



**DARLINGTON**

Borough Council

**Looked After Children and Care Leavers Commissioning and  
Sufficiency Strategy Refresh  
2024- 2025**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Looked After Children and Care Leavers Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy is a refresh of the Strategy that was originally published in 2021 and provides updated data and trend analysis, as well as evidence of progress made in achieving our original and planned future commissioning intentions. The core ethos of the Strategy is that where possible, children and young people are best looked after within their families, and that families should be supported to care for children and young people. This approach is reflected across Darlington Borough Council's Children's Social Care department with the adoption of the Strengthening Families approach.

This Strategy reflects changes at national level, namely the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, the Competition and Markets Authority review of placements, and the new Ofsted Supported Accommodation Regulations.

Through the refresh of this Strategy, commissioners have reviewed the key issues that are impacting on sufficiency and on ensuring a responsive and diverse range of care and support for children, young people and their families is available. These key challenges and issues are outlined below, along with the actions that are being taken to address them:

- **Placement accessibility and sufficiency:** Both the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and the Competitions and Markets Authority review of children's placements have highlighted the pressures that local authorities, including Darlington, face in sourcing adequate and appropriate placements for children and young people. Commissioners continue to work with our local provider market to ensure that any developments meet Darlington's specific needs and are in line with our Commissioning Intentions.
- **In-house fostering:** It is recognised that one way to increase and improve placement accessibility is to increase the number of placements that are provided directly by the local authority. The incentives that are offered to in-house foster carers have been reviewed and an enhanced foster care offer was implemented on the 1 April 2024. The revised offer reinforces and recognises the significant value of our foster carers and the contribution they make. The enhanced offer is now much more closely aligned with the offer from Independent Foster Agencies. The impact of the enhanced offer both in terms of foster carers retention and growth will be closely monitored throughout 2024/5.
- **Modernising and reviewing in-house residential provision:** Work is currently ongoing to replace the existing stock of in-house residential homes with newer homes. These new properties will allow more breakout space for individual work with children and young people. Through this incremental programme of home replacement, some of the existing residential homes will be repurposed to meet identified sufficiency pressures and provide opportunities to trial innovative approaches. There has also been a significant expansion to the Darlington Borough Council taster flats provision which has a target growth from February 2024 of a further seven spaces to provide a 14-place provision. As at April 2024, 13 spaces had been secured.

## INTRODUCTION

This Looked After Children and Care Leavers Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy seeks to improve the outcomes for children and young people through the provision of local, high-quality, outcome-focused support services and placements. Having a sufficient range of services and placements available locally, that meet the current and future needs of children and young people, is essential to supporting positive outcomes for children and young people in Darlington. This will provide them with the best start in life and opportunities as they transition towards adulthood. Which is aligned with the core value and priorities of the Council Plan.

This strategy provides an analysis of the needs of children and young people in Darlington and identifies where there is adequate provision to meet need and where further development is required. It also draws together the findings from research into the needs of children and young people in Darlington as detailed within the:

- Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2018,
- The Children and Young People's Plan,
- Service-level performance data,
- Office of National Statistics (ONS),
- The Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT),
- Darlington Borough Council Homelessness Strategy, and
- Findings from individual external placement reviews within Children's Social Care.

This strategy also takes into the account the findings from the Single Inspection of Darlington Council Children's Services published December 2022 and follows the journey of the child, considering the range of commissioned provision required from Early Help through to specialist placement provision with therapeutic support.

## NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

### The Sufficiency Duty – Children Act 1989

Section 22G of the Children Act 1989 requires local authorities to take steps that secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the authority's area which meets the needs of children that the local authority are looking after, and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the local authority's area (*'the sufficiency duty'*).

The sufficiency duty requires local authorities to do more than simply ensure that accommodation be 'sufficient' in terms of the number of beds provided. The accommodation must also:

Allow the child to live near his/her home, unless that is not reasonably practicable or safe to do so

Not disrupt the child's education or training

Where it is reasonably practicable or safe to do to enable siblings to live together

Meet the needs of disabled children and those with more challenging and complex behaviours support our children in care to successfully transition to independence

Comply with National Legislation and Guidance

Help support care leavers to achieve their full potential by providing suitable move-on accommodation

Under the guidance, the sufficiency duty places a number of requirements in relation to commissioning as follows:

**April 2010:** Local authorities should include in relevant commissioning strategies their plans for meeting the sufficiency duty.

**April 2011:** Working with their partners, local authorities must be in a position to secure, where reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for looked after children in their local authority area.

This sufficiency strategy forms the next step in this process by outlining the types of needs that we believe it would be possible to meet closer to or within Darlington by developing, remodelling, and reshaping provision.

## Independent Review of Children's Social Care

In May 2022 the independent review on children's social care published a report recommending wide-ranging reforms to children's social care.

The report was the product of an 18-month independent review chaired by Josh MacAlister. The aim of the review was to "take a fundamental look at the needs, experiences and outcomes of the children it supports and what is needed to make a real difference". The final report focused on the notion that relationships should be at the heart of the care system and is themed around the following core areas:

- Reset children's social care
- A revolution in Family Help
- A just and decisive child protection system
- Unlocking the potential of family networks
- Transforming care
- The care experience
- Realising the potential of the workforce
- A system that is relentlessly focused on children and families

## Competitions and Market Authority Review

In March 2022 the Competitions and Market Authority (CMA) published their final report looking at the Children's Social Care market. The study was launched in response to two major concerns that had been raised with the CMA about how the placement market was operating:

1. Local authorities were too often unable to access appropriate placements to meet the needs of the children in their care, and
2. The prices paid by local authorities were and this was placing significant strain on local authority budgets.

Through this study the CMA found that:

1. There was a lack of placements of the right kind, in the right places, meaning that children and young people are not consistently getting access to care and accommodation that meets their needs,

2. The largest private providers of placements are making materially higher profits, and charging materially higher prices, than would be expected if the market was functioning effectively, and
3. Some of the largest private providers are carrying very high levels of debt, creating a risk that any market failure would disrupt the placement of children in care.

In response to these areas, the CMA made a series of recommendations, focused on three key areas:

1. To improve commissioning, by having some functions performed by collaborative bodies, providing additional national support, and supporting local authorities to provide more in-house foster care,
2. To reduce barriers to providers creating and maintaining provision, by reviewing regulatory and planning requirements, and supporting the recruitment and retention of care staff and foster carers, and
3. To reduce the risk of children experiencing negative effects from children's home providers exiting the market in a disorderly way, by creating an effective regime of market oversight and contingency planning.

### National Standards for Unregulated Accommodation

In 2021 the Government announced a ban on unregulated placements for all children under the age of 16. In addition, plans were announced for the introduction of national standards and mandatory registration of settings that provide support for 16 and 17 year olds, as well as care leavers up to the age of 25. These New Supported Accommodation Ofsted regulations came into place for 16 and 17 year old Looked After Children and Care Leavers from October 2023. All Darlington-based provisions (both directly provided by the Council and externally commissioned) were registered ahead of the October deadline.



## LOCAL CONTEXT

Darlington Borough Council is a Unitary Authority in the North East of England which covers 76.3 square miles. Darlington is part of the Tees Valley city region. As of 2020 Darlington had a population in excess of 107,000<sup>1</sup>, with 22% (23,744) aged 0-18.

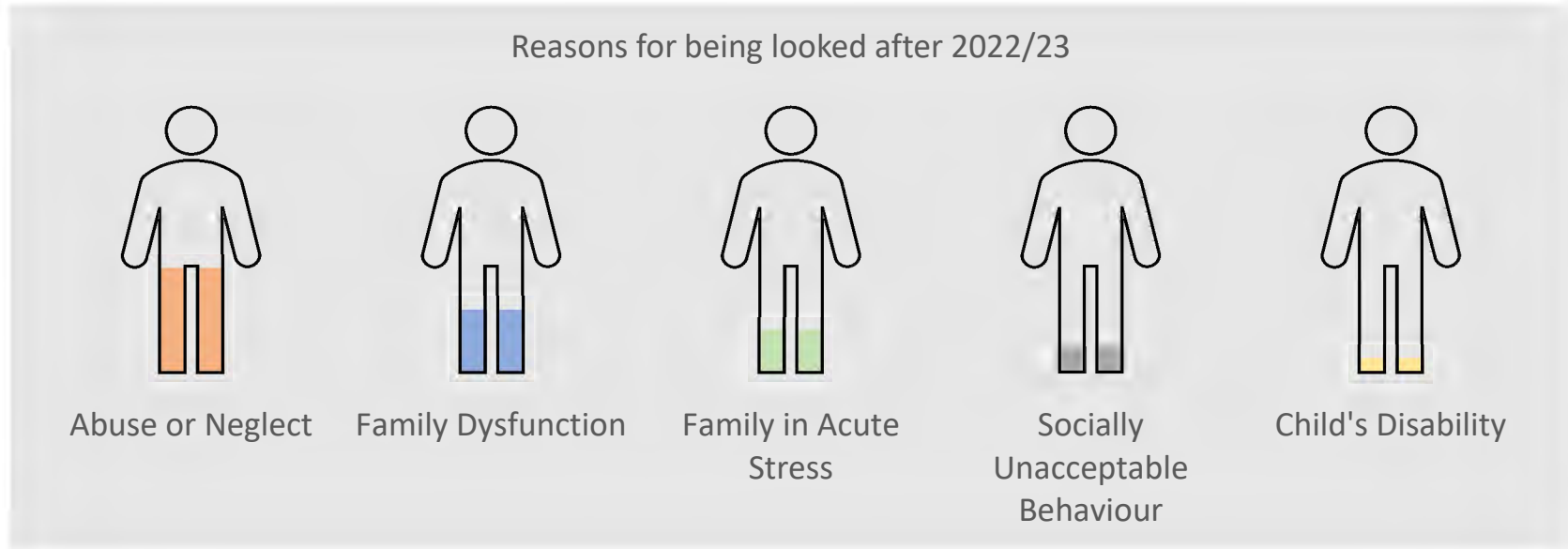
As of 31 March 2023 there were:

- 265 children and young people subject to a Child in Need Plan (CIN).
- 116 children and young people subject to a Child Protection Plan (CPP). 322 children and young people in the care of Darlington Borough Council.

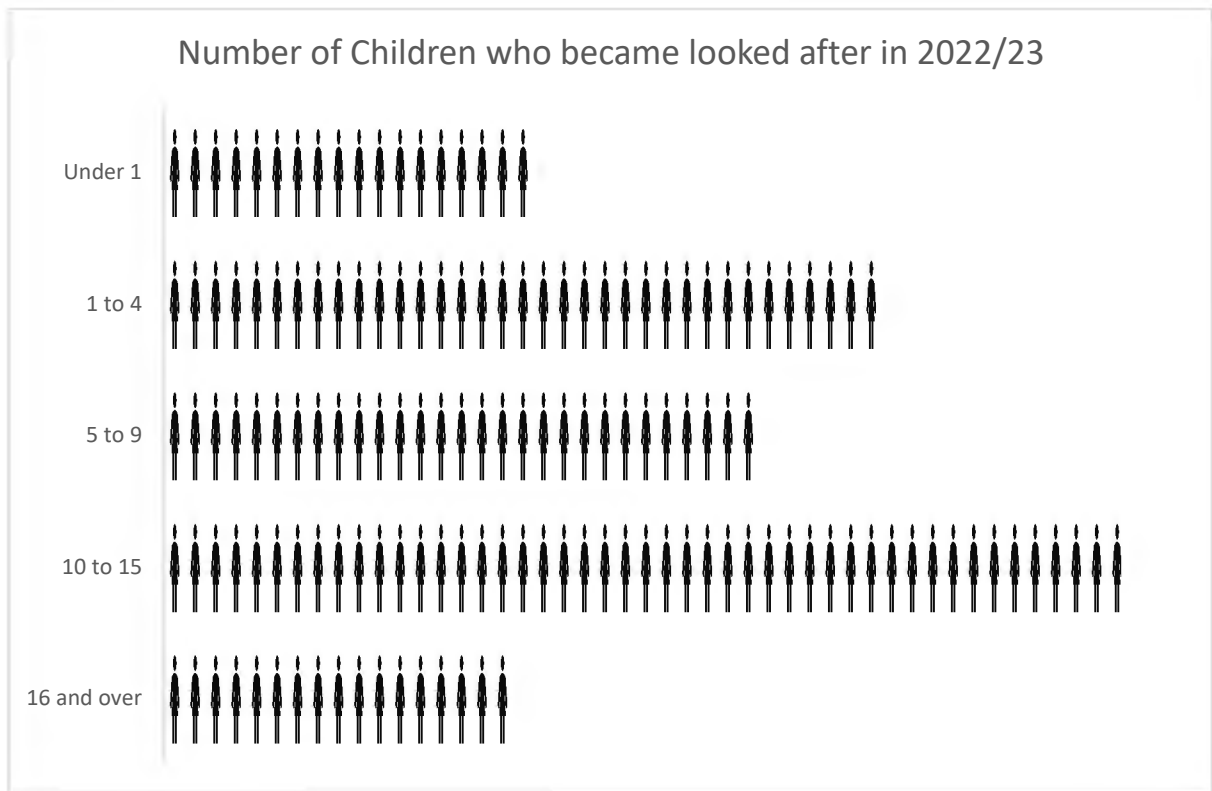
During 2022/23 149 children and young people became looked after by Darlington Borough Council, 18 of which came into our care through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) as an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child (UASC).

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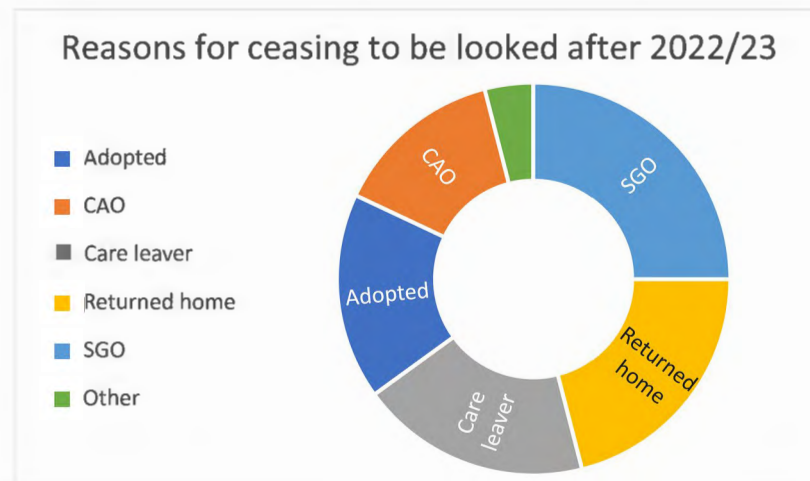
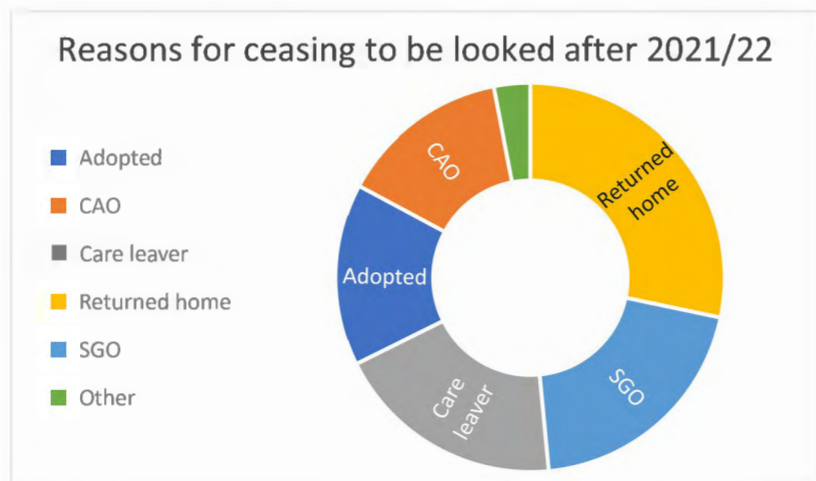
<sup>1</sup> 2020 Population Estimates (NOMIS)



There was a significant increase in the percentage of children under the age of 1 becoming looked after during 2021/22, rising from 24% in 2020/21 to 34% in 2021/22 but in 2022/23 we have seen this fall to 14.1%.



During 2022/23, 100 children and young people ceased to be looked after by Darlington Borough Council. This was a small increase of 0.9% when compared with the previous year. The main reasons for children and young people ceasing to be looked after are outlined below:



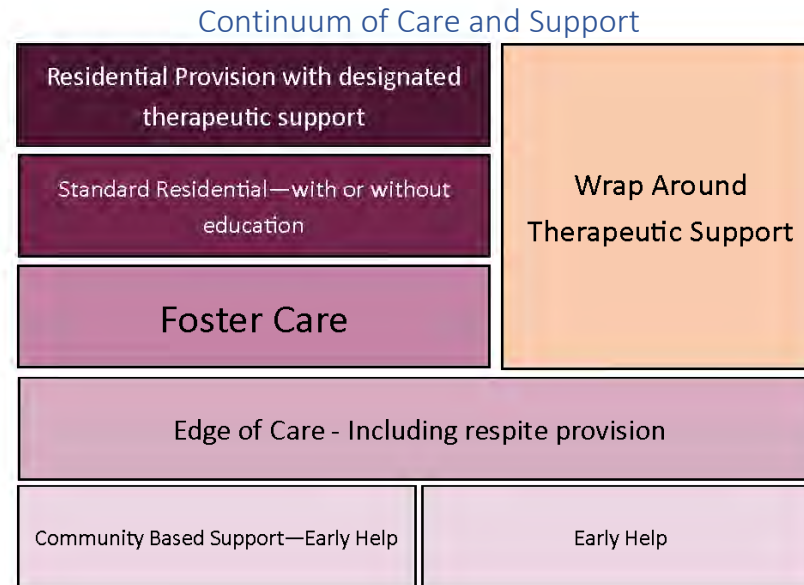
*CAO Care Arrangement Order: An order that regulates with whom a child is to live, spend time or otherwise have contact, and when a child is to live, spend time or otherwise have contact with any person. Each Child Arrangements Order is decided on the circumstances of the individual family and on what is in the best interests of that particular child.*

*SGO Special Guardianship Order: A family court order that places a child or young person in long-term care with someone other than their parent(s). The person(s) with whom the child lives with will become the child's special guardian.*

## CURRENT SERVICE DELIVERY

Delivery of services in Darlington is built around a continuum of care (as illustrated below), starting with Early Help (locally known as the Building Stronger Families) and moving up to specialist residential provision for children and young people who are looked after. Darlington Borough Council believes that in most circumstances children and young people are best cared for within their own families. The decision to take children and young people into the care of the Council is one that is only taken after all appropriate support options for children and young people to remain with their own families have been exhausted.

At every stage of this continuum, commissioners work in partnership with Social Care staff and service providers to explore what services are required to support children, young people and their families in Darlington to prevent, where appropriate, escalation up this continuum.



## EARLY HELP AND EDGE OF CARE

Early Help in Darlington known locally as building stronger families, as set out within the Early Help Strategy, has been defined as *“providing help for children and families as soon as problems start to emerge, or when there are emerging problems predicted for the future, and is designed to reduce or prevent specific issues from escalating or becoming entrenched”*.

A range of commissioned services are available in Darlington which provide early help and targeted support. These include:

- A designated exploitation service to support children and young people who are at risk.
- A dedicated independent missing from home support service to ensure that the Council meets its statutory duty with regards to missing from home interviews and to ensure that when a missing episode has occurred, the reasons for this are understood and action plans are developed to mitigate the risks associated with children and young people missing from home.
- Designated supported accommodation to provide support to young people and families to enable them to live within the community and transition to independent living.
- Community-based independent living support and drop-in support for children and young people and vulnerable families to ensure that where possible, children and young people are able to live with their families.
- Targeted community-based support for families experiencing a range of difficulties or behaviours which affect their ability to meet their children’s needs such as domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse or lack of routines.

The Early Help Strategy<sup>3</sup> outlines a clear commissioning priority: *“To develop an Edge of Care Model that supports young people to remain with their family as well as a reunification programme for children in care who have the potential, with multi-agency support, to be returned to the care of their family.”* A key priority in developing this model is the exploration of the potential for increased co-location of commissioned service provision within Children’s Services. This has been very successfully achieved through the co-location of the commissioned exploitation and missing from home service and since 2021 the voluntary and community sector-led families accommodation and outreach service has been integrated with the Building Stronger Families service in response to an identified increase in the number of families with housing issues.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/7626/early-help-strategy.pdf>

During 2023 the contract for the Darlington young carers support service was re-tendered. The Service Specification incorporated the views and priorities of Darlington young carers and their families and outlines a series of service development priorities. The new service went live on 1 April 2024 and is co-located with the adult carers support service to ensure a seamless transition to adulthood and joined up service delivery.

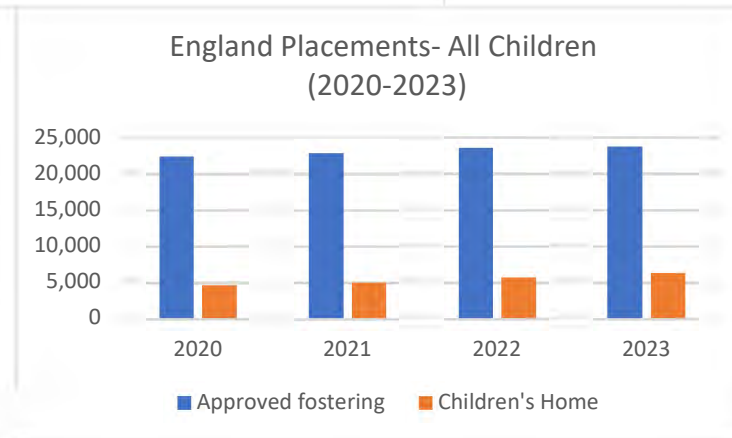
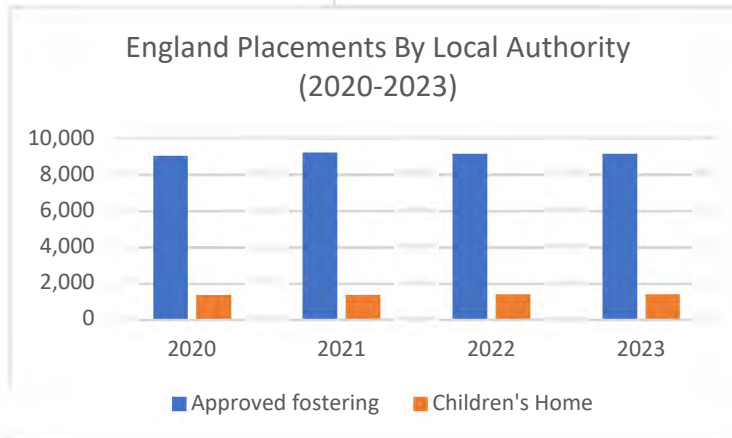
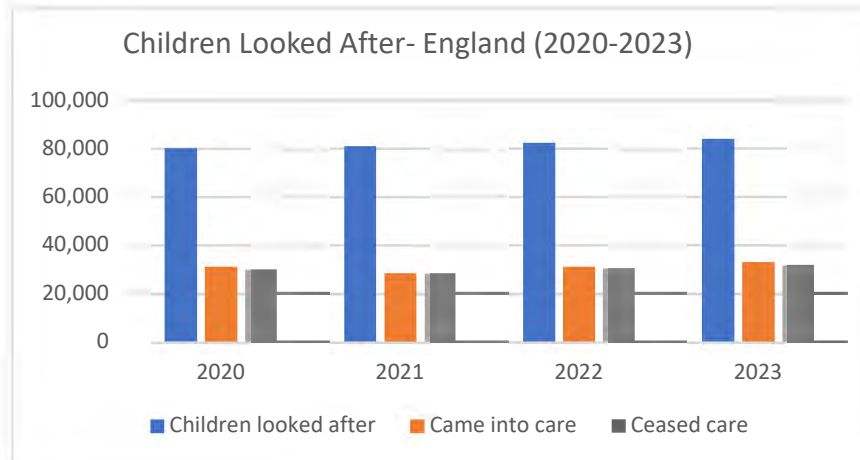
## CHILDREN IN THE CARE OF THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

### The National Picture

Between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2023, 92,560 children have come into care in England and 90,030 children have left care during this time. This is a small reduction on the 94,980 children coming into care between 1 April 2017 and 31 March 2020 but a small increase on those leaving care, which was 89,340. (source: [explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk))

The National Statistics have recorded a 9% increase in the number of Children's homes (2,880) in March 2023, compared to March 2022. This has resulted in a 7% increase in the number of places (10,818) and they confirm a continued trend of the number of homes rising faster than the number of places. But this distribution of homes is not even across England with the Northwest accounting for a quarter of all the children's homes. This is also reflective of the home towards dual homes and solo home to ensure diversity of provision and care and support options for the children with complex needs.

In March 2023, there was a total of 56 residential special schools registered as a children's home. This is a 36% drop when compared with 88 schools registered in 2014, and the lowest it has been over the past decade. In contrast we are seeing an increase in residential family centres, although still a small proportion of social care providers, it has had a 15% increase compared to last year, from 68 settings to 78.

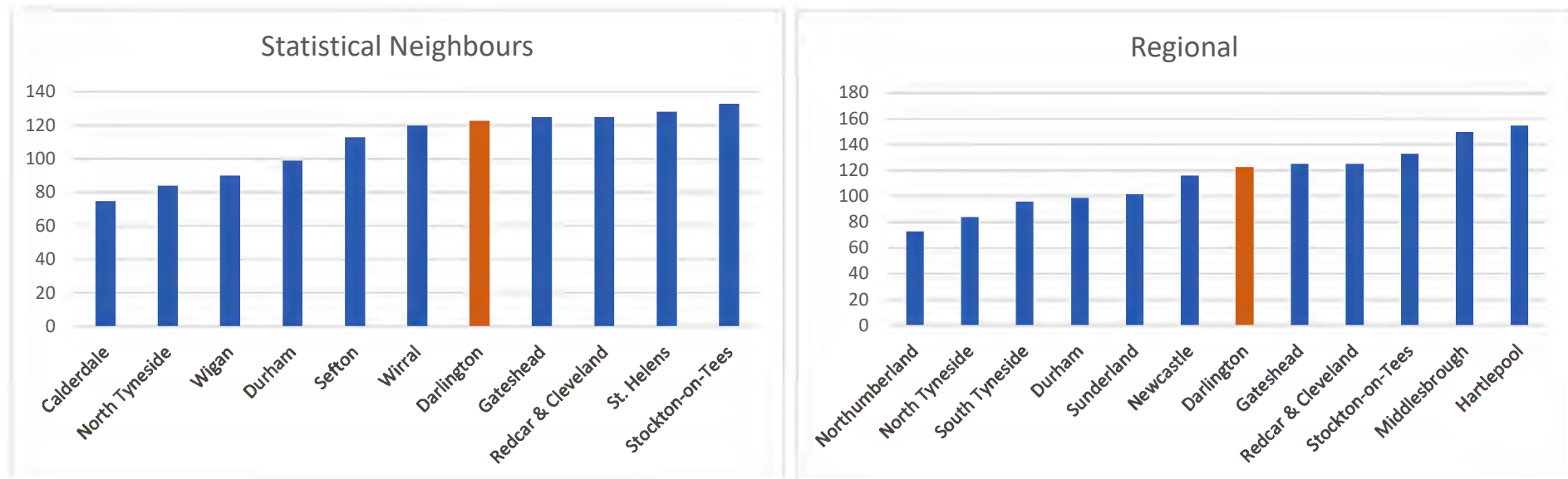


As depicted, the number of placements is not keeping pace with the number of children looked after by local authorities. Coupled with issues around matching the needs of children and young people, this has resulted in limited capacity within the sector to respond to placement demands and has led to increased competition between local authorities to source placements for their children and young people.



## The Local Picture

As of 31 March 2023, there were 322 children and young people looked after by Darlington Borough Council. The most recent benchmark data (2023) shows that Darlington had the second highest rate of children and young people looked after per 10,000 amongst statistical neighbours, and the joint fourth highest rate amongst regional neighbours.



## PLACEMENTS FOR CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER BY THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

There are a range of interventions and services available to support children and young people in Darlington across a continuum of need. Our default position is that wherever possible and safe to do so, children and young people achieve better outcomes when they reside with their family. However, where the needs of a child do mean that a placement is in their best interests, it is Darlington's vision that, unless specific exceptional needs are identified, children should be able to benefit from living in the right placement, which is local, meets their specific needs, is found 'first-time' and remains stable. This will ensure the best outcomes and avoid further disruption for the child or young person.

It is acknowledged that due to factors such as exploitation or very specialised needs, there will always be occasions where the most appropriate arrangement is to place children and young people away from their family and community to ensure they receive appropriate care, and that support is tailored to their specific needs. When this is the case, it is even more vital that the correct placement is made to ensure that placements are stable and minimise any disruption.

When it is determined that a placement is in the best interests of the child or young person, Darlington Borough Council implement a progressive approach to placements, which is detailed below:

- Family Group Conference (FGC) to identify any family or friends who can provide care,
- In-house foster carers,
- IFA foster carers,
- In-house residential provision,
- External residential provision, and
- Specialist residential provision.

### Connected Care

In recent years there has been a concerted effort in Darlington to, where possible, increase the number of placements that are made with family or friends of children and young people. Children and young people tend to achieve better outcomes when they are placed in a family environment, and by placing children and young people with family and friends they can remain in a familiar setting and benefit from maintaining close familial relationships.

As of 31 March 2023, kinship care was providing placements for 51 children and young people, an increase from 44 children and young people in 2021, and 46 children remained at home with a parent whilst being supported by the looked after child procedures, an increase from 22 children and young people in 2021.

Commissioning activity has been focused on opportunities to provide additional support for Connected Carers which now includes:

- As part of the 2021 contract award for the families outreach and accommodation provision Connected Carer became a named group for prioritisation of support within the Service Specification. Networks are in place between the service provider and the foster services to signpost families identified who would benefit for additional support.
- Annual budgetary provision has also been made within the Disabled Facilities Grant DRO Policy for the provision of Housing Assistance funding for Kinship Carers. This provision provides an opportunity to respond to some of the logistical and practical accommodation difficulties which can occur when an individual becomes a Connected Carer.

### In House Foster Carers

As of 31 March 2023, fostering households managed by Darlington Borough Council were providing 79 placements for children and young people in care, which is an increase of (23%) when compared with March 2022.

Darlington are now part of a collaborative partnership with 11 other local authorities from across the North East of England. Fostering services are joining forces to recruit much-needed prospective foster carers. Foster with North East enables anyone who is considering fostering in our region will benefit from a united, single support hub which provides additional support for prospective fosters carers and is supported by the Department for Education.

A review of the incentives offered to Foster Carers was undertaken in order to attract and sustain Darlington Borough Council Foster Carers. The new offer is on par with what is offered by the independent sector and remains under ongoing review. To provide additional support to in-house carers a Mockingbird constellation of foster carers has been implemented within the in-house foster care service. This model aims to develop strong support networks for a group of foster carers, which in turn helps to maintain placement stability for children and young people. A designated social worker will undertake the liaison worker role, and a foster carer will undertake the hub home carer role.

A target has been set for a year-on-year increase in Foster Care placements of 10. This aims to increase capacity and choice, and to effectively respond to natural attrition rates which result from aging Foster Carers and those who cease fostering, as they are granted Special Guardianship Orders in respect of the children that they care for.

The training and development of in-house Foster Carers also remains a priority. This aims to maximise the skills mix that is available to meet the needs of more complex children and minimise the need to commission placements with IFAs or out-of-borough foster carers.

The diversity and resilience of the in-house foster care offer has a direct correlation with the demand for externally commissioned services. The ongoing recruitment of foster carers is therefore a priority, and a marketing and recruitment strategy is in place. During 2023 in addition to our rolling social media presence, marketing activities centred on the annual Foster Care Fortnight were held alongside a number of rolling dedicated recruitment events at the local leisure centre (the Dolphin Centre) and key community events.

### Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs)

It is acknowledged that due to the varied needs of children in care and the difficulties in achieving placement matches, there will continue to be a requirement to positively utilise the skills and expertise of the independent sector to ensure the diversity of placements to meet needs. As of 31 March 2023, there were 98 children and young people from Darlington placed with IFA foster carers, an increase from 91 children and young people in 2021. The 98 children account for 30.4% of all in care which is a reduction on the 33.5% in 2021.

Currently, IFA placement expenditure is high (although has reduced by 22% since the last iteration of the Looked After Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy) currently c£3.2m per annum. Ensuring commissioned IFA arrangements provide value for money is critical in making the best use of resources. There is a clear commissioning priority to ensure that where a placement has to be made with an IFA, the commissioned regional IFA framework contract is exhausted first.

Commissioners in Darlington have a strong and effective relationship with IFAs operating in the Darlington area. Commissioners have written to IFAs setting out their desire to work alongside IFAs to make Darlington-based foster carer beds as accessible as possible for Darlington children. Arrangements are in place for IFAs to notify commissioners and the Placement Officers when a Darlington-based foster carer bed becomes available and when any new recruitment of Darlington-based foster carers takes place.

#### [Tyne Tees IFA Framework](#)

Darlington is part of the regional collaborative procurement looking to bring together the Tees Valley Framework and the NE12 Framework into the new Tyne Tees IFA Framework. This collaborative procurement resulted in 19 IFAs joining the framework and went live on 1 July 2022.

The contract is needs led, and has provision for:

- Standard Support placements,
- Extra Support placements,
- Enhanced Support placements,
- Parent and Child assessment placements, and
- Staying Put arrangements.

The aim of the collaborative procurement process is to:

- Increase the choice and diversity of placements available to support the best outcomes for children and young people,
- Manage the quality and cost of placements, and
- Work collaboratively with providers to help shape the market according to the needs of children and young people.

There are occasions where spot purchases outside of framework agreements (“off framework”) will continue to be needed in order to place children whose needs are not able to be met by foster carers managed by Darlington Council or by IFAs on the framework contract. This is primarily because of very challenging or complex behaviours which can include aggression to other children, mental health problems and/or sexualised behaviour. Where these occur, direct negotiations are held with the provider to ensure value for money is achieved.

Analysis of the use of IFAs shows that there are a higher number of sibling groups and older children with complex needs placed with IFAs on the framework agreement than in other fostering arrangements. It is within the age group of 10-15 where the placement pressures have been the most significant for the Council. There is a gap in provision in this area.

#### [In House Residential Children's Homes \(Managed by Darlington Borough Council\)](#)

There are three, four-bedroomed, children's homes in Darlington, each offering three placements. Whilst this is positive, the statements of purpose for each of these homes are identical, in that they all offer medium/long term care for young people aged 11 to 17 with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Some young people may stay until they are able to live independently whilst others may move on to other residential accommodation, foster care or an eventual return to their families.

Work is currently ongoing to replace the existing stock of in-house residential homes with newer homes. As part of the home replacement programme opportunities to diversify the remit of the existing children's home will be maximised. These newer properties will allow more breakout space for individual work with children and young people. Through this incremental programme of home replacement, some of the existing residential homes will be repurposed to meet identified gaps, and to try new and innovative approaches. This approach will also create more guaranteed access to Darlington based residential provision for Darlington children. The first replacement home opened at the end of 2023, with the existing home being repurposed into an Ofsted registered in-reach, outreach and weekend respite accommodation provision. This service, locally known as Cedars, and has been instrumental to providing Ofsted-registered emergency placements, residential short breaks and Outreach. Owing to the positive impact which Cedars has had in diversifying the range of Ofsted-registered provision for Darlington children and young people during 2024, work will be undertaken to further extend the service into a full-time service provision.

#### [External Residential Care Provision with and without Education](#)

As of 31 March 2024, there were 30 young people in external residential care. Of these, 11 young people receive education as part of their placement arrangement.

In line with national trends the age of young people in residential care is significantly higher than those placed in IFAs. Darlington Council remain committed to ensuring that children aged 11 or under are not placed in residential homes unless there are specific circumstances where it is felt this would be in the child's best interest or alternatively there is absolutely no alternative regulated provision available.

### Block Arrangements

There is one block contract in place with an external provider for additional in-borough standard residential care. Positive outcomes have been achieved from the block contracting arrangement which has been fully occupied by Darlington children. A number of young people have positively moved on from the home as part of a planned and progressive part of their transition to adulthood. The impact and effectiveness of the block contract is closely monitored and is subject to the natural programme of service review and quarterly commissioning review.

### Bed Reservations

Darlington commissioners proactively engage with local providers regarding bed reservation opportunities in response to areas of sufficiency pressure to increase the accessibility of Darlington beds for Darlington children. This approach has successfully secured occupation of a new dual home in Darlington with Darlington children.

Bed reservations and block contracting are, however, not feasible to undertake at any scale for a small Council owing to the matching requirements.

### Regional Collaboration and Frameworks

External residential care is commissioned through a joint contractual agreement between the five Tees Valley Councils, with Darlington Borough Council acting as lead commissioner for this provision. This contract started in April 2020 but, with market changes and the move to a number of providers operating spot contract arrangements only, the numbers of providers on the Framework have declined, compounded by the increase in numbers of children coming into care with high and complex needs. This has resulted in pressures in securing appropriate placements and associated increased pressures on the Council's budget. Commissioners continue to engage with independent providers to establish the most effective contracting arrangements going forward.

Darlington has experienced particular challenges in sourcing residential accommodation for a small core group of very complex young people with intensive support needs. There have been instances where all existing commissioned arrangements and a wider provider search has not identified a suitable placement. This is a position reflected across the region. In response, Darlington are proactively involved in a joint commissioning subregional working group with the Integrated Care Board to strengthen local arrangements for all children but with a particular focus on Looked After Children and SEND.

The need to diversify residential provision available in Darlington through specific registered provision tailored to the specific needs and requirements of Darlington children is a key commissioning priority. It has been identified that in addition to the three care homes managed by Darlington Council, there are also a large number of registered children's homes in Darlington with similar Statements of Purpose. It is therefore our current sufficiency position that the only expansion to any mainstream homes not aligned to a specific priority (and supported by Darlington Commissioners) will be directly provided by the Council. At this point in time there is no requirement for further independent sector mainstream residential children homes developments for Darlington. As of March, there were 58 independent children's home beds and 12 directly provided by council and 30 Darlington children in need of residential care.

In addition to the Ofsted-registered residential children's homes, Darlington also has a CQC-registered home which can provide bespoke care for children and young adults.

Although there is a significant volume of registered provision, accessibility of the beds for Darlington children remains an ongoing challenge owing to national referral systems in operation, compounded by matching requirements and the lack of diversity of in-borough provision to adequately meet the current range of needs. As a result, a very small number of children and young people are having to be placed in expensive out-of-borough homes.

### Specialist Independent Schools

Ensuring sufficient and robust education arrangements and educational attainment in Key Stages 3 and 4 is key to our placement stability and also forms a joint strategic priority within the SEND Joint Commissioning Strategy. Presently specialist independent school placements which are not part of a residential placement are commissioned through a spot contract arrangement.

Specialist Independent Schools provides full-time education for five or more pupils of compulsory school age or one or more pupils with a statement of special educational needs or who is in public care (within the meaning of Section 22 of the Children's Act, 1989) and is not maintained by a Local Education Authority (LEA) or a non-maintained special school.

Placement provision with on-site education form some of the highest cost placement arrangements and one of the biggest risks to effective deployment of resources. Joint explorations are being progressed through the joint SEND Strategy to maximise the in-borough education offer, which will reduce the future need for out-of-borough education placements in the medium term.



## Adoption

The number of children and young people being adopted per year has started to see a positive rise increasing from 7 in 2020/21 to 17 in 2022/23.

Darlington has a good performance on the DfE Adoption Scorecard and are consistently in the top performing 25% of Local Authorities. Darlington's average number of days between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family was 156 days in 2022/23 and Darlington had the highest percentage of adoptions in the region.

Adoption Tees Valley was launched in 2018 as the Regional Adoption Agency for the five Tees Valley authorities. The vision of the Agency is to achieve the best possible adoption outcomes for children and adopters through high quality and timely services which is delivered in the Tees Valley by an effective and financially sustainable organisation.

## Looked After Children and Young People with Complex Needs and SEND

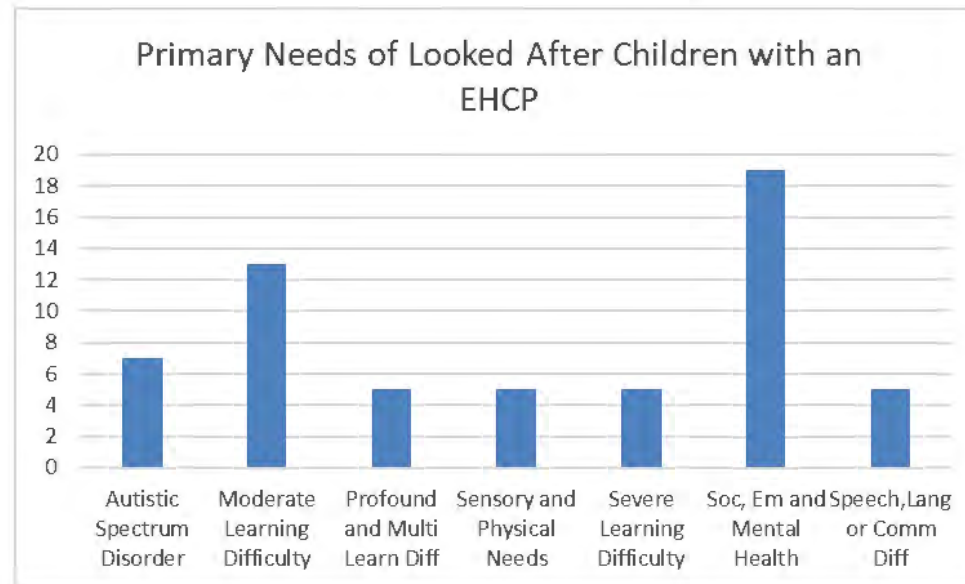
With regard to school age looked after children aged 5-16, there are 55 looked after children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP). 27 attend mainstream provisions and 28 attend specialist providers.

The latest published data of 31 March 2022 shows 30.1% of Darlington's looked after children, who have been continuously looked after for 12 or more months, have a Special Educational Need (SEN). This is in line with England's average (30.2%).

During 2022- 23 new requests for statutory assessment increased by 56% on the previous year with parental requests accounting for a very significant 77% increase.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) continues to be biggest area of need. For males, ASD is the primary need for over 37% of the cohort, up from 35% the previous year. The next biggest primary need for males is SEMH at 22%, up from 20.5% and represents a change from the previous year when MLD was the next biggest group at 20.7%, currently 21%. Females make up approximately 1/3 of the EHCP cohort.

For females, Moderate Learning Disability is the largest primary need at almost 35% of the female cohort, up from 33.5% in the previous year. ASD is the second largest group of the female cohort at 25.5%, down from 27% in the previous year. Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) forms the third largest group currently at 14.6%, up from 9% in the previous year.



\* Numbers under 5 have been rounded up to 5 for data protection purposes

Darlington currently has five young people aged between 11-19 years who are in care and have specialist residential placements funded by health, social care and education. Additionally, Disabled Facilities Grants are available (following an Occupational Health team assessment) for children and young people with disabilities who require property adaptations in order for them to remain safe and secure in a property which is adapted to their specific needs.

The needs of this group of children and young people have historically been met via residential placements. However, in recent years, increased effort has been applied to source community-based packages of support that seek to prevent entry into residential care.

Darlington is seeing a rise in demand for specialist education placements which are both costly and in short supply. It is vital that the local authority is able to access the most appropriate provision and placements, informed by ongoing accurate assessment of need and consideration of parental/young person's choice. Equally, the need for effective multi-agency support is required when commissioning

provision across education, health and social care. A new subgroup of the schools' forum has been established during 2023/24. This group has representation from Darlington schools across primary, secondary and Further Education, children's commissioning and the operation SEND team. The subgroup will be instrumental in driving forward the review of the existing SEND resources bases and Outreach Services and exploring options in relation to gaps in provision.

Ensuring sufficient and robust education arrangements in borough and educational attainment in Key Stages 3 and 4 is key to our placement stability and forms a joint strategic priority within the SEND Sufficiency Strategy. The SEND Sufficiency Strategy will be developed in line with the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) delivery plan following the SEND inspection.

A review of the commissioned resource bases will factor into the SEND Sufficiency Strategy. During 2023/4 a full statutory consultation was undertaken regarding the repurposing of the existing resource base at Heathfield to have a primary remit to support children of reception, year 1 and year 2 with communication and interaction needs. The intention is the base will be incrementally filled over a three-year period. This significant change has been approved by the DfE. The repurposing of the base will ensure that the services are aligned to the presenting needs of Darlington children and young people with SEND. Running concurrently is a review of all the commissioned outreach support services for children with SEND to ensure that they are aligned with the presenting needs of Darlington children with SEND. The services have been in their current configuration for a significant period of time.

A multiagency Vulnerable Pupil Panel (VPP) is in place. This panel has a key role in maintaining education arrangements in borough and facilitating support and interventions which avoid disruption to education as far as reasonably possible.

### Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children are children and young people who are seeking asylum in the UK but who have been separated from their parents. Since 2016, a National Transfer Scheme has been in operation to enable the safe transfer of unaccompanied children from one local authority to another local authority due to some local authorities experiencing a large number of unaccompanied children entering the country in their area. Initially the scheme was voluntary, however, due to an increase in the number of unaccompanied children entering the UK, as of November 2021 the National Transfer Scheme is now mandatory.

As Darlington currently is below the 0.07% threshold, Darlington has been included in the National Transfer Scheme. As of April 2024, Darlington have received 32 referrals through the National Transfer Scheme. This has further compounded the placement pressures within

Darlington. Darlington can have 22 aged under 18 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children at any one time as per the Home Office distribution figures based locality size.

Many of the referrals often have exceptionally limited information making timely placement sourcing and matching challenging.

Once a UASC young people turns 18 they move into Leaving Care support arrangements, and a further rota referral is then received.

## CARE LEAVERS

### “Staying Put”

Darlington Borough Council has a “Staying Put” policy and as of 31 March 2023 there were 17 young people in accommodation under this arrangement. This has been further enhanced during 2023 following a successful “staying close” bid to the DfE. This has enabled the personalised support services for care leavers and looked after children to grow and be further supported by a new commission focusing on the wellbeing and therapeutic needs of the Care Leaver. The modernising foster care transformation work stream has a target to increase the numbers of young people who remain in their placement over a long period of time. The increased provision in Staying Put also links with the Local Offer for Care Leavers contained in The Children and Social Work Act (2017).

In addition, the existing Tees Valley IFA framework contract, and the new Tyne Tees IFA framework contact, enabled the provision for children and young people to stay put; however, it is acknowledged that further developmental work is required with the IFAs to set out the expectation for a staying-put arrangement to be available from the commencement of a placement.

In August 2020 a review of the financial offer for staying put and supported lodgings was undertaken. As a result of this, the financial offer was increased to ensure that Darlington was competitive and in line with the offer from other local authorities.

## Regulated Supported Accommodation

### Taster Flats

Arrangements are in place with the Housing Department for properties to be sourced close to in-house residential homes to provide “taster flats” based on the ‘staying close’ model.

The level of taster flat provision has increased from seven in 2022 to 13 by March 2024, with further growth planned. As part of a strategic review of housing-related accommodation and support for young people aged 16+ there is now an agreement that outreach support will be delivered to those young people for whom it is deemed necessary, to support them in their journey towards independence.

### Supported Lodgings

Supported lodgings arrangements are available for young people leaving care<sup>4</sup>. The modernising foster care transformation work stream will also consider the opportunity to maximise the availability of supported lodging placements.

### Supported Living Accommodation

A three-bedded supported living service for care leavers was developed in 2015 in response to identified gaps in provision in this area. This service is now Ofsted registered under the Supported Accommodation regulations. This was to ensure that young people have the opportunity to move from care into a supported environment whilst their levels of independence increase. Care leavers are supported to develop independent living skills, attend college, find employment, and have positive friendship groups. Sleep-in support is also provided as part of this service. At present, this service is also supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children who are aged 16 or 17 to develop independent living skills.

In 2020 the commissioned service provision with Safe Families was diversified to provide the opportunity for befriending support to Care Leavers, which has been very impactful, with lifelong friendships being formed. Opportunities to expand the current levels of Ofsted-registered supported accommodation for 16/17 year old looked after children and care leavers have been explored by commissioners and existing local providers. It is expected that there will be further growth in the provision of individual units (within a shared building) of 24-hour supported accommodation throughout 2024.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.darlington.gov.uk/education-and-learning/childrens-social-care/fostering-and-supported-lodgings/types-of-foster-care/>

## HOMELESS 16/17 YEAR OLDS

A joint protocol is in place between Housing Services and Children's Social Care for 16/17 year olds to meet their accommodation and support needs.

The impact of the additional provisions contained with the Homeless Reduction Bill for children and young people will be closely monitored by the contracts and commissioning team to ascertain any changed in level of demand, service accessibility and gaps in provision.

### The Positive Support Pathway

The Positive Support Pathway (PSP) contract was renegotiated in 2021 to build on its evidenced success. The Positive Support Pathway is a flexible housing support model for young people aged 16-25 providing a range of support, from supported accommodation to outreach support in the community. As part of the PSP an additional three designated beds were developed for Care Leavers. Care Leavers and any young person between the ages of 16 (and no longer in compulsory education) and 25 can access all other support and accommodation options on the PSP which include:

- Mediation
- Instant access accommodation,
- Community-based outreach support
- Dispersed units of accommodation
- Instant access drop-in support
- The rest of the accommodation

The pathway is responsive to enable individuals to move up and down the pathway depending on their developing specific needs and as their personal circumstances change.

Having the three designated units of accommodation in a single locality with a large number of other beds is not always an option for some young people. Previously, dispersed accommodation units have been explored, however it was felt that these were not sustainable due to issues of placement matching. In response, through the new contract arrangement the building configuration has been adapted to enable

designated separate access to certain flats in order to manage the range of need which can be accommodation through this provision. This has proved to be exceptionally effective and has enabled a more diverse range of young people to be supported. The accommodation components of the PSP were the first of its kind in the country to be fully registered with Ofsted.

## TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

When a young person turns 18 they are legally an adult under SEND and Leaving Care statutory guidance. However Children's Services retain the responsibility to ensure the right package of care is provided for young people up until age 25 for children with SEND and access to a Personal Advisor for Care Leavers. There is a difference between the thresholds for support and models of care between Adults and Children's services, therefore a child and young person who has qualified for care and support under the SEND agenda for children's legislation will be reassessed as to their eligibility to receive support from Adult Social Care. This also occurs with health-funded packages with the transition from Continuing Care to Continuing Health Care where there is no automatic entitlement. It is for this reason that responsive and flexible commissioning arrangements must be in place where a young person continues to have eligible needs to provide a seamless transition from Children's Social Care to Adult Social Care.

This Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy is strategically and operationally aligned with the delivery priorities set out in the:

**The Adults Market Position Statement (MPS) and Commissioning Strategy 2024 – 2027** to ensure young people are:

- Enabled to meet their full potential.
- Gain/regain skills and confidence.
- Achieve greater independence in their day-to-day living.
- Be ready for employment.
- Make full use of community resources and facilities.

**The Adult Social Care Accommodation with Care and Support Strategy 2024 – 2027** which for transitions has a strong emphasis on developing independence skills and approaches to managing risk through a strengths-based support approach.

As we progress through 2024/5 and beyond, there will be a Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care, Health and Education focus on the following priorities:

- Provision that supports (proportionately and appropriately) young adults (and their families) who exhibit challenging behaviour (some of which may be as a result of adverse childhood experience and complex developmental trauma) and/or emerging personality disorders.
- Provision that supports young adults with high levels of anxiety and/or issues arising from high functioning social communication/integration issues.
- Provision that supports young adults with complex neurodevelopmental conditions and associated behaviour that challenges.

To ensure that transitions are managed effectively and efficiently there is an established Transition to Adulthood multiagency meeting (TASC) comprising representatives from Children's and Adult Social Care, SEND, Housing Services and Health. Cases are presented to this panel from the age of 16 to facilitate seamless co-working. Further strengthening of multi-agency approaches to transitions forms a key priority within Darlington's Written Statement of Action delivery plan following the previous joint Ofsted and CQC inspection of Special Education Needs and/or Disabilities.

## PLACEMENT CHALLENGES

There are still significant challenges in securing placements for children and young people with complex needs and challenging behaviour, even with a diverse local and sub-regional provider market. Matching the needs of these children and young people with the service is critical to the wellbeing of the individual being placed, those already placed and their carers. The inability to match children with available placements is the single biggest reason for a placement offer not being made when there is a placement available. This is compounded by the often-pressing timescale within which placements are required. The limited market capacity, and access to existing capacity, is presenting a particular challenge and a growing associated financial pressure.

Residential care and foster care providers are also experiencing significant demands that are greater than the current supply. This has been compounded by the increasing complexity of the needs of the children and young people requiring placements, meaning that local authorities are now in effect competing against each other for placements. The Ofsted placement matching requirement for service providers has also resulted in a high number of referrals not resulting in an offer due to the high "matching" threshold. This in turn leads to an increased demand for solo placements.

Maximising the utilisation of Darlington-based accommodation when a placement is required is a key element in meeting our sufficiency duty. The utilisation of in-borough accommodation by children and young people needs to be increased, and strategies are now in place to track placements becoming available in-borough to ensure that Darlington children have every opportunity to remain residing in Darlington where it is safe to do so.



## FINANCIAL IMPACT OF PLACEMENTS

Intervening early and effectively when problems first arise within families not only results in better outcomes for children and young people, but also costs less than having to take them into the care of the Council.

The current expenditure for services which support and accommodate children and young people is circa £12.4 million per annum. Committed expenditure within contracted services for children and young people in Darlington is circa £8.9 million per annum.

The expenditure within this area is a growing pressure for the Council as a direct result of increased demand for service provision and the increased complexity in the needs of children and young people which cannot be met through existing commissioned arrangements.

Clearly this is not a sustainable position for the Council to continue to provide services in the current way or at the present levels of expenditure. All social care contracted services are proactively monitored to ensure that specific positive and lasting outcomes for children and young people are achieved.

<b>PROVISION</b>	<b>WEEKLY PLACEMENT COSTS (Average)</b>
	<b>Darlington</b>
<b>Foster Care Connected Persons</b>	£174
<b>In house Foster Care</b>	£391 <sup>5</sup>
<b>Externally Commissioned Foster Care (IFA)</b>	£941
<b>In house Residential Care</b>	£4,382.
<b>Externally Commissioned Residential Care</b>	£4,534

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<sup>5</sup> This includes professional fees and 30% on-costs

## COMMISSIONING INTENTIONS

When this strategy was first produced in 2021, we set out a series of commissioning intentions based on the information contained within the strategy. Below we have outlined what these intentions were, the progress achieved during 2023/24 and the areas which have been prioritised during 2024/25.

Commissioning Intention	Progress to Date
<p>To work collaboratively with children and young people to ensure that any services that are commissioned are child focussed and accurately reflect the thoughts and feelings of children and young people in Darlington.</p>	<p>Commissioners have met with Darlington’s Children in Care Council, Darlington Parent Carer Forum and Darlington Young Carers to build relationships and gather views about how we can more effectively work with those who access services and ensure that their views and thoughts are reflected in the services commissioned. The experiences of Young Carers and their families were integral to the new Service Specification development for the young carers service effective from 1 April 2024.</p>
<p>To develop and implement a range of preventative community initiatives and support aimed at strengthening community resilience, supporting vulnerable families and reducing the need to bring children and young people into the care of the Council.</p>	<p>Work has been undertaken to expand the family outreach contract, including an increase in the number of properties that will be delivered through the contract. Work continued to progress with the repurposing of an existing residential children’s home into the new Cedars. Cedars will be further developed into a seven-day-a-week provision during 2024. A targeted pilot health, social care and education experiences support commission delivered by designated independent sector and third sector providers has been in place during 2023/24 with exceptionally positive outcome for children and families. The pilot is continuing with a targeted approach in designated schools throughout 2024/5 overseen by the children’s joint commissioning board.</p>
<p>To undertake a strategic review of commissioned services providing community-based support to vulnerable families to ensure that they continue to effectively respond to the needs and requirements of Children’s Social Care, and explore the potential for further co-location of commissioned service provision for</p>	<p>Integrated work joint work was piloted in 2020/2021 between early help and a voluntary and community sector provider. This was very effective in dual skill sharing and responding to families’ housing issues and causational factors at the earliest opportunity to avoid an escalation in circumstance. This joint work was formulised as a core component of service delivery in the new service commissioned from 1 April 2022 and has continued to be exceptionally impactful in avoiding an escalation of circumstance.</p>

<b>Commissioning Intention</b>	<b>Progress to Date</b>
vulnerable families as an integrated part of the Early Help offer.	Regular meetings have been undertaken with all providers, and where relevant these meetings have included Children’s Social Care colleagues to ensure that the linkages between commissioned services and Children’s Social Care are strong.
To have diverse and responsive quality accommodation provision for children who require a placement in Darlington.	Diversification continues with the expansion of Cedars and entering into bed reservation arrangements with providers of new Darlington-based accommodation services. During 2023/24 this has included a bed reservation arrangement with a dual registered children’s home and during 2024/25 is due to take place with a new provider of Ofsted-registered supported accommodation for 16/17 year olds.
To ensure that commissioned support services complement the working practices of children’s social care and provide a range of response services at the right time and in the right place.	<p>Both the Positive Support Pathway and families support service have been remodelled to meet emerging pressures and needs.</p> <p>Missing from Home service capacity increased to one full-time equivalent and service remit expanded to cover all forms of exploitation.</p> <p>Following a successful external grant bid a new service was commissioned which will provide a 24/7 freephone line, live chat, email, WhatsApp and SMS with a mental health professional providing in-the-moment support and up to eight face-to-face counselling sessions.</p>
To ensure there is quality local care with IFA foster carers to support the continuum of need, supplement in-house provision and to offer choice and value for money.	Partnership approaches are well embedded with local fostering agencies with a joint focus on maximising the availability of existing Darlington-based foster care beds. A number of focused multi-agency meetings have taken place with fostering agencies to explore fostering placement potential for specific children. Fostering agencies are closely contract monitored through regional arrangements.
To develop Darlington Borough Council’s in-house fostering service to ensure that there are high quality foster carers available when a child or young person needs to be taken into the care of the local authority.	The in-house foster service is embedding a foster care model and has undertaken a series of service promotion and community engagement activities throughout the year to increase recruitment.

<b>Commissioning Intention</b>	<b>Progress to Date</b>
	<p>Focused work has taken place to enhance the Darlington Borough Council foster care offer to support the growth of the in-house foster service, the impact of which will be closely monitored in this forthcoming year.</p>
<p>To ensure there is effective in-borough support across education, health and social care for children with complex physical and psychological health needs.</p>	<p>This is a joint commissioning priority (also in the top ten priorities for the new Integrated Care Board) being progressed through the Tees Valley Integrated Care Board's complex care subgroup. The target pilot commission in schools has been a key part of this workstream.</p>
<p>To ensure commissioned services are high-quality, cost-effective, contractually-compliant and achieve positive outcomes for children and young people.</p>	<p>A programme of contract monitoring is in place for all in-borough provision.</p>
<p>To ensure outcomes for Darlington children and young people are maximised through participation in collaborative procurements and joint working.</p>	<p>Darlington has participated in the Tyne/Tees Regional IFA Procurement and the North East Children's Advocacy Procurement. Contracts have been entered into with providers to meet Darlington-based sufficiency pressures.</p>
<p>To enhance the scope and impact of commissioned service arrangements and diversify the market providing support and encourage innovation.</p>	<p>Recent regulated service developments in Darlington bring further diversity to the existing Darlington offer of a dual registered home and further Ofsted-regulated supported accommodation growth planned for 2024/5.</p> <p>Commissioners continue to engage with providers to ensure that any developments within Darlington meet out sufficiency needs.</p>
<p>To ensure commissioned services are reviewed to safeguard continued service accessibility in line with changing local or national policy and changing service demands.</p>	<p>Strong focus on service accessibility with providers delivering across the care continuum. Providers have been solution focused and committed to achieving the best possible outcome for Darlington children and young people.</p>
<p>To work alongside Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care, Health and Education to further diversify the preparation for</p>	<p>The new young Young Carers contract effective from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 has a strong focus on whole family approaches and seamless transition to adulthood. The Young Carers Service is now co-located with the Adult Carer Support Service with shared strategic priorities</p>

<b>Commissioning Intention</b>	<b>Progress to Date</b>
adulthood offer for Darlington young people aligned to the priorities of the Adults Market Position Statement and Commissioning Strategy and the Adults Accommodation and Support Strategy.	and operational delivery arrangements. The impact of this arrangement and the outcomes achieved will be a focus for evaluation during 2024/25. The growth Ofsted regulated supported accommodation in 2024/25 for Darlington Young People aged 16 and 17 will further diversify the preparation for adulthood accommodation and support offer.