



Interim Report

SAFEGUARDING PRESSURES PHASE 8

November 2022

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd



1 Introduction

ADCS is committed to ensuring an evidence-based approach to planning and delivery of children's services. As part of this commitment, Safeguarding Pressures research has been examining changes in demand, needs and the delivery of children's early help, social care and associated services, set in the wider national policy context, since 2010.

Phase 8 brings the evidence base up to date. This interim report, ahead of our full publication later in 2022, provides key headlines together with a special thematic report on children's mental health.

Evidence has been collected from 125 local authorities, covering 83% of England's child population; 21 interviews with directors or assistant directors of children's services; and reviews a range of relevant literature, policy and nationally available datasets.

All England estimates have been extrapolated from responses where appropriate to do so, and official DfE data is used where available. It is important to note that national and regional averages mask significant disparity between local authorities. These variations are explored in more detail in the full publication.

Children and young people have told us that they do not like to be referred to as 'looked after children' or as 'care leavers', while recognising this is the government terminology, this report uses the alternative terms, children in care, and care experienced young people.

¹<https://adcs.org.uk/safeguarding/article/timeline>

2 Context, Legislation and Policy

In the past two years there has been significant change in the context in which children are living, and services are operating. A timeline on the ADCS website¹ illustrates the key context, events, reviews, and legislation which have impacted upon children's services over the past 15 years, and into the next period.

While historic legislation and policy continues to influence the lives of children, their families and services to them, for example, the exorbitant costs caused by outdated home-to-school transport legislation, new and emerging policy has the potential to rewrite how services for children are framed and delivered. The most significant of these are:

- the *Independent Review of Children's Social Care* (IRCSC, 2022) was published in response to the 2019 Conservative Party manifesto commitment to review the children's social care system to make sure children and young people get the support they need. The report recommends a 'dramatic whole system reset' and findings include changes in early help, child protection, family networks and transforming care and the care experience
- an education White Paper - *Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child* (DfE, 2022a) proposes transformation of teaching, schools and behaviour management. In response to the government's Levelling Up mission, the Paper commits to 90% of children leaving primary school having achieved

the expected standard in reading, writing and maths within a fully academised school system by 2030

- a Green Paper following the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Review: *Right support, Right place, Right time*. (DfE, 2022b) proposes a new national SEND and alternative provision system with an emphasis on meeting the needs of children in mainstream education settings, with targeted support where needed, and where this isn't possible in high quality specialist provision.

The government has committed to publishing a response to the *SEND and AP Green Paper* and the *Independent Review of Children's Social Care* by the end of 2022.

This will include a response to the recommendations made in the National Panel review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson, and the recent Competition and Markets Authority study of children's social care provision.

The collective impact of three major policy reform programmes for children's services, which have not yet been brought together via a national strategy or overarching vision, along with difficult experiences in the recent past in implementing national policy, left respondents feeling both hopeful and anxious. The consequences will be significant if these reform programmes are not 'joined up', implemented in collaboration with the sector, and sufficiently funded.

Other recent changes to legislation and policy cited by respondents will be detailed in the full publication, including:

- the impact on placement sufficiency due to reforms to unregulated provision

- an increasing use of the High Court's inherent jurisdiction to deprive children of their liberty linked to the lack of appropriate placements
- changes in refugee and asylum seeker legislation, policy and funding
- the seemingly narrowing regulatory framework for inspection, especially in residential care, reducing sufficiency in the system.

3 Safeguarding During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic, and its impact on children and young people, their families, and public services is well reported.

Respondents taking part in this research were clear that whilst there is strong and wide agreement on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and actions to reduce both the spread and resulting harm, other factors also came into play during this time.

The research concludes that during the initial months of the pandemic most areas did see a reduction in demand which soon returned to a more expected level. For some, there has been, and continues to be, a substantial increase in demand for services and in the complexity of presenting needs.

At the time of writing this report, the country has not yet reached a 'post-pandemic' state nor do we fully understand the latent need and implications yet to emerge.

NEEDS AND PRESENTING FACTORS

4 Social determinants

4.1 Population

There were 12.09 million children aged 0-17 in England in 2020, 0.6% more than two years ago (ONS, 2021). ONS predict that by mid-2030, the number of children aged from 0-15 years is projected to decrease by 1.1 million (-8.8%) (ONS, 2019).

Whilst increases in population are slowing down nationally, there is variability in the actual and forecast changes (both increases and decreases) in each local authority area. Growth in population accounts for some, but not all, of the historic increase in demand for services.

4.2 Poverty and Housing

The impact of welfare reforms and the lack of affordable secure housing have increased the numbers of children living in poverty and at risk of adverse childhood experiences. The Department for Work and Pensions (2022) report that more than one in five children are living in poverty. This is, respondents believe, a significant determinant of increased demand for early help and children's social care services.

Nationally, there has been a 23.6% increase from 2020/21 in the number of households with children who were either threatened with homelessness or are already homeless (DLHC, 2022).

The continued impact of welfare reforms, the current cost of living crisis and the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

have exacerbated a range of fundamental inequalities, including but not limited to, those linked to significant deprivation and child poverty. Sadly, respondents state these conditions are likely to deteriorate further, both in terms of the quality of life for children, and their families, but also the future impact on children's services in providing the necessary help and support.

5 Parental capacity and needs

Adults experiencing domestic abuse, poor mental health and/or substance misuse, remain among the most common reasons why children come to the attention of early help and/or children's social care services.

The evidence gained through ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research affirms the increase and impact of a lack of parental capacity in providing an adequate caregiving environment for some children. The disruption to intervention services during the Covid-19 pandemic has also meant that some parental concerns have been left unaddressed for extensive periods, which may have contributed towards negative impacts for children.

Domestic abuse continues to be a significant factor, present in over 40% of the serious incidents reviewed by the National Panel in 2020 (CSPRP, 2021c). Domestic abuse was highlighted as a significant issue in the national review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson. (CSPRP, 2022).

6 Children’s Mental Health

There is significant evidence relating to increasing demand stemming from the emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of children and their parents. There is also a body of national policy and service provision which aims to both prevent and tackle this.

The Safeguarding Pressures research special thematic report on children’s mental health, published alongside this interim report, contains fuller information.

Respondents to this research raised the lack of emotional resilience, poor emotional wellbeing and mental health as the most significant factors impacting children’s lives.

The increase in demand for emotional wellbeing and mental health support seen in the past two years is forecast to continue exponentially, with worrying outcomes for our children which will only continue into adulthood if they are not addressed.

Some respondents report interim local solutions and good working relationships with their NHS mental health providers in developing more permanent solutions.

The implementation of mental health support teams (MHSTs) in schools and other community based provision offering support at an early stage is helping, but it is insufficient in some areas and access to more specialist services for mental ill-health, such as Tier 4 beds, is either taking too long or not available.

There was a strong feeling that if policymakers across government

departments do not address the challenges brought to light in this and other research, they have the potential to overwhelm the children’s social care system and may ultimately undermine any progress that may be made from implementation of the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care and the SEND and AP Green Paper.

7 Extra-familial Risks and Harm (EFRH)

Respondents reported having robust frameworks and strong partnerships to ensure a coordinated response to EFRH, including PREVENT and radicalisation; child criminal exploitation; youth violence; trafficking, female genital mutilation; and children who go missing.

They report an increase in children where EFRH is a concern, but also an increase in awareness, specialist knowledge and tailored practice approaches.

Number of Assessments completed with EFRH factors		
Factor	2017/18 - 2021/22	2021/22
Going missing		15,740
Child sexual exploitation		16,330
Trafficking		2,470
Gangs		11,600
Female Genital Mutilation		850
Faith linked abuse		1,960
Child Criminal Exploitation		10,140

Figure 1 – Number of EFRH factors identified at end of assessment (source DfE). Note: An assessment can have more than one presenting factor.

Local authorities collect data on EFRH factors in social care assessments, with child criminal exploitation (CCE) added as a factor in 2021/22. The reduction in the number of assessments where EFRH is a factor is linked to pandemic-related disruption to the provision of children's services resulting in

fewer assessments being undertaken, and not a reduction in prevalence of these factors. This is a good example of where data needs to be accompanied by the context in order to avoid misinterpretation.

Approximately half of responding local authorities indicated that PREVENT activity has increased. Reasons for an increase appear to be partly due to an improved identification of the risk factors in addition to an increase in prevalence itself.

CCE, youth crime and youth violence have increased. Changes in the past two years relate to an increase in the involvement of girls, younger aged and more vulnerable children, including those with poor mental health, and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). No local authority reported a decrease.

Respondents have developed, or are developing, robust approaches to prevent, disrupt and address CCE, often involving integration and collaboration with partners through the creation of Exploitation Hubs; Multi-Agency Adolescent Boards across adult and children's services; or youth mentors working in communities with young people. National and local projects, such as the DfE Safer Taskforce and Violence Reduction Units, were reported positively.

8 Needs identified in early help and social care

Child mental health (28.9%), behaviour (24.7%) and domestic abuse (24.3%) were the most prevalent reasons for involvement in early help assessments where multiple factors were recorded in 2021/22.

Parental domestic abuse, poor parental mental health, and emotional abuse continue to be the most prevalent factors in social care assessments. However, the factors which have seen the greatest increases in the past two years are child mental health (up from 11.4% to 13.6%); learning disability: concerns about child (up from 7.5% to 8.5%); and, self-harm (up from 3.9% to 4.3%).

More children are subjects of child protection plans for neglect (46.8%) and emotional abuse (41.0%), and fewer for physical or sexual abuse. 58.9% of children entered care due to abuse or neglect, a reduction from 62.5% in 2019/20. This percentage reduction reflects the increase in UASC who are in care.

These data illustrate the substantial impact that parenting capacity has on children and on demand across early help and social care services, along with the growing prevalence and impact of children's poor mental health.

9 Other Factors

Respondents assert that SEND policy and practice has become as much of a pressure than safeguarding. This is due to challenges in meeting the requirements of the statutory SEND Code of Practice (2014) in the context of increased demand, insufficient funding, the cost of provision for children with SEND, and the increase in the number of children receiving an education health and care plan (EHCP). The number of initial requests for an EHCP assessment in 2020/21 increased by 23% from the previous year, and EHCPs increased by 9.9% to 473,255 in January 2022 (DfE, 2022c).

10 Overview of Changes in the Past Two Years

All respondents stated that there was an overall increase in safeguarding work during the past two years, despite an initial reduction in referrals. In general, respondents stated that referrals to children's social care during this period reflected more complex needs. Families who were just about managing pre-pandemic and would not normally come to the attention of social care were now in need of help.

More children, who were not previously known to social care services, were presenting at a later stage with greater needs and risks. As a result, more children were immediately becoming subjects of child protection plans or proceedings.

Our assertion in the phase 7 report that: *"recovery and renewal, as we learn to live with Covid-19, will require remedial action and reprofiling of resources to meet the emotional and mental health needs of a generation of children and young people to redress lost learning"*, is even more acute than it was two years ago.

11 Early Help

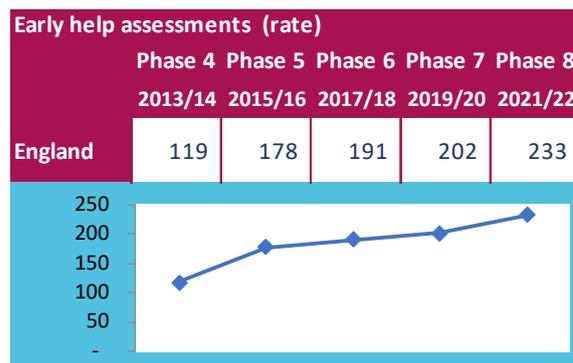


Figure 2: Rate of early help assessments per 10,000 0-17 population (Source: SGP respondents).

115 authorities reported a total of 218,339 early help assessments (EHAs) completed during 2021/22. This extrapolates to an estimated 282,320 early help assessments in 2021/22, a 16% increase in the past two years. However, there were fewer cases open to early help at the 31st March 2022 (185,100) than two years ago.

In qualitative responses, 94% of the 88 respondents stated that they had experienced an increase in early help activity, compared to 82% in Phase 7 of this research (ADCS, 2021).

The outcomes of early help assessments in the year have not changed significantly. On average, 10.7% of EHAs in the 45 local authorities who were able to provide a response resulted in a referral to children's social care, and a similar proportion (10.6%) resulted in step down to universal/other services.

From interviewees and the 96 respondents, there is a much greater sense than in previous phases of strong and successful early help demonstrating measurable impact. The strength of partner relationships, funding, and leadership

appear to be key enablers for the design, provision and outcomes of early help services.

The non-statutory basis of early help allows flexible local solutions to be developed in response to the local demand profile and needs of the community, but it does mean reliance on discretionary and often short-term funding which in turn depends on local leaders prioritising early help at a time when other vital services, such as adult social care, are vying for dwindling resources. The £302m DfE and DHSC Family Hubs and Start for Life programme 2022-2025, which launched this year, was welcomed amongst the 75 LAs selected to receive funds.

The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (IRCSC, 2022) has the potential to change the way in which support for children and families is designed and delivered, and it recognised that ‘early help’ can be a better space for engaging with some families.

12 ‘The Front Door’ to Children’s Services

12.1 Initial contacts

Single point of contact arrangements, such as Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) or joint hubs, vary across local authorities and therefore, what is considered an initial contact can also vary depending on these arrangements. This shift towards early help being integrated into multi-agency ‘front door’ arrangements is evident in the higher proportion of initial contacts which are passed to early help.

Initial contacts, and the nature of these contacts at the ‘front door’ are not captured and reported nationally. This represents a significant amount of activity for local authority children’s services which is not visible.

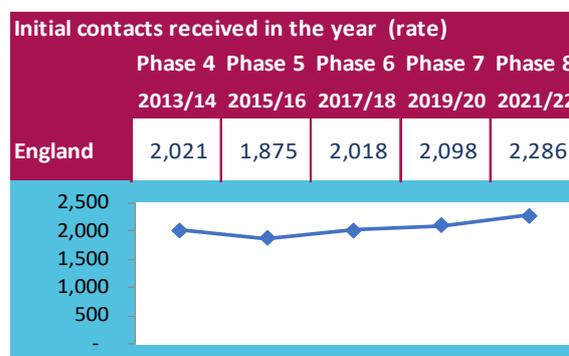


Figure 3: Rate of initial contacts per 10,000 0-17 population (Source: SGP respondents).

Based on local authority responses, there were an estimated 2.77 million initial contacts in 2021/22, an increase of 10% in the last two years. This suggests that an average of 7,575 contacts a day are received by children’s services ‘front door’ arrangements compared to 6,910 reported two years ago.

In 2014/15, the outcome of 28.9% of contacts was referral to social care and 8.0% passed to early help, this research showed that in 2021/22, slightly fewer were referred to social care (23.9%) and twice as many were passed to early help (16%).

12.2 Referrals

Of the 93 authorities providing commentary about thresholds, 75% stated that there had not been any changes impacting on either early help or safeguarding services, compared to 48% two years ago. Where there had been changes, this was to clarify understanding of thresholds or support more work by partners to prevent escalation.

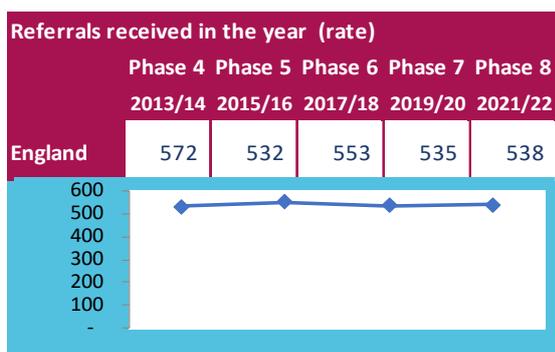


Figure 4: Rate of referrals per 10,000 0-17 population (Source: DfE).

There were 650,270 referrals in England in 2021/22, equivalent to a rate of 538 per 10,000 0-17 population, an increase of 21% since 2007/8. The reduction seen in 2020/21 has been reversed to pre-pandemic rates, but averages continue to mask significant disparity between different local authorities.

The reported drop in contacts and referrals from education sources and increases from police during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic are evident. Police continue to be the biggest source of contacts and referrals by far, representing approximately a third of both contacts and referrals.

12.3 Assessments

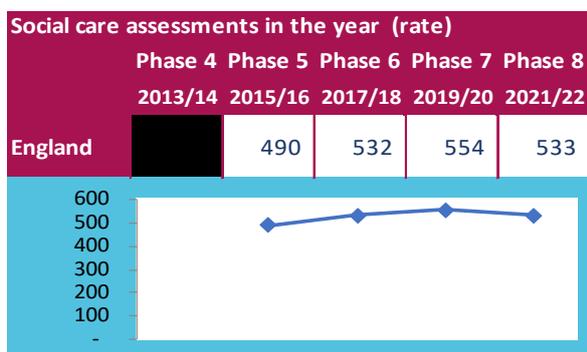


Figure 5: Rate of assessments per 10,000 0-17 population (Source: DfE).

There were 645,070 social work assessments completed in England in 2021/22, a decrease of 3.1% in the last two years. This

correlates to the reduction in referrals in the same period.

12.4 Children in Need

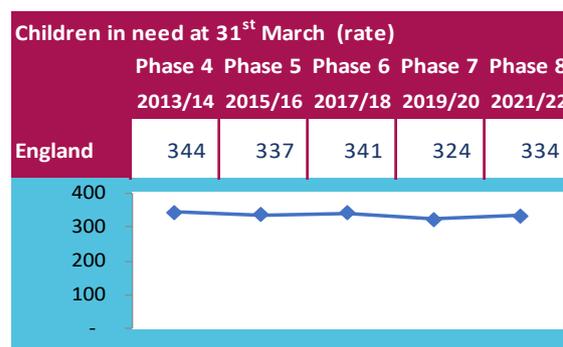


Figure 6: Rate of children in need per 10,000 0-17 population (Source: DfE).

There were 404,310 children in need (including child protection and children in care) as at 31st March 2022, equivalent to a rate of 334 per 10,000 0-17 population, an increase of 4% in the last two years.

13 Child Protection

13.1 Section 47 enquiries

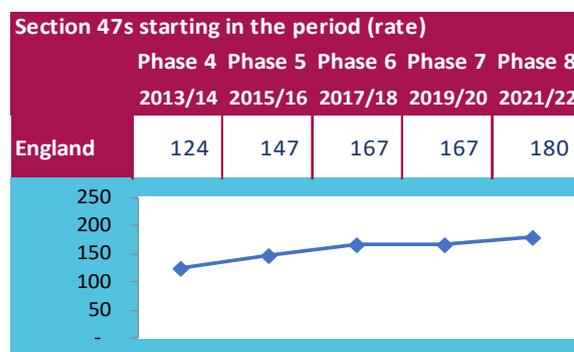


Figure 7: Rate of Section 47 enquiries per 10,000 0-17 population by quarter (Source: DfE).

Over time, the number of Section 47 enquiries has increased substantially. There were an estimated 217,800 Section 47 enquiries undertaken in England in 2021/22, an increase of 184% since 2007/8 and an increase of 7% in the last two years, despite a reduction in 2020/21, most notably at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and in 'lockdown' periods. Whilst there has been a continued increase in the number and rate

of Section 47 enquiries, initial child protection conferences (ICPCs) have continued to reduce since 2018 (from a rate of 64.4 to a rate of 61) per 10,000 0-17 population.

13.2 Child protection

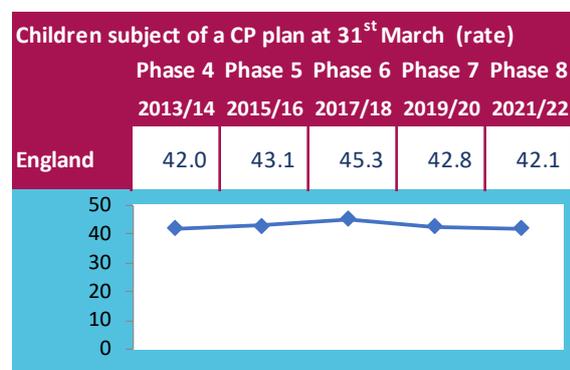


Figure 8: Rate of children subject of a child protection plan as at 31st March per 10,000 0-17 population (Source: DfE).

The number of children becoming subjects of a child protection plan has reduced by 3% in the past two years. 64,390 children became subjects of child protection plans during 2021/22 in England, equivalent to a rate of 53.2 per 10,000 0-17 population.

The number of children subject of a child protection plan as at 31st March also continued to reduce. 50,920 children were subjects of child protection plans in England as at 31st March 2022, a rate of 42.1 per 10,000 0-17 population, a decrease of 8% since 2019/20.

13.3 Child safeguarding practice reviews

43% of the 89 responding authorities stated there had been no change in the number of, or reasons for, safeguarding reviews. 48% reported a small or moderate change.

Those that did experience increases commented that some were a tangible impact of Covid-19, with reasons such as non-accidental injury to babies and safe

sleep/overlay child deaths, suicides and episodes of serious self-harm.

Tragic child deaths in the past two years have been the subject of national learning reviews as well as much media attention. Whilst respondents commented on their learning from reviews, it was also reported that high profile national child abuse cases have impacted on demand at the front door and how social workers are being negatively perceived and received. This is affecting their ability to develop meaningful relationships with the families they are working with.

14 Children in Care and Care Experienced Young People

14.1 Court and care proceedings

Cafcass (2022) reports that although there has been an overall reduction in new applications for public and private proceedings since the start of the pandemic, the long-term trend over the last five years has been an increase of 16.7% in the number of children they work with from 127,670 children in 2017/18 to 149,018 in 2021/22.

The national rate of care applications in 2021/22 was 9.6 per 10,000 of the 0-17 population, a reduction from 10.8 two years ago. However, there is significant variation between individual local authorities.

75% of respondents report that they have experienced changes in Family Court decisions which have impacted on plans for children and young people, fewer than in phase 7. They reported the damaging impact

of the significant delays in legal proceedings resulting in delays in permanence for some children.

The Public Law Working Group’s Best Practice Guidance (PLWG, 2021) was welcomed by respondents as a mechanism to deliver improvements, and some reported that they are working closely with their District Family Judges to try and resolve issues locally when they arise.

14.2 Children in care

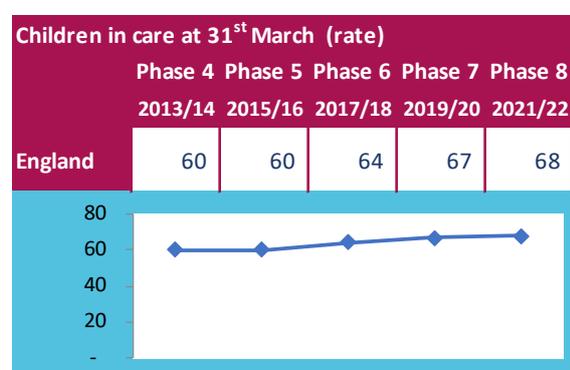


Figure 9: Rate of children in care per 10,000 0-17 population (Source: DfE (p4-7) and SGP respondents (p8)).

Respondents report that there has been an increase in the number of children entering and leaving care during 2021/22 and also who are in care as at 31st March 2022:

- 31,328 children entered care during 2021/22, a rate of 26 per 10,000 0-17 population
- 82,040 children were in care as at 31st March 2022, a rate of 68 per 10,000 0-17 population
- 30,020 children left care during 2021/22, a rate of 25 per 10,000 0-17 population.

There have been changes in the profile of the legal status of children in care with more

children subject of a Full Care Order (58.2%) or Interim Care Order (19.4%), and fewer children subject of a Placement Order (5.4%) or accommodated voluntarily under Section 20 (16.7%).

86 authorities provided information about the type of plan for children in care as at the 31st March 2022. Fewer children have a plan of adoption, but more have a plan to return to their birth family when it is safe and appropriate to do so. A larger proportion of children have a plan of ‘long term foster care’ or ‘supported living in the community’ (independent living), which illustrates that whilst for some children permanency (whether through adoption, Special Guardianship Order or returning home) is the aim, there are a large cohort of children (58.2%) for whom the plan will be to remain in care until their 18th birthday.

14.3 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

The latest published data (DfE, 2022c) states that the number of UASC reduced by 20% to 4,070 in 2020/21, representing 5% of all children in care. A Migration Observatory Briefing (Walsh, 2022) states that the Covid-19 pandemic substantially reduced asylum seeking and refugee resettlement in the UK in 2020, although in 2021, asylum seeking was at its highest level since 2003.

119 respondents providing information about the UASC in their area in 2021/22 indicate that the number has grown significantly. In these areas alone, 4,365 were in care as at 31st March 2022². Only

² This number has not been extrapolated to an all England figure due to the unequal distribution of UASC through the country and small number.

two authorities reported a decrease. 94% of unaccompanied children as at 31st March 2022 were male and the majority (86.1%) aged 16 and 17. 14.2% were aged 10-15 and 0.1% were aged 10 or under. These proportions have changed little over the last six years.

Responding local authorities continue to be concerned about the robustness of the age assessments undertaken by the Home Office, including those who are placed as adults in dispersal centres and asylum hotels, with an increase in subsequent presentations to the local authority claiming to be under 18 years of age.

The DfE does not identify if children entering or leaving care are UASC. This information is collected for this research to better illustrate the increasing volume of children that are supported by children’s services in-year. In 119 responding authorities, 4,710 UASC entered care in 2021/22, 7,640 were in care at any time in the year, and 3,251 left care in the year.

There has been little change to where most asylum-seeking children originate from, with Afghanistan, Iran, Sudan and Eritrea being the most common countries of origin, although respondents reported 84 different countries of origin compared to 63 two years ago. This presents a significant challenge in delivering ‘child centred’ support that is sensitive and inclusive to a child’s cultural identity and nationality.

Some authorities with larger numbers of UASC have created dedicated teams in order to provide the necessary capacity and specialist support to better meet needs.

Importantly, respondents reported that many UASC engage very well with services and make the most of the opportunities they are presented with, such as education.

A higher proportion of UASC in care as at 31st March were placed in residential care (44%) and the proportion in foster care has reduced from 55.3% in 2015/16 to 37.4% in 2021/22.

Respondents reported that Home Office funding for UASC continues to be insufficient to meet costs, despite the increase in funding for care experienced UASC in 2020. Whilst it is considered that the Home Office funding just about covers the cost of a placement, it does not cover the social work time and other statutory provision that is required for children in care. The care experienced funding is woefully insufficient leaving many authorities to make up the difference from wider budgets.

14.4 Care experienced young people

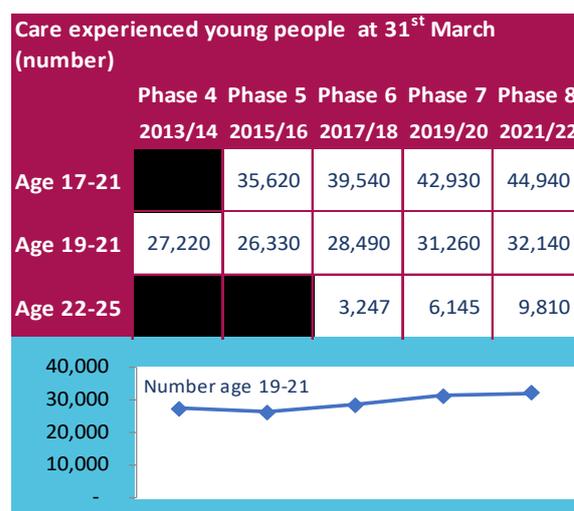


Figure 10: Number of care experienced young people as at 31st March (Source: DfE (17-21 p4-7), SGP respondents (22-25 & p8)).

There were 32,140 care experienced young people aged 19 to 21 in England on 31st March 2022, according to respondents, an increase of 3% in the last two years. From

data provided by research respondents, it can be estimated that there are an additional 9,810 care experienced young people aged 22 to 25, a 60% increase since 31st March 2018 – a number that will continue to grow incrementally as a result of the extended support duties contained in the Children & Social Work Act 2017.

15 A Whole System View

15.1 Correlating activity

The charts below illustrate the rate per 10,000 0-17 years population across a range of early help and social care activity in 2021/22 (figure 11) and correlate trends since 2007/8 (figure 12).

The infographic at the back of this report highlights the change in numbers over each phase of ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research.



Figure 11: Rates per 10,000 of the 0-17 population

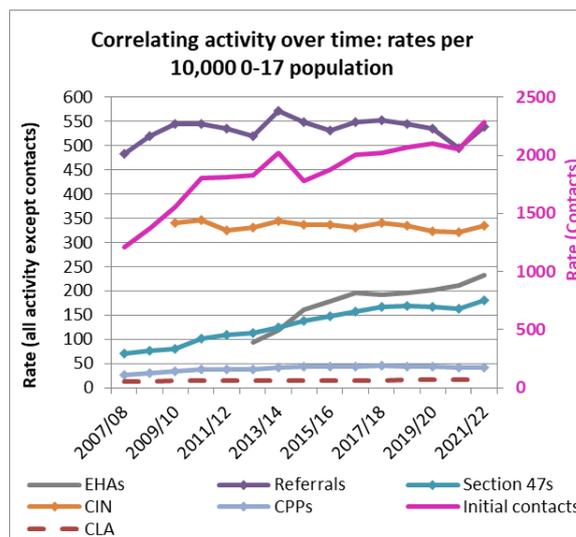


Figure 12 - Correlating activity over time

The variation between local authorities and the range between those with the highest, and lowest rates continues to be significant, with deprivation, geography, government funding and service transformation programmes, contributing to these differences.

Looking at children’s social care activity since the first phase of this research in 2007/8, the significant increase in early help assessments, initial contacts and section 47 enquiries is evident. Prior to the pandemic, in 2019/20, it was clear that activity was increasing year on year for many local authorities. Short-term reductions in some children’s social care activity in 2020/21 can be linked to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the impact of implementation of new models of practice and approaches for some authorities have, and will continue to, ameliorate the likely continued increasing demand (also see chapter 15.3).

15.2 Ages

The ages of children receiving social care support has changed over the years. The age profile of children becoming subjects of

child protection plans has continued to shift towards older children. 4.4% of children starting a plan were aged 16 and 17 compared to 3.9% two years ago. 26.5% of all children entering care in 2021/22 were also aged 16 and 17.

Respondents evidenced both an increase and a high proportion of children aged over 16 who need support and social care interventions, such as child protection plans or entry into care. 74% of respondents stated that there had been a moderate to high change in their needs or service provision, generally linked to mental health needs and in some instances, due to family breakdown, leaving the family home voluntarily or being removed. For some authorities, rising numbers of over 16s relate to UASC, but EFRH is also a factor.

15.3 Effectiveness of social care activity

Authorities continue to operate in a timely and efficient manner with little change in performance despite the increasing need. In 2021/22, 83.9% of assessments were completed within the 45-day timescale, and the proportion of initial child protection conferences held within 15 working days of S47 has improved in the past two years from 77% to 81%. Child protection cases reviewed within set timescales continue to be above 90%, and with little change over the years.

There has also been little to no change in the duration of episodes of children in need or child protection plans since 2013/14, demonstrating clearly the huge efforts made by local authorities, and their staff, to avoid delay and avert drift for children.

Repeat activity (or revolving door) does not necessarily mean that there is failure in the

system to address the needs of children and young people. Some children require multiple interventions over time as their home or wider circumstances change. There were fewer re-referrals in 2021/22 (21.9%) and little change in the number of children re-entering care for a second or subsequent time. 10.1% of children have been subject of a second or subsequent child protection plan in the last two years.

Overall, most respondents reported a reduction or no significant change in their 'revolving door'. Where there has been a decrease in referrals, child protection plans and children entering care, this was attributed to new models of practice, strengthened practice, and decision making that helps to balance concerns and strengths as well as work with partners to better understand thresholds. Some authorities reported that repeat referrals are mainly related to domestic abuse.

15.4 System Factors

The focus on new models and cultures of service organisation and delivery that were reported in phase 7 have continued. A number of innovations have been found to be effective and have been adopted by increasing numbers of local authorities in an attempt to spread good practice, and to reduce demand to children's social care e.g. Strengthening Families, Protecting Children programmes. Where these have been successful, authorities report the impact has been as varied as decreases in the numbers of children entering care and being subject of a child protection plan.

Respondents were also directly involved in creating and brokering bespoke emergency packages of care to keep children with

complex needs who are a risk to themselves and others, as safe and well as they are able to do so. The latter is often at exorbitant cost and in response to crisis situations.

The increase in children's services activity in the past two years should not be viewed as a failure of these actions or programmes; the last two years have been unprecedented; the 'shifting sands' and the changing operative context must be considered when evaluating success.

RESOURCES

16 Placement Sufficiency, Quality and Cost

Legislation and regulation in respect of placements for children in care is rigid and little has changed over the past six years. There is, however, a growing body of research and analysis relating to placements, providers and costs.

It is important to remember that the majority of children in care are placed with families or in settings where they do exceptionally well. It is a small, yet growing number of children in care for whom it is not possible to find an appropriate registered placement, which meets their needs at an affordable cost. Sufficiency, quality and/or cost of placements for these children, who are often on the edge of criminalisation or hospitalisation, is one of the biggest concerns for nearly all local authority children's services leaders.

As at 31st March 2022, there were fewer children placed with 'other foster carer'

(54.5%) or placed for adoption (2.6%), and more in a 'foster placement with relative or friend' (15.4%), in independent living (9.1%) or placed with parents (6.8%) than in the previous phase of this research (ADCS, 2021).

There is a slight increase in the proportion who are living in registered children's homes (9.0%).

Foster placements, children's homes and other residential accommodation are causing the most challenges in terms of sufficiency, quality and cost for local authority children's services leaders. Fewer children are placed in provision provided by their own local authority (49.1%) and a greater number are placed in private provision (37.5%).

Respondents were positive about the future in terms of the recommendations from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care regarding kinship care, family networks and pre-proceedings, but less positive about the continuing high cost of IFA placements and sufficiency of foster placements generally. It was felt both needed swift government intervention.

The Safeguarding Pressures research, to be published in full later in 2022, features an in-depth analysis of findings relating to placement sufficiency, quality and cost. It provides an overall summary across all placement provision including local authority experiences and actions to address issues in the market.

17 Workforce

A sufficient, skilled workforce was widely reported by research respondents as one of the key challenges at present.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2022) recommended the government invest £253 million over four years on a range of social work workforce measures including: new national pay scales, routes to build expertise and remain in practice, more flexible working, an early career framework, and tackling reliance on agency staff. If implemented, the review will have a significant role in shaping the children's services workforce of the future.

The latest reported children's social care workforce data (DfE, 2022c) indicates a 2% increase in staff who were qualified social workers on 30th September 2021. There was, however, a 3% reduction in the number who were case holding. In the context of increased demand, complexity and impacting factors already evidenced in this report, this quite simply means that the size of the workforce is not keeping up with social care demand.

These figures do not provide the full picture of capacity shortages during the Covid-19 pandemic as they do not capture those staff who were self-isolating or shielding and unable to carry out face to face work. A longer-term trend appears to be greater numbers of staff seeking flexible working options, masking further reductions in capacity.

Information from respondents indicates that the lack of sufficiency in the social care workforce is likely to have deteriorated since

the DfE workforce census was completed in September 2021.

Sufficiency is not limited to social workers. It is being keenly felt across other professions such as:

- children's home residential staff, particularly registered managers
- educational and clinical psychologists
- business support staff
- occupational therapists
- speech and language therapists.

There appear to be varying reasons for this, including the time and space offered in various 'lockdowns' for people to reassess their priorities and work-life balance, with some choosing to take early retirement or leave their profession to pursue other work.

Whilst the drivers for some of the recruitment and retention difficulties are still to be explained, a large number of social workers have left local authority direct employment to join employment agencies, which offer increased flexibility and competitive incentives. Respondents reported that an increasing number of agency social workers are newly qualified, which is concerning.

Agency staff continue to be a significantly more costly option compared to directly employed social workers, and there can be concerns about quality. There is a strong feeling that "profiteering" by private providers needs to cease. Respondents continue to raise the need for there to be national reform on how employment agencies and agency social workers are regulated, without destabilising an already fragile and insufficient workforce.

Ofsted (2022) acknowledge that the pandemic has exacerbated long-standing staffing challenges in children's social care, which in turn have serious consequences on both the number of social workers available to work with families and the number of suitable children's home places available. They conclude that due to the staffing crisis: *"too many children, with increasingly complex needs, are not getting the help they need."*

18 Finance

The continued impact of budget constraints, changes in expenditure and future funding uncertainty on local authority children's services cannot be over-estimated. Local authorities have for a long time, and continue to, review, restructure, rationalise and realise more effective ways of doing things, but in a context of spiralling costs.

Exorbitant charges for children's home placements by private providers have incrementally impacted on children's services. Many of the new factors further impacting on public sector budgets and expenditure have emerged in the past year, indeed the rate of inflation and steep rise in the cost of living and its impacts have yet to be fully understood and felt. The evidence gathered regarding current and predicted children's services funding may be soon out of date as the fiscal envelope shrinks and financial crisis deepens.

Funding pressures have been quantified throughout research phases. This year, 65 respondents reported a total shortfall of £334.8m, an average of 7.5% of their children's services budget. Extrapolated to

all 151 local authorities, the total required now to close the budget gap is £778m in one year to 'stay still'.

This budget gap reflects the fact that many children's services budgets have been uplifted in the past two years, including in 2022/23, either as part of an authority's response to increased demand and rising costs, or through grant funding. Additional ad-hoc funding was provided in the pandemic period by government, some of which was ring fenced for adult and children's social care services. Should this additional funding, both in terms of LA investment and government funding streams, not have been provided, the financial situation and budget gaps of many authorities would be much starker.

Respondents continue to report the immense value they place on their elected members and senior leadership teams working together with them to manage and shape funding for children's service as effectively as possible. The sustainability of this at a time when local government income is reduced and expenditure on adult social care and other areas is also increasing is a concern. 27% of responding authorities stated they are required to make savings from 2022/23 onwards, and more are anticipating these will be necessary as the cost of living crisis continues to bite.

The top four current funding pressures cited by respondents reflect pressures that are largely outside of the direct control of local authorities. Some gave examples of proactively managing and influencing to relieve and mitigate where possible:

1. placement costs for children in care, specifically independent fostering agencies and private residential children's homes placements
2. agency social workers and managed project teams
3. increase in demand for services and complexity of presenting needs
4. SEND and high needs block, including home to school transport. Whilst this is not central to Safeguarding Pressures research, this continues to be a significant and growing pressure for children's services.

Despite the best efforts of political, corporate and children's services leaders to shape their services and intervene early to reduce demand and costs, an effective service cannot be delivered in a financially sustainable way without addressing the underfunding in base budgets. Further, the continued use of short-termist and selective funding pots, and other causal factors such as private organisations profiteering on the back of vulnerable children, along with out-dated government policy on areas such as home to school transport, are all factors at play.

19 Direction of Travel

Many of the key changes that respondents have predicted throughout Safeguarding Pressures research, have been realised, as the findings from this phase shows. Sadly, most of these predictions were changes that would, and indeed have, impacted negatively on some of the most vulnerable children and families and the public services that they rely on.

During this phase of Safeguarding Pressures research, respondents were more certain about the direction of travel for children's services than they have been previously. Of the 97 respondents to this question, 60% predicted a general continued rise in demand in the next two years compared to 48% two years ago.

The five greatest certainties expressed for the next two years were:

- changes to legislation and policy relating to children's social care, schools and SEND which would have a significant impact and require robust implementation
- continued budgetary pressures for authorities, especially with an aging population and pressures in adult social care; and the potential for less income through business rates
- the cost of living crisis and pressure on citizens will sadly push more children into poverty and exacerbate parental factors that we know contribute to child harm e.g. parental conflict
- children's mental health will continue to deteriorate
- a continuing rise in the cost of placements, along with placement sufficiency and quality challenges, if there is no change in legislation or market development.

20 Conclusion

The increases in demand seen in early help and children's social care resulting from heightened need and pressure on other services to prevent, identify and respond to

the needs of children (especially those aged 16-17) and their families are compelling.

Meeting the needs of children's poor mental health, especially, was a significant worry for many respondents where, due to a lack of NHS provision, responsibility often falls to local authority children's services, with no accompanying resource to do so.

Education and health systems are also under growing pressure. SEND is now a major issue for many authorities with increasing numbers of EHCPs, pressure on high needs funding and significant cost of home to school transport.

There was an overwhelming feeling that the support available from local authority children's services has become the last resort for some children and their families whose escalating needs should have been prevented or met through effective universal services, which were impacted during the pandemic.

The research is clear that whilst the large majority of children in England are happy, healthy, safe and do well, there is a small minority who are vulnerable and at risk of, or are currently experiencing, harm and will have reduced life chances into adulthood as a result. Sadly, these growing number are forecast to increase.

As called for two years ago in Safeguarding Pressures phase 7, there continues to be an urgent need for government to draw together at a national level the disparate policy initiatives and pots of funding for unconnected policy intentions, away from private sector profiteering and into one substantial coherent whole that invests

funding in the right places within the system. That way, we can make this a country that works for all children.

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Safeguarding Pressures: Change in children's services activity

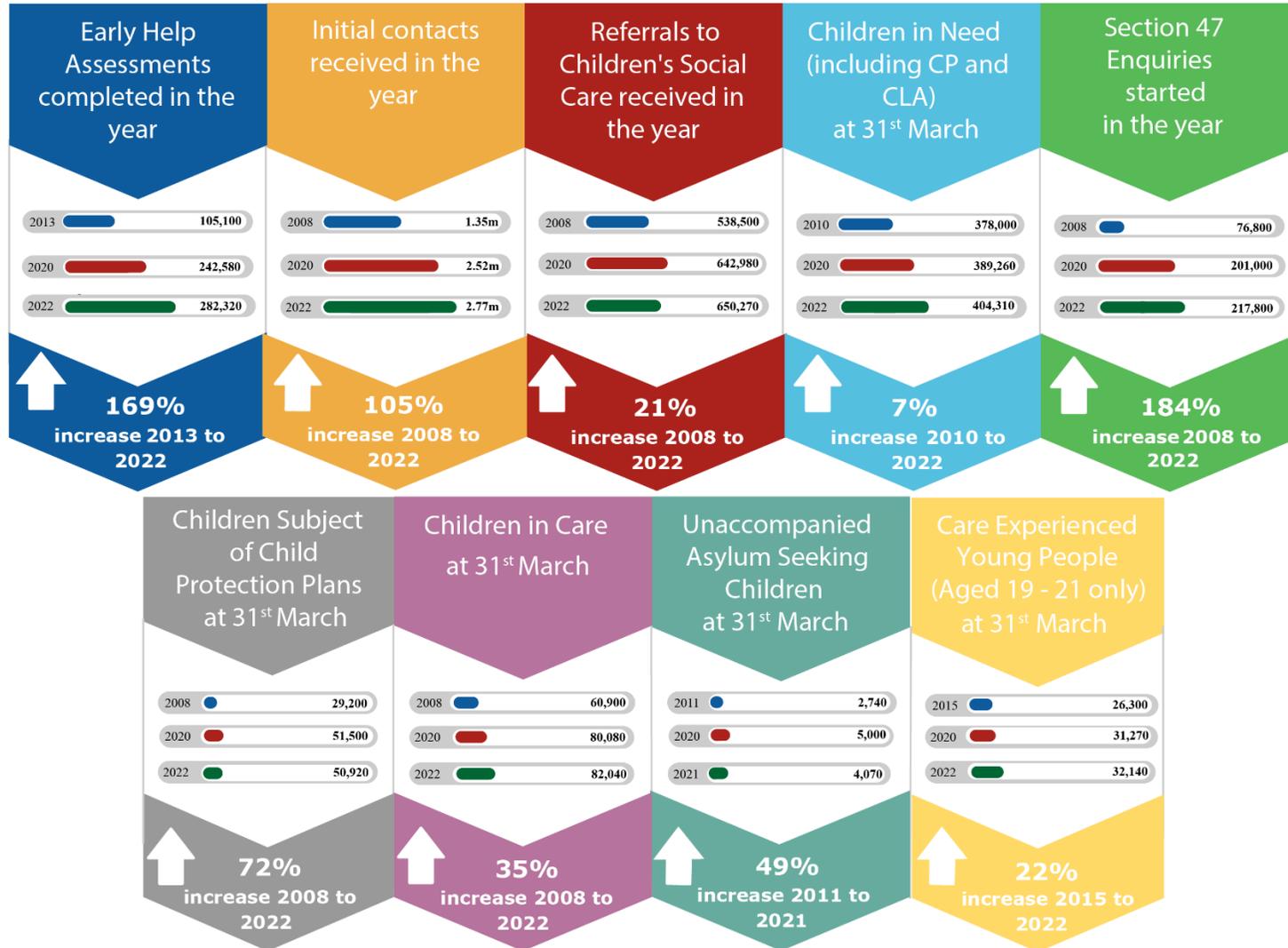


Figure 13: Where nationally available data is not available, results from responding authorities has been extrapolated to an all-England total based on proportion of population covered. Source of latest data for Early help assessments, Initial contacts, Children in Care, UASC and Care Experienced Young People: SGP8 respondents.

The research was commissioned by the Association of Directors of Children’s Services Ltd and undertaken by Carole Brooks Associates Limited on their behalf. The Association retains ownership of the data and of the publication rights to the report.

Views expressed in this report are based on evidence provided by local authorities and other sources during the project. Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the precision of the information contained in the report, we cannot guarantee its accuracy or currency.

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