



Northumberland
County Council

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Children in Care and Care Leavers

Sufficiency Strategy 2022 - 24

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1. Overview

Northumberland County Council's Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy 2022 -2024 sets out the Council's approach to meeting its responsibilities to provide secure, safe and appropriate accommodation to children in care and care leavers. This current review of our sufficiency strategy is taking place in the context of the national independent review of children's social care, of which the provision of placements is a key element. The interim report of that review, the Case for Change (June 2021) has highlighted the national challenges and that the current market does not effectively meet the placement needs of children and young people.

In Northumberland, we aim to provide the right service at the right time for families recognising that at times families require additional support to help them stay together. Looking after and protecting children and young people is one of the most important jobs that we do. If it is not safe for children to stay at home then we will intervene and strive to ensure they are given the care, support and stability that they deserve.

As corporate parents, underpinned by our leadership pledge, we will strive relentlessly to provide the best quality care and support to our looked after children and care leavers that we can. We recognise the importance of safe and secure placements to ensure children in our care live happy, healthy lives and achieve the best possible outcomes that they can. This is provided through well supported placements that meet the child's needs. We will place our children in a family setting wherever we can, unless their needs are better met in residential or other care settings.

The duty to provide or procure placements for Children Looked After (Children in Care) is explicit in the Children Act 1989. These regulations require a strategy to be in place that describes how local authorities intend to provide sufficient care placements for its children in care. The introduction of Sufficiency Statutory Guidance (2010) and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations has provided further clarity on the implementation of section 22G of the Act.

This Statutory Guidance sets out a requirement for local authorities to work with key partners to be in a position to secure, where reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for children in care which meets the needs of children and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the local authority's area.

The Guidance requires local authorities to do more than simply ensure that accommodation be 'sufficient' in terms of the number of beds provided. They must also have regard to the benefits of securing a number of providers and a range of services. Fundamentally, the accommodation available must meet the needs of children.

To structure this strategy, we are using the guidance developed for the Local Government Association (LGA) in May 2021 which aims to establish a nationwide framework for producing

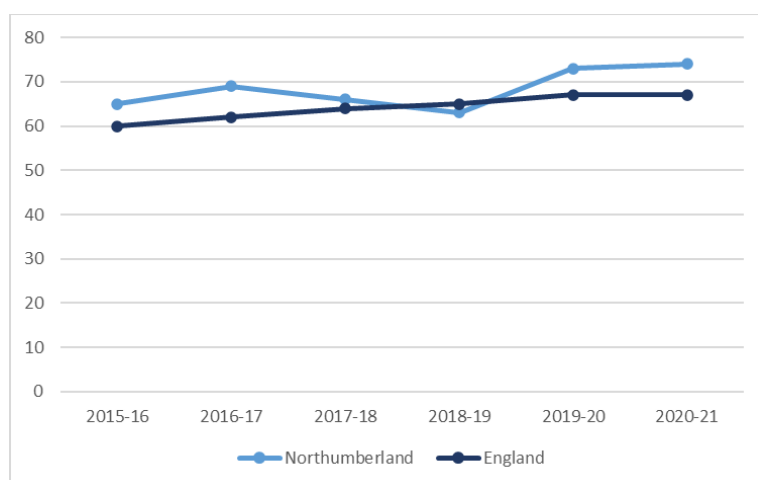
sufficiency statements to support consistent monitoring of need, delivery and value for money across the country.

This strategy sets out the overall approach to managing demand, focusing specifically on the right solutions. It identifies appropriate planning and delivery of sufficient and high-quality placements and associated support, so that every child who is looked after achieves their potential. To ensure this strategy is robust, we have drawn on a wide range of available data, including historical trend, comparator data, and current service data which gives us evidence of trends and needs around placement provision so we can develop the right resources.

2. Demand for placements

2.1 Population of children in care

Figure 1. Children in care as at 31 March 2021 as a share of total population of children



Analysis

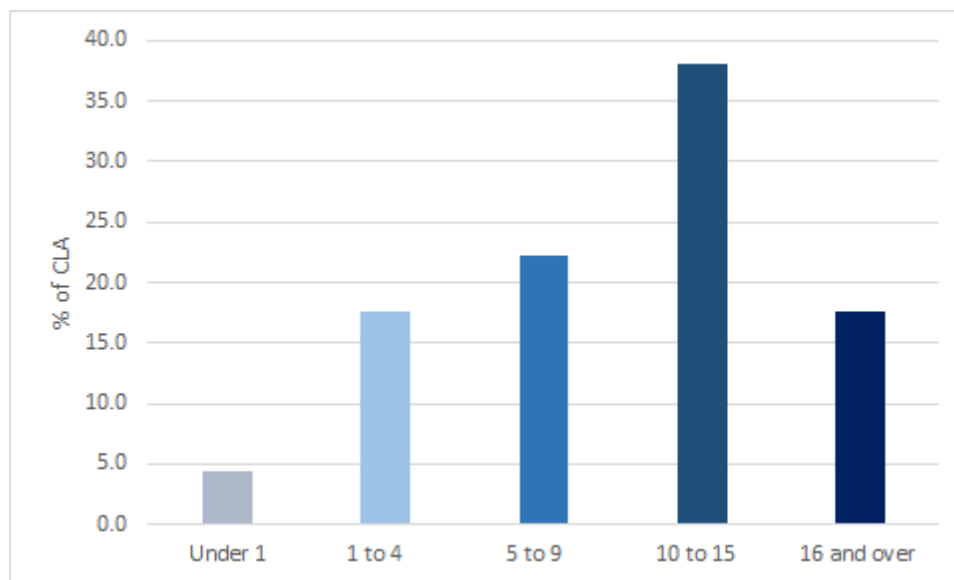
During 2020/21 Northumberland County Council (NCC) did experience a slight increase in the numbers of children looked after. This followed a rise between 2018 and 2020, our analysis of which showed a higher-than-average number of children entering care, the majority of whom had been subject to child protection plans which had escalated to require intervention. An audit of this indicated appropriate decision making. The average numbers of children leaving care were broadly in line with the usual numbers. More generally, a higher proportion of 5 to 9-year-olds had entered care than in previous years and there was an increase in children entering care from a specific geographical area.

More recently the numbers of children looked after has decreased again to be around 67 per 10,000 which is in line with the national average. The number of children looked after has been impacted by the Covid pandemic and the consequences for the court system to process care proceedings and the availability of services to deliver support and interventions in a timely way.

What have we done

We have in place robust systems to ensure rigour and scrutiny and senior management oversight of decisions for children to become looked after and that all safe and appropriate alternatives to becoming looked after have been considered. As well as our independent reviewing, we also have put in place performance and tracking systems to support the timely progression of plans for children who are looked after, including discharge where appropriate.

Figure 2. Children in care by age group (as a share of total LAC population), 2021



Note: The figure includes the number of children in care as at March 31, 2021.

Analysis

The gender split of children in care tends to be more even in Northumberland than the national and regional pictures, with 52% of children at March 2021 being male (48% female), compared to 56% male (44% female) nationally, and 55% male (45% female) regionally.

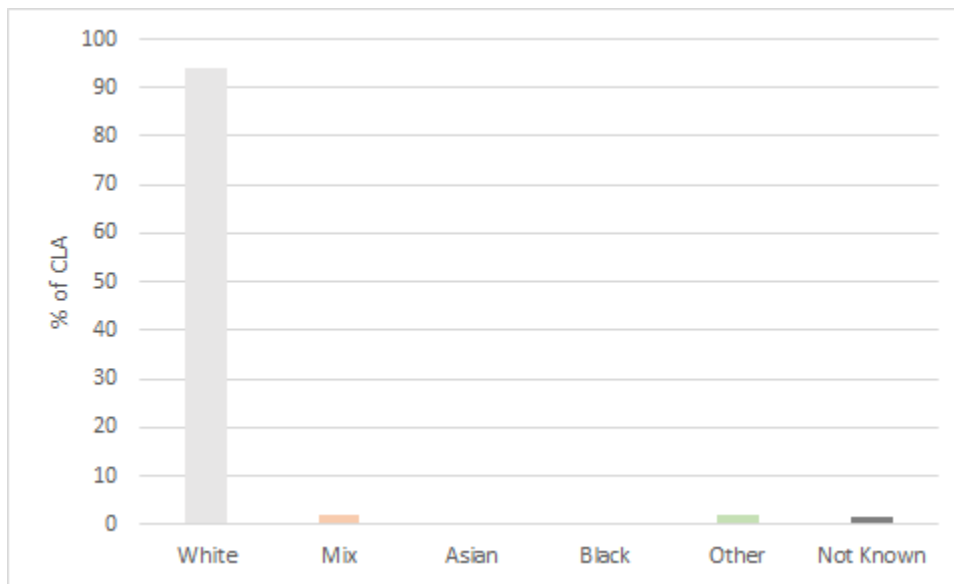
As at March 2021, 56% of the children in care were aged 10 or over, which is consistent with the previous five years. Compared to the national picture, Northumberland has a lower proportion of children in care aged 16 or over (18% at March 2021, compared to 23% nationally), but a higher proportion aged 1 to 9 (40% at March 2021, compared to 33% nationally). The proportion of Northumberland’s children in care within the 5 to 9 year old age group has gradually increased each year - from 18% in March 2018 to 22% in March 2021 (see above).

There are no specific issues relating to the sufficiency of placements based on gender and while there are more challenges for consistently finding placements for children aged 10-15, it is the range and specificity of their wider needs rather than age which determines placement availability.

What have we done

Recruitment of our in-house foster carers is targeted to specific areas of placement need. Our recruitment process ensures we explore and explains the various roles in foster care, for example, different age profiles of children, skill base of applicants, developmental stages of children. For more details about foster care recruitment see below.

Figure 3. Children in care by ethnic background (as a share of total CLA population), March 31 2021



Note: The figure includes the number of children in care as at March 31, 2021.

Analysis

Nationally, 75% of looked after children are White, in Northumberland this figure is 94% which reflects the demographic profile of Northumberland (90% are White regionally). 2% are mixed race in Northumberland compared to 10% nationally and 3% regionally.

We continue to be inclusive in our foster care recruitment campaigns to ensure it reflects the communities that our children and families live in.

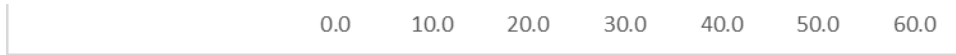
What have we done

Where children are placed with carers who are from a different background we ensure that specific work and support is in place to meet the children’s needs relating to background, culture and identity.

Future challenges

To increase the percentage of carers and placements that are other than White British we ensure our marketing campaign is inclusive and diverse, for example, in relation to ethnicity, age, gender.

Figure 4. Legal status of children in care as at March 31 2021

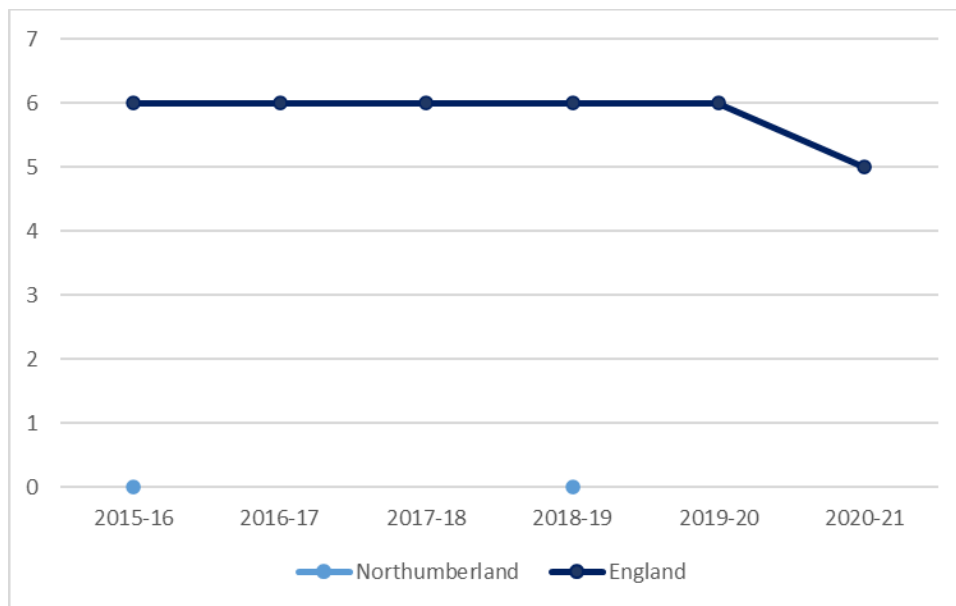


Note. The figure includes information on the legal status of children looked after at March 31 in the year of interest.

Analysis

The legal status of children looked after in detailed in figure 4 is in line with national and regional comparators and does not indicate that changes are required to current practice. The practice and processes in place to manage and oversee children becoming looked after including the planning and appropriate legal status is referenced elsewhere in the strategy.

Figure 5. Children in care who were Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers as a share of the total CLA population



Note: The figure includes the number of children in care as at March 31, 2021 who were unaccompanied asylum seekers.

Analysis

As of 31st March 2021, 5 young people who were unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people (UASC). This number has since reduced to 3 young people as two young people have now turned 18. Overall, we are supporting a total of 13 young people who are unaccompanied young people, 3 are under 18 and 10 are over 18 and have care leavers status.

What have we done

On arrival, young people who are 16 or 17 are supported to access a Northumberland Adolescent Service (NAS) support tenancy and will live with other UASc young people whilst the claim for asylum is processed. Once a decision is made on their claim for asylum and where leave to remain is granted, young people are often supported to access their own tenancy via Northumberland Homefinder and they are given priority status as care leavers.

We also have a number of young people with outstanding asylum claims, who have turned 18, which is impacting on move on plans for them and as a result is blocking placements for any new referrals.

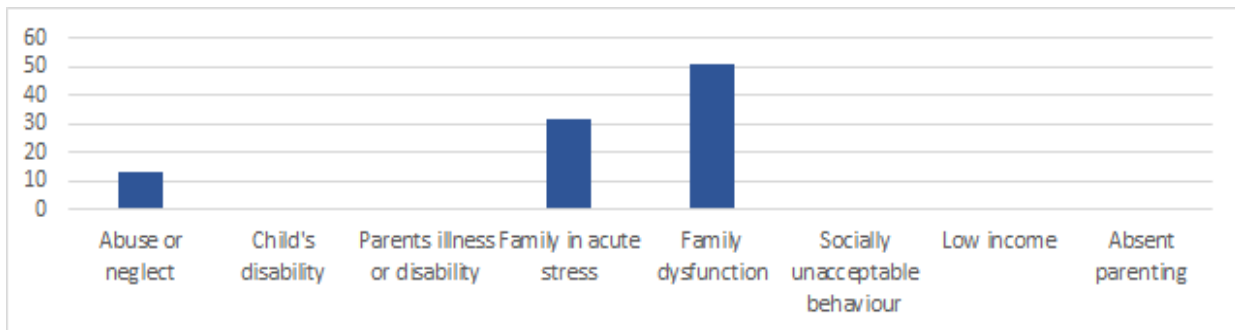
Work is on-going with the regional office for the home office to progress the claims and discussions are taking place with our partners within housing to source suitable properties.

Future challenges

In terms of forward planning and pressures being faced, NCC is part of the wider National Transfer Scheme and are participating in the national rota through which the allocations are mandatory. Due to the increasing number of arrivals in the south of the country, further requests for placements are being made over and above the original planned rota of placements. At the time of writing, we have been able to provide placements for UASC allocated to Northumberland as part of the national rota but this has the potential to become problematic in terms of being able to source appropriate placements to meet these requests consistently in future.

2.2 Needs of children in care

Figure 6. Children who started to be looked after during 2021 by primary need category



Note: The figure shows the proportion of children who started to be looked after during the year ending March 31, 2021 by recorded need category

Analysis

Figure 6 indicates the primary reason for children becoming looked after. This information is drawn from documents completed at the point that children enter care. In many cases, the reasons are complex and cannot be fitted neatly into one category so this graph needs to be viewed as an indicator and it is correct to state that the combined impact of abuse, neglect, family

stress and dysfunction influences the decision for most children when they are accommodated. Socially unacceptable behavior is often a factor for young people and this tends to accompany one of the other recorded categories.

We have separate data relating to children with a disability later in the strategy.

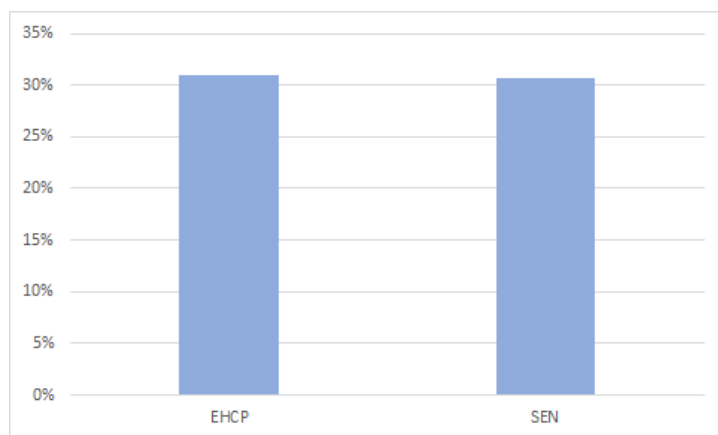
Table 1

Difficulties in providing placements for children across primary need categories	Currently		Over the next 1-3 years	
	Council	England	Council	England
Abuse or neglect	Amber	Amber	Amber	Amber
Child's disability	Red	Red	Red	Red
Parent's illness or disability	Green	Green	Green	Green
Family in acute stress	amber	Amber	Amber	Amber
Family dysfunction	Amber	Amber	Amber	Amber
Socially unacceptable behaviour	Red	Red	Amber	Red
Low income	green	Green	Green	Amber
Absent parenting	green	Amber	Green	Amber

Notes: Red indicates that the council expects that they will face difficulties meeting demand through existing suppliers and/or needs to produce services at high costs; Amber indicates that the council expects that they will mostly meet demand through existing providers at reasonable costs, but there are cases where that is not true; Green indicates that the council expects they will meet demand through existing supply at reasonable cost.

The national average is calculated based on the responses provided by the 34 councils that responded to the survey.

Figure 7. Children in care with special needs and disabilities (as a share of total CLA population), 2021



Note: The figure includes the proportion of children in care as at March 31, 2021.

Analysis

Figure 7 demonstrates that a significant proportion of our children looked after population have been identified as having special educational needs or requiring an Education Health and Care Plan.

In terms of placement provision, the numbers of children looked after with a disability has remained fairly constant at 16% in 2019/20 and 14% 2020/21 although the numbers entering care with a disability have increased from 6% to 8%. While it is more difficult to evidence statistically, it is viewed that the complexity of their needs is increasing. This can make finding foster care and residential placements difficult although we do have some notable exceptions to this.

What have we done

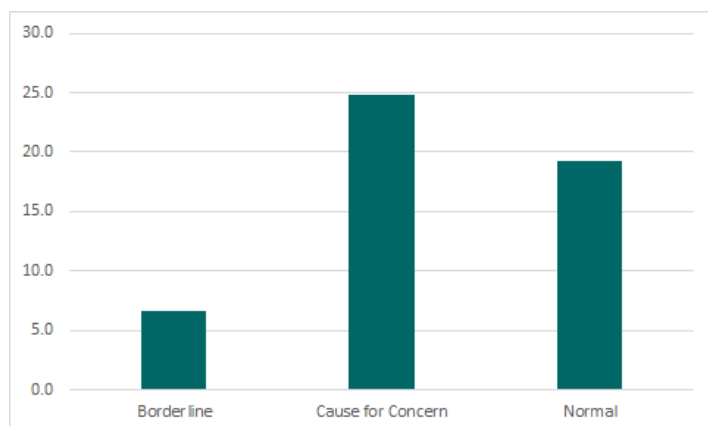
The local authority and partners have responded to this by increasing its resource into the Virtual school for children with SEND, allocating resource within its CYPS service specifically for children looked after and increased the resource into its social work service for disabled children. The number of children with a range of complex disabilities and mental health needs is increasing and finding placements for these, both within fostering and residential services is an ongoing challenge. In response the multi-agency partnership is working together more proactively at an earlier stage to try and continue to support children in their family home where appropriate.

More specifically, work is progressing as part of the SEND strategy to develop and expand the short break service to further enhance the support available for disabled children to maintain them within their families.

Future challenges and actions

The range of residential provision, especially locally, for disabled children is very limited with some providers closing recently and others struggling with staffing challenges. We do not anticipate that this will change significantly in coming years.

Figure 8. Proportion of looked after children by SDQ score (as a share of total CLA population), 2021



Note: The figure includes the proportion of looked after children whose SDQ score was normal, borderline, and cause of concern

What have we done

We have introduced a range of trauma informed practice training for staff to support looked after children and are increasing the mental health practitioner resource into children's social care, building on the practitioners already within our adolescent service, to support children, families and professionals where there is additional support needed to understand their complex emotional wellbeing needs including children looked after.

In addition we have reviewed our guidance for carers, schools and social workers to support them when completing SDQ's and also interpreting and using the information to support young people.

2.3 Care Leavers

	17-18 year old	19 – 21 year old
Number of Care Leavers by age as of 31st March 2021	30	121

Analysis

We currently support 151 care leavers between the ages of 17 to 21 years of age and Northumberland Adolescent Service oversees the support provided to young people who have left care, through the provision of allocated leaving care support workers.

It is our responsibility to ensure that every young person has a completed pathway plan, that outlines a young person’s transition towards independence. This includes ensuring young people have access to appropriate and suitable accommodation as well as being supported to access education, employment and training opportunities.

Figure 9. Care leavers by suitability of accommodation (as a share of total population of care leavers), 2021



Note: The figure includes care leavers in the year ending March 31, 2021, aged 17 and 18 and 19 to 21 who were looked after for a total of at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday including some time after their 16th birthday

Analysis

As can be seen in figure 9, a very high percentage ,92%, of all care leavers were deemed to be living in suitable accommodation, which equates to 139 young people. The main reason for the vast majority of those who are deemed not to be in suitable accommodation is that they are in custody (6 young people).

Young people accessed a variety of accommodation options in the year up to 31st March 2021. However, for those age 17-18, most remained in their existing accommodation or moved into supported accommodation. Only 13% of those in this age accessed their own tenancy. This is in comparison to young people aged 19-21, which saw 47% of young people accessing their own tenancy.

What have we done

To ensure young people have access to appropriate accommodation, there is a Care Leavers Accommodation and Support Protocol in place, which is a multi-agency protocol and provides support around accommodation for young people who are preparing to leave care as well as those who have already left care.

In order to meet the needs of young people making the transition towards independence, care leavers are given priority banding via Northumberland Homefinder and this enables young people to access their own tenancy in a timely manner, as and when ready.

For those young people who may not be ready to access their own tenancy, there is an option to support young people to access a variety of supported accommodation options. Supported accommodation options within Northumberland are commissioned services and are subject to quality and performance monitoring checks.

In January 2021, a new supported accommodation framework was commissioned and implemented in recognition that the previous framework was not meeting the wider support needs of young people, including those with complex support needs. As a result, a new service specification was developed to meet the identified gaps in service provision.

The new framework is working effectively and the gaps in provision are being addressed by the new provisions added to the framework. There is a robust quality monitoring process in place that includes quarterly contract and performance meetings being held with providers, Northumberland Adolescent Service and Children Services Commissioning. In addition to this, there is also a wider supported accommodation providers forum that meets quarterly.

In addition to supported accommodation options, young people who are in foster carer also can remain with their foster carers post 18 as a Staying Put arrangement. As of 31st March 2021, we had 15 young people in a staying put arrangement and this continues to be promoted as a positive option for young people.

We have worked closely with adult services and with external specialist providers to commission a range of Independent Supported Living (ISL) arrangements for children over the age of sixteen within Northumberland. This has resulted in an increase in our ISL arrangements over the 2020/21 period to nine with four still being in place as of the end of March 2021.

For those young people who are in custody, a CLASP meeting will be held prior to discharge from custody to ensure that there is a clear route to accommodation for young people once they come to the end of their sentence and will involve their allocated worker, the Youth Justice Service, Housing and Probation, where appropriate.

Future challenges

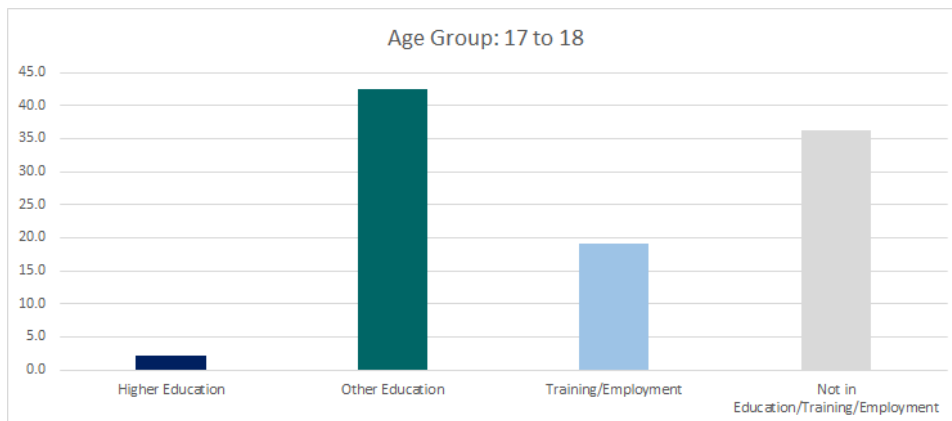
At the time of writing, it is likely that there will be increased regulation and independent oversight of placements for young people aged 16 and 17 which are currently unregistered and unregulated. As detailed above, we have put systems in place to oversee the quality of the provision from a local authority perspective and we will need to respond to any national developments.

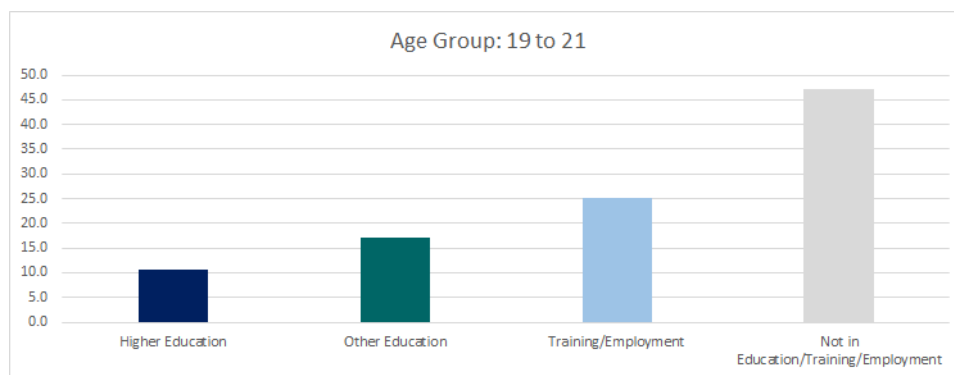
Whilst we have very good multi-agency support in place for young people and work closely with housing and adult services to try and address the accommodation needs of young people post 18 as detailed above some challenges remain with respect to young people who may have multiple complex needs, such as offending, substance misuse and mental health. In such instances, it can become difficult to identify and sustain appropriate accommodation for young people with these presenting needs.

In order to ensure performance and address future gaps in service, a performance dashboard is being developed that will identify unmet need around accommodation provision and monitor the referral processes in place.

Education, Employment and Training Opportunities for Young People (EET)

Figure 10. Care leavers by type of activity (as a share of the total population of care leavers), 2021





Note: The figure includes care leavers in the year ending March 31, 2021, aged 17 and 18 and 19 to 21 who were looked after for a total of at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday including some time after their 16th birthday. The figure does not include care leavers for whom the activity is not known.

Analysis

As can be seen from figure 10, education options for young people are split across three main types, those attending university, those in further education and those in training or employment. For those aged 17-18, most young people were accessing further education options such as college or access courses in preparation for university.

This changes as young people get older with more young people accessing training and employment between the ages of 19-21. We also see an increase in young people attending university in this age group as they move through the further education options they have accessed when aged 17-18.

What have we done

It is recognised that there are still a number of young people not accessing any education, employment or training options (NEET) within both age groups. Work is on-going to support those who are NEET to find suitable options to meet the individual needs of those young people. Discussions take place within regular EET clinics in which partners from the education and the DWP attend and advise of the opportunities available to young people.

Ongoing work is in place to provide care leavers opportunities to access traineeships and apprenticeships within the county council, ensuring all services are aware of their responsibility as a corporate parent to support all young people who are looked after or care leavers.

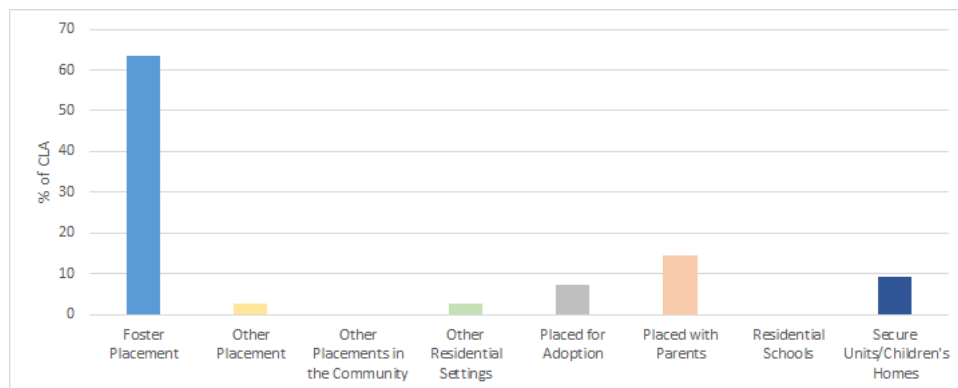
3. Supply of placements

3.1 Provision of placements

The Sufficiency Duty requires Northumberland to have a range of appropriate quality accommodation options for children in care and care leavers. The type of accommodation where a child is placed will depend on their assessed needs. The suitability of the accommodation for each individual placement is an important component to improving placement stability.

Placement stability is one of the highest priorities for us and there are a range of wrap-around services being piloted and developed to improve the child’s experience and support placement stability.

Figure 11. Children in care by type of placement (as a share of the total CLA population), 2021



Note: The figure includes the proportion of children in care as at March 31, 2021

Analysis

Figure 11 shows the varied placement types that children looked after are living in. As at the end of March 66% of children were living in a foster placement and 12% were living in a residential placement.

Of the placements, 65% are provided by Northumberland County Council compared to a national figure showing 49% of placements are provided by the local authority responsible. 14% of the total were living in a placement provided by either private firms or by the voluntary and community sector. This compares favourably to the national average (36%) and regional average (20%); and demonstrates that, where possible, we look to maximise our in-house placement provision.

The number and percentage of children placed with parents significantly increased in line with regional trends and reflecting court trends and outcomes. This has impacted on the percentage of children placed in foster care when compared nationally. This does mean however, that 85% of our children looked after were in a family setting in line with our principle of placing in a family setting where possible and where this meets the child's needs.

What we have done

Whilst this table does not evidence unplanned or emergency placements we have appropriately accommodated children in to care in registered and regulated placements with the majority of children being placed in foster care placements. When necessary, we have been creative in pulling together packages of support to accommodate children in an emergency.

Audit work was undertaken in relation to children placed with parents that concluded that these children are appropriately placed with plans in place for progressing the care plan and when

appropriate the discharge of the court order. Since the review was initiated, the applications to discharge these care orders have increased where it is appropriate to do so and the numbers of children placed with parents on care orders is reducing. See below for more detail on foster care and residential care.

Adoption

Analysis

The detail of adoption placement activity for Northumberland can be found in the Adopt North East (ANE) annual report. The performance in the year 20/21 has significantly improved from the previous year which was the first full year of operation of ANE. The key information is contained in the summary table below:

Activity	2019/20	2020/21
Children matched	20	40
Children placed	21	40
Children adopted	21	26

Performance around placing children for adoption in Northumberland is good, with a higher percentage of children leaving care and being adopted equating to 16% which is higher than the national (10%) and regional (13%) averages.

What we have done

We have continued to work with ANE overseeing, challenging and supporting the ongoing developments and performance of the agency. In Northumberland, we continue to identify and support children who are harder to place for adoption and we still have a higher than national average percentage of children leaving care to be adopted.

We continue to use interagency adoption placements (IA) for children that ANE cannot identify adopters within their own cohort. This is so children are secured in a permanent placement in a timely way in line with care planning and decision making for them to reach their full potential.

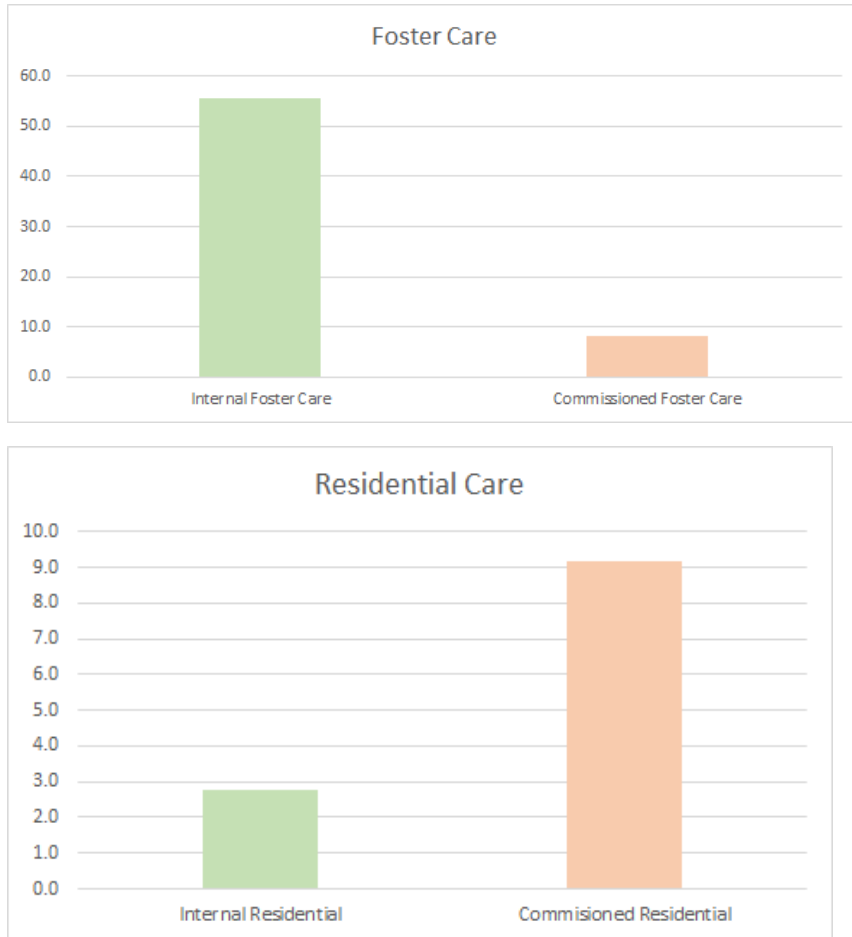
Foster to adopt continues to be embedded into social work practice. This directly links to the improvements in care planning for unborn babies and young babies, which supports the timely achievement of permanence for young children. We have increased our usage of foster to adopt placements but aim to increase this more.

Future challenges

While the performance of ANE has improved as detailed above, there remain challenges to locate adoptive placements in a timely way for harder to place children and to reduce the number of

children who are placed interagency. While we have seen an increase in the numbers of children who are placed in early permanence placements in Northumberland, this remains an area for on-going development for Northumberland.

Figure 12. Children in care by placement provider (as a share of the total CLA population), 2021



Note: the figures include the proportion of children in care as at March 31, 2021, by type of place

Figure 13 Number of fostering households, 2021

	2019	2020	2021
Number of fostering households (internal)	132	166	175
Number of fostering households (IFAs)	41	35	32

Note. The table includes the number of fostering households (internal) and the number of fostering households (IFA) at March 31 of each year.

Foster care

Analysis

Figure 12 shows that the number of children placed with our own approved foster carers remains higher than the national average. We have continued to reduce our reliance on external independent fostering agencies but we continue to use them as a valuable resource if the needs of the child cannot be met by an in-house placement. Over twenty children who are placed in a long-term IFA placement have been formally approved as long term to provide certainty and security for those children.

Figure 13 shows that we have seen an increase in the number of fostering households. Some of the deregistration of foster carers has been due to several reasons including foster carers retiring having moved a young person on to independent living and foster carers adopting children.

What we have done

We have maximised our own placement capacity and ensured approval categories for our foster carers are flexible. We have maintained a core cohort of our foster carers therefore securing a stable and experienced set of foster carers.

We continue to place children with family and friend's carers, also known as connected persons or kinship carers. These are individuals who already have an established relationship with the child who they start to look after and subsequently become approved foster carers having usually been initially approved as a temporary Regulation 24 carer. The number of family and friend's carers has decreased slightly. This is due to children leaving care by way of securing permanence via an alternative legal order.

We continue to base our foster care recruitment strategy on analysis of current and emerging areas of need of children and young people and consider the demographics of the county. We are successful in recruiting foster carers that can look after children aged under 12 years of age. We recognise and continue to undertake targeted recruitment for foster carers who can look after sibling groups, teenagers and offer long term care to children until they reach adulthood. We ensure our recruitment advertising is inclusive so that individuals are drawn to Northumberland and can see the benefits of fostering with us to look after children locally.

We have improved our processes for identifying, matching and securing children in long term foster care.

Northumberland is collaborating with the 11 other local authorities in the North East (NE) Region to implement the Mockingbird programme. The Mockingbird programme is an innovative method of delivering foster care using an extended family model which provides sleepovers and short breaks, peer support, regular joint planning and training, and social activities. Evidence

from the programme is that it improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationships between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families.

We also continue to engage with businesses to provide foster friendly working conditions for their staff who are foster carers.

Future challenges

There is further need to increase the number of placements offered by our foster carers for specific cohorts of children. This includes teenagers that may present with specific challenging needs, emergency placements and carers that will look after sibling groups long term.

We will continue to invest in and implement the Mockingbird model detailed above. This will help to reduce the current pressure by supporting placement stability and foster carer retention at scale and complements the strategic aims of NE authorities to grow in-house fostering provision and keep children close to home. It will take 2 years for the first two constellations to be in place from the launch date that is planned for January 2022.

Strengthening support to our in house foster carers is also being progressed by the delivery of training that will use the foundations of a Non-Violent Resistance Parenting Approach and will include attachment-based parenting principles to support connection and co-regulation. This will impact positively on placement stability regarding more complex children that have experienced trauma and loss and as a result, can present with challenging behaviours. The launch date for the first training programme is February 2022.

The market for and recruitment and retention of foster carers has been identified as a national challenge and will also be considered as part of the independent review of children's social care.

Residential care

Analysis

The percentage of children placed in residential care in Northumberland is in line with national average of 12%. All bar one of the children's homes in Northumberland are rated as good or outstanding.

What we have done

We have strengthened and aligned the management and oversight of our residential homes with our family placement service with the aim of both enhancing the support to our homes and to enhance the placement planning for our children.

We have continued to use out of county placements due to a demand for residential provision and the more complex needs of children needing residential care. Children with specific needs cannot always be looked after within NCC’s own provision; for example, children with significant complex health needs, children diagnosed with complex autism.

There is agreed corporate funding to increase the in-house residential placement capacity which is progressing. This is linked to a bid for DfE match funding to support our plan to build and increase the in-house residential capacity in Northumberland to enable us to keep children living within their own communities and keep local connections, particularly with their families.

Future challenges

We aim to further enhance the links between the residential and fostering teams by way of increasing the use of residential care to undertake specific work with children and to support them to move back into a family setting where this is right for them to do so.

We aim to increase the flexible use of short breaks residential care to support both our foster placements and to support children to remain at home.

In some cases, for disabled children with particularly complex needs there is a lack of externally commissioned provision available which is a national issue. Over the last twelve months two local external specialist residential provisions for disabled children have closed.

We will respond to any developments and recommendations arising from the independent review of CSC.

Placement Stability

Stability of placements for children in care	2021
% of children looked after for at least 12 months	70
% of children looked after with three or more placements during the year	14
% of children looked after continuously for at least 2.5 years aged under 16 who were living in the same placement for at least 2 years	65

Note: This table shows numbers of children in care as at March 31, 2021.

Analysis

The proportion of children in care classed as being in care for long-term who have been in the same placement for at least 2 years has increased slightly to 68% at the end of October 2021

which is in line with the most recent national average of 68%. 82 of the 120 children aged under 16 have been in the same placement for at least two years (or have been placed for adoption).

The proportion of the children in care that had three or more placements is continually monitored however remains an area for improvement. The reason for a placement move can be positive, for example, child returning to the care of birth family, child being placed for adoption, child being placed in long term foster placement.

What have we done

We have set up and undertaken specific work in relation to placements and other elements of stability for children looked after in Northumberland.

Permanence monitoring processes are embedded within practice that tracks and monitors looked after children to ensure they are secured in their permanent placement in a timely way.

We have increased the training for and support to foster carers which is detailed in the earlier section, along with the detailed plans to develop Mockingbird model.

There is strong partnership working in relation children looked after which supports their health and education needs. This has been enhanced by the addition of a specific post within our CYPS (CAMHS) service for children looked after and is to be further added to by additional mental health posts to be embedded within our social work teams funded by the CCG.

We have enhanced the links with our virtual school to ensure education remains a key consideration when planning placement moves.

Future challenges

We continue to strive to further improve the effectiveness of the support and placement provision to our children in care and their carers to increase placement stability.

Commissioned Placements

What we have done

We have a strategic approach to the commissioning of services to meet the social care needs of children in Northumberland.

Whilst regional arrangements for commissioning are in place they are not proving effective enough and there is little or no incentive for providers to participate in commissioning framework agreements. The bulk of spend continues to be off-framework (more so in residential than in fostering placements), with providers not needing to engage in commissioning approaches. Placement-costs and Ofsted matching requirements can make block contracting less feasible. It is recognised that greater system capacity and capability for market management needs to be

developed and there are lessons to be learned from adult services where the duty to ensure sufficient provision, coupled with better developed approaches to quality oversight, enable more dynamic relationships with the independent sector.

Although regional and indeed national work is ongoing, and Northumberland continues to participate in the collaborative IFA arrangements, the pace of change is not quick enough to meet the needs of children who are in need of services now. As a result, Northumberland has chosen to invest in a more individualised approach creating 2 x Commissioning and Relationship Development Posts. A pivotal part of this role is to develop relationships with providers within the social care arena with the purpose of working with them to achieve positive outcomes for our children looked after in Northumberland. It includes providing an effective commissioning approach to brokerage within and between Children’s Commissioning, Social Care and market providers to build productive and positive relationships that lead to the appropriate identification and matching of placements. Considerations include balancing the need to identify a suitable package of care, often within a tight timescale timescales whilst promoting value for money in a supplier led market. Once a child/young person is placed with a provider, there continues to be linkage with the social care teams in order to enhance the CLA review process by identifying provider trends and themes whilst reviewing the ongoing suitability of the placement ensuring that good quality monitoring and evaluation frameworks support and inform decision making.

Table 2

Overall experiences and progress of C&YP	Care				
	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inspectorate, not Ofsted	Registration Cert
IFA	3	13		1	
Children's Home	4	14	2	4	3

How well C&YP are helped & protected	Care				
	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inspectorate, not Ofsted	Registration Cert
IFA	1	15		1	
Children's Home	1	16	3	4	3

Effectiveness of leaders & managers	Care				
	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inspectorate, not Ofsted	Registration Cert
IFA	2	11	3	1	
Children's Home	5	11	4	4	3

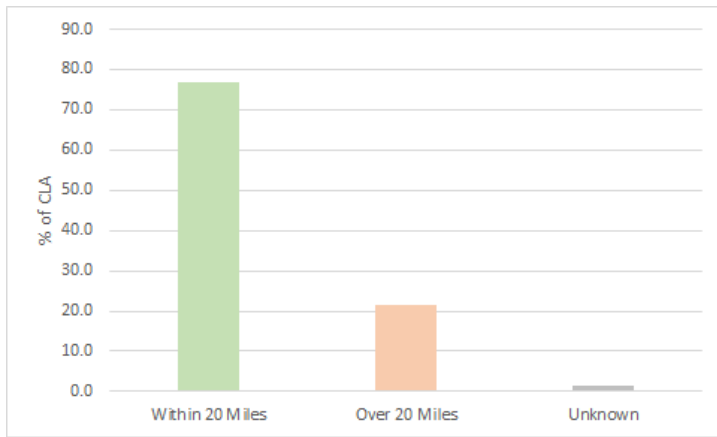
Note: The table includes outcomes from Ofsted inspections of IFAs and children’s homes (both internal and external). Numbers of IFAs and children’s homes are presented by inspection outcomes. Information

on Ofsted inspection outcomes for residential schools and secure home is not shown here, as they represent a small proportion of available residential settings.

We aim to place children in any external provision that is Ofsted rated at a minimum as good. Should a provider’s Ofsted rating drop below this standard it would not directly result in the child being moved to an alternative provision as this will be balanced against the needs of the child, the issues raised by Ofsted and close monitoring, review of the action plan and assurance visits.

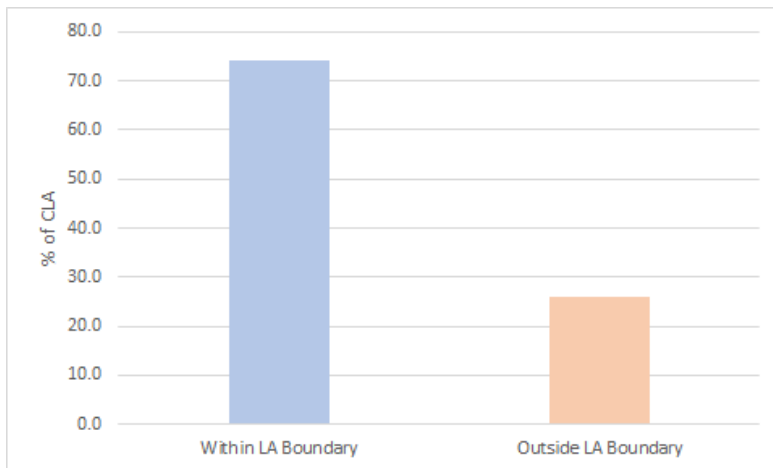
3.2 Location of placements

Figure 14. Children in care by the distance between the placement and home (as a share of total population of CLA), 2021



Note: The figure includes numbers of children in care at March 31, 2021.

Figure 15. Children in care placed within and outside the LA boundary, (as a share of total population of CLA), 2021



Note: the figure includes numbers of children in care at March 31, 2021.

Analysis

The percentage of children placed within 20 miles of their home address in the year 20/21 is 75% which is better than the national average of 71%.

Given the size of the county some children living outside of the boundary may actually be living closer to their home community than if they were placed within the county. For those children living more than twenty miles away the placement decision is one that is made usually as a result of the complexity of their needs and the requirement for a residential placement which cannot be found within close proximity to the county boundaries.

What have we done

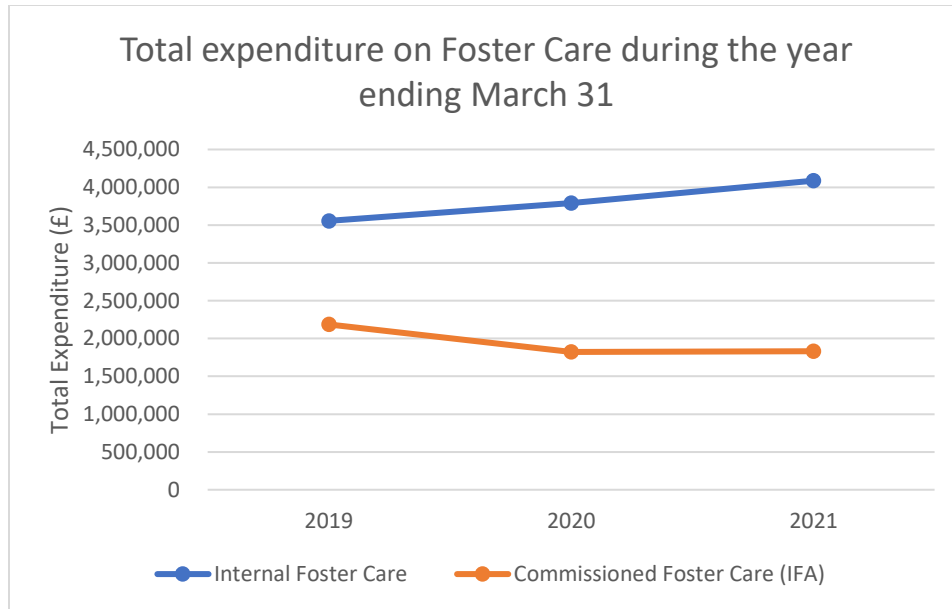
As detailed in the earlier section, we are planning to increase our in-house residential provision to further enhance our capacity for local placements as well as our ongoing recruitment activity for foster carers.

We have robust systems in place where external provision is requested to ensure that all supports and alternatives have been considered and to inform the commissioning of appropriate placements to meet the needs of those children where these cannot be met in-house.

3.3 Cost of placements

The costs of placements for our children looked after is the largest expenditure and biggest pressure on the children's social care budget. We always prioritise the needs of children in our placement practice and within this we do have to consider operating in the most cost-efficient way for the use of public money. As can be seen in other areas of this strategy, Northumberland do have a greater percentage of in-house provision than national comparators and this is predicated on the quality of provision that we are able to offer. We have reduced the use of IFA placements as detailed below and we plan to enhance our in-house residential capacity to further support local provision and reduce the cost of external residential placements.

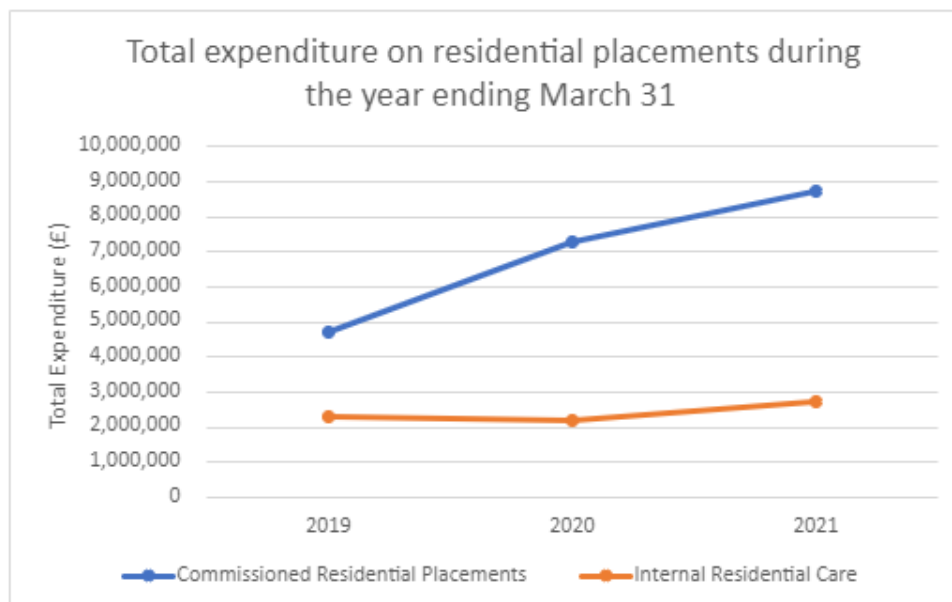
Figure 16. Total expenditure in foster care including staying put costs in IFA's during the year ending March 31



Note. Council figures do not include management & other internal costs while expenditure on commissioned services includes overhead costs.

Our cost of in house foster care placements has reduced as we have continued to maximise our own placement provision. This has impacted on our cost of external IFA placements that has significantly reduced however has then remained relatively static during 2020/21. This is due to a number of young people remaining in an IFA placement long term. The costs increase slightly as the young person gets old. This costs also included young people who are in IFA staying put placements.

Figure 17. Total expenditure in residential placements during the year ending March 31



Note. *The figure only includes expenditure in residential placements (management & other internal costs are not taken under consideration).*

The cost of external commissioned placements has significantly increased over the last 2 years which has coincided with the increase in our overall children looked after population. This supports our vision to increase our own residential placement to ensure value for money however most importantly so that children can stay local to their own support networks, communities and families. We will always need to access external residential provision for a number of children and we will continue to strengthen our commissioning arrangements.

3.4 Challenges in providing placements and related services

Overall, we aim to place children that need looking after within our own in-house provision where this can meet their needs. This is based primarily on the quality of the provision we can offer and that this is more likely to maintain the key relationships and links for the child. We have a significant number of our children placed with family and friends foster carers and a key element of our practice model is to ensure that we effectively engage the family's support network at the earliest possible stage to support the parents. However where this is not possible to be done safely, we can approach family members and friends who are already known to the child in the first instance.

The building of new NCC owned residential provision within the county is an important part of the strategy as it allows more children and young people to be cared for in house with the potential of staying closer to their birth family connections and support structures.

Additional NCC owned children's homes within the county would allow for the provision of more "in-house" care at a reduced cost compared to commissioned placements. NCC owned provisions are at a lower cost however this does not and should not compromise the quality of care and that the level provided is equal to or greater than a commissioned provision.

Recruiting staff to our residential homes is a challenge, as it is nationally. We are therefore developing a Recruitment Strategy to address this that will include, for example, our innovation with our apprenticeship scheme offer that incorporates 'grow your own' model of practice.

To achieve best value, funding has been secured to increase our in house residential capacity by 7 placements. This includes a new build and an extension on one of our current children's homes. To maximise our short break provision, as part of the review, consideration is being given to a 24/7 5 bedded provision which will include 2 emergency assessment placements. This would enhance the level of support to families and carers within the community as well as offering this provision to looked after children that in turn supports placement stability.

New legislation came into force in September 2021 in relation to placing vulnerable children under the age of 16 in unregulated accommodation as part of a series of reforms to drive up

standards in children’s social care. Children in care under 16 years of age will no longer be allowed to be accommodated in unregulated independent or semi-independent placements. While the aim of this legislation is to ensure the most vulnerable are cared for in settings that best meet their needs, this places even more pressure on already scarce resources needed to accommodate young people who need emergency accommodation and where authorities have used this, it is in the absence of any alternative placement options. Opportunities to develop emergency provision are detailed in the above paragraph.

The local authority has seen some challenges with its residential short break provision over the last year; it currently commissions one provider and has one internal provision. Both of these have had challenges with staffing and building suitability which have led to a reduction of provision available. In addition to this an external provision in a neighbouring authority used by a small number of families of children with particularly complex needs closed at the start of the pandemic and has made the decision not to reopen. The needs of children requiring residential overnight short break provision are growing more complex and we are working with our commissioned provider to respond to these.

Kyloe House Secure Unit provides placements, nationally, for up to 14 young people, this includes a 2 bedded transition unit within the perimeter of Kyloe House. The age range is 12 to 17 years on admission although young people can be accepted at age 10 with Secretary of State approval. The placement period will be dependent on needs to meet the identified Care Plan and ongoing requirements of the young person. The unit accommodates young people on a welfare basis. Grants have been secured from the DfE regarding a number of improvements to the unit.

Specialist care provision for those children who are being exploited or who have sexually harmful behaviour will continue to need to be externally commissioned because of the relatively small numbers and special requirements of the support they need.

Table 3.

Difficulties in meeting the demand for placement of children in care	Currently		Over the next 1-3 years	
	Council	England	Council	England
Meet demand for placements	Amber	Red	Amber	Amber
Meet demand for foster care	Amber	Amber	Amber	Amber
Meet demand for residential care	Amber	Red	Amber	Amber

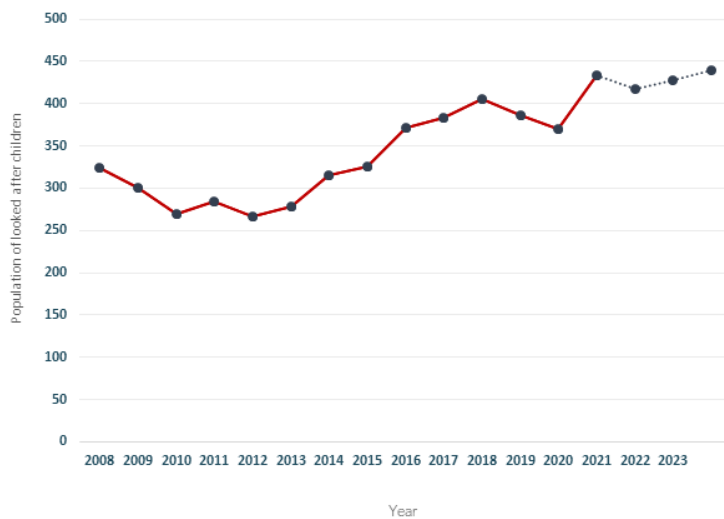
Notes: Red indicates that the council expects that they will face difficulties meeting demand through existing suppliers and/or needs to produce services at high costs; Amber indicates that the council expects that they will mostly meet demand through existing providers at reasonable costs, but there are cases where that is not true; Green indicates that the council expects they will meet demand through existing supply at reasonable cost.

The national average is calculated based on the responses provided by the 34 councils that responded to the survey.

4. Projections on demand for placements

Northumberland has traditionally had a lower than regional average number of children looked after. This increased during the first twelve months of the pandemic for a variety of reasons including court timetables being significantly delayed. We have recently seen this number reduce and flatten out to a level more in line with what we were experiencing before the pandemic. While data-based projections do indicate a likely increase in our looked after population, we have in fact managed the placement demand with increased numbers than are currently the position.

Figure 18. Population of children in care – forecasts over 2020-2023



Note: Forecasts are produced using historical data on numbers of children in care at March 31 of each year.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the body of the report we have analysed the information and detailed actions and responses that we have already put in place. We have identified future challenges and planned actions to respond to the needs of our looked after population of children and young people and we will develop those into an action plan to support the implementation of this sufficiency strategy.

We have also identified the national challenges and developments to which we will need to respond as national actions are also required to improve placement sufficiency.

It remains the case that providing stable placements in a timely way for our children looked after is crucial in ensuring we give them the best chance to make the most of their lives and the implementation of this strategy is a key element of this.