



Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for Children Looked After and Care Leavers 2022-2024

May 2022

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Please note that the most up to date available data has been used in the writing of this strategy.

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Lead Service(s) **Integrated Commissioning Service**

1. Introduction

The Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy sets out Durham's strategic approach to securing sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of our looked after children.

It looks closely at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, how this has affected our sufficiency and the steps we are taking to ensure that our sufficiency offer is robust and continues to meet our changing needs.

2. Policy Context

The council has a duty, as stated in section 22G of the Children Act 1989, to take steps to secure, as far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for looked after children within their local authority area. The 2010 guidance on the 'sufficiency duty' states that local authorities should have embedded plans, as part of their commissioning processes and through partnership working, to meet the duty.

The sufficiency duty must take account of the requirement, under section 22C (5) of the Children Act 1989, that the overriding consideration for placing a child is that the living arrangement must be the most appropriate available to meet the child's needs. Next, preference must be given to a living arrangement with a friend, relative or other person connected with the child and who is a local authority foster carer. Failing that, a living arrangement must be found, as far as is reasonably practicable in all circumstances, that:

- Is near the child's home;
- Is within the local authority's area, unless that is not reasonably practicable.
- Enables the child to live with an accommodated sibling;
- Where the child is disabled, is suitable to meet the needs of that child; and
- Does not disrupt his/her education or training.

3. Being a Corporate Parent

Looking after and protecting children and young people from harm is one of the most important jobs that Durham County Council, as a Local Authority must undertake. Where a child cannot remain safely at home for whatever reason and comes into the care of the Local Authority and becomes 'Looked After' the council becomes the 'corporate parent' for that child. They are also the corporate parent for any young person who is under 25 and has been looked after for at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday.

The term 'corporate parent' means the collective responsibility of the council, elected members, employees and partner agencies, for providing the best possible care and safeguarding support for the children and young people who are looked after by the council. A child in the care of the council looks to the whole council to be the best parent it can be to that child. Every member and employee has a statutory responsibility to act for that child. Our commitment is to all children and young people living in foster care and children's homes, placed for adoption, those living in supported lodgings or at home under Placement with Parent Regulations, as well as those living in secure establishments or in custody.

4. Position Statement

As an Authority we:

- Will work collaboratively with families and our partners to offer family support and enable children and young people to be cared for within their own families wherever possible.
- Offer a range of early help services to support children subject to a Child Protection Plan and their families and prevent entry into care. This includes Family Group Conferencing, our Supporting Solutions Service (Edge of Care service) and direct social work interventions from our One Point Service and Families First Teams.
- Will undertake robust assessment, planning and case review to ensure that we only look after children and young people for whom being in care is the only way of ensuring their safety, protection and development.
- Will continue to work with those with parental responsibility to help a child or young person in care return home safely, wherever this is possible.

As an Authority we:

- Will aim to secure legal and emotional permanence, preferably through adoption, Special Guardianship, Kinship Care, Child Arrangement Orders or where this is not possible, through long-term foster care. We have 780 kinship care households caring for children and young people with further plans to improve our offer enabling more children to live with extended family and friends where it is in their best interests.
- Will maximise the use of internal foster care resources before using local external fostering agencies.
- Will avoid using children's homes except when it is in the best interests of the child / young person and meeting their complex needs.
- Are committed to be the best parent we can be for our Looked After Children and Care Leavers and strive to ensure that we deliver support and care that is as good as every good parent.
- Are committed to ensuring that Looked After Children and Care Leavers have the best opportunities available to them to achieve their potential and that these are at least as good as the opportunities available for all other children. We recognise that many children and young people face significantly greater levels of challenging circumstances before reaching adulthood than their peers and that this may mean that they have the need for additional support.
- Are committed to ensuring that services are designed with and for Looked After Children and Care Leavers to meet their needs.
- Want all our Looked After Children to live in loving, stable and safe homes in a place that they can 'call home'.
- Want the people who are caring for them to be fun, loving, skilled, enthusiastic, ambitious and fighting their corner every step of the way.
- Want our children and young people to form good, trusting, nurturing relationships with their carers and have positive experiences.

- Want our children and young people to live in stable living arrangements and only having to move when it is in their best interests or when they have chosen to do so.
- Are ambitious for our children and young people and want to encourage them to dream big and fulfil their potential.
- Are committed to ensuring that they receive the best education in the best schools and get additional support if they need it; that they are well prepared for independence and work through apprenticeships, high quality training, supported into higher education and into university for those who aspire to do so.
- Want our children to be well, healthy and have good emotional and mental health.
- Want to celebrate their achievements, whether big or small so that they can be proud of themselves and know that we are proud of them.
- Want them to have fun and be able to develop their own interests and hobbies so that they can develop in confidence; develop friendships and memories that they can fondly look back on in later years.
- Are committed to listening to our children and young people, hearing what they have to say and acting on it wherever possible. We will develop our services based on this feedback and regularly check with them that we have got it right. We will be open to change and challenge.
- Want our care leavers to be well prepared for adulthood and ensure that they feel that they are part of a wider extended family who will be there for them if they are needed.
- Want our care leavers to feel safe and to receive the appropriate level of support and advice to enable them to transition to adulthood. This includes young people living in staying close arrangements and staying put arrangements with their carer(s) and having access to suitable high-quality supported living or independent living provision. We recognise how big a challenge this is and that many of our young people do this at a much younger age than many other young people.
- Want our young people to be able to make mistakes and know that they will be supported to learn and that someone will be there to help them pick up the pieces.

5. Listening to children and Young people

As an authority we are committed to listening to children and young people and have embedded this practice across Children and Young People's Services. We work in partnership with a social enterprise called 'Investing in Children'. They deliver a range of children's participation services on our behalf and implement several schemes through a contract arrangement:

- Facilitation of young people's participation / reference groups;
- Facilitation of the eXtreme group to ensure that the voice of children and young people with disabilities are listened to and acted upon;
- Coordination of the Children in Care Council;

- Management of the Drive Project – enabling some young people to learn to drive;
- Management of the Freedom Card – enabling Looked After Children and their carers to access a range of leisure activities at a discounted price;
- Management and facilitation of the Investing in Children Membership Programme – services are reviewed annually to ensure that they meet investing in children criteria.
- Ensuring young people’s views and thoughts are captured when we develop new services i.e., Edge of Care Home, recommissioning the Independent Fostering Agency Framework and the service specification for our new children’s homes.

All teams across Children’s Services have either achieved Investing in Children Membership or are working towards this. The ‘Investing in Children membership’, is a kite mark which demonstrates that Looked After Children and young people feel valued and are listened to by adults.

6. Challenges

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented the council with many challenges over the last two years, in relation to sufficiency of living arrangements for children and young people and the ongoing work with social care providers to ensure that children’s living arrangements are stable and that they continue to provide good quality care.

An increase in the number of Children Looked After by the Authority

Whilst the number of children in need has been relatively stable over the last four years (3,570 in 2017/18, 3,571 in 2018/29, 3,551 in 2019/20 and 3,683 in 2020/21), the number of children looked after by the Local Authority has risen by 62% from 615 as of 31 March 2015 to 982 as of 31 March 2022. Based on recent increases, it is forecast that CLA numbers will increase to 1015 by December 2022 (see Appendix 2 – Table 1). The current rate of CLA is 96 per 10,000 which is above the national average (67), however remains below the NE average (108).

From March 2020 we experienced an accelerated increase in the number of children looked after as a direct result of COVID, which was above the long-term forecast. Delays at court, as a result of the pandemic also prevented children and young people who had plans to return home to parents or family, from returning home, which resulted in fewer children leaving the care of the local authority. When courts re-opened this enabled an increasing number of children and young people to return home between June and August 2021 (Appendix 2 – Table 3), however with a steady increase in the number of children coming into care and a reduction in the number of children leaving care, the overall number of children that are looked after, has continued to increase, placing ongoing pressure on services across CYPS.

Our number of under 1-year olds (24%) remains around the regional 2020/21 benchmark (national – 20%; regional – 23%) and is the second lowest it has been over the last 12 months. The proportion of 16/17 year olds have increased to 13% over the last 12 months bringing us in line with statistical neighbour and regional average. Our biggest increase has been in relation to teenagers aged 14–15-year-olds, with a 31% increase. Our Sufficiency Strategy Action Plan focuses on the development of new smaller, local children’s homes to meet this increasing need.

There has been a growth in the number of older children looked after by the Local Authority, that present with complex needs and behaviours:

- Environmental factors: attachment difficulties, parental conflict, domestic abuse, homelessness.
- Internal factors: social communication difficulties including Autism, mental ill-health, behaviours that challenge services.
- External factors: interpersonal relationships, criminal and sexual exploitation, alcohol and substance misuse, serious youth violence and bail, licence and discharge conditions.

Where living with family cannot be maintained, securing safe, local accommodation and care that can meet the often be-spoke needs and requirement of this age group can be both complicated and very costly and represents a particularly volatile area of increasing demand.

This has presented many challenges for services across the Authority, ensuring that appropriate living arrangements that meet the individual needs of children and young people can be secure.

Ensuring that our children and young people live locally

The sufficiency duty requires Local Authority's to "take steps to secure, as far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for looked after children within their local authority area.

A large proportion of our children and young people live in County Durham, with 70.3% living in county and 29.7% living in out of county arrangement. Of the 29.7% of children and young people that live outside of County Durham, 17.5% live under 20 miles from their originating home address and 12.2% of children and young people live 20 miles or more from their originating home address.

We always seek to secure appropriate living arrangements locally, when it is safe to do so and in the child or young person's best interests. A small proportion of children and young people need to live away from their local area (+20 miles) due to the immediate risks and challenges this presents, however some children and young people live in out of area provision, due to limited availability to meet young people's complex needs within County Durham. This Strategy outlines a range of development priorities which will create additional local sufficiency options, enabling a greater proportion of children and young people to live locally.

The Transforming Care Agenda

During 2019 the Multi-agency Collaborative Care Meeting (MACC) was established. This ensures that all children and young people with a diagnosis of autism and/or a learning disability are offered a Care, Education and Treatment Review (CETR) prior to admission and discharge to or from hospital to ensure that they are in receipt of suitable support or care services within the community.

The numbers of County Durham children placed in Tier 4 beds remains relatively stable, although there is a notable increase in the number of children and young people being admitted who had not been previously known to social care services. There is also a high number of children and young people at risk of admission due to an eating disorder.

The Closure of West Lane Hospital in Autumn 2019 has resulted in Children and Young People requiring treatment in a Children's Mental Health in-patient setting often having to be placed far from home due to bed shortages in the area or placed on adult wards. Ferndene Hospital in Northumberland and Acklam Road provide tier 4 CAMHS hospital provision for children and young people, with 7 Durham young people currently inpatients at these settings.

The MACC group was re-launched in October 2020 and takes place monthly to ensure any urgent multi-agency discussions can take place as soon as possible, with professional seeking advice and guidance from the MACC group when they are concerned about children and young people who are at risk of in-patient admission.

Durham's new Rapid Response Service, providing support to children, young people and their families / carers, to prevent admission and readmission to tier 4 hospital provision, works closely with children and young people identified and discussed within the MACC meeting.

Mental Health Offer

The emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people continues to be key priority for the council.

All children have been impacted one way or another during this period i.e., face to face family time moving to virtual means, children not being able to see their friends, not being able to participate in group activities and sports and most significantly, not accessing education for a substantial period of time. Whilst these restrictions are no longer in place and we learn to live with covid, the pandemic has had a lasting impact on many young people, particularly in relation to poor mental health, with a significant increase in demand on community health services.

The Council, TEWV and other health partners worked collaboratively to develop a new support offer for children, young people and their families to prevent admission to tier 4 mental health hospital provision, launching the Rapid Response Service (RRS) in July 2021.

The RRS was developed in response to an identified need for additional services to support young people and their families where there is a high level of risk of young people being admitted to hospital under the Mental Health Act. Support is focused specifically on young people who are identified in the Dynamic Support Register. The offer of support includes intensive support and packages of intervention tailored to the particular needs of the young person and their family / carers.

When children and young people need to be discharged from tier 4 hospital into the care of the Local Authority, there is often limited suitable local provision that can provide the specialist care and support that young people require. To enable the timely discharge of children and young people back into community-based provision, a dedicated specialist service is required. Work is ongoing to explore all available options to meet this particular sufficiency need, prior to any service development.

Sourcing suitable living arrangements and matching children and young people

Over previous years, CYPS has rolled out signs of safety training and practice support across all Social Work Teams and this is now captured within our children and young people's risk assessments. Producing strength-based information has improved the quality of information that we share with a provider which improves opportunities for children and young people.

Matching children and young people in residential provision given existing young people in the setting and their presenting risks continues to present us with an ongoing challenge. Given the complexities of some of our children and young people we have a greater need for smaller regulated children's home settings which is identified as a priority within our Sufficiency Action Plan.

As our use of externally commissioned children's residential home provision has increased by 50% between 2020 and 2022, with 69 children and young people living in children's homes managed by providers, we have developed a dedicated brokerage function within our Commissioning Service, to support with the increasing number of children's home searches and activity. This investment consists of a new Placement Team Manager post and two additional Placement Officer posts, to support the existing post within the Commissioning Service.

Availability of Foster Carer Households

The availability of foster carer households for children and young people, particularly those aged 13+, continues to be a pressure across the service. This has resulted in a small number of children and young people accessing children's homes given the lack of availability. These young people's plans continue to be monitored closely.

The number of children and young people living within in-house foster care provision reduced to 375 in November 2021, however this has gradually increased, month on month, with 408 children and young people currently living within in-house foster carers (41.3% of all CLA). Covid had a significant impact on the availability of in-house foster care provision.

Due to limited availability in-house, this has placed a reliance on the use of IFAs, which peaked at 174 in February 2022, however over recent months has started to gradually reduce.

It is our ambition to care for an increasing number of children and young people with Durham foster carers, with a target of 48% by March 2023. As such, we continue to focus on the recruitment of new foster carers for teenagers, sibling groups, UASC, children with a disability and respite for children with a disability, whilst continuing to support the retention of current foster carers.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

In line with the new mandatory National Transfer Scheme, Durham is required to accept approximately 4-5 UASC per cycle, with over 50 UASC expected over the coming months. The Local Authority must identify suitable care or support arrangements, dependent on each young person's needs. To date, the majority of young people referred have been aged 16+ and their needs have been primarily met in Supported Lodgings or Supported Accommodation, with a smaller proportion of children identified as being under the age of 16.

Identifying suitable living arrangements for this cohort of children and young people, does present sufficiency challenges i.e., suitable living arrangements need to be sourced within 10 days, there is limited information available about UASC, many UASC wish to live in cities and not rural areas (Durham is predominantly rural) and there are already pressures in relation to securing regulated provision for children that are under the age of 16.

Whilst our UASC require accommodation, care and support, it is important that they can access other key services such as health, education, mental health, advocacy, translation services and an independent visitor, when there is a requirement for one.

The offer available to UASC is being developed on both a regional and local level to ensure there is sufficient capacity to meet our ongoing needs. Sufficiency options to improve capacity are currently being developed, within our wider supported accommodation provision.

Children's Home's in County Durham and securing 'local' provision through a Durham First Approach

Durham has the highest percentage of children's homes per population in the region, with 467 children's homes in the North-East (81%) judged good or above (August 2021), which is a reduction from 88% in August 2019.

Whilst there is a high percentage of children's homes in Durham given its rural nature and more affordable property, there is also a high proportion of children placed in these homes from Local Authorities across the country, which often makes it difficult to identify suitable, local children's home provision for Durham children and young people and places significant pressure on services such as the Police, CAMHS and Education.

In order to maximise our access to local children's home provision, we remain in regular contact with providers to understand current and future vacancies, so children who require children's homes provision, can access this in a planned way.

We continue to work with external providers to shape and influence the services that they are developing for children and young people and to ensure that these meet our sufficiency needs, particularly smaller solo or dual registered homes, where there is an increasing demand for this type of provision.

When providers seek to develop new homes that do not meet our local needs, we positively challenge these during the early stages of their development and through the statutory planning process taking into account Planning Policy Guidance (Children's Home Planning Policy 18).

We work closely with Durham Police to consider new developments and sign-post providers to the police for locality risk information when considering the suitability and safety of a location.

Where the council has a definitive need for the service that is being developed, we ask that the provider enters into a 'Durham First Approach', enabling Durham County Council to access local provision or services, first and foremost. This approach enables us to secure provision in the local area, as it is generally in children and young people's best interests to live within Durham, close to family, friends and support networks. However, it should also be recognised that some young people benefit from living at distance, either due to risks in the local area or the need to access more specialist provision out of area.

Supporting Stability of Living Arrangements

Given an increasing number of breakdowns in children and young people's living arrangements and moves, there is an ongoing drive to support stability and to offer increased support and intervention to carers if there is a risk of breakdown, across all our types of living arrangements. Those carers who work with children and young people with particularly complex and challenging behaviours often require support or respite for short periods of time.

To respond to this particularly need, we are taking steps to develop and implement an improved support offer for our in-house foster carers. This consists of a 'wrap around support' team that will work intensively with our foster carers to promote stability and prevent breakdown of living arrangements. The Mockingbird Model is also being implemented which will offer improved support networks and respite for our foster carers.

To further support our children, young people with disabilities and their carers, we also plan to develop our in-house foster care offer to enable children and young people to access planned respite, as we have an increasing demand for respite at our Short Break Children's Home (Parkhouse) and this will enable us to expand our respite offer.

Families on the Edge of Care

Families on the edge of care, often require outreach support and respite to prevent children and young people from coming into care.

The Supporting Solutions Service has been operating since 2018 offering crisis support to young people aged 11-17 and their families / carers. The service is expanding its offer, supporting children and their families / carers for children aged 7-11. The service offers:

- Edge of Care support – intensive intervention to young people, parents and carer where there has been a relationship breakdown and without support it is likely that the young person may need to become looked after or experience a move.
- Family Group Conference – support to families to identify and establish a sustainable plan to meet the needs of children and young people within their family unit.
- Missing from Home Coordinator – co-ordination and deliver of services for children who are Missing from Home.
- Child Exploitation Workers – offering support and interventions to young people at high risk of child exploitation.
- Access to a crisis bed – providing an out of hours, one night only crisis bed for a young person when all other options have been explored and exhausted.

During 2020/2021 the service supported 179 young people and their families, in comparison to 101 young people supported in 2019/20. Of those young people support during 2020/21, 74% continued to live at home / with extended family or have remained in their long-term living arrangement. 28 young people (15%) who accessed support, became CLA after Supporting Solutions interventions and this is a clear increase from the previous year. These young people could not continue to live at home with family as it was not safe to do so. Some of these young people remained open to the Supporting Solutions Service in the hope that in the future a return to family care can be supported. 11 young people moved to a new living arrangement as relationships with carers had completed broken down.

The number of young people who remained open to an edge of care worker, has increased during 2020/2021, with 88 young people in 2019/20 and 132 young people in 2020/21, highlighting a 50% increase. This period covered the second covid lockdown, when some families were struggling to care and support their children at home and required intensive support and ongoing interventions.

The service continues to demonstrate the positive work that it undertakes to support children to continue living with their family, where it is safe and possible to do so.

To further support our Edge of Care, Supporting Solutions Service, we plan to open a new Edge of Care home later in 2023. The new home will support children and young people on the edge of care, offering planned respite. The home will also support children who are looked after and whose living arrangement may be at risk of breaking down. This will enable CYPS to broaden its current Edge of Care offer with dedicated respite provision.

Child Sexual Exploitation – Adolescent Safeguarding and Exploitation Team

There is an increase nationally, regionally and locally in Durham of adolescents experiencing extra-familial harm and young people presenting with complex issues including mental health and substance misuse who require a different model and approach outside of the traditional child protection framework and operating model.

The (ASET) Adolescent Safeguarding and Exploitation Team was established in early 2022 and consists of a Team Manager, Social Work Consultant and 6 Social Workers.

The vision for the team “is a future where young people feel safe beyond their own homes because their communities and our safeguarding system can, and will, protect them from harm”.

ASET will provide assessment and care-planning in line with statutory safeguarding procedures and deliver interventions to young people who are victims or at risk of extra-familial harm or experiencing complex issues and comorbidities. The team provides specialist advice and guidance to workers where a young person and/or their siblings are already open to services. This will reduce the need to change workers while ensuring young people receive a specialist service. ASET are a specialist knowledge hub who will provide advice and guidance and support the delivery of evidence-based practice while upskilling of the wider workforce.

Short Breaks for children, young people and their families

Both during and following the pandemic the Council has experienced an increase in the demand for both non assessed and assessed short breaks, with an increasing number of families seeking support. It is important that assessments are holistic and understand the overarching needs of children and their families with a range of different options being explored, working with the voluntary community sector.

Following the pandemic, the provider market is in a weakened position, with the following intelligence gathered:

- Current providers on commissioning frameworks are not able to meet all needs – both volume and needs
- Ongoing staffing issues in relation to capacity
- New providers developing within the market, who require intensive development support
- Lack of experience in the workforce
- Difficulty meeting the needs of the most complex children and young people
- Ratio of support to children is increasing, therefore placing more pressure on providers and cost impact on the Council
- Delays in securing services for children, young people and their families / carers
- A reduction in families use of direct payments

Work is ongoing with the provider market to review the ongoing challenges and to develop creative solutions. An Action Plan is being developed which will capture all key improvement areas, including, exploring the development of:

- A long-term children's home for disabled children and young people;
- An improved overnight short break offer for children and young people with highly complex needs;
- In-house foster carers that can offer respite to disabled children and young people

Supported Accommodation for young people aged 16 and 17

Our use of supported accommodation arrangements for young people aged 16 and 17 has more than doubled since pre-pandemic (22 in June 2021, increasing to 43 in April 2022). It is likely that demand will continue to increase as we receive UASC through the National Protocol Arrangements.

In order to broaden our Supported Accommodation Offer we will open our preferred provider list in October/November 2022, enabling new providers to join and deliver services to young people in Durham.

We will work with providers during 2023 in relation to the introduction of new national standards and the Ofsted-led registration and inspection framework, to understand any impact on sufficiency.

Supporting the Provider Market

The Supporting the Provider Market Team within the Commissioning Service now works with providers offering services to children and young people to improve services and to support market stability and sustainability.

The team focuses on five key areas:

- Recruitment and retention of staff
- Training and development
- Proactive interventions
- Technology and innovation
- Provider interfaces with health and social care

The County Durham Care Academy managed within the team, offers a routeway course for individuals wishing to work in adult or children social care. The 6-week programme does not affect an individual's benefits and results in a guaranteed interview with a provider and a transferrable DBS.

The children's routeway has been piloted with Durham County Council's Children's Residential Service to support recruitment and will be rolled out to support a wider range of providers supporting children and young people in County Durham.

This new offer has come at a time, when many providers are struggling to recruit and retain staff, as the country continues to recover and adjust following the pandemic and workforce sectors evolve.

Spend Position

The increasing number and complexity of children that are looked after by the council is continuing to result in increased social care costs for children and young people.

The outturn position for 2021/22 for CLA living arrangements, excluding in-house services was:

- Budget - £30.817m
- Actual - £33.993m
- Overspend - £3.176m

CLA budgets have increased year on year in line with increasing demand for services. This will increase by a further £2.863m in 2022/23 plus price inflation.

All costs are considered in a range of decision-making panels, where suitability of the living arrangement in line with the care plan and value for money are considered and scrutinised.

The priorities set out in this Strategy are subject to individual business cases, considering rationale, cost, impact, value for money and sustainability. Proposals will demonstrate best use of public funding, alongside our ongoing need to meet our sufficiency duty.

7. In-house Fostering

We have an extensive in-house fostering offer, which we utilise for children and young people who cannot live with their families and whose needs would be best met in a family environment.

- Pre-covid in March 2020, we had 430 children and young people living in in-house fostering households, accounting for 48% of all CLA.
- In December 2021, 41% (378) of our CLA were living in in-house fostering provision, which was a significant reduction and resulted in the increasing use of IFA provision.
- Of the 378 children living with an in-house foster carer as of December 2021.
- 1 in 5 children had been in their current living arrangement for 5 years or more (21%); almost a quarter (23%) have been living in their living arrangement for less than 6 months.

- We experienced a reduction in children placed with our in-house foster carers directly following the first national lockdown in March 2020 primarily as a result of carers own ill-health and concerns about taking new children into their own homes during the pandemic.
- As of May 2022, we have 411 children and young people (41% of CLA) that are accommodated in this type of living arrangement. There has been an increasing number of in-house foster care households made in the last two months.
- During 2021/22, 29 new foster carer household were recruited, against a target of 30 households.
- Our Marketing and Recruitment Strategy focuses on ongoing media campaigns using TV adverts, digital advertising, social media, radio and a new promotional sign located outside of County Hall.
- Work is ongoing to make improvements to the website.
- Almost half of enquiries (49%) in 2021/22 have come from the website enquiry form, followed by email (37%). Website hits are increasing month on month.
- Social media campaigns have been targeted based on ongoing demands. These include campaigns focusing on the recruitment of new foster carers for children with disabilities, UASC, teenagers and sibling groups.
- In order to remain competitive with the independent sector and to attract and retain foster carers we will review our current Payment for Skills Model. It is important that we develop a foster carer 'offer' where all carers are incentivised and incorporates the following: competitive financial incentives for caring for children/young people (particularly those with more specialist behavioural and health needs), good quality support and training and development. Whilst this will require changes to the payment structure, an increase in the number of these foster care households will be a key enabler in improving outcomes and reducing the overall cost of provision in the longer term.
- We are in the process of implementing a Mockingbird Model, which will ensure that our foster carers receive ongoing, appropriate, experienced support and planned respite when it is required. Hub carers are being appointed which will support stability and the retention of foster carers. The new service model is being launched in July 2022.

Priorities

1. Recruit 35 new foster carer households in 2022/23 and a further 35 new foster carer households in 2023/24.
2. Develop and launch the new fostering website by December 2023.
3. Launch the Mockingbird Model to support our in-house foster carers in July 2022.
4. Review the current Payment for Skills Model in consultation with foster carers, which seeks to improve our sufficiency of in-house foster carers, by attracting new carers and retaining existing carers; and to implement the findings by October 2023.
5. Develop a 'wrap around support' team that will work intensively with our in-house foster carers to promote stability and prevent breakdown and implement by March 2023.
6. Develop the respite foster care offer for children and young people with a disability.

8. Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs)

When we are unable to meet the needs of our children and young people within in-house foster care provision, we approach Independent Fostering Agencies.

- Durham is currently part of the new NE12 Regional Framework, which enables the council to purchase independent foster carer household arrangements.
- From July 2022, IFA households are commissioned through one single regional commissioning solution, involving all 12 regional Local Authorities. Extensive consultation and market engagement has been carried out to help shape and influence a commissioning model, that meets the needs of Local Authorities and is fit for purpose for participating providers.
- As our CLA numbers have continued to increase, our reliance on IFAs has increased also, with 158 IFA arrangements in June 2021 (similar to pre-Covid rates of 159/18%) rising to 172 arrangements in April 2022, equating to 17.5% of all CLA living with IFAs.
- As of December 2021, 28% of our children and young people were living with an IFA household for 6 months or less; 14% between 6-12 months, 47% between 1 and 5 years; and 11% lived in an IFA household for 5 years or more, demonstrating the high proportion of children who have a plan of permanence and who are settled.
- Children and young people live in IFAs, primarily due to brothers and sisters needing to be placed alongside one another, limited availability within in-house foster care provision and matching criteria.
- Due to the increasing needs of a small cohort of young people, when a foster care can not be identified, a children's home has been considered and secured. This change in provision has been considered and informed by the care team with the change in the young person's care plan ratified.
- As our number of children and young people placed in in-house foster care starts to increase, we aim to reduce the number of children and young people living in IFAs by 15% by March 2024. This would equate to approximately 147 children and young people living in an IFA household.

Priorities

1. We will continue to work regionally with other Local Authorities to ensure that the commissioning solution continues to be fit for purpose and to encourage off framework providers and new providers to join.
2. We will launch a new Provider Forum with our IFAs outside of our regional arrangements to share information about our demand, gaps in provision and to maximise effective partnership working.

9. Adoption

Adoption gives vulnerable children, including many with complex needs and a history of ill-treatment, the greatest possible stability, in a permanent home with a permanent family.

In April 2021, Adopt Coast to Coast launched as the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) for Durham County Council with two partners, Cumbria County Council and Together for Children who provide children's services on behalf of Sunderland City Council. The RAA is a partnership model whereby the central function of marketing and recruitment activity are centrally located in the hub with each partner retaining their adoption team who respond to enquiries in their allocated area and assess / support enquirers throughout their journey. All enquires received through the new enquiry and outcomes system where the enquirer has a Durham postcode, lives South of the Durham boundary or chooses Durham to receive the interest.

- In 2021/22 there has been 217 adoption enquiries, in comparison to 100 in 2020/21 and 165 in 2019/20.
- There was an 18% conversion rate from enquiries to approvals in 2021/22, a reduction in comparison to 2020/21 (41%) but an improvement from 2019/20 (15%).
- There were 66 placement orders in 2021/22, an increase from 2020/21 (58).

Recognising the sufficiency challenges across the region, a contract with ARC Adoption North-East provides the three spokes of Adopt Coast to Coast with exclusive access to prospective adopters they are assessing until they are approved as prospective adopters. This is in place to support early linking prior to a Placement Order being granted to reduce the time a child waits to be placed with their adoptive family.

Priorities

1. To ensure that the transition to Adopt Coast to Coast does not impact on the recruitment improvements made in 2020-2022.
2. To work collaboratively with RAA partners to develop practice around linking and matching, to reduce the waiting time for children when being matched to their forever family.

10. In-house children's home provision

The council recognises that group living in residential homes is a positive choice for some young people and is the best way to meet their assessed needs.

We are committed to looking after as many of our own children as possible as we believe this enables children to be close to home and their family. This offers the best opportunity of achieving good outcomes and stability for children and young people. This approach also ensures that resources are used as effectively and efficiently as possible.

We are committed to ensuring that all of our children and young people with a plan of care are living in provision that is regulated with Ofsted.

Existing Offer and Usage

- Durham continues to deliver an in-house residential home offer to children and young people. Eight of Durham's children's homes are rated by Ofsted to be 'good', one new home is awaiting its first Ofsted Inspection and one requires improvement with plans in place to address all areas of improvement.

Table 1 – In-house residential home provision

Children’s Home	Type of Provision	Number of Beds	Age Group
West Rainton	Long-Term	3	12-17 years
New Lea House,	Long Term	4	12-17 years
High Etherley	Long Term	3	12-17 years
Framwellgate Moor	Long Term	5	12-17 years
Moorside	Long Term	5	12-17 years
Coxhoe	Long Term	3	12-17 years
Hickstead	Long Term	3	12-17 years
Orchard House	Long Term	3	12-17 years
The Manse	Medium / Long-term	2	12-17 years
Park House	Short Break/Respite for disabled children/young people	6 + 1 emergency bed	7-17 years

Over the last 12-24 months we have:

- Changed the registration of our children’s home in West Rainton from a children’s home for young children (7-11) which supports them to step down into foster care, into a home for young people aged 12+. The statement of purpose was reviewed to reflect our ongoing pressures for young people aged 12+. There are however an increasing number of younger children that require residential home provision, so we will seek to re-provide the step down to foster care model in the future.
- Re-provided our children’s home previously at Cedar Drive. Our new children’s home cares for up to three young people.
- Developed and opened a new children’s home (Orchard House) for up to three young people.
- Developed a new smaller home for up to two young people aged 12-17. This was registered with Ofsted in June 2022.
- Used our short breaks home for both short breaks and short-medium term care arrangements, whilst alternative provision was identified for children and young people. This supported some of our immediate accommodation pressures but reduced the number of available overnight short breaks. The home has since reverted back to a short break only home with one emergency bed.
- Closed a children’s home in Tow Law, as the building was no longer considered fit for purpose. An alternative property has been identified and the home is being re-provided.
- The council has increased its’ number of long-term children’s homes from 7 to 9, with 31 beds available for children and young people.

As of May 2022:

- 31 children and young people were accommodated within in-house children's home, in comparison with 26 children and young people accommodated in March 2020.
- An increasing number of females are accommodated in our in-house children's homes (52% as of May 2022 and 43% in March 2020). 42% are male and 6% are transgender.
- 45% of young people accommodated are aged 11-15 years old with this trend being consistent since 2019 (46% in October 2019); an increasing number of young people are aged 16+ (52%); with 3% of children under the age of 10 (1 child), which was 11% in 2020.
- We have 13 young people (42%) that will be turning 18 over the next two years, whereby improving the sufficiency across our children's homes and reducing our reliance on independent children's home providers. We will also focus on reviewing young people's care plans at the age of 16 to determine if children's home provision continues to be the most appropriate type of provision to meet their needs.
- There has been a lot of movement within our homes over the last 3 month with 9 new arrangements made. 11 young people have been in their home for less than 1 year; 8 young people have been in their home for just over 1 year.
- Our future demand for residential provision is dependent on the number of children that are becoming looked after and the complexity of their needs; the number of children that are due to exit the service and our plans for bringing children back into Durham from out of county provision. As our children looked after numbers continue to increase, children continue to present with a range of complex behaviours where their needs cannot be met in fostering provision and we are increasingly placing young people out of area, with demand for local residential provision continuing to be high. Whilst there is limited capacity to accommodate further young people and little flexibility within in-house homes to move children if a situation arises, this presents a clear rationale to grow and broaden our in-house offer.
- Given the ongoing demand for smaller children's residential homes to meet the needs of our complex and challenging young people who can't be safely matched into larger homes, we have secured investment to develop a number of new, smaller children's homes over the next 3 years.

Residential Transformation Programme – new children's homes

Due to our ongoing demand for children's residential home provision, with up to 30 children and young people being searched for at any one time, and ongoing challenges identifying smaller homes that can safely manage the needs of some of our more complex children and young people, we are committed to developing a number of new smaller children's homes in County Durham.

This will ensure that we have sufficient, smaller local children's home provision, reducing the need to place children and young people at a distance or to place young people in unregulated arrangements for short periods of time. Homes will either be purchased, leased or new builds. Given the lead in time for purchasing / building and setting up children's home, a number of temporary medium-term options have / are being developed through lease agreements.

We are in the process of developing the following children's homes:

- Up to **4 x smaller children's homes for children and young people aged 12-17**. Two homes will each provide accommodation and care for two children, with a further two solo homes (with one overarching Registered Manager), each providing accommodation and care for one child. Two homes will be operational by the end of 2022, with the further two homes operational by the end of 2023.
- The development a new **Edge of Care Children's Home**. This new service will support our children and families on the edge of care preventing them from entering statutory services and will support children who are currently looked after, offering planning respite with a view to supporting stability and preventing breakdown. The home is forecast to be operational from summer 2023.
- **Re-provide a home for three children and young people** that was closed in 2020. The home is forecast to be operation in Autumn 2023.
- The ongoing development of a '**Peripatetic Residential Staffing Pool**'. This will provide greater capacity and will reduce our use of external agencies.
- We are continuing to improve our quality assurance and oversight, systems and records and investing in our workforce to ensure that services provided to Durham children and young people are good or above, in relation to Ofsted's Quality Improvement Framework.

Given the needs of children and young people, it is increasingly difficult to match children and young people into either a 4th or 5th bed within a children's home. This is evidenced in our occupancy information for larger homes. As such, all new homes developed will have an upper limit of three young people.

We propose to review the upper capacity of our established larger homes, when our new homes are developed, however this this must be considered carefully alongside our ongoing sufficiency needs.

Based on our ongoing sufficiency pressures we have identified gaps in the following types of service provision and will explore a range of delivery options including the development of services that DCC will operate, and provider delivered services:

- Children's home for disabled children and young people
- Specialist Short Break Home which offers planned respite for up to two young people with complex needs

The above gaps in service provision were also identified by Ofsted in their July 2022 inspection.

Staying Close

When young people transition from their children's home and into supported accommodation or independence at the age of 18, this is often described as a 'cliff edge'. Staying Close looks to improve the outcomes for young people transitioning from their children's home, by providing continual, ongoing, familiar support from their keyworker or children's home staff as they transition into adulthood, for an agreed period of time.

The development of a Staying Close offer is a key priority and as such we now wish to develop and pilot this, capturing all learning and feedback and use this information to inform and shape Staying Close as we move forward.

We will be working closely with the DfE and other pilot providers / Local Authorities following a successful funding bid which will fund the programme over a 3-year period, enabling an increasing number of young people to access staying close, year on year.

Priorities

1. Develop up to 4 x children's homes. Two will accommodate up to two children and young people and a further two homes will accommodate one young person each. Homes to be operational in 2022 and 2023.
2. Develop an Edge of Care home and open the home in summer 2023.
3. Re-provide a children's home for three young people by Autumn 2023.
4. Continue to develop the residential peripatetic staffing team to support capacity and reduce the use of agency staff within homes.
5. Continue to have close oversight of the residential workforce to ensure that the experience and skills of the workforce continues to meet our sufficiency needs.
6. Continue to review the upper bedding capacity in our existing children's home, taking into account ongoing sufficiency press
7. Re-provide a step down to foster care children's home for younger children, by reviewing the use of our existing children's homes.
8. Develop a children's home for disabled children and young people, in line with feedback from Ofsted. We will consider both DCC and provider led options, including new build options.
9. Develop a specialist short break home which offers planned respite for up to two children / young people with complex needs. We will consider both DCC and provider led options, including new build options.
10. Develop a Staying Close Pilot Programme for a small group of identified young people.

11. External children's home provision

Given our increasing demand for children's home provision and the lack of in-house capacity, we are placing more children with external residential providers.

There are currently 41 registered children's homes in the County Durham area:

- 1 x Secure Children's Home operated by Durham County Council
- 9 x Children's Homes operated by Durham County Council
- 31 x Private/Voluntary Sector Children's Homes

Private and voluntary sector children's homes meet a range of needs i.e., emotional behavioural difficulties, learning disabilities, sensory needs and physical disabilities. The size of homes ranges from 8 beds to 1 bed, with the average home caring for 4 young people.

A high proportion of children and young people from out of area, are accommodated in children's home in County Durham.

Existing Offer, Usage and Gaps

- We are using 47 external residential home providers as of 4 April 2022, in comparison to 27 providers in March 2020. Our use of the external market has increased significantly.
- 7% of CLA are now living in external residential homes, in comparison with 3.6% in 2019.
- As of February 2022, there was a 3% increase in the overall number of new CLA starts since March 2020, and a 31% increase in 14–15-year-olds in external children's homes. Demand is therefore not being driven by new young people coming into care, but by movement within existing looked after children and young people.
- We have had an 82% increase in the use of external residential homes since pre-covid, with 31 living arrangements in March 2020 increasing to 69 living arrangements in April 2022.
- We have seen an increase in the number of young people who have entered care and been accommodated in a children's home, rather than a foster carer household, due to their level of needs and complexity.
- We have started to place a small number of under 10-year-olds in residential homes, compared to zero children in March 2020. This highlights the increasing complexity of our younger children, and the inability to meet their needs within foster care provision.
- 40% of our children living in external residential homes are aged 14-15, in comparison to 16% in March 2020 (26 compared to 6 children, a 333% increase).
- 4 in 10 moves to external children's homes are from another external children's home. 45% of these are aged 14-15. 66% are age 13-15. This highlights providers difficulty in sustaining living arrangements for children and young people.
- There are very few 1 or 2 bedded homes in County Durham, that can offer specialist care and support to meet the needs of our most challenging children and young people. We have an increasing need for smaller homes and as such are working with a number of providers to shape and influence the services that they are developing.
- In 2016, the council joined the Regional Children's Home Framework, given our increasing use of external residential home provision. Whilst we continue to be part of this regional solution, Durham makes very few children's home arrangements with framework providers, with many providers choosing to remain off framework.
- Given the significant demand for external children's home provision (with demand often outstripping supply), independent providers can be selective regarding any future admissions, which often results in the most challenging and high-risk young people with limited home opportunities, being placed at a distance. Given the lack of suitable local provision, we must therefore develop services that can meet this need.
- Whilst our use of parent and child residential units remains relatively low, when we need to secure this type of arrangement for a parent and their child, which is often directed by court, there are limited local options available.

Durham First Approach

Due to the ongoing pressures in securing appropriate, local children's home provision, whilst we continue to focus on developing and broadening our in-house children's home offer to meet a range of needs, it is equally important to work closely and in partnership with the private and voluntary sector to ensure that we have a mixed sufficiency offer that Durham children and young people can access.

A 'Durham First Approach' has been adopted which allows us to shape and influence new services being developed by external providers, so these meet our sufficiency needs and to ensure that Durham has access to these services first and foremost. This usually takes place prior to the formal planning process and has resulted in the size of the development being reduced and the scope of the service being adjusted, so that services met Durham's sufficiency needs.

There are a number of new homes currently being developed which will result in 10 new vacancies in the county which can be accessed by Durham children. To date we have worked with providers to develop five Durham First homes, which can be accessed subject to suitable matching and assessment of risks.

All providers delivering care to children and young people are allocated a Link Officer with the Commissioning Service. Link Officers offer support and guidance, have oversight of complaints and LADO involvement and develop a positive working relationship with the provider.

Step Down Provision from Tier 4 Mental Health Hospital

During 2021/22, we have had to secure provision within the community for a number of children and young people that have been discharged from Tier 4 hospital. Given the complexity and the ongoing risk that children and young people continue to present this is often difficult; and sometimes results in a delayed discharge from hospital, requiring the development of bespoke regulated living arrangements, which requires a significant lead in time.

It is important that we develop a dedicated regulated offer that can support children and young people for a period of time, until the young person can be carefully transitioned into their long-term community living arrangement or is able to go home. Whilst the provision will provide onsite ongoing intensive care and support for a small number of young people, the service would also be able to provide an element of out-reach wrap around support to young people not accommodated on site, but who are at risk of being admitted to hospital. We will explore options for developing an Intensive Home Treatment Plus Model that is able to provide specialist support into the service and into the homes of identified young people who are looked after and at risk of admission to hospital.

Priorities

1. We will continue to work with providers to sustain children and young people's children's home provision, offering support and solutions which minimises moving children and young people.
2. We will continue to work closely with providers that wish to develop new Durham First services in County Durham, to shape services and to positively challenge development when this does not meet our needs.
3. We will explore options for working in partnership with a provider to develop a solo / dual registered children's home in County Durham, specifically for our use.

4. We will review our potential future use of parent and child residential units and encourage providers to develop these services when there is an identified need.
5. We will continue to play an active role in the NE12 regional consortia, working with neighbouring Local Authorities, to understand regional challenges, demand and to work collaboratively.
6. We will launch a new Provider Engagement Forum in July 2022 with our residential home providers. This will be specific to Durham's local needs.
7. We will work with health partners to develop a new registered step down from hospital offer to meet the needs of children and young people who are in our care and who have ongoing mental health needs.
8. As our capacity increases within in-house children's home provision, we will review our out of county living arrangement, to understand which children and young people have a plan to move back into the area.

12. Supported Accommodation and Care Leavers

Supported accommodation provides a stepping-stone for our young people aged 16 and 17 and care leavers, supporting the development of skills for life as young people transition into adulthood.

Many young people's needs can not be met in traditional accommodation options such a children's homes, with assessments determining that young people no longer require care but would benefit from ongoing support in their day to day lives.

- Our use of supported accommodation provision has increased since pre-covid by 187% (15 YP increasing to 43 YP), which accounts for 4% of our CLA.
- In 2020/21 we had 78 care leavers aged 17-18 that we supported, which is a slight reduction, from 84 in 2019/20. The number of care leavers aged 19-21 has however increased from 175 in 2019/20 to 197 in 2020/21.
- In 2020/21 we had 275 eligible care leavers aged 17-21 and 278 eligible care leavers as of the 8th April 2022, with number remaining relatively static over the 2 year period.
- 92% of our care leavers aged 17-18 are in suitable accommodation, which is above the national benchmark (91%) but below the statistical neighbour (93%) and regional (94%). Our number of care leavers aged 19-21 is suitable accommodation is also 92%, which is above the national (88%) and regional benchmark (91%) and on par with the statistic neighbour benchmark.

Supported Accommodation Offer

In order to meet the accommodation and support needs of our 16- and 17-year-olds, Durham has a range of 16+ unregulated accommodation options. These include:

Service	Accommodation	Level of Needs
In-House Provision:	Supported Lodging Carers	Low-Medium Level Needs
Commissioned Services:	Hedley House – Changing Lives (block contract) Staying Put (through IFAs) YMCA (spot purchase) ROC Solid (spot purchase) Moving on (spot purchase) Jigsaw Recovery Project (spot purchase) Home Group Staying Close (see in-house residential) Durham Local Letting Agency for general needs housing options for young people.	Low-Medium Level Needs
Commissioned Services:	Supported Living Provider Panel for young people aged 16-17 who have needs that challenge services – consisting of 11 providers	High Support Needs

The current supported accommodation provider panel is due to be opened in October 2022, giving new providers an opportunity to join and deliver services for young people, whose needs are best met in a solo occupancy accommodation. This will broaden our current availability of supported accommodation services for young people.

New National Standard and Ofsted-led registration and inspection

We will be working with supported accommodation providers when further information is published by Ofsted in relation to the new national standards and the registration and inspection regime.

Discussion will be facilitated through Provider Engagement Forums to understand any additional support required, the potential impact on providers due to regulatory changes and to understand any emerging gaps in service provision.

Homelessness

When young people aged 16 and 17 present as homeless, they are assessed as being children in need, (CLA would not be considered as homeless) and are considered within joint housing protocol meetings, to explore suitable accommodation and support, if their assessed needs can be met through support accommodation.

Housing Solutions have a dedicated officer who works with Care Leavers to assist within the Homeless Reduction Act when a care leaver is homeless or threatened with homelessness, to help access the most appropriate accommodation to meet their needs.

Priorities

1. To review the marketing and recruitment strategy for Supported Lodging providers, which seeks to recruit new carers.
2. We will open up the Supported Accommodation Provider Panel for young people in October 2022, broadening our pool of providers.
3. Establish a new Provider Engagement Forum with supported accommodation providers.
4. We will work with supported accommodation providers in relation to the regulation of provision, to understand any potential impact or emerging gaps in provision.

13. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC)

Durham is working in partnership with regional Local Authorities to explore how best to meet the needs of UASC coming into the region, alongside the development of regional and local commissioning solutions. This includes:

- The North-East Migration Partnership acting as a brokerage service on behalf of all 12 regional LAs, when seeking to identify appropriate provision for under 16's from IFAs through the NE12 Tyne Tees Regional IFA Commissioning Solution.
- The allocation and management of the UASC living arrangements are made based on their location. This does not change the number of UASC allocated to each LA.
- The targeted recruitment of foster carers and supported lodging providers that can care for UASC.
- Development of pooled resources i.e., training, legal and age assessments, pathways and living skills documentation.
- Exploring the development of a regional short-term residential service, where UASC live whilst assessments are concluded, and independent living skills are developed. This type of service would enable LAs to meet the 10-day lead in time for placing children and young people, when all other options had been explored.

As demand for suitable provision will continue and will not reduce, our accommodation options must also be expanded to meet this unprecedented need. One single service will not meet our overarching accommodation and support needs, instead a range of sufficiency options need to be explored and developed.

Priorities

1. Work with local supported accommodation providers to explore the extension of existing services to meet our increasing accommodation and support needs for UASC.
2. Consider options to develop a local supported accommodation and assessment hub, which will assess UASC over a 6 – 12-week period, before moving young people onto suitable supported accommodation.
3. Continue to work in partnership with regional LAs to develop a commissioning solution for UASC.

14. Short breaks for disabled children and their families / carers

The Council has a legal duty under the Children Act 1989 to provide services for children in need and their families. This includes children who are disabled.

Parent and carers of children and young people with special educational needs and / or disabilities tell us that they often need a short break from their caring role. Children and young people would ordinarily take part in social opportunities outside of their education, providing a break for their parent / carer which is intended to prevent children requiring statutory services or becoming looked after.

The Council provides a two-tier short break offer:

- Non-Assessed Community Short Breaks – providing 2-3 hours of community activities, which offer support and a regular break to parents and carers
- Assessed Specialist Enhanced Short Breaks – offering enhanced support to children and young people with more complex needs, which enables young people to access the community and overnight respite following a statutory assessment. This can be secured through the following:
 - Direct payment – personalised response for the family
 - Domiciliary Care – going into the young person's home to provide assistance with personal care, feeding, washing, sitting services etc
 - Health services – into the home for children with health needs
 - Specialist community-based services – hub-based delivery in very small groups or outreach into the community
 - Overnight respite within a regulated residential setting

Responsiveness, Gaps and Challenges

- Some providers are unable to offer non assessed short breaks to children and their families as they are unable to provide specialist support required by children.
- As of the 1 April 2022, 242 statutory short break assessments identified that a short break service should be commissioned for a young person and their family. Of the 242 assessments:
 - 1.7% - had been agreed at panel and were due to be actioned
 - 4.6% - no service had been identified
 - 10.3% - service identified but not yet commenced
 - 83.4% - service is being delivered
- There has been a drop in families use of direct payments, with further work ongoing to understand why this is the case, however early indication is that there are ongoing problems in relation to attracting direct payment workers.
- There has been a significant increase in demand for specialist community short breaks, however providers have often been unable to respond to needs. This is in terms of both volume and complexity of children and a lack of providers within the market. During the pandemic some families were waiting 12 months for support due to provider availability.
- The market is unable to respond to overnight respite referrals due to limited availability. There is also limited availability within DCC's in-house respite home, Park House, due to a number of young people being accommodated on a longer-term basis (until they can be transitioned into an alternative home), which is bed blocking.

- There is limited-service provision within hospices, due to inadequate Ofsted judgements, leaving fewer beds available.

Priorities

1. In order to commission services in line with needs, a whole system approach is required to re-shape, stabilise, capacity build and upskill the market. A Sufficiency Action Plan will be developed and implemented which will Short Breaks highlight the range of actions that will be taken forward to address the ongoing challenges and gaps in provision, and to improve both the universal and statutory short breaks offer for children, young people and their families / carers. This includes:

Non-Assessed Community Short Breaks:

- Ensure that organisations maximise inclusion for disabled children in community activities across County Durham and have the right skills and experience to respond to young people's needs.
- Further invest to enable children and young people with disabilities to access local universal activities, ensuring that parents / carers access regular breaks when these are needed and reducing the reliance on commissioned assessed services, preventing escalation of family needs.
- Continue to commission a menu of community activities for children unable to access the community due to their disability, without the need for a statutory assessment, whilst ensuring that providers are upskilled to respond to specialist needs.

Assessed Specialist Enhanced Short Breaks:

- Ensure that the provider market has the capacity, experience and skills to meet to children and young people's short break needs, either at home, in the community or in a residential setting.
- Develop specialist and inclusive community hubs to enable complex young people to be supported within their local area.
- Review overnight respite provision at Park House, alongside the wider overnight respite offer in the region, propose options to meet all needs, including those young people with complex disabilities / challenging behaviours that post a risk to other children. Develop a model and service provision for overnight respite (this action overlaps with Priority Number 9 within the In-House Residential Homes section of this strategy).
- Change our commissioning approach to block investment with existing providers to develop, stabilise and upskill the workforce so it can respond to short break demand, particularly for those young people with autism and challenging behaviours.

15. Conclusion

The aim of this Strategy is to ensure that children and young people in care live in stable, high-quality settings, where their needs can be met and their outcomes improved, enabling them to return home where this is in their best interests.

As corporate parent, the whole Council has a role to play to improve the outcomes for Durham's looked after children and care leavers. This Strategy and the delivery of its outcomes form just one part of our overall approach to supporting looked after children and care leavers and those on the edge of care and should be read in conjunction with other local strategies for children and families in need of support and protection.

16. Priorities

Based on the analysis of the needs of looked after children and care leavers, an understanding of the market locally and a range of research, four main objectives have been identified within this Strategy to contribute to achieving the authority's sufficiency duty and meeting the best possible outcomes for children and young people.

The six objectives are set out in Appendix 1 of the Strategy and will shape the activities, we as an authority believe will best deliver this outcome.

As we make progress with these objectives, we will achieve the quality, sufficiency and value for money we need in order to achieve the best for children and young people in County Durham

17. Indicators

A range of 'Indicators' have been identified and will be reviewed on a 6- monthly basis, to help inform and assess the Authority's effectiveness in delivering its overall sufficiency duty.

These are set out in the table below.

1. Number of children that are looked after
2. Number of children that are adopted
3. Number of children living with in-house foster carers
4. Number of children living with independent fostering agency carers
5. Number of children living in in-house children's homes
6. Number of children living in external children's homes
7. Number of children living in supported accommodation / living
8. Number of UASC accommodated
9. Number of living arrangements endings which are at the carers request due to a child's behaviour (looking at age of the child and length of time in their living arrangement)
10. Percentage of children who are looked after with 3 or more living arrangements during the year
11. Percentage of children looked after continuously for 2.5 years or more aged under 16 who are living in the same living arrangement for at least 2 years
12. Number of children with a plan of permanence
13. Percentage of care leavers living in suitable accommodation
14. Number of unregulated living arrangements made for children who required care
15. Number of out of county living arrangements made
16. Number of children and young people with a disability who live with their family and who are accessing respite

Key Priorities

Overarching Objective	Priorities	Completed by
Objective 1 Grow our number of in-house foster carers, support the retention of carers and work with IFAs to ensure that children and young people can live with foster carer families when it is in their interests to do so	Recruit 35 new foster carer households in 2022/23 and a further 35 new foster carer households in 2023/24	March 2023 and March 2024
Objective 1 Grow our number of in-house foster carers, support the retention of carers and work with IFAs to ensure that children and young people can live with foster carer families when it is in their interests to do so	Develop and launch the new fostering website	December 2023
Objective 1 Grow our number of in-house foster carers, support the retention of carers and work with IFAs to ensure that children and young people can live with foster carer families when it is in their interests to do so	Launch the Mockingbird Model to support our in-house foster carers	July 2022
Objective 1 Grow our number of in-house foster carers, support the retention of carers and work with IFAs to ensure that children and young people can live with foster carer families when it is in their interests to do so	Review the current Payment for Skills Model in consultation with foster carers, which seeks to improve our sufficiency of in-house foster carers, by attracting new carers and retaining existing carers and implement findings	October 2023
Objective 1 Grow our number of in-house foster carers, support the retention of carers and work with IFAs to ensure that children and young people can live with foster carer families when it is in their interests to do so	Develop a 'wrap around support' team that will work intensively with our in-house foster carers to promote stability and prevent breakdown	March 2023
Objective 1 Grow our number of in-house foster carers, support the retention of carers and work with IFAs to ensure that children and young people can live with foster carer families when it is in their interests to do so	Develop the respite foster care offer for children and young people with a disability	September 2022 – March 2024

Overarching Objective	Priorities	Completed by
Objective 1 Grow our number of in-house foster carers, support the retention of carers and work with IFAs to ensure that children and young people can live with foster carer families when it is in their interests to do so	We will continue to work regionally with other Local Authorities to ensure that the new commissioning solution continues to be fit for purpose and to encourage off framework providers and new providers to join.	April 2022 – March 2024
Objective 1 Grow our number of in-house foster carers, support the retention of carers and work with IFAs to ensure that children and young people can live with foster carer families when it is in their interests to do so	We will launch a new Provider Forum with our IFAs outside of our regional arrangements to share information about our demand, gaps in provision and to maximise effective partnership working.	September 2022
Objective 2 Increase the number of adopters	Ensure that the transition to Adopt Coast to Coast does not impact on the recruitment improvements made in 2020-2022.	March 2024
Objective 2 Increase the number of adopters	Work collaboratively with RAA partners to develop practice around linking and matching, to reduce the waiting time for children when being matched to their forever family.	March 2024
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	Develop up to 4 x smaller children's homes. Two will accommodate up to two children and young people and a further two homes will accommodate one young person each. Homes to be operational in 2022 and 2023.	December 2022 and December 2023
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	Develop an Edge Care Home	December 2023
Objective Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	Re-provide a children's home for three young people	November 2023

Overarching Objective	Priorities	Completed by
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	Continue to develop the residential peripatetic staffing team to support capacity and reduce the use of agency staff within homes.	April 2022 – March 2024
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	Continue to have close oversight of the residential workforce to ensure that the experience and skills of the workforce continues to meet our sufficiency needs.	April 2022 – March 2024
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	Continue to review the upper bedding capacity in our existing children’s home, taking into account ongoing sufficiency press	April 2022 / March 2024
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	Develop a step down to foster care children’s home for younger children, by reviewing our existing children’s home provision	March 2024
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	Develop a children’s home for disabled children and young people, in line with feedback from Ofsted. We will consider both DCC and provider led options, including new build options.	March 2025
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	Develop a specialist short break home which offers planned respite for up to two children / young people with complex needs. We will consider both DCC and provider led options, including new build options.	March 2025
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	Develop a Staying Close Programme for a small group of identified young people	July 2022 – March 2025

Overarching Objective	Priorities	Completed by
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	We will continue to work with providers to sustain children and young people's residential home arrangements, offering support and solutions which minimises moved for children and young people.	April 2022 – March 2024
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	We will continue to work closely with providers that wish to develop new Durham First services in County Durham, to shape services and to positively challenge development when this does not meet our needs.	April 2022 / March 2024
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	We will review our potential future use of parent and child residential units and encourage providers to develop these services when there is an identified need.	March 2024
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	We will explore options for working in partnership with a provider to develop a solo / dual registered children's home in County Durham, specifically for our use.	April 2022 – March 2024
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	We will launch a new Provider Engagement Forum with our residential homes providers. This will be specific to Durham's local needs.	July 2022
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	We will work with health partners to develop a new registered step down from hospital offer to meet the needs of children and young people with ongoing mental health needs.	March 2024

Overarching Objective	Priorities	Completed by
Objective 3 Continue to develop and broaden our residential homes offer and maximise opportunities with external providers when there is a case to do so	As our capacity increases within in-house residential home provision, we will review our out of county living arrangements, to understand which children and young people have a plan to move back into the area.	Ongoing
Objective 4 Develop access to a diverse range of appropriate accommodation for Care Leavers	Review the marketing and recruitment strategy for Supported Lodging providers	March 2024
Objective 4 Develop access to a diverse range of appropriate accommodation for Care Leavers	We will open up the Supported Accommodation Provider Panel for young people with complex needs, broadening our pool of providers.	March 2024
Objective 4 Develop access to a diverse range of appropriate accommodation for Care Leavers	Establish a new Provider Engagement Forum with supported accommodation providers.	September 2022
Objective 4 Develop access to a diverse range of appropriate accommodation for Care Leavers	Work with supported accommodation providers in relation to the regulation of provision, to understand any potential impact or emerging gaps in provision.	August 2022 – March 2024
Objective 5 Improve our sufficiency offer for UASC and reduce waiting times Improve our sufficiency offer for UASC and reduce waiting times	Work with local supported accommodation providers to explore the extension of existing services to meet our increasing accommodation and support needs for UASC.	December 2022
Objective 5 Improve our sufficiency offer for UASC and reduce waiting times Improve our sufficiency offer for UASC and reduce waiting times	Consider options and funding opportunities to develop a local supported accommodation and assessment hub, which will assess UASC over a 6 – 12-week period, before moving young people onto suitable long-term supported accommodation.	December 2022

Overarching Objective	Priorities	Completed by
<p>Objective 5 Improve our sufficiency offer for UASC and reduce waiting times Improve our sufficiency offer for UASC and reduce waiting times</p>	<p>Develop a new supported accommodation assessment service for UASC</p>	<p>September 2023</p>
<p>Objective 5 Improve our sufficiency offer for UASC and reduce waiting times Improve our sufficiency offer for UASC and reduce waiting times</p>	<p>Continue to work in partnership with regional LAs to explore opportunities for joint commissioning</p>	<p>April 2022 – March 2024</p>
<p>Objective 6 Broaden our short breaks offer for disabled children and their families</p>	<p>Develop a Short Breaks Sufficiency Action Plan which highlights the range of actions that will be taken forward to address the ongoing challenges and gaps in provision, and to improve both the universal and statutory short breaks offer for children, young people and their families/carers.</p>	<p>July 2022</p>
<p>Objective 6 Broaden our short breaks offer for disabled children and their families</p>	<p>Deliver a programme of non-assessed community short break improvements:</p> <p>Ensure that organisations maximise inclusion for disabled children in community activities across County Durham and have the right skills and experience to respond to young people’s needs.</p> <p>Further invest to enable children and young people with disabilities to access local universal activities, ensuring that parents / carers access regular breaks when these are needed and reducing the reliance on commissioned assessed services, preventing escalation of family needs.</p> <p>Continue to commission a menu of community activities for children unable to access the community due to their disability, without the need for a statutory assessment, whilst ensuring that providers are upskilled to respond to specialist needs.</p>	<p>July 2022 – March 2024</p>

Overarching Objective	Priorities	Completed by
<p>Objective 6 Broaden our short breaks offer for disabled children and their families</p>	<p>Deliver a programme of assessed specialist enhanced short breaks:</p> <p>Ensure that the provider market has the capacity, experience and skills to meet to children and young people’s short break needs, either at home, in the community or in a residential setting.</p> <p>Develop specialist and inclusive community hubs to enable complex young people to be supported within their local area.</p> <p>Review overnight respite provision at Park House, alongside the wider overnight respite offer in the region, propose options to meet all needs, including those young people with complex disabilities / challenging behaviours that post a risk to other children. Develop a model and service provision for overnight respite (this action overlaps with Priority Number 9 within the In-House Residential Homes section of this strategy).</p> <p>Change our commissioning approach to block investment with existing providers to develop, stabilise and upskill the workforce so it can respond to short break demand, particularly for those young people with autism and challenging behaviours.</p>	<p>July 2022 – March 2024</p>

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