialist assessments, use of family networks and Family Group Conferencing with a stronger focus on early permanence.

Further to this, Northumberland has been accepted to participate in the DfE pilot around early engagement and discussions between CAFCASS and the local authority in public law care proceedings. There is no start date at the time of writing.

Partnership work



Changes in NCASP: The LCSPR framework has recently been updated to incorporate the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's guidance for safeguarding partners. This has strengthened understanding of the criteria for Serious Child Safeguarding incidents and the rapid review process. There is an effective system in place for the notification of all incidents meeting the criteria and a clear process for rapid reviews to be held (as set out in working together). This process has been implemented and is overseen by the NCASP business manager, partners and relevant

agencies understand the purpose and are fully engaged with (and contribute to) rapid reviews

and LCSPRs. The [LSCPR Framework and Practice Guidance](#) sets out the process and ensures consistency.

There has been an increase in serious cases being notified (SIN), these have been reviewed and agreed appropriate referrals. We have noted an increase in numbers of under 1s with injuries and are setting up a task and finish group to look at the cases and consider any wider determining factors.

The publication of CSPR Panels data has also prompted regional discussions. As of June 2023, we have submitted 5 SIN's this year (from Jan 23), rapid reviews have been held for all cases, with learning identified and acted upon, LCSPR (Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review) recommended for one case. The national panel have agreed with all our decisions to date and have commended our rapid reviews for being well written with clear action plans.

The changes introduced last year to the children missing education (CME) procedure have had a positive impact. Almost 1000 children at risk of missing out on full time education have been tracked and from September 2022 to July 2023, 286 students were discussed at panel, of which 173 are no longer CME. The new role of Education Welfare Support Officer is having an impact on severely absent pupils, and this is being strengthened for 2023-24. Schools have therefore used the system to identify children at risk of or subject to sexual exploitation, and/or criminal exploitation, and then make timely referrals to early help or children's social care where appropriate. Integration with other risk management processes, such as child protection, MSET (Missing, Slavery, Exploitation and Trafficked) and Operation Endeavour, are also achieved through the panel.

Signs of Safety: Northumberland continue to use Signs of Safety as a model of practice, as has been previously mentioned in this report. Comprehensive training has been/is given to all staff and work has been undertaken with partner agencies with regards to the implementation of the use of Signs of Safety. The Signs of Safety Board was disbanded in December 2022 and a working group is now in place and Practice Champions within teams support other workers and continue to support the further embedding of the use of the model. Templates are available in our children's database that support this model of practice and a more consistent approach to the recording of supervision sessions has been piloted.

Children missing education/Children with a Social Worker: Arrangements for children that are electively home educated are effective, and in line with the national picture; numbers are higher than before the pandemic. A Virtual School officer based at the Front Door shares intelligence which links individual children to support services when appropriate. An Education Welfare Officer was nominated by local EHE families to receive a KIT Award from the charity Education Otherwise which recognises people who have achieved high standards in their role. Preparation is complete for the implementation of a Children Not in School register, expected to be a requirement in 2023-24.

The education of children with a social worker has a high profile across children's services and with schools. A successful Relationships Matter conference, a collaboration between the Virtual School, Be You and NEWST, launched a local authority approach to relational and trauma-informed practice and the nationally respected keynote speaker is continuing to work with

Northumberland to develop and embed this learning. Training has been delivered to social workers and a Task and Finish group is developing resources and strategies to strengthen school-social care relationships. A performance monitoring framework has been developed, and case file audits are in place to evaluate the integration of barriers to education in children's safety plans.

Children's Voices Pilot: Northumberland are currently partaking in this piece of work with North Tyneside to contribute to research being undertaken through funding from the DfE around highlighting the child's voice within records and encouragement in the use of gathering feedback wherever possible and appropriate to do so. The staff have embraced this and have utilised the equipment to more effectively record interventions in 'real time'. This has given opportunities to utilise a different way of working and the next steps are currently being explored as the pilot ends at the end of September.

2.6 What could we do better?

The timeliness of Child and Family assessments being completed (80% within timescales) to be proportionate, within timescale and evidence the rationale for extending assessment timescales.

We could improve the quality of plans and timelines within our records

We could improve school attendance for children with a social worker.

2.7 What impact has this had and how do we know?

Meaningful Measure 1- keeping children safe, supported, and improving their lives

There is good application of thresholds and children are receiving the right service at the right time. Referrals are well received into the Front Door and triage is thorough and analytical in the application of thresholds for intervention. Re-referrals are scrutinised and ongoing work to understand any patterns or themes is undertaken by the Senior Manager at the Front Door.

Cases that meet the criteria for MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub) are progressed where a multi-agency approach determines the next steps. Strategies are held in a timely way and Section 47 enquiries are initiated at appropriate junctures across the service and measures are put in place to safeguard the child(ren). This is strengthened by oversight from the Service Manager as to whether the case needs to progress to an Initial Child Protection Conference. The recording of information and analysis in Section 47s is variable and templates are not particularly set up for comprehensive information to be contained. Completion of work around our thresholds indicates we are reassured that we are applying them appropriately.

Use of child protection/looked after and child in need procedures are well embedded within the teams and effective and timely use of conferencing/reviews (as previously highlighted) and relevant meetings strengthens the overall effectiveness in keeping children safe and improved outcomes. This has been evidenced through Practice Days and audit activity where strong child-centred practice has been highlighted.

Implementation of plans and regular case discussions/supervisions provide a forum for workers to discuss cases and identifying how driving of the plan is executed.

Meaningful Measure 2- Making sure we are working with children, parents, important family, and friends so that they are fully involved in developing plans that are clear about who will do what and when

Children and young people are at the centre of social work practice, and staff members know their children and families well. The working with and understanding of them being supported in a range of creative ways are underpinned by effective relationship building.

The views of young people in all aspects of work are seen as strong, are highlighted within case recording and give a real sense of collaboration. Workers have a real understanding of their cases and are committed, motivated and driven to ensure good outcomes are achieved. This has been evidenced in Practice Day findings and young person feedback is a key priority for the participation team, alongside the use of the Child's Voice pilot which has contributed to a further strengthening of understanding from children and young people about intervention in all cohorts.

Parents and wider family members and networks are engaged well and there is regular and effective multi - agency collaboration. Plans are variable, however are improved with the Signs of Safety form used now. Identification of family networks is an improving picture, and they are being engaged and are creating safety for the child and are further reinforced using "fire drills."

Feedback regarding intervention from the pre-birth team from families outlined the following:

Family A: ***"We were ashamed and scared that our baby was going to be taken away, but we are now learning new things."***

Family B: ***"We were initially annoyed as we were not informed that they were going to be involved but they were absolutely honest with us from the beginning and that others should be open minded about involvement."***

Family C - ***"The baby was at the forefront for everyone."***

Meaningful Measure 3 - Making sure that children are living safely and securely as soon as possible

At the Front Door, good application of thresholds informs decision making which might include use of rapid safety plans and where necessary seeking legal advice. The complexity in cases highlights the increased attendance at Legal Gateway Panel by Team Managers from the Front Door.

Step-up arrangements are well understood across the service and quality of practice activity evidences that this is executed well and with the child at the focus, joint visits being arranged, and the situation explained to parents about the shift in level of involvement required. Early Help Family workers remain involved until the statutory assessment is completed, and the outcome is known. This provides support and consistency to families during this period.

The acceptance of RHIs in 2022 was 80% which shows an increase from both 2020 (52%) and 2021 (73%). This figure is testament to the tenacity of the workforce undertaking this role.

Meaningful Measure 4 – Making sure families and staff from all services work with each other to make things better for children

Good multi agency working has been evidenced across the service and assessments, plans and attendance at relevant meetings is strong. Plans, however, continue to be variable in their recording, although the Signs of Safety format supports clarity of which tasks will be completed by whom and by when. This gives workers, partner agencies and, more importantly, families, a clear understanding of what is expected.

The aim of implementing the Education Early Help Assessments Team was to increase the number of children with education-initiated Early Help Assessments to 200 for the academic year 2022/23. This target has been exceeded and from September 2022 to 21 July 2023, there have been 420 children with education-initiated Early Help Assessments.

Feedback outlined below from education colleagues has been very positive:

“This role has helped us to provide support to parents that would normally shy away from what they consider 'authority'.”

“I wanted to send a huge thank you for introducing the Education EHA worker to our school, she cannot do enough to support us and has made the process of initiating / completing EHA meetings a simple one. As a result of their involvement, I feel families are getting the best support possible and as a school we feel fully supported in our role to ensure the best outcomes for the children and their families.”

2.8 What are we going to do next to support continuous improvement?

We will implement statutory DfE guidance on ‘Working together to improve school attendance.’

We will recruit to a new post of Virtual School Mentor: education of children with a social worker to better embed changes in legislation.

The next phase of Education EHA Team is to now develop data collection to be able to record impact against several measures, these include measures that are education focussed such as attendance and attainment and training with regards to SEND.

Focused workshop to be undertaken regarding the completion of child and family assessments so we better understand any blocks to completion within set timescales and why timescales may be extended.

We will undertake work with staff groups to further improve the quality of plans to ensure consistency.

We will agree a process to manage and oversee cases where contextualised safeguarding is a factor.

We will ensure that multi-agency audit regarding domestic abuse is undertaken in October 2023.

We will ensure that Neglect Actions plans are re-visited to determine the impact of the Neglect Summit held in 2022.

Work to be undertaken with regards to understanding and proposal of next steps for cases in the child in need cohort.

We will participate in the DfE pilot regarding early engagement with CAFCASS in care proceedings.

Exploration of funding for working with FDAC (Family Drug and Alcohol Court) as an alternative family court for care proceedings where parental substance and alcohol misuse is a key factor as is the case for 47% of parents currently in care proceedings.

3. CHILDREN WHO ARE LOOKED AFTER AND CARE LEAVERS

CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER

3.1 What have we done well in the last year?

Northumberland continues to have the lowest rate of children and young people in care in the North East region (77 per 10K compared to 110), although our overall numbers have increased (from 73 per 10K in March 2022). Of those who have been leaving care, more do return home than any other route (33% compared to 28% nationally). The numbers leaving care due to being adopted have reduced in this period compared to the previous one (11 per quarter in 2021 to 5 per quarter in 2022), although remain higher than the national average (14% compared to 10%).

We have reviewed and updated the corporate parenting strategy, and the related action plan and further enhanced partnership engagement including updating the terms of reference for MALAP (Multi Agency Looked After Partnership). As indicated earlier, we continue to strengthen the CPAG arrangements including the recent taking-up of the chair by the Leader of the Council.

The quality of our in-house residential care has been maintained, including responding promptly and appropriately to an Ofsted monitoring visit, with all our homes currently rated as good and our secure unit Kyloe House being the only secure provision nationally to be judged as outstanding.

External residential placements continue to be closely monitored by a multiagency High-Level Resource Panel which meets weekly to agree and review external placements, including ensuring weekly oversight of bespoke arrangements on the occasions these must be made.



As noted earlier, we are progressing with the build of a children's home which will be open from Autumn 2023 and have gained agreement to use the remainder of agreed funding to develop satellite provision linked to our existing children's homes which should increase both capacity and flexibility.

We have continued to work with the regional initiative of implementing the Mockingbird model and have in place our first hub and spoke fostering arrangements of this model. More broadly, we have increased the number of in-house placements available continuing with creative recruitment practices and the use of flexibilities as required to maintain and increase our capacity.

We have responded effectively to the increased demand for kinship care assessments primarily through the court arena and have seen an improvement in the timeliness of those. This supports the numbers and percentage of children who leave care with an SGO (Special Guardianship Order). We have also reviewed our SGO policy and at the time of writing are finalising the updated policy.

We have maintained the allocation of children with a plan for adoption with our child permanence team so that they are offered specialist support from an adoption worker who will oversee their care planning until the adoption order is granted. This has improved the consistency and quality of the CPR documents, life story work, later life letters (an area for improvement noted in the

previous ILACS (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) inspection) and permanence planning for young children with adoption plans. We have also continued with the UEA model for moving children from foster care to adoption which is seen as good practice and had positive feedback from carers and staff.

The children with adoption plans who are not yet adopted are reviewed quarterly through the head of service-led adoption monitoring meetings that feedback to the ADM on progress.

We continue to work with Adopt North East and will be supporting the implementation of improvement plans arising from the peer review of that service, in further developing the partnership working. Work is still ongoing to agree a revised funding model based on activity over a 3-year rolling period.

We have embedded permanence performance clinics to monitor and challenge the planning for children in our care who have not reached their permanent placement which supports improved accountability and timely care planning.

We are moving to reinstating face to face looked after reviews, but the majority continue to be conducted virtually and these have facilitated wider participation and take place in a timely way (97% in timescales). IRO contact with the young people, separate to the reviews, has been effective and there is consistent IRO oversight of looked after plans in between reviews to further support timely progression of plans.

Accessible consultation and pathways to mental health and wellbeing services for our children looked after having been maintained and this is monitored regularly at CPAG.

We have maintained effective working relationships with the court and CAFCASS, receiving positive feedback from the local District Judge and senior colleagues in CAFCASS. We have been accepted on a DfE pilot to trial early discussions between CAFCASS and local authorities in care proceedings, although no detail or start date available at the time of writing this.

We do provide a range of advocacy and participation supports and activities which are used by our children looked after and young people.

Family Time service has continued to support family time for our children and young people with their birth families.

The Ofsted Focused visit in July 2022 considered how effectively we achieved permanence with positive findings:

“Social workers identify permanence plans for children at the earliest opportunity. This helps most children to achieve permanence in a timely way.

Social workers know their children well. They use personalised and sensitive tools to communicate effectively with children and prepare them for permanence. An established quality assurance framework assists senior leaders and managers in monitoring the progression of children's plans and the quality of social work practice.

A small number of older children and children with complex needs experience drift due to multiple placements or changes of social worker. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) monitor children's progress to achieve permanence, but the impact of their challenge and escalation to managers is not well reflected in children's records.

Social workers describe feeling supported and valued by their managers. They appreciate the learning and service development opportunities provided by senior leaders. These opportunities enhance their practice to support children in achieving permanence. Managers provide regular case supervision for social workers."

Following the focused visit, work has been undertaken regarding the effective use of supervision which is ongoing with a view to use of a Signs of Safety form to ensure focus in the appropriate areas of case supervision. Changes have been made to how challenges are recorded, captured and how they highlight what impact this may have on the child or young person so this can be better captured in our improvement journey.

There have been encouraging improvements to education outcomes for looked after children in most areas. Achievement and academic progression are showing signs of being back on track in most key stages. We have continued to mitigate the impact of disruption to learning by focussing on school placement stability. Mid-year school moves have dropped as an impact of effective integrated working between the Virtual School, children's social care and the Family Placement Service. High levels of support have been provided for schools, including enhanced Pupil Premium Plus payments, to slow down the rate of suspensions, and we continue to have had no permanent exclusions for our looked after children since 2008. An integrated strategy with the Education Welfare Service to improve school attendance is in place.

There has been a reduction in the percentage of children re-entering care, with it being as high as 15% in some quarters in 2020 and 2021 but ranging from 0% - 10% over the most recent 12-month period. This is a positive outcome for children, young people, and their families.

3.2 What could we do better?

Overall during the period, there has been an increasing percentage of children in care who experienced three or more placements (14% compared to 10% the previous year) and an audit of the reasons behind the placement moves revealed that whilst around 40% of children had moved due to a disruption in their previous placements, more positively, half the children had moved (according to their plan) into a long-term placement.

Time scales for adoption have increased. As the number of children in the cohort is relatively small, one child can significantly impact on the figures and this has been the case here, reflecting the experience of older, harder to place children that Northumberland strives to secure adoption for.

The numbers leaving care due to being adopted have reduced in this period compared to the previous one (11 per quarter in 2021 to 5 per quarter in 2022), although remain higher than the national average (14% compared to 10%). The reduction seen in 2022/23 reflects fewer

Placement Orders being awarded during the pandemic, although that is now increasing, indicating that the numbers of children being adopted will increase again in 2023/24.

We have not managed to significantly improve our use of independent visitors, but this is reflecting regional and national challenges with the provider not being able to recruit and match albeit low numbers sufficiently or timely.

Achievement at Key Stage 2 needs to improve, and in early years more children need to reach a satisfactory level of development so that they are school ready. Suspensions are higher than last year, the absence rate is high, and there have been more school placement moves where schools could not manage behaviour or fully meet needs.

3.3 What impact has this had and how do we know?

Services in place in Northumberland for our children who are looked after are robust and ensure that necessary assessments are carried out with regards to their health with 84% of our children having their teeth checked by the dentist, 97% of our children having an annual health assessment and all of our children under 5 having a health development check completed, showing an improving picture.

GOOD	IMPROVING	NOT YET GOOD ENOUGH
No permanent exclusions 14th consecutive year	Achievement at Key Stage 4 the Basics 35.1%	Persistent absence 23%
PEP completion 93%	Progress 8 and Attainment 8 at Key Stage 4	Pupils attending good and outstanding schools 71%
Looked after children progressing into further education at 16 77%	KS1 age related expectations in reading, writing and maths 20%	Year 11 progressing to level 3 qualifications 17%
Children missing education 0	Total absence 7.4%	123 suspensions for 39 pupils in 29 different schools
Destinations at 16 – in education, training and employment 87%	PEPs quality assured as green or amber 81.4%	Early Years good level of development 20%
Level 3 achievement 4 young people, 100%	Mid-year school moves 37 moves for 31 pupils	KS2 age related expectations in reading, writing and maths 18.2%
Level 6 achievement honours degrees, 3 young people, 100%	Multiplication tables check 19.2 (average score)	Phonics test, meeting threshold 50%

The table above provides an at a glance evaluation from the Virtual school head teacher’s annual report from 2022 of how work in the Virtual School has impacted on care-experienced children and young people. There are notable strengths in the fields of permanent exclusions, destinations at age 16, and academic achievement of 19–25-year-olds; improvements regarding mid-year school moves and academic performance at key stages 1 and 4; but also, some areas that are not yet good enough such as academic achievement in the first years of school and key stage 2,

absence, and suspensions (formerly known as fixed term exclusions). The Autumn term persistent absence rate in Northumberland has decreased by 3.8% from 26.9% in 2021/22 to 23.1% in 2022/23, this is equivalent to 1,421 fewer pupils being persistent absentees in 2022/23 compared to 2021/22. This reduction is contrary to the rising trend seen nationally (up 0.7% to 24.2%).

Meaningful Measure 2- Making sure we are working with children, parents, important family, and friends so that they are fully involved in developing plans that are clear about who will do what and when

Practice days have highlighted direct work with young people to be of an extremely high quality with staff working with young people in a meaningful and purposeful way and where appropriate using a range of creative methods and tools which support the Signs of Safety model.

The Children's Voices pilot has strengthened working with children and whilst this has only been in place for a short period of time, has enabled workers to undertake further direct work on a tablet that lots of children and young people are au fait with.

Meaningful Measure 3- Making sure that children are living safely and securely as soon as possible

Legal Gateway Panel is well established and embedded within practice across the Service. The panel give prompt and timely oversight on cases that require planned public law outline (PLO) or legal action, and this is well documented within children's case files. PLO and cases within care proceedings are progressed without delay, the average for them to conclude from point of issue increasing from 36 weeks in March 2022 to 39 weeks in March 2023 which remains better than the national average of 46 weeks. The managers have a good grip of those cases and are aware of timescales and these are discussed in supervision. The panel membership has been reviewed and paperwork has been amended in line with the PLO re-launch to give a better understanding of the child(ren)'s lived experience and the opportunity to improve outcomes.

The use of networks gives a more robust approach to consideration for rapid safety plans and initiation of viability assessments where necessary and these are seen to be completed in a timely way to prevent delay for the child. This is further evidenced by our use of Special Guardianship orders for children who exit care: 24% of children looked after were made subject to special guardianship orders in the year, a higher proportion than the national figure of 13%.

Through permanence performance clinics, actions to improve the timeliness of permanence for our CLA have been identified, including timely discharge from care where appropriate. The proportion of children re-entering care has reduced from 9% in 2021/22 to 4% in 2022/23.

92% of CLA cases where the IRO has monitored the plan in the last 6 weeks is an increase from 86% in 2021/22, and 87% of CLA cases where the IRO has consulted with the child in the previous 6 months is an increase from 75% in 2021/22. This provides a robust IRO footprint on case records and opportunities for children and young people to ensure they have their voice heard in their review meetings, even if they choose not to attend. Attendance and shaping of the review meeting are negotiated with young people and a range of methods are used to elicit views on an individual basis.

The ongoing focus on a wide range of CLA data, including the development of permanence, kinship, adoption and fostering clinics centred around data trends has improved the tracking of cases along a child's permanence journey and the continued success in terms of adoption and SGO outcomes for our children in care. The percentage of children adopted / made subject to SGO consistently is above the national figure (the percentage of CLA leaving care subject to SGO increased from 18% in 21/22 to 24% in 22/23). This evidences robust and timely decision making for children and young people.

74% of our children in care are placed within a 20-mile radius of the family home which is higher than the national average of 69%, but a real strength given Northumberland's geographical area and rurality. This enables family and friend connections to be maintained subsequently supporting placement stability.

We have increased our in-house fostering capacity as part of our drive to meet our sufficiency need: We had 386 places in 221 households (as of 31st March 2023) which increased from 326 and 181 respectively in the previous year.

Of the 152 children who left care in the year ending March 2023, 14% were adopted, which is better than regional and national averages of 13% and 10%, respectively.

3.4 What are we going to do next to support continuous improvement?

Addressing the issue of placement sufficiency is a key priority, and actions include the continued implementation of the sufficiency strategy and there are a range of actions in place to increase sufficiency and further develop resilience and support for carers, which in turn is expected to positively impact on placement stability. For example, the NEWST team offer additional support to the care team who work with the children and young people whose placements may be at risk.

We are working with the regional fostering pathfinder to develop and enhance the recruitment and retention of foster carers and will continue to develop the Mockingbird model.

Implement the plan to develop 2-bedded satellite homes linked to our existing provision to increase capacity and flexibility.

Explore potential for charitable funding from a local Trust fund to develop our overnight short break provision.

We need to work with schools to introduce new strategies, or identify strategies that are known to work, to accelerate the academic progress of children looked after so that more are learning in their age-related curriculum.

We need to reduce the number of persistent absentees and suspensions from school.

CARE LEAVERS

3.5 What have we done well in the last year?

Northumberland Adolescent Service (NAS) provides an integrated and holistic approach to safeguarding young people and ensures the needs of all children looked after and care leavers are supported to reach their full potential. To develop the service further we have taken feedback and recommendations from JTAI (Joint Targeted Area Inspections) 2019, ILAC 2020, HMIP Probation Inspection 2023, In-house practice days 2022 and Mark Riddell, National Leaving Care Specialist DFE (Department for Education) 2020 & 2023. We also have lead roles in the following forums:

- Regional Lead for Northumberland County Council for contextual safeguarding.
- Regional Lead for the financial workstream for care leavers and jointly deliver training with Adult Social Care around transitions to Adult Services.

14+ Team work with young people who are 14 years old or above who are care-experienced, as well as young people who are over the age of 16 who need Child in Need support or who are at risk of homelessness. We ensure that our 14+ care experienced young people all have a pathway plan, this focuses on their current support needs, their future goals and how we are going to achieve these. We support our young people to transition into adulthood and when it is identified that they need further support we work with partner agencies such as Adult Social Care and Adult Mental Health Services.

18+Care leavers Offer provides support to care-experienced young people who are aged between 18-25 years. All have an allocated leaving care worker up until the age of 21 years old and can re-contact our service for support up until the age of 25. Support is also offered to 16- and 17-year-old Relevant Care Leavers, post 18 Former Relevant Care Leavers and post 16 Qualifying Care Leavers.

Care Leavers have a Pathway Plan, reviewed at least every 6 months. The Pathway Plan ensures that young people receive ongoing support as they transition from care into adulthood. This includes all aspects of the young person's life.

The leaving care social worker (LCSW) ensures that young people are supported in all areas of their life and transition into adulthood, through the completion and regular review of their pathway plans. Support remains as detailed above.

When young people are supported to access their own tenancy and for those living in Northumberland, they can access priority banding via Homefinder, setting up home allowance and any other charitable grants are available to ensure that their future home is homely and meets their needs. Care leavers are also offered support to develop their money management skills, access to 10 driving lessons and the purchase of a driving licence and access to free travel within Northumberland via Nexus.

Care Leavers Covenant The service works with the Virtual School and the care leavers covenant to progress opportunities for young people under the 5 broad headings, which form part of a wider action plan to support young people leaving care and is overseen by the Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting Advisory Group. The areas relating to care leavers are: better prepared and supported to live independently; having improved access to employment, education, and training; experiencing stability in their lives, and feeling safe and secure; having improved access to health and emotional support; and being supported to achieve financial stability.

We have refreshed our Care Leavers' Covenant to consider the work of new partners, namely the North East and North Cumbria ICB and North East Raising Aspirations Partnership. Improving retention in education, training, and employment (EET) is a priority in the Children looked after and care leavers' strategy 2023-25, and we continue to prioritise opportunities for 16+ young people in the developing whole council approach to corporate parenting.

Accommodation Service supports young people to transition from care into accommodation suitable to their needs in a variety of forms including a tenancy of their own, supported accommodation, a NAS Supported tenancy or arrangements for their current foster care placement to convert into a Staying Put arrangements at 18. Support provided are visits to young people, settling into their own tenancies, providing regular support to the NAS supported tenancies. Care Leavers Accommodation & Support Protocol meeting (CLASP) is a multi-disciplinary meeting that includes representation from Housing to share information, so they can make a choice about their transition to alternative accommodation once they reach 18.

We have a very small number of young people who are in custody and serving a sentence, during that time the Youth Justice Service, leaving care support worker, housing, probation, and prison staff work with the young people to ensure that we have plans in place to support them once they leave custody and a CLASP meeting is held prior to discharge.

Sorted substance misuse service & the Health Hub provides intervention for children and young people up to the age of 18. Young people are supported to reduce, manage, or stop using substances, and to reduce the associated risks from substance misuse, both to themselves and their communities.

Sorted have a designated 18+ care leavers worker who provides support to those who may have substance misuse concerns or support needs up to the age of 21. This role bridges the gap between the under and over 18's drug and alcohol services. This is achieved by monthly consultation and transition meetings with the adult service. The Allocated worker can also offer support directly to leaving care young people who are not wishing to access NRP (18+ services).

Exploitation/EFH/Missing for Care Leavers input includes practical responses to missing episodes in the form of Return Home Interviews (RHI). Exploitation support is multi-faceted including practical 1:1 intervention with young people, consultations for Social Care and Early Help, training, contribution to wider service delivery including multi-agency groups.

As previously noted in the safeguarding section, Northumberland is moving towards a Contextual Safeguarding approach to managing Extra Familial Harm. Our scale up has included delivery of

bespoke training to all partners including social care, Youth Justice Service, Community Safety, Police, Health, Probation, Education, Fire & Rescue Services and more. Moving forward we hope to impact test this learning to inform further developments of contextual approach as a response to extra familial harm.

Youth Justice Service and Care leavers work to promote a childhood removed from the justice system using diversion through our 10-point checklist, Out of Court, and Divert from Charge initiatives. This is done via multi-agency training and awareness raising across social care and wider partnerships. This allows us to support cases outside of the court arena where outcomes and intervention plans focus on repairing harm, reducing reoffending, and increasing general wellbeing without criminalising young people. Our first-time entrant's rate is lower than the national rate therefore evidencing a positive impact of this initiative.

On approaching their 18th birthday young people will be discussed in transitions meetings, those with complex needs can remain with YJS to ensure holistic support needs are met.

There are revised Terms of Reference for the monthly EET clinics, that includes broader multi-agency representation, and engaging with the private sector. Careers' guidance from the Virtual School has been strengthened as we have participated in a Post 16 Pupil Premium Plus pilot and recently introduced the role of a Post 16 education intervention worker.

3.6 What could we do better?

We aim to improve the percentage of 19–21-year-old care leavers in EET (the data indicates a reduction from 57% to 52%).

Supporting NAS Tenancies and existing supported accommodation providers to register with Ofsted to ensure compliance with the regulatory framework that will formally begin in October 2023. Ensuring that we are compliant with the regulation and ensuring that the standard of accommodation provided to young people remains of a good standard.

3.7 What impact has this had and how do we know?

The 903 DFE return tells us that the percentage for 17 and 18-year-olds in EET has increased from 70% in 2021-22 to 77% in 2022-23, far higher than the national average of 66%. This evidences the impact of EET clinics and the provision of opportunities for this cohort.

We are in touch with 118 care leavers aged 19-21 (98%) which is higher than last year (95%) and higher than the England/North East (92%) and statistical neighbour average (92%).

13% of our young people in the 17-18 and 19–21-year-old age groups are staying put with former carers which is in line with the National average for 17–18-year-olds, and higher for 19–21-year-olds (9%).

By using data to improve accurate recording and through dedicated staff, the proportion of 17 and 18-year-old care leavers with their 'in touch' activity information recorded has increased from 90% in Sept 2022 to 100% in March 2023.

We have 97% of 19–21-year-old care leavers in suitable accommodation which is a 2% increase on 2021-22 and significantly higher than the national average of 88%.

Meaningful Measure 2- Making sure we are working with children, parents, important family, and friends so that they are fully involved in developing plans that are clear about who will do what and when

We know from care leavers' feedback that they feel supported and listened to from the following:

“They have helped me by helping with furniture for my flat and getting me moved in, if I ever need any help with anything they are always there.”

“(Worker’s name) helped support applications and areas I had struggle with. (worker’s name) helped me overcome issues I was having in interviews for a job and attend a group that helped with tips and techniques that could be used to remain calm.”

“(Worker’s name) has been amazing, I’m so pleased she became my worker she’s done so much for me she got me funding from a charity, and I was able to buy driving lessons. New clothes, and it covered my bus every week which really helped as I’m not earning much doing my apprenticeship.”

“The support has been amazing, honestly. I haven’t used the service recently really as I haven’t needed it. But if I have needed it, you’ve been really supportive. I’ve had you (worker’s name) as the same worker for 3 years which is the longest, I’ve had any worker. I’d scale a 10 for everything. There’s nothing that can improve the service and support - everything has all been a positive experience for me.”

3.8 What are we going to do next to support continuous improvement?

The Virtual School will provide leadership for the Care Leavers' Covenant and corporate parenting strategy, and a new post 16 ePEP (Personal Education Plan) has been developed for implementation in September 2023.

We will continue to improve the opportunities for Care leavers to be involved in our care leavers group.

We continue to look to promote an opportunity for a care leaver to be employed, even part time, within the service to support the views and wishes of young people. We are aware that some authorities have a care leaver employed for 6 hrs a week to focus on the care leavers board workstreams; we are a part of the regional care leavers board so that our young people benefit from this development.

Increasing placement sufficiency has been detailed earlier.

Currently consideration is being given to purchase and development of the care leavers app with Focus.gov.uk.

Planning academic and vocational pathways for Year 11 pupils could be better aligned with pathway plans.

4. Conclusion

This self-assessment demonstrates the scope of work that has been undertaken with the overall aim of continuously improving the range, quality, and effectiveness of our services for children, young people, and their families. We have assured ourselves with the findings that our services continue to improve and that children and young people, their voices and lived experiences are at the centre of our core practice. We continue to strive to improve those areas of practice that we have identified, and we will also ensure that we are as prepared and inclusive as possible in responding to the major changes and challenges that are coming to social care in this and following years.

Continuous Improvement Plan 2023/24: Overview

As indicated above, our continuous improvement plan is drawn from the findings of this self-assessment, the ongoing quality of practice work and responses to national developments.

Improvement Priority	Areas to Cover
<p>1. STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP:</p> <p>To ensure effective oversight of the progress and implementation of key strategies and that management actions are in place to support continuous improvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Set up of satellite units linked to Childrens Homes to increase choice and flexibility - Create In-house short break service - Further consideration of the needs of disabled children with regards to accommodation - Consider response to the Stable Homes report - Implement an Attendance Strategy and strengthen with the use of data - Streamlining of the corporate parenting approach across the whole council - Further development of Family Hub provision including links with Northumberland Communities Together service - Action recommendations from HMIP inspection
<p>2. WORKFORCE:</p> <p>Further developing the workforce, embedding family-focused practice, and supporting effective recruitment and retention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue to explore wider options around recruitment and retention to re-energise our recruitment campaign - Revisit career pathway and grading structure - Supporting of experienced staff to complete national managers programmes - Explore improvement of recruitment and retention within residential services to provide in house capacity - Review Social Work Academy to determine effectiveness and identify any changes - Sustaining of use of Signs of Safety model across all aspects of practice
<p>3. SUFFICIENCY, STABILITY AND SUPPORT</p> <p>To further improve the stability, range of and support for placements and for children and young people living away from birth parents</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Progress actions relating to the Sufficiency Strategy - Embed regional fostering pathfinder, recruitment, and retention of foster carers - Continue to develop the Mockingbird model - Setting up of satellite homes (as Strategic Leadership) - Create overnight short break provision (as Strategic Leadership) - Determine and implement strategies to accelerate academic progress of children

	<p>looked after</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop mechanisms to reduce persistent absenteeism and suspensions from school - Continue to promote face to face reviews for children and young people - Further increase opportunities for care leavers - Support accommodation providers ensuring regulation and good standard of accommodation for care leavers
<p>4. IMPROVING SOCIAL CARE PRACTICE:</p> <p>Further improve the effectiveness, timeliness and consistency of social care planning and practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continued implementation of QPAG in overseeing all quality of practice work - Further embed the use of the Quality of Practice Framework with the workforce - Further embed the use of Meaningful Measures in performance clinics and the reviewing of Locality Action Plans - Build upon the foundation of use of the Children’s Voice pilot in collating and using feedback for shaping of service delivery - Develop meaningful mechanisms for closing the loop regarding learning from quality of practice activities (including those undertaken within NCASP) - Undertake mapping exercise regarding child in need cases in line with the recent social care review - Agree and develop a procedure for cases where contextual safeguarding is a factor - Development of workshops for staff regarding the following practice areas which have been identified as areas for development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Timeliness and completion of child and family assessments - Consistency of recording in case supervision - Development of quality of children’s plans

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

ADM	Agency Decision Maker
ASYE	Assessed and Supported Year in Employment
C&F	Children and Families
CAFCASS	Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service
CCG	Clinical Commissioning Group
CCN	Child Concern Notification
CLA	Children Looked After
CME	Children Missing Education
CP	Child Protection
CPAG	Corporate Parenting Advisory Group
CPR	Child Permanency Report
CQC	Care Quality Commission
CSC	Children's Social Care
CSM	Children's Senior Manager
CSPR	Child Safeguarding Practice Review
DA	Domestic Abuse
DCS	Director of Children's Services
DDP	Dyadic Developmental Practice, Psychotherapy and Parenting training
DfE	Department for Education
EB	Evidence Based
EDT	Emergency Duty Team
EET	Education, Employment & Training
EFH	Extra familial Harm
EH	Early Help
EHA	Early Help Assessment
EHE	Elective Home Education
EHM	Early Help Module
EOTAS	Education Other Than at School
EWSO	Emotional Wellbeing Support Officer
FH	Family Hub
FV	Focused Visit
HMIP	His Majesty's Probation Inspectorate
HR	Human Resources
ICB	Integrated Care Board
ICPC	Initial Child Protection Conference
ICS	Integrated Children's System
ILAC(S)	Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services

IRO	Independent Reviewing Officer
JTAI	Joint Targeted Area Inspection
KIT award	Education Otherwise award for excellence
L&D	Learning and Development
LA	Local Authority
LCSPR	Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews
LCSW	Leaving Care Social Worker
MALAP	Multi Agency Looked After Partnership
MASH	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub
MSET	Missing, Slavery, Exploitation and Trafficked
NA	National Average
NAS	Northumberland Adolescent Service
NCASP	Northumberland Children and Adults Safeguarding Partnership
NCC	Northumberland County Council
NE	North East
NENC ICB	North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board
NESWA	North East Social Work Alliance
NEWST	Northumberland Emotional Well-being Support Team
NRP	Adult Treatment Services
PAM	Parent Assessment
PBR	Payment By Results
PEP	Personal Education Plan
PLO	Public Law Outline
PSW	Principal Social Worker
QIP	Quality Improvement and Performance subgroup
QofP	Quality of Practice
QPAG	Quality Performance Activity Group
RHI	Return Home Interviews
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SGO	Special Guardianship Order
SIN	Significant Incident Notifications
SoS	Signs of Safety
SW	Social Worker
TUPE	Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment
UEA	University of East Anglia (Adoption Model)
VCS	Voluntary Community and Support
YJS	Youth Justice Service