



DARLINGTON

Borough Council

**Looked After Children and Care Leavers
Commissioning and Sufficiency
Strategy Refresh
2022**

2021 -2024

CONTENTS:

Executive Summary	Page 3
Introduction	Page 4
National Policy Context	Page 4
Local Context	Page 6
Current Service Delivery	Page 8
Early Help and Edge of Care	Page 8
Children in the Care of the Local Authority	Page 10
The National Picture	Page 10
The Local Picture	Page 11
Placements for Children Looked After by the Local Authority	Page 11
Connected Care	Page 12
In House Foster Carers	Page 12
Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs)	Page 13
In House Residential Children’s Homes	Page 14
External Residential Care Provision with and without Education	Page 14
Specialist Independent Schools	Page 15
Adoption	Page 16
Looked After Children and Young People with Complex Needs and SEND	Page 16
Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)	Page 18
Care Leavers	Page 18
“Staying Put”	Page 18
Taster Flats	Page 19
Supported Lodgings	Page 19
Supported Living Accommodation	Page 19
Homeless 16/17 Year Olds	Page 19
The Positive Support Pathway	Page 19
Transition to Adulthood	Page 20
Placement Challenges	Page 20
Financial Impact of Placements	Page 21
Future Need Forecasts	Page 22
Commissioning Intentions	Page 23

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 an update on some of the data, as well as progress that has been made in achieving our Commissioning Intentions, as set out in the 2021 Strategy. 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 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 Department for Education's announcement regarding National Minimum Standards for Unregulated Care.

As of the 31st March 2022 there were 326 children and young people subject to a Child in Need Plan (CIN). During this same period there were 120 children and young people subject to a Child Protection Plan (CPP). As of the 31st March 2021 there were 273 children and young people in the care of Darlington Borough Council. During 2021/22 100 children and young people became looked after by Darlington Borough Council.

Through the refresh of this Strategy, Commissioners have reviewed the key issues that are impacting on Commissioning. 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 face in sourcing adequate and appropriate placements for children and young people, this is no different in Darlington. 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 is now in-line with the offer from Independent Foster Agencies and is being kept under review to ensure that Darlington's offer is competitive enough to attract new and transferring foster carers.
- **Modernising and reviewing in-house residential:** Work is currently ongoing to replace the existing stock of in-house residential homes with newer homes. 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.

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.

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 explores the potential changes in the overall care population between 2021 and 2024 taking into account our ambitions to improve preventative services and to increase the number of children for whom legal permanence is secured.

This Looked After Children and Care Leavers Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy 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 takes into the account the findings from the Single Inspection of Darlington Borough Council Children's Services published 21st May 2018, the criteria outlined for the inspection of Local Authority Children's Services 2018 (ILACS) 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 so 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 to 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

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care was announced in January 2021, with Josh Macalister announced as the Chair of the review in March 2021. 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 of the Independent Review was published in May 2022 and made 72 recommendations with a focus on the notion that relationships should be at the heart of the care system.

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 placement 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 placement 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 in 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. It is anticipated that these standards will come into force in Autumn 2023, with inspections to begin in 2024 however, to date the national standards have not been released. Darlington commissioners have engaged with the relevant

providers to ensure that they are aware of the new expectations and will support with any issues that arise to ensure that service stability is maintained.

LOCAL CONTEXT

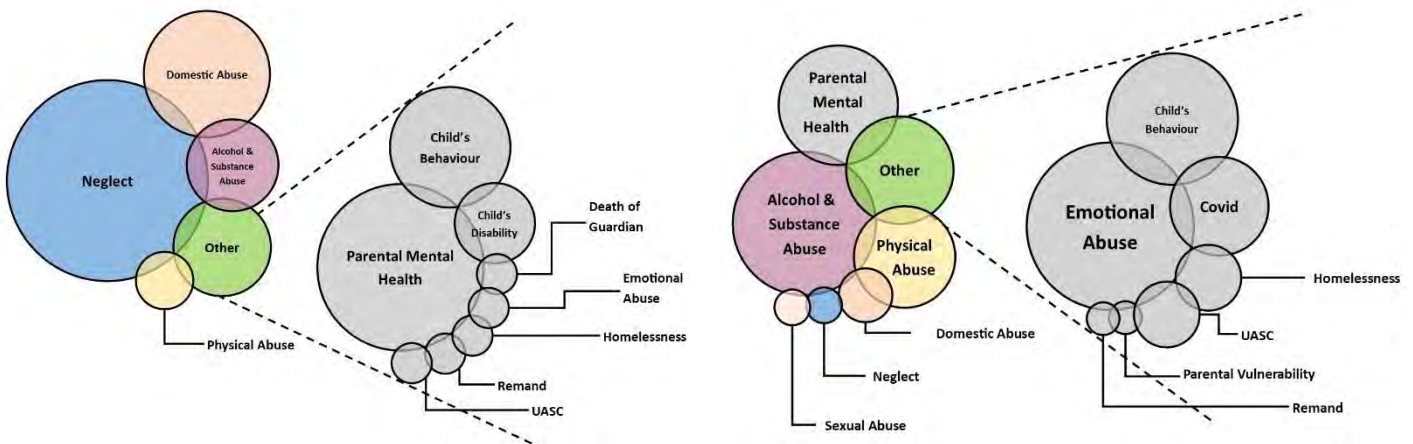
Darlington Borough Council is a Unitary Authority in the North East of England which covers 76.3 square miles. Darlington is part of the Tees Valley city region. As of 2020 Darlington had a population in excess of 107,000¹, with 22% (23,744) aged 0-18.

As of the 31st March 2022 there were 326 children and young people subject to a Child in Need Plan (CIN), which is similar to the number at the end of March 2021. During this same period there were 120 children and young people subject to a Child Protection Plan (CPP), a 38% increase when compared with March 2021. This gives Darlington a CPP rate of 53.3 per 10,000 population, which, while higher than in 2021 is still lower than the most recent regional and statistical benchmarks. As of the 31st March 2021 there were 273 children and young people in the care of Darlington Borough Council, this is an increase of 1 when compared with March 2021. This gives Darlington a rate of 121 children in care per 10,000 population, which is higher than regional, statistical, and national benchmarks.

During 2021/22 100 children and young people became looked after by Darlington Borough Council. This was an increase of 22% when compared with 2020/21. There was a significant change in the reasons for children coming into the care of Darlington Borough Council, with alcohol and substance abuse being the largest single reason in 2021/22, while neglect was the largest single reason in 2020/21. There was also a large increase in the rate of children coming into the care of the local authority due to parental mental health.

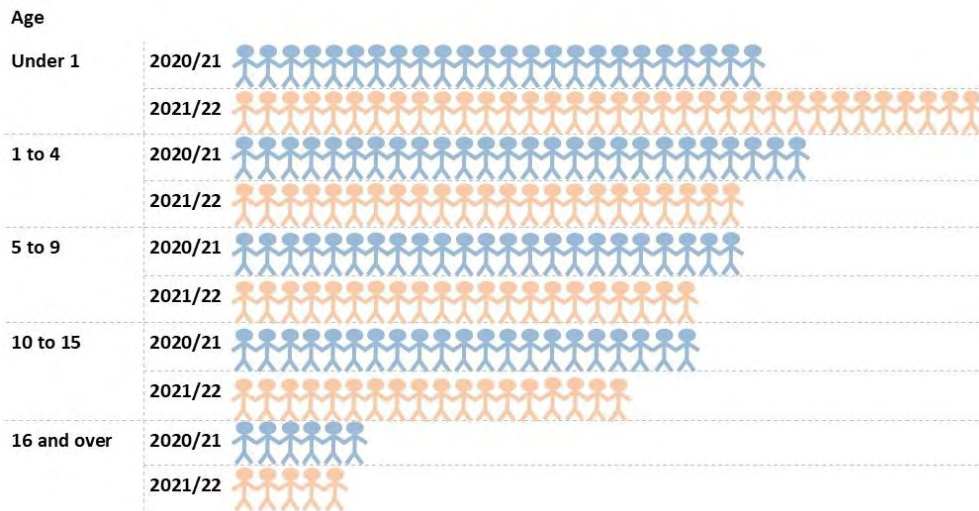
Reasons for Becoming Looked After 2020/21

Reasons for Becoming Looked After 2021/22



¹ 2020 Population Estimates (NOMIS)

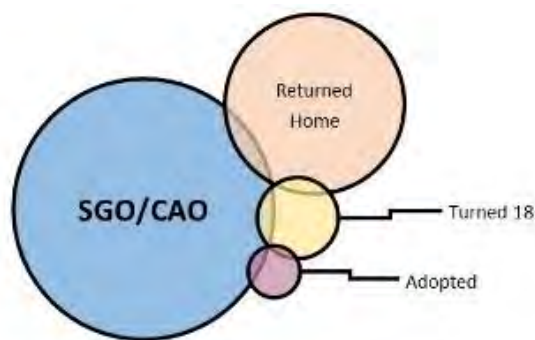
The age profile of children coming into the care of Darlington Borough Council during 2020/21 and 2021/22 is outlined below. There was a significant increase in the percentage of children under the age of 1 becoming looked after during 2021/22, rising from 24% in 2020/21 to 34% in 2021/22.



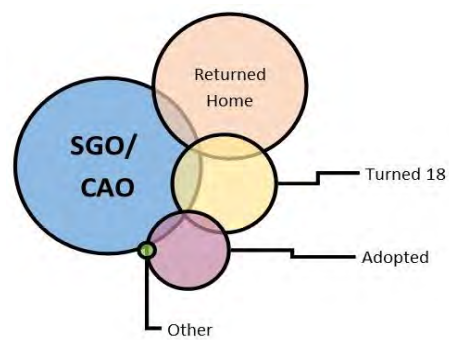
2

During 2021/22, 99 children and young people ceased to be looked after by Darlington Borough Council. This was an increase of 24% when compared with the previous year. The main reasons for children and young people ceasing to be looked after are outlined below:

Reasons for Ceasing to be Looked After 2019/20



Reasons for Ceasing to be Looked After After 2020/21

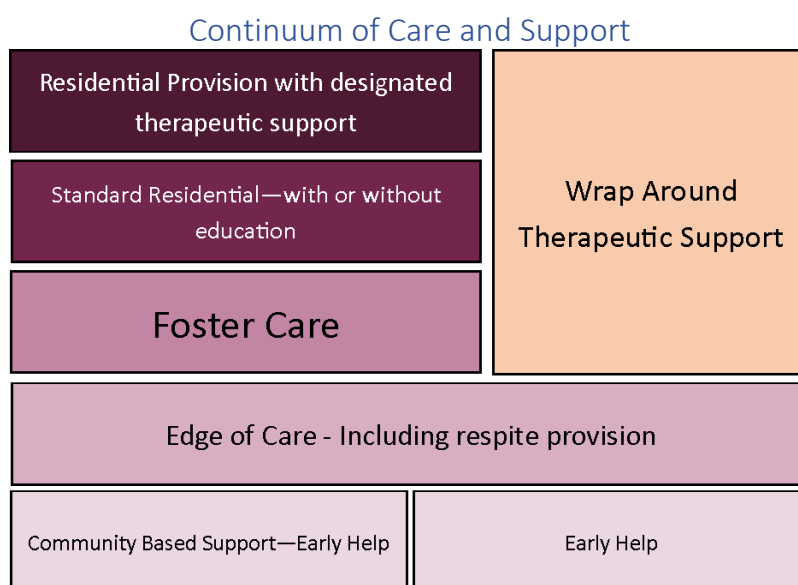


² Each stick man represents one percent

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 team) 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, 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 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, and
- 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 Strategy³ 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 with the 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.

Alongside the new Edge of Care service, the intention is to develop Edge of Care Foster Carers, as well as a respite accommodation service.

Significant progress has been made in 2021 against the commissioning and sufficiency priority to develop a broader based respite accommodation provision as an effective earlier intervention to avoid escalating circumstances. A previous 3 bed directly provided children's homes is being repurposed in 2022 into an Ofsted registered in-reach, outreach and weekend respite accommodation provision. This service will be locally known as Cedars.

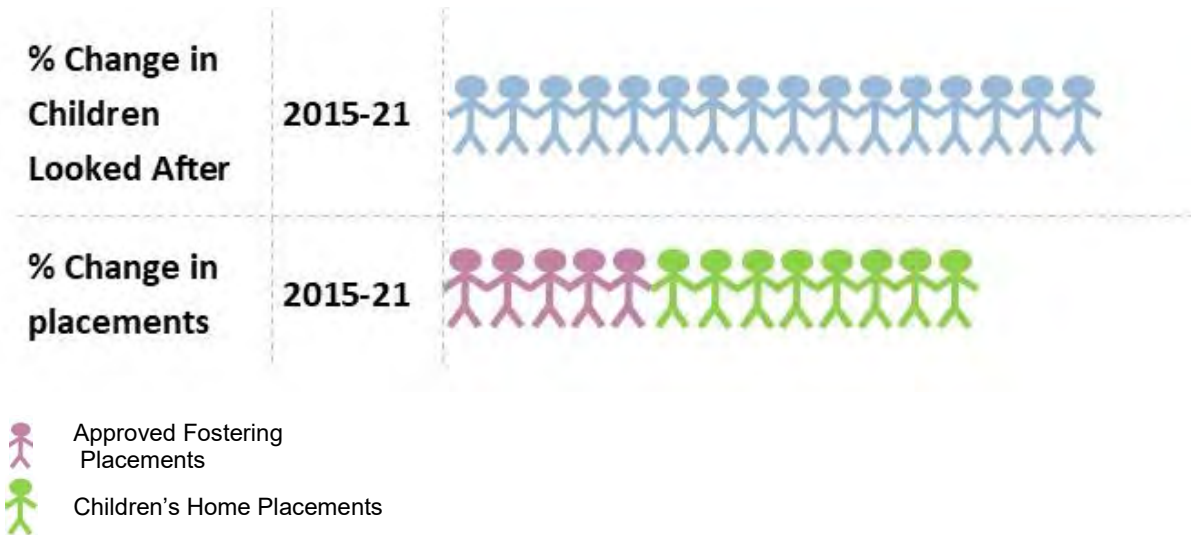
³<https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/7626/early-help-strategy.pdf>

CHILDREN IN THE CARE OF THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

The National Picture

Between 2015 and 2020 the number of children looked after in England has increased by 16%, rising from 6,9470 to 80,850. During this same time period the number of approved foster places increased by 5%, and the number of places that were unoccupied but were unavailable due to the needs of a child or young person already in placement or the personal circumstances of the foster carers increased by 21%. As well as the number of foster placements increasing at a slower rate than the number of children looked after, the number of residential placements has also failed to increase at a sufficient rate to keep up with the increase in children looked after. Between 2015 and 2021 there was a 30% increase in the number of residential childrens homes registered with Ofsted. However, the actual number of registered places only increased by 8%.

Percentage Change from 2015 to 2021 in England

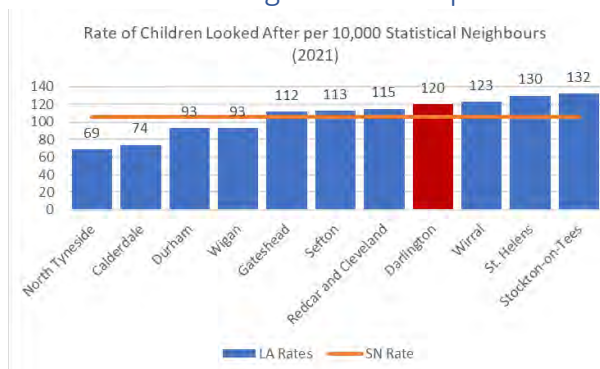


The number of placements not keeping pace with the number of children looked after by local authorities coupled with matching the needs of children and young people has resulted in limited capacity within the sector to respond to placement demands and has led to increased competition between local authorities to source placements for their children and young people.

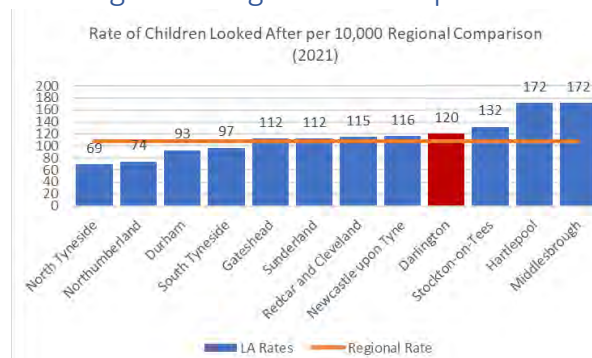
The Local Picture

As of 31st March 2021 there were 272 children and young people looked after by Darlington Borough Council, an increase of 36% when compared with 2015 (72 children and young people). The most recent benchmark data (2021) shows that Darlington had the fourth highest rate of children and young people looked after per 10,000 amongst statistical neighbours, and the joint fourth highest rate amongst regional neighbours.

Statistical Neighbours Comparison



Regional Neighbours Comparison



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 31st March 2022 connected carers were providing placements for 44 children and young people. This is a 52% increase when compared with 2015 and is evidence of the work that has been ongoing within Darlington.

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

- As part of the 2021 new 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 DFG DRO Policy for the provision of Housing Assistance funding for Connected Carers, this provision has been very effective in responding 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 the 31st March 2022, fostering households managed by Darlington Borough Council were providing 62 placements for children and young people in care, which is an increase of 8 (14%) when compared with March 2021.

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 is being rolled out 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 2022 in addition to our rolling social media presence, marketing activities centred on the annual Foster Care Fortnight with a further 2 recruitment events at the local leisure centre (the Dolphin Centre) and more have been scheduled in Darlington over the coming months, including the

Fostering and Supported Lodgings Team attending community events such as Darlington Pride, to promote fostering as a career.

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. As of 31st March 2022, there were 84 children and young people from Darlington placed with IFA foster carers, an increase of 65% (43) since 2015, but a decrease of 8% when compared with March 2021.

Currently, IFA placement expenditure is high and has increased from c£2.3m to c£4m since the last iteration of the Looked After Children Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy, an increase of 74%. Therefore, 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 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 Officer 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 1st 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 sexualized 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. 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 is due to come online before the end of 2022, with the existing home due to be repurposed into an Ofsted registered in-reach, outreach and weekend respite accommodation provision. This service will be locally known as Cedars.

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

As of 31st March 2022, there were 19 young people in external residential care, this is a decrease of 17% when compared with 31st March 2021. Of these, 4 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 is absolutely no alternative.

[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 are closely monitored and are 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.

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 5 Tees Valley Councils, with Darlington Borough Council acting as lead commissioner for this provision. This contract was recently re-procured, and the new contract started in April 2020. Whilst this arrangement has helped to diversify the level of contracted residential provision, the increase in numbers of children coming into care with high and complex needs has resulted in pressures in securing appropriate placements and associated increased pressures on the Council's budget.

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 home 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 homes developments for Darlington. As of September 22, there were 58 independent children's home beds and 9 directly provided by council and 27 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 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 5 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 onsite 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 in the in-

borough education offer which will reduce the future need for out of borough education placements in the medium term.

Adoption

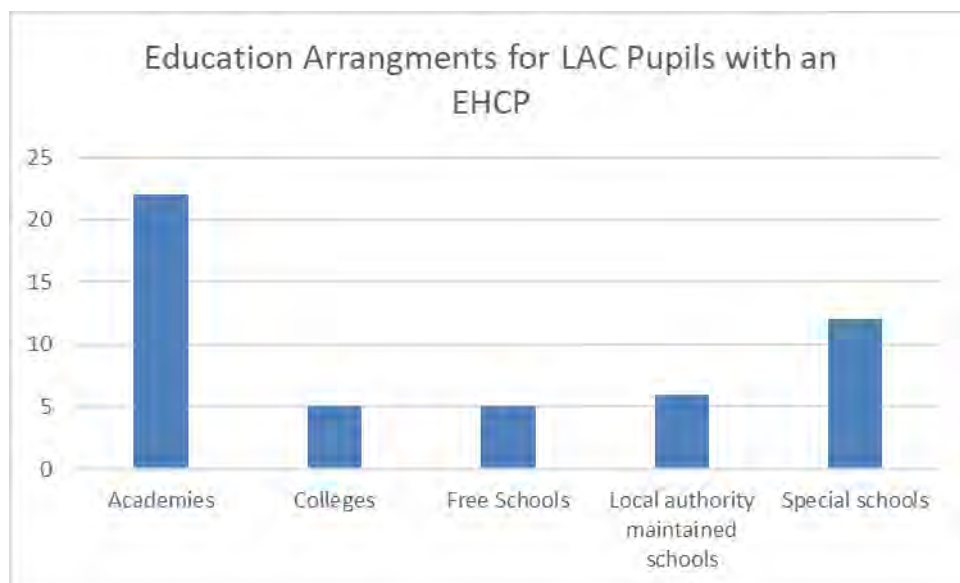
The number of children and young people being adopted per year has reduced over recent years, falling from 23 in 2014/2015 to 15 during 2020/21.

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 291 days between 2017 and 2020⁴. The England average was 367 and, on this indicator, Darlington is ranked 16th out of the 152 Local Authorities.

Adoption Tees Valley was launched in 2018 as the Regional Adoption Agency for the 5 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

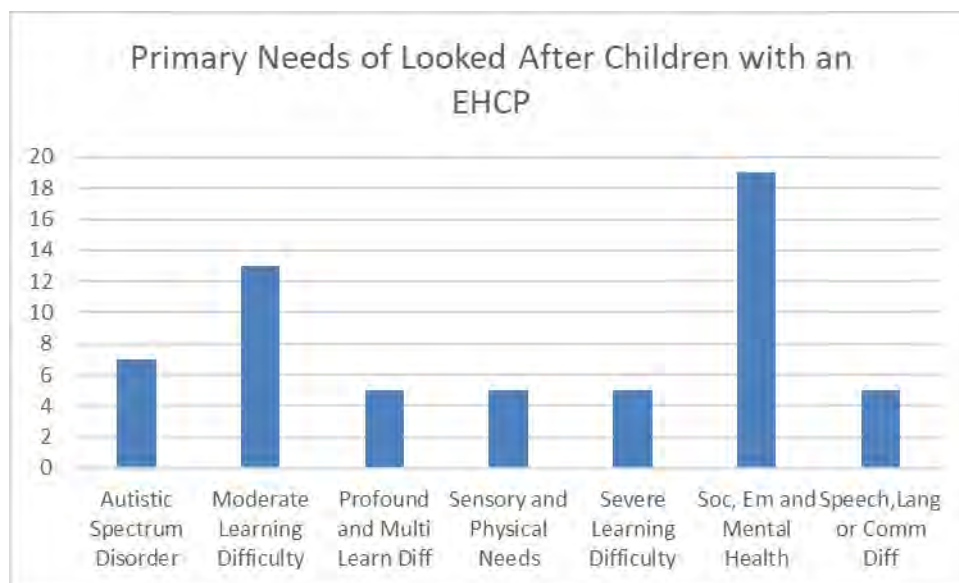
Specifically in relation to looked after children aged 5-16, there are 44 looked after children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP). The majority (50.0%) of looked after children with an EHCP are educated within academies. 27.3% are educated in special schools.



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

The majority (43.2%) of children looked after with an EHCP have social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) as their primary need. 29.5% have moderate learning difficulty (MLD) as their primary need.

⁴ Most recent published data.



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

Darlington currently has 5 young people aged between 11-19 years who are in care and have specialist residential placements funded through a combination of health, social care and special educational needs. 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 institutionalised 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.

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, in addition to how we address Post 16 provision in respect of children and young people with SEND around destination planning and future aspirations. Transport arrangements for young people with SEND will also be considered within the SEND Sufficiency Strategy.

A multiagency Vulnerable Pupil Panel (VPP) was established in September 2018, 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, whereby local authorities with numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children at or over 0.07% of their child population can refer newly-arrived unaccompanied children to the scheme, and this young person will be transferred to a different local authority that is below the 0.07% threshold.

As Darlington currently is below the 0.07% threshold, Darlington has been included in the National Transfer Scheme. As of September 2022, Darlington have received approximately 10 referrals through the National Transfer Scheme. This has further compounded the placement pressures within Darlington.

CARE LEAVERS

“Staying Put”

Darlington Borough Council has a “Staying Put” policy and as of 31st March 2022 there were 14 young people accommodation under this arrangement. 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 contain 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.

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. There are currently two such properties operating in Darlington with an additional two taster flats provided by a Housing Association in which young people can stay for up to six weeks and have the opportunity for additional independent living support through the Positive Support Pathway.

The level of taster flat provision has, with a small increase of 1, to date been sufficient as an accessible resource for young people. As part of a strategic review of housing related accommodation and support for young people aged 16+ there is now an agreement that some floating 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 care⁵. The modernising foster care transformation work stream will also consider the opportunity to maximise the availability of supported lodging placements.

Supported Living Accommodation

A 3-bedded supported living service for care leavers was developed in 2015 in response to identified gaps in provision in this area. 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. Meeting the therapeutic needs of Care Leavers has remained a key priority, a commissioned service provision remains in place with TEWV to provide direct therapeutic support to Care Leavers, this service has been exceptionally impactful for the Care Leavers who have used this service.

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 current 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 3 designated beds were developed for Care Leavers. Care Leavers and any young person between the ages of 16 (and no longer

⁵ <https://www.darlington.gov.uk/education-and-learning/childrens-social-care/fostering-and-supported-lodgings/types-of-foster-care/>

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, and
- 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.

Service Commissioners are working closely with this provider to prepare for forthcoming regulatory changes.

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. This is in order to provide every opportunity for a seamless transition from children's social care to adult social care.

To ensure that transitions are managed effectively and efficiently the Lifestages Team, which provides support for children, young people and young adults has been restructured to ensure seamless transitions. There is an establish 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 approach 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 the 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 time scale within which placements are required. The limited market capacity, and access to existing capacity is presenting a particular challenge and a growing 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.

The coming regulatory changes for unregulated accommodation carry a significant risk, as these providers are vital in preparing some of our children and young people for independence and adulthood.

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 million per annum. Committed expenditure within contracted services for children and young people in Darlington is circa £8.5 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.

PROVISION	WEEKLY PLACEMENT COSTS (Average)
	Darlington
Foster Care Connected Persons	£174
In house Foster Care	£391 ⁶
Externally Commissioned Foster Care (IFA)	£785
In house Residential Care	£4,294 ⁷
Externally Commissioned Residential Care	£3,932

⁶ This includes professional fees and 30% on-costs

⁷ This is calculated using average occupancy and includes 30% on-costs.

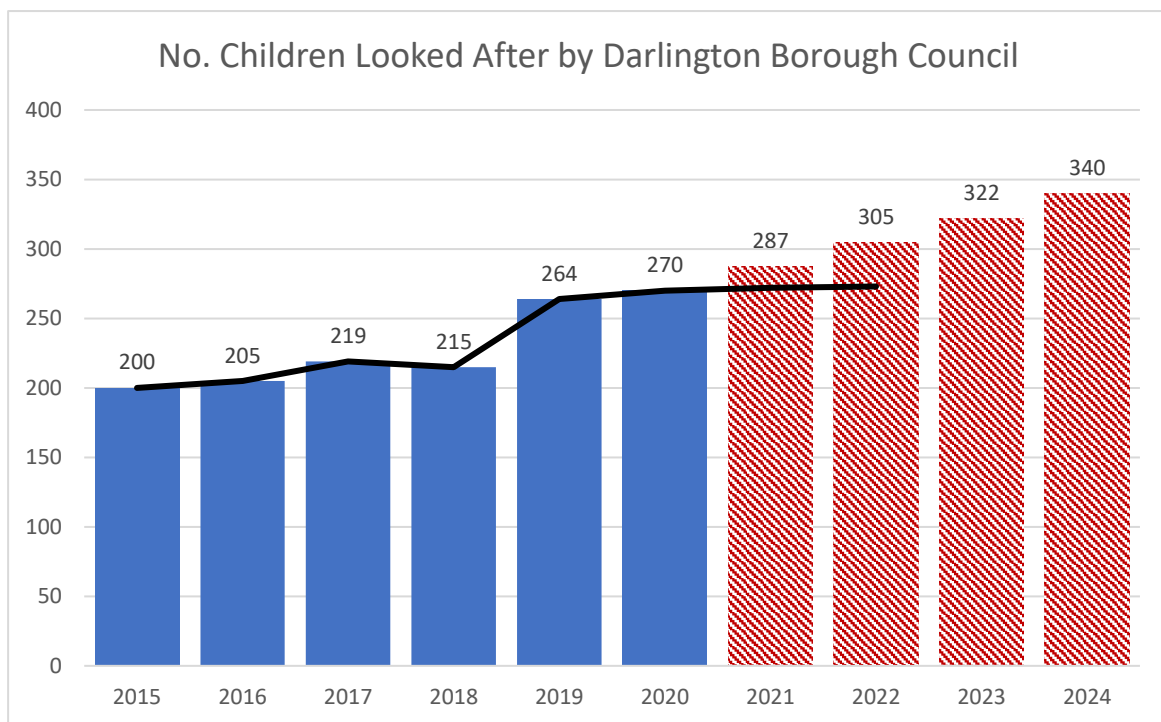
FUTURE NEED FORECASTS

Due to the volatility of placement requirements and the influence of external factors (i.e. wider economic conditions, Government policy, cuts to non-statutory services and the current Covid-19 pandemic) it is difficult to effectively forecast the number of children who will be looked after in the coming months and years. This is further exacerbated by the increased length of time children remain in care when compared with previous years.

As the Early Help offer continues to grow and will be embedded at the forefront of Children's Social Care, it is anticipated that the numbers of children becoming looked after will begin to decrease; however, there is usually a gap between the implementation of Early Help and any positive impacts in terms of numbers of children becoming looked after.

A linear trend analysis was undertaken when this strategy was first produced, which showed that if the existing trends continued, Darlington would have 340 children and young people in care by 2024, with 287 children in care in 2021, and 305 children in care in 2022. The updated chart below shows how the number of children in the care of Darlington Borough Council has stabilised in recent years and has not reached the numbers predicted by the linear trend analysis.

Linear Trend Analysis 2015 to 2024



COMMISSIONING INTENTIONS

When this strategy was first produced, we set out a series of commissioning intentions based on the information contained within the strategy. Below we have outlined what these intentions were and what progress has been achieved.

Commissioning Intention	Progress to Date
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.	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.
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.	Work has been undertaken to expand the family’s outreach contract, including an increase in the number of properties that will be delivered through the contract. At the most recent reopening of the short breaks framework a new provider successfully applied to join. Work has been ongoing with the repurposing of an existing residential children’s home into the new Cedars development, with plans to launch by the end of 2022.
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 vulnerable families as an integrated part of the Early Help offer.	<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 formalised as a core component of service delivery in the new service commissioned from 1st April 2022.</p> <p>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.</p>
To have diverse and responsive quality accommodation provision for children who require a placement in Darlington.	Diversification continues with the introduction of Cedars and entering into a bed reservation arrangement in relation to step down to fostering residential care.
To ensure that commissioned support services complement the working practices of children’s social care and provide a range	Both the Positive Support Pathway and families support service have been remodelled to meet emerging pressures and needs.

Commissioning Intention	Progress to Date
of response services at the right time and in the right place.	Missing from Home service capacity increased to 1 full time equivalent and service remit expanded to cover all forms of exploitation.
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. 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.
To ensure there is effective in-borough support across education, health and social care for children with complex physical and psychological health needs.	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.
To ensure commissioned services, are high quality, cost effective, contractually compliant and achieve positive outcomes for children and young people.	A programme of contract monitoring is place for all in borough provision.
To ensure outcomes for Darlington children and young people are maximised through participation in collaborative procurements and joint working.	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.
To enhance the scope and impact of commissioned service arrangements and diversify the market providing support and encourage innovation.	Recent regulated service developments in Darlington bring further diversity to the existing Darlington offer, including step down to fostering residential care. Commissioners continue to engage with providers to ensure that any developments within Darlington meet out sufficiency needs.
To ensure commissioned services are reviewed to safeguard continued service accessibility in line with changing local or national policy and changing service demands.	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.