



Northumberland

County Council

Families and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

3RD MARCH 2022

Safeguarding Activity Trends and Benchmarking Report

Report of the Executive Director of Adult Social Care and Children's Services, Cath McEvoy-Carr

Cabinet Member: Lead Member for Children's Services, Councillor Guy Renner-Thompson

Purpose of report

To provide analysis of trends within the social work activity in responding to safeguarding concerns regarding Northumberland's children and young people; highlighting key indicators of performance, with comparisons to national and regional variations.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee:

- 1) Identify any issues for further scrutiny.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the 'Living' and 'Learning' priorities included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021.

Key issues

- Whilst there is variation in the numbers of contacts received, this is mostly due to school closures during the Covid-19 lockdown period.
- There are less children and families being re-referred to children's social work services, indicating the right service at the right time, and that families can sustain the successes that led to case closure.
- Where children are at risk of significant harm, cases are responded to appropriately and in a timely manner. Where children are subject to a child protection plan, these are reviewed regularly, with very small numbers of plans lasting longer than two years.
- Numbers of children in care increased initially at the start of 2020, but have since been reducing. When children leave care in Northumberland, a higher proportion are adopted, made subject to a special guardianship order or return home than nationally.
- With regards to the social work workforce, the staff turnover rate, proportion of agency workers employed, vacancy rate and sickness absence rates all increased

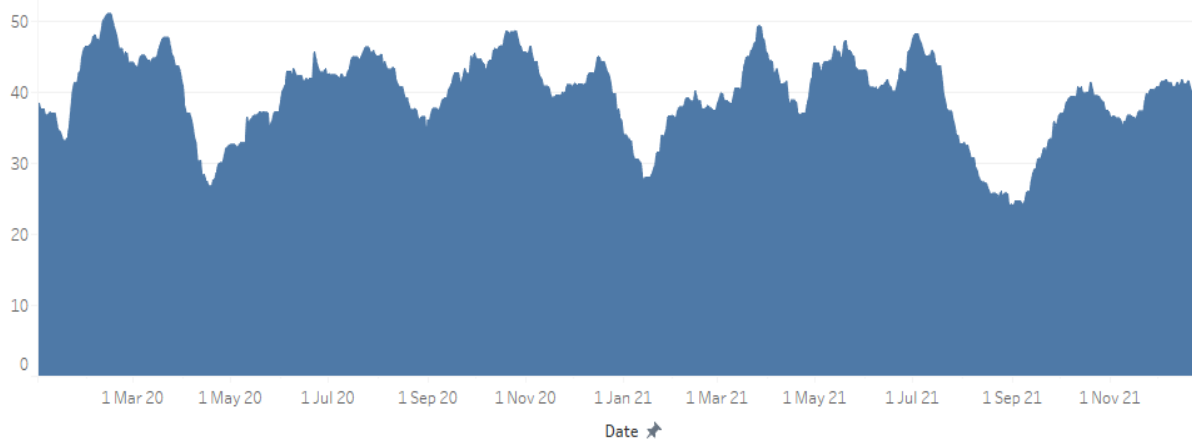
in 2021 (compared to 2020) – reflecting the issues that all authorities are facing with the recruitment and retention of their social work workforce.

Background

TRENDS WITHIN THE SAFEGUARDING PROCESS

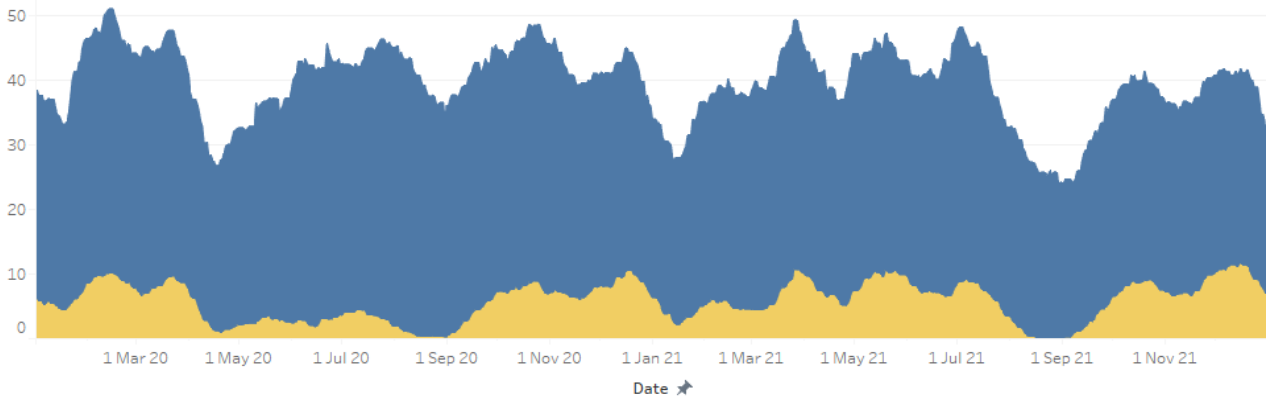
1. Northumberland children’s services established their ‘front door’ in 2017, which in a social care context, is an arrangement where professionals gather information and make decisions about which pathways to follow with regards to the health, well-being, and safety of children.
2. Within the realms of the ‘front door’, an initial ‘contact’ is when an organisation or individual gets in touch with them about a child. This contact can sometimes be a request for general advice, or a request for a service in the form of a ‘referral’. A referral, as defined by Department for Education (DfE) is ‘a request for services to be provided by local authority children’s social care’

Chart 1 – number of contacts received per day (figures are a 4-week average)



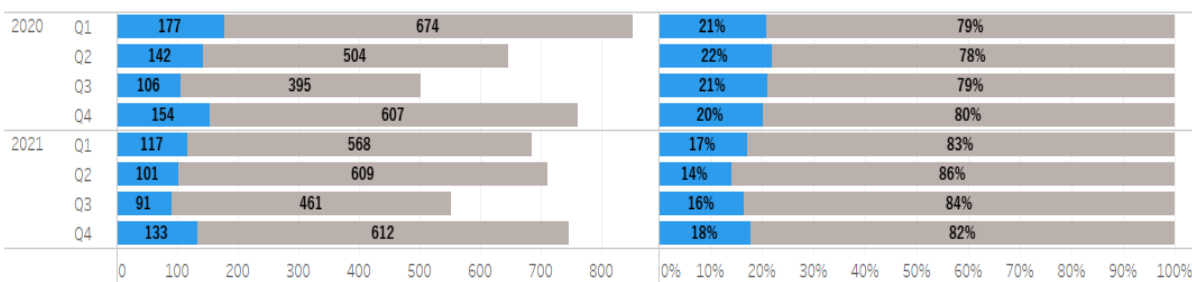
3. Chart 1 shows the number of contacts received per day over a 4-week average between January 2020 and December 2021. The numbers show some periods where there were less contacts per day on average, with these periods being mostly due to schools being closed due to Covid-19 lockdown or during holiday periods – see Chart 2.

Chart 2 – number of contacts (blue) v school contacts (yellow) received per day (figures are a 4-week average)



4. Over the course of 2021, Northumberland’s ‘front door’ received 13,698 contacts in total for 9,185 children living within 8,206 households. Of the total contacts, 9,460 of these (69%) were triaged by social work services, with the remainder being directed towards early help services¹.
5. From the 9,460 contacts triaged by social work services in 2021, 28% of these (2,692) converted to a referral – which is a similar proportion to 2020 (25%) and to the latest national figure of 25%². 2,692 referrals, when equated to the most recent child population figures in Northumberland³, gives a rate of 458 referrals per 10,000 children: above the latest national figure (2020/21) of 438 but below the latest regional figure (2020/21) of 507.
6. One of the national performance indicators that is monitored closely within children’s services is the proportion of repeat referrals (re-referrals) within twelve months of a previous referral. To count as a re-referral, the case must have been open to a social worker previously but is now closed. New information about a child who is part of an already open case does not constitute a new referral for the purpose of this indicator.

*Chart 3 – number and proportion of re-referrals within 12 months
blue indicates re-referrals*



7. Chart 3 shows that the proportion of re-referrals in Northumberland has reduced in 2021, with the overall calendar year figure being 16% (compared to 21% in 2020).

¹ Early Help is about working with children, young people and their families who would like support. It is a consent-based service which involves the whole family and their Networks to come up with solutions to any difficulties or challenges experienced at the time.

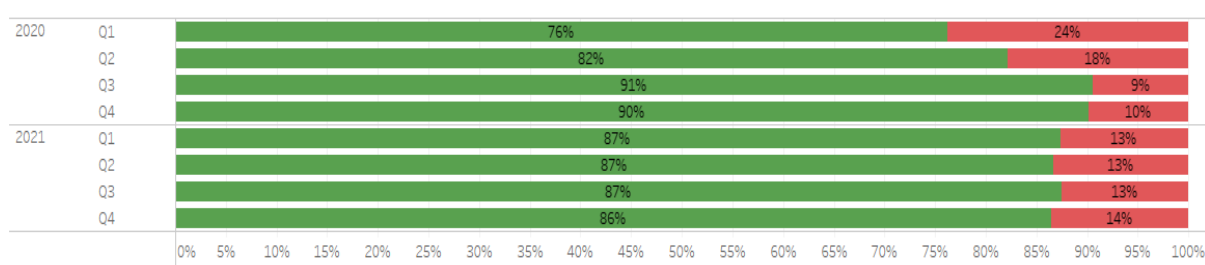
² ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Phase 7 2019/20 – https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation//ADCS_Safeguarding_Pressures_Phase7_FINAL.pdf

³ Latest estimate of under 18 year olds is 58,801

This reduced figure is generally seen as a positive reflection on children receiving the right service at the right time, and that when cases are closed, families can sustain the successes that led to case closure without ongoing social worker support. Both the national and regional re-referral figures in 2020/21 were around 21%.

8. The vast majority of referrals (98%) lead to an assessment by a social worker within the 'front door'. The child and family (C & F) assessment was introduced across England in March 2014, and it allows social workers to gather information about a child and their family in order to assess what services are needed, and who should provide them. There is an expectation that this assessment should be completed within 45 working days of the referral being accepted.

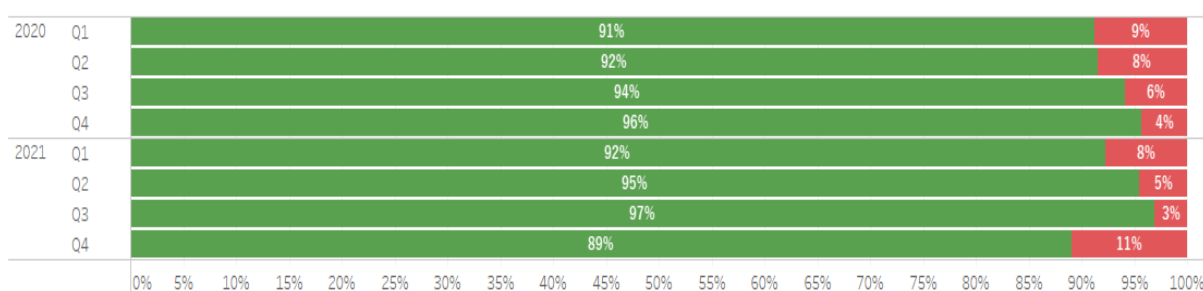
Chart 4 – proportion of 'front door' assessments completed within 45 working days
Green = within 45 working days, red = over 45 working days



9. Chart 4 shows that performance with regards to assessments being completed by the 'front door' has remained steady across 2021, with between 86% and 87% being completed within the 45 working days in each quarter. Overall, performance has improved from 84% in 2020 to 87% in 2021, which is just below the latest national figure of 88% and above the latest regional figure of 83%.
10. Where the information gathered during a contact, referral or assessment results in the social worker suspecting that a child is suffering (or likely to suffer) significant harm, a strategy discussion meeting should be held to determine whether to initiate enquiries under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989. A multi-agency assessment is the means by which Section 47 enquiries are carried out and this should be completed within a maximum of 15 working days. In 2021, Northumberland completed 990 Section 47 enquiries, which equates to a rate of 168 per 10,000 children – broadly in line with the national rate of 164 and below the regional rate of 237. 95% of the Section 47 enquiries concluded in 2021 were completed within the 15 working days (no national or regional comparisons are available for this measure).
11. If the outcome of a Section 47 enquiry concludes that the original concerns were substantiated (meaning that the child is judged to be suffering (or likely to suffer) significant harm), then an Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) should be held within 15 working days of the date when the Section 47 enquiry was initiated. The purpose of the ICPC is to bring together family members, the child (where appropriate) and key professionals to share information, assess risks and then

come up with an agreed way to keep the child safe. 60% (593) of the 990 children who were subject to a Section 47 enquiry in 2021 were subject to an ICPC – a higher proportion than the national figure of 37% and the regional figure of 43%. Although the figure is higher, Northumberland’s appliance of thresholds is scrutinised regularly through audit, which has given assurance that they are being applied appropriately and not intervening unnecessarily.

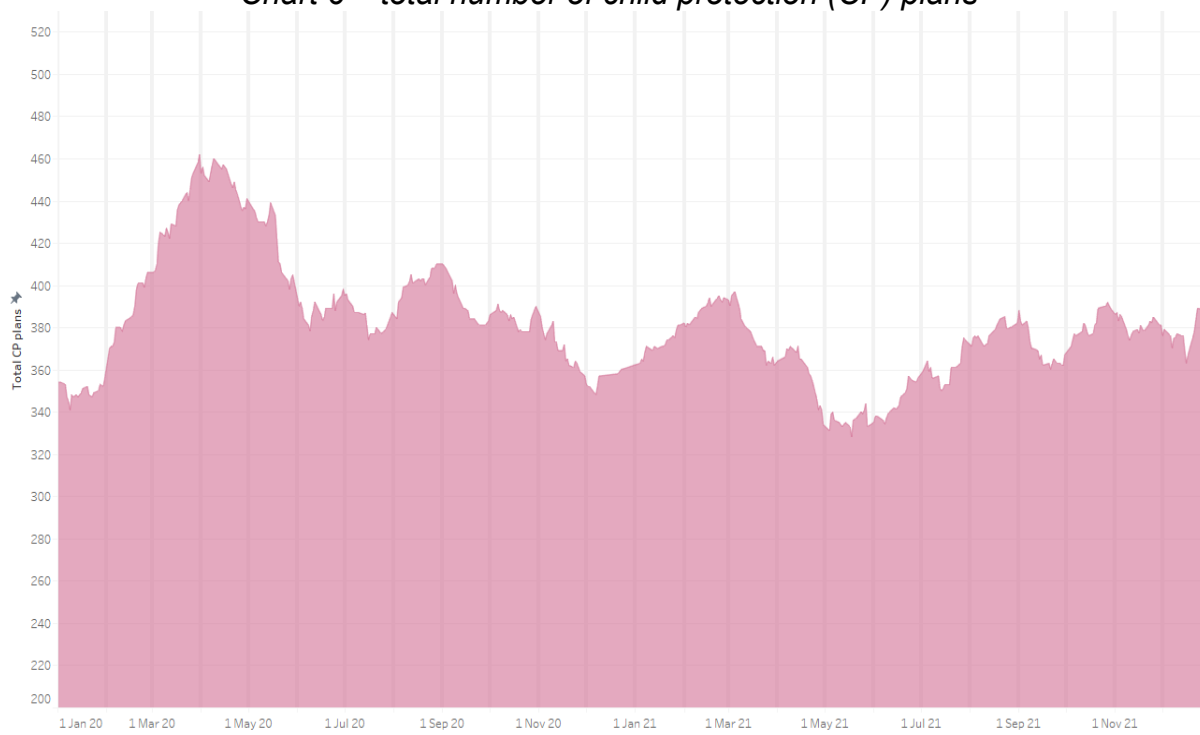
Chart 5 – proportion of ICPCs held within 15 working days of strategy discussion
Green = within 45 working days, red = over 45 working days



12. Chart 5 shows the timeliness of ICPCs held over the last eight quarters. Although performance has reduced to 89% in the most recent quarter, this figure is better than the most recent national figure of 83% and the most recent regional figure of 86%.
13. Of the 593 children subject to an ICPC in 2021, 90% (535) commenced a child protection plan. This is a similar proportion to 2020 (91%) and is roughly in line with the latest national (88%) and regional (90%) averages. A child protection plan outlines the nature of the concerns, and sets out what needs to be done to ensure that the child is safe and prevent them from suffering further harm. Equating the 535 children to the under eighteen population gives a rate of 91 child protection plans starting per 10,000 children; a higher rate than the latest national rate (53), and in line with the latest regional rate (91).
14. One way to look at the success of child protection plans is to monitor the proportion of children who are made subject to second or subsequent plans. A higher proportion of children with multiple plans would suggest that the decision to end a plan was premature or that the child protection process is not effective in bringing about lasting improvements for children. Of the 535 children who started a child protection plan in 2021, 24% (129) had previously had a plan, which is a reduced rate from 2020 (27%) but is slightly above the latest national and regional figures (of 22% and 21% respectively). This figure is closely monitored, with increases leading to a themed audit of cases to investigate whether plans were started appropriately.
15. During the course of a child protection plan, there are regular review conferences held to monitor how the plan is progressing, and if a child is judged to no longer be at continuing risk of harm then the plan will end. 99% of these reviews were held in

timescale in Northumberland, compared to 93% across England and 91% in the North East. Across 2021, there were 505 child protection plans ended, which equates to a rate of 86 per 10,000 children – above the latest national figure of 54 and below the latest regional figure of 93. The duration of child protection plans can vary, but plans should aim to be completed within two years (although it is recognised that some children will need plans for longer than this). Of the plans that ended in 2021, only one plan ended beyond two years (0.2%); compared to 4% nationally and 2% regionally.

Chart 6 – total number of child protection (CP) plans

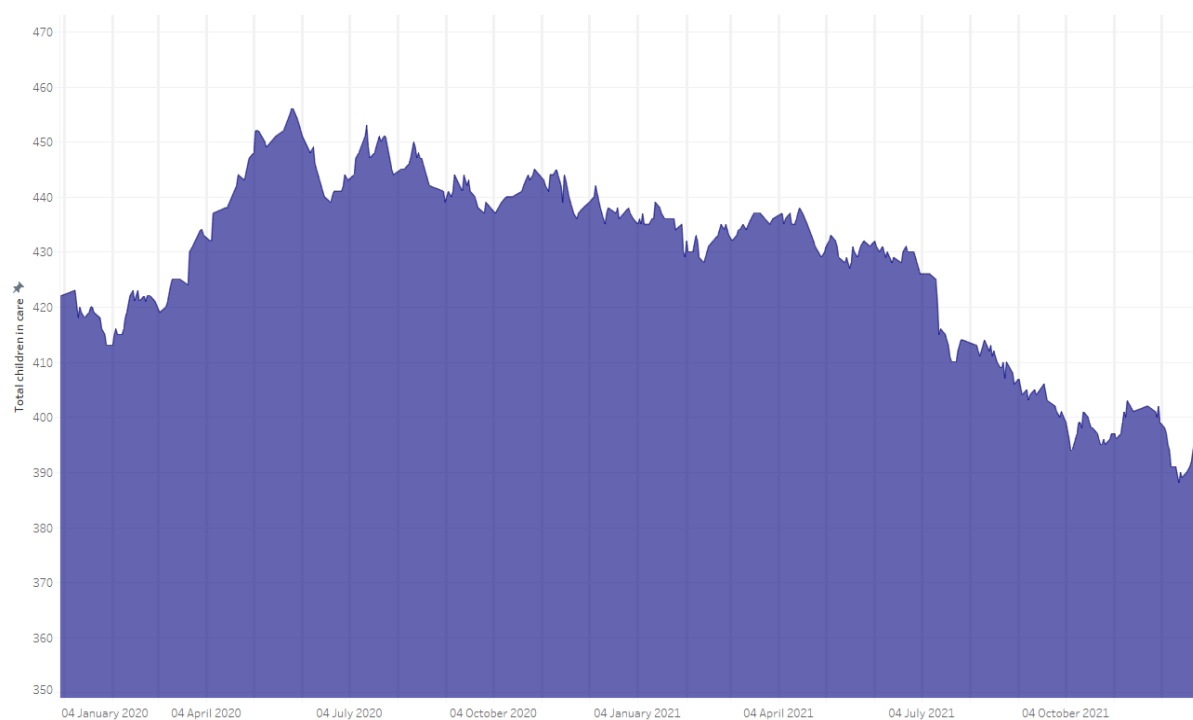


- Chart 6 shows the total number of child protection plans since the start of 2020. There was an increase in the first quarter of 2020, with the numbers peaking at 462 in March 2020 due to a higher-than-average number of plans starting coupled with a lower than average number of plans ending. The numbers then generally decreased to 348 in December 2020 before increasing to 397 in March 2021. Due to higher-than-average numbers of plans ending in March and April 2021, the total reduced to 328 and since then has slowly increased to 388 at the end of December 2021. Converting this to a rate gives a figure of 66 child protection plans per 10,000 children; which is higher than the national rate of 41, but in line with the regional rate of 67.

CHILDREN IN CARE

- Where it is necessary to take immediate action to protect a child, or where parents are unable to care for children (and there are no agreed alternative family to do this), a child may enter the care of the local authority.

Chart 7 – total number of children in care



18. Chart 7 shows the number of children who were being cared for by the local authority since the start of 2020. The numbers increased to 456 between January and May 2020 and then have slowly decreased to a figure of 400 at the end of December 2021. Converting this to a rate gives a figure of 68 children in care per 10,000: in line with the national rate of 67 and below the regional rate of 108.
19. A panel of senior managers meet regularly to assess and oversee the children who may need to enter care, and this 'gatekeeping' arrangement has been successful in accommodating children after suitable appropriate alternatives have been fully considered. For children who are in care, their plans for permanency are considered as part of the reviews held by an independent reviewing officer, and permanency clinics have been set up with social work team managers to monitor their progress.
20. The stability of a child's placement is important to help them build security in their lives by developing secure attachments, to support their ability to form relationships in the future as adults, and also to help them develop a strong sense of belonging

and identity⁴.

21. There are two indicators of performance that look specifically at placement stability. The first indicator looks at the proportion of children in care who have experienced three or more placements within the previous year. 9% of Northumberland's children in care experienced this number of placements. This is in line with the latest national figure and slightly worse than the latest regional figure (8%).
22. The second indicator looks at the cohort of children below the age of 16 who have been in care for at least two and a half years. Of the children in the cohort, the indicator looks at the proportion who have been in the same placement for at least two years (or are living with prospective adopters). At the end of December 2021, Northumberland's figure was 68%: worse than the latest national average of 70% but slightly better than the latest regional average of 67%.
23. A task and finish group was set up in early 2021 to look specifically at placement stability, with further data analysis and an audit of the placement moves finding that two thirds of 5 to 9 year olds and two fifths of the 13 to 15 year olds who moved were for positive reasons (for example, moving to a long-term placement). December 2021's figure of 68% above has reduced from 70% in September, and is due to some of the children who were living with prospective adopters now being adopted.
24. Permanence in the context of children in care is defined in the Children Act 1989 as providing children with:

'a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity ... a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond'

Permanence can be reached through different pathways:
 - a return to birth parents
 - shared care arrangements
 - permanence whilst in care as part of a residential placements, long-term unrelated foster carer or friends and family care
 - legal permanence via adoption, special guardianship or child arrangement orders
25. With regards to permanency for Northumberland's children in care, in the calendar year 2021, 22% (44) of the 203 children who left care were adopted; with this figure being higher than both the national and regional figures of 10% and 13% respectively. A further 23% of children who left care were subject to a special guardianship order (higher than the national average of 14%), with 29% of children returning home to birth parents (also higher than the national average of 25%).
26. As part of the children looked after (CLA) return that is submitted to the Department of Education, there are a number of annual 'outcome' indicators that are published. In the reporting year ending March 2021 (2020/21):
 - 75% of children in care were up to date with their immunisations (compared to

⁴ The Care Inquiry, "Making not Breaking – Building Relationships for our Most Vulnerable Children" – April 2013

86% nationally and 89% regionally).

- 29% of children in care had their teeth checked (compared to 40% nationally and 43% regionally).

- 93% of children in care had an annual health assessment (compared to 91% nationally and 94% regionally).

- All children under five had an assessment of their development (compared to 89% nationally and 92% regionally).

- 3% of children in care had a substance misuse problem identified (compared to 3% nationally and regionally).

- 1.5% of children in care aged ten or above were convicted or subject to a final warning or reprimand (compared to 2% nationally and 3% regionally).

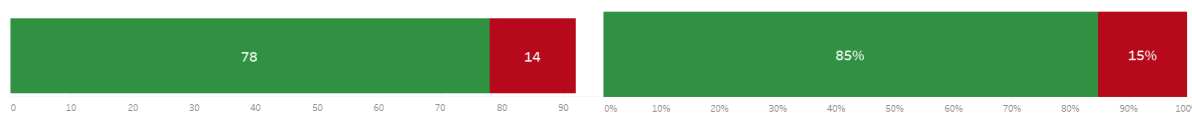
- 6.5% of children in care had at least one missing episode (compared to 10% nationally and regionally) with an average of five missing episodes per child (compared to seven on average nationally and six on average regionally).

27. Both indicators measuring the proportion of children in care immunised and getting their teeth checked have reduced compared to the statistical year 2019/20 due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. In each of the previous six reporting years, both of these indicators have been in line with or better than the national averages.
28. When children leave care after the age of 16, if they have been in care for at least thirteen weeks since the age of 14 then they become a 'care leaver'. Care leavers are young people who the local authority must continue to keep in touch with, maintain their pathway plan (a document that sets out how services will be provided to respond to young person's needed), and to help them achieve the goals within it. The support must go on until the young person turns 21 (or 25 if the young person wishes).
29. As part of the same CLA return submitted to the Department of Education, there are a number of indicators that monitor care leaver's outcomes across an older (19 to 21 year old) and younger (17 to 18 year old) cohort. In the reporting year ending March 2021 (2020/21):
- 97% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were in touch with their link worker (compared to 91% nationally and 93% regionally).
 - 96% of care leavers aged 17 to 18 were in touch with their link worker (compared to 94% nationally and 96% regionally).
 - 95% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were living in suitable accommodation (compared to 88% nationally and 91% regionally).
 - 94% of care leavers aged 17 to 18 were living in suitable accommodation (compared to 91% nationally and 94% regionally).
 - 52% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were in employment, education or training in the period around their birthday (compared to 52% nationally and 50 regionally).
 - 8% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were in higher education (compared to 6% nationally and 7% regionally).
 - 64% of care leavers aged 17 to 18 were in employment, education or training in the period around their birthday period (compared to 65% nationally and 63% regionally).

SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE

30. All local authorities must submit detailed information about their social work workforce to the Department for Education each year. The collection provides details of the workers they employ and a snapshot of agency workers employed by local authorities. The return looks at the period between October and September, with the headlines from the year ending September 2021 being:
- Northumberland's staff turnover rate increased from 15% in 2020 to 17% in 2021: above the latest national rate of 14% and the latest regional rate of 12%.
 - The proportion of agency social workers in Northumberland increased from 9% in 2020 to 10% in 2021: below the latest national figure of 15% and in line with the latest regional average.
 - Northumberland's vacancy rate increased from 10% in 2020 to 12% in 2021: below the latest national rate of 16% and above the latest regional rate of 8%.
 - The absence rate of Northumberland's social work workforce increased slightly from 3% in 2020 to 4% in 2021. This is now above the latest national and regional rates of 3% (although it is anticipated that when these are updated for 2021, there will be an increase in these figures).
31. Social worker caseloads are monitored as part of performance clinics, with an innovative workload weighting system developed between the social work team managers and the Children's Services Performance team to take into account the different types of cases (and associated complexity) as well as the number of families in each worker's caseload, numbers of children, the location of the family (for the travel time), and any additional legal work that a worker is undertaking.
32. Each worker is then given a workload weighting score, with a score of 100 to 105 meaning a worker is working at full capacity. At the time of writing, 78 of 92 social workers (85%) in the county were working to capacity. This figure includes agency social workers and advanced practitioners but excludes social work support assistants and student social workers. Workers with high workload weighting scores are appropriately challenged by the relevant team and senior managers as part of the performance clinic discussions.

Chart 8 – number and percentage of social workers working to capacity
Green indicates worker is within capacity, red indicates worker is over capacity



33. Where social work staff are absent, systems are in place to ensure that their work trays within the integrated children's system (ICS) can be picked up, checked and actioned by another worker or team manager.

Implications

Policy	Performance and monitoring of social work activity is a key part of safeguarding children.
Finance and value for money	Figures provided in this report allow officers and Members to monitor workloads and activity to ensure resources are allocated appropriately.
Legal	The report includes information relating to children who are in care, with a number of these being subject to care proceedings in accordance with Section 31 of the Children Act 1989.
Procurement	None.
Human Resources	The council should continue to monitor the impact of resource investments with regards to workloads to ensure effective targeting to support staff and to improve performance. At present, there is a national focus on supervision, training and stress-levels of social workers.
Property	None.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Risk Assessment	Children's Services should prioritise and respond to children who are most at risk of significant harm.
Crime & Disorder	The prevalence of domestic abuse and substance misuse are monitored during case reviews, and influence workload management decisions.
Customer Consideration	The data in the report indicates the extent to which service user's needs are being met.
Carbon reduction	None.
Health and Wellbeing	The report highlights activity to safeguard children, which in the long-term will promote better health and wellbeing.
Wards	None.

Background papers:

Lord Laming – The Victoria Climbié Inquiry.
Lord Laming – The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report
Findings and recommendations of the Care Inquiry 2013
ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Report Phase 7

Report sign off

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	Full Name of Officer
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Suki Binjal
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
Relevant Executive Director	Cath McEvoy-Carr
Chief Executive	Daljit Lally
Portfolio Holder(s)	Guy Renner-Thompson
Legal Clearance	Lynsey Denyer

Author and Contact Details

Report Author: **Brian Smeaton – Children’s Improvement & Development Manager**
(01670) 623583 brian.smeaton@northumberland.gov.uk