



Executive Summary

SAFEGUARDING PRESSURES PHASE 7

February 2021

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd



1 Introduction

ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research has provided evidence of changes in demand, needs and the delivery of children's early help, social care and associated services since 2007 (ADCS, 2018). Phase 7 brings the evidence base up to date. Evidence has been collected from 129 local authorities, covering 89% of England's children and young people population; 17 interviews with directors or assistant directors of children's services; a core dataset of 18 metrics produced by each region¹ to Quarter 2 2020/21 (April to September 2020).

2 Context, Legislation and Policy

There are 12.0 million children and young people aged 0-17 in England (ONS, 2020), an increase of 1.3% from two years ago. Spending by local authorities on education, children's and young people's services was £40.3 billion in the financial year 2019/20, an increase of 1% from two years ago, with school expenditure accounting for over two-thirds (DfE, 2020). Within this, the total expenditure on children and young people's services increased by 7% between 2018/19 and 2019/20, to £10.53 billion.

A timeline on the ADCS website² illustrates the key context, events, reviews, and legislation which have, and continue to impact upon children's services over the past 12 years and into the next period.

¹ Not all regions provided the same data.

²<https://adcs.org.uk/safeguarding/article/timeline>

3 Safeguarding During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Local authorities reported how their approaches to safeguarding during Covid-19 were effective. A significant number of respondents gave a real sense of continuing 'business as usual' in maintaining communication and contact with children and families, making some face-to-face visits safely, and assisting families to cope.

Implementing agile risk assessments of vulnerability and monitoring vulnerable children closely with schools was highlighted as effective in prioritising those at greatest risk.

Not all services for children have been able to operate during the pandemic, especially during the first national lockdown (March – June 2020). Ways to mitigate the impact of service restrictions on children and families were reported by some respondents. For example, the closure of some short break provision and residential placements during this period has meant that children with disabilities have been supported where possible through flexible outreach.

Creative uses of technology to engage and support children, families and professionals during the pandemic have been harnessed. Virtual case conferences and meetings have resulted in an increase in professionals attending, including GPs. However, digital poverty, together with 'not knowing what is happening behind the camera' can carry additional problems for some families and

groups of children including very young children, and some children with disabilities.

In the initial six months of the Covid-19 pandemic, more children were referred who were not previously known to social care services. Families who were just about managing pre-pandemic and would not normally come to the attention of social care were now in need of significant help. More children were presenting at a later stage, once issues were complex and entrenched, and then immediately becoming subjects of child protection plans or proceedings.

4 Early Help and Social Care Services

4.1 Overview

The chart below illustrates the rate per 10,000 0-17 population across a range of early help and social care activity in 2019/20, and the infographic at the back of this report highlights the change in numbers over each phase of ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research.

The variation between local authorities and the range between those with the highest, and lowest rates is now greater than ever, with evidence of different factors that have influenced this including deprivation, service transformation programmes and other drivers such as housing difficulties, in-secure work and geography in relation to the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children within a local area.



Figure 1: Rates per 10,000 of the 0-17 population

4.2 Early help

Services and approaches have matured and more authorities now appear to be providing an integrated model of practice, with variations in delivery by local authorities or other agencies within the local area.

There is no legislative requirement for local authority children's services to provide preventative services. Six years ago, Ofsted stated: *It is only right that local authorities and their partners are focusing increasingly on early help and prevention services for families. Many are now establishing a more coordinated and structured approach to this crucial role* (Ofsted, 2015). Whilst the non-statutory basis of early help allows flexible local solutions to be developed in response to demand, it does mean reliance on discretionary funding which in turn depends on local leaders prioritising early help at a time when other significant pressures and services are vying for dwindling resources.

There is evidence of re-investment in early help in authorities which had previously experienced significant cuts as part of budget savings. In some local authorities, the continued determination of local politicians to fund early help services has

prevented their decimation. However, the future funding for early help remains at significant risk.

Early help activity continues to increase. There were an estimated **202** early help assessments per 10,000 0-17 population completed in 2019/20. This equates to approximately **242,580** early help assessments completed when extrapolated to all England.

4.3 Initial contacts

Based on local authority responses, there were an estimated **2.5 million** initial contacts in 2019/20, an increase of 5% in the last two years. We don't know how many children this represents, as some children will have been the subject of multiple contacts during the year. We can surmise that this is an average of **6,910 contacts a day** received by children's services 'front door' arrangements.

Single point of contact arrangements such as a MASH or joint hubs account for the variation across authorities in what is considered an initial contact.

4.4 Referrals

Statutory core processes and children's social care functions relating to referral, assessment and children in need have not changed significantly since The Children Act 1989, apart from the introduction of single social work assessment in 2014.

48% of responding authorities stated that there have not been changes to the thresholds impacting on either early help or safeguarding services in the past two years in their authority, noting an improvement in

partner agencies' understanding of thresholds and their application of them.

There were **642,980** referrals in England in 2019/20, equivalent to a rate of **535** per 10,000 0-17 population (DfE, 2020). The decrease of 1.9% in the last two years in England masks significant variations between authorities. Of the 118 authorities which provided data in phase 6 and phase 7, 62 (53%) reported a decrease and 56 (47%) reported an increase in referrals.

Police continue to be the biggest source of contacts and referrals, with the number (and proportion of the total) from health and education increasing incrementally over the years. A more detailed breakdown of the source of referrals in 2019/20 illustrates that primary health services and A&E departments are the two biggest components of health referrals. Indeed, referrals from A&E alone outstrip those from school nurses, health visitors and GPs combined.

Covid-19 pandemic: April to September 2020

Referrals in the quarter (Rate)						
	2019/20				2020/21	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
England (n=128)	132	133	132	132	110	126

Figure 2: Rate of referrals per 10,000 0-17 population by quarter (Source: regional quarterly data).

The number of referrals extrapolated to all England between April to September 2020 is **284,375**.

The majority of respondents report a reduction in referrals in the first quarter (April to June) and slowly picking up, as shown above. Case study authorities and

interviewees commented that a surge in referrals took place from October onwards for some authorities, whilst others saw referrals return to their normal levels.

The most common sources of contacts and referrals have changed since March 2020. There were fewer referrals from schools, which are traditionally one of the highest sources of referrals, due to school closures, and an increase in those from the public and self-referrals.

4.5 Assessments

There were **665,660** assessments in England in 2019/20, an increase of 5.5% in the last two years. The number is equivalent to a rate of **554** per 10,000 0-17 population (DfE, 2020).

4.6 Children in Need

There were **389,260** children in need at 31st March 2020, equivalent to a rate of **324** per 10,000 0-17 population. The reduction of 4% in the last two years again masks significant variation between local authorities.

The greater volume of activity in-year, 753,840 children in need episodes across the year involving 705,060 children, indicates more accurately the extent of children's needs and the volume of work that is undertaken with children and their families (DfE, 2020).

Covid-19 pandemic: April to September 2020

Children in Need at period end (rate)						
	2019/20				2020/21	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
England (n=141)	300	296	300	292	283	290

Figure 3: Rate of children in need per 10,000 0-17 population by quarter (Source: regional quarterly data).

According to regional data, there are 2% fewer children in need at 30th September 2020 compared to the same period last year, against a rising number of children subjects of child protection plans and children looked after.

4.7 Section 47 enquiries

There were **201,000** Section 47 enquiries undertaken in England in 2019/20, an increase of 1% in the last two years (DfE, 2020) which reflects a levelling off of the significant increase of previous years.

Covid-19 pandemic: April to September 2020

Section 47 enquiries in the period (rate)						
	2019/20				2020/21	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
England (n=128)	39	39	42	42	37	39

Figure 4: Rate of section 47 enquiries per 10,000 0-17 population by quarter. (Source: regional quarterly data)

The number of Section 47 enquiries extrapolated to all England between April to September 2020 is **90,700**.

Regional quarterly data indicate that overall, 2.6% fewer Section 47 enquiries were started in England in Quarter 2 2020/21 compared to the same period last year.

4.8 Child protection

The year-on-year increase in the number of children becoming subjects of child protection plans has plateaued. **66,970** children became subjects of child protection plans during 2019/20 in England, equivalent to a rate of **55.2** per 10,000 0-17 population. (DfE, 2020).

51,510 children were subjects of child protection plans in England at 31st March

2020, a rate of **42.8** per 10,000 0-17 population (DfE, 2020). The number has started to decrease after a decade of a rising trend.

There were **66,970** child protection plans ceasing in 2019/20, a rate of **55.7** per 10,000 0-17 population and a reduction from two years ago. This represents a slight downturn in what has been a steady trajectory over a decade of increasing numbers of children no longer subjects of child protection plans.

Covid-19 pandemic: April to September 2020

Children subjects of CP Plans at period end (rate)						
	2019/20				2020/21	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
England (n=144)	43	43	42	43	44	45

Figure 5: Rate of children subject of a child protection plan at period end per 10,000 0-17 population (Source: regional quarterly data).

The number of children subjects of child protection plans at 30th September 2020 extrapolated to all England is **53,800**. 4% more children were subjects of child protection plans at 30th September 2020 compared to the same period last year.

Local authorities reported an increase in children becoming subjects of child protection plans during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic, more children remained subjects of plans and fewer children were stepped down from plans due to potential heightened risk, and absence of other support services.

4.9 Care proceedings

The national rate of care applications per 10,000 of the 0-17 population, which had increased from 8.0 in 2009/10 to a height of 12.3 in 2016/17, is now reducing. There

were **10.8** care applications per 10,000 0-17 population in 2019/20. However, there is significant variation between individual local authorities, from the lowest rate of 4.3 to the highest rate of 47.4 (Cafcass, 2020).

92% of respondents state that they have experienced changes in Court decisions which have impacted on the plans for children and young people. They reported the damaging impact of the significant delay in legal proceedings resulting in delays in permanence for some children. Other factors include risk aversion from the judiciary and Cafcass, resulting in outcomes contrary to the local authority's advice. For example, an increase in children placed at home with parents on care orders; continued increase in court-directed placements in residential mother and baby units; or, seeking specialist additional assessment.

Strong relationships with the Local Family Justice Boards and working together to resolve some of these issues was cited by some respondents as a welcome factor mitigating delay in some instances.

Covid-19 pandemic: April to September 2020

Between April and December 2020, Cafcass reports a -1.7% decrease in new Public Law Cases (-3.3% decrease in the number of children) - 13,464 cases featuring 21,565 children - compared to the same nine months in the previous year. The Courts have responded to the pandemic with significant changes in the way they function including the introduction of remote hearings for some cases.

4.10 Children Looked After

Policy relating to children looked after and care leavers has been subject of more reviews and legislative change than other aspects of children's social care, with further significant future changes heralded with the commencement of the Children's Social Care Review in January 2021. Recommendations from previous reviews (e.g. the review of children's residential care (Narey, 2016) and the Fostering Stocktake (Narey and Owers, 2016) have not been implemented. Numbers of children looked after continue to rise suggesting that the factors and determinants which lead to children becoming looked after, remain unresolved.

Fewer children are starting to be looked after each year. There were **30,970** children starting to be looked after during 2019/20, a rate of **26** per 10,000 0-17 population, and a 4% reduction from two years ago (DfE, 2020).

Variation between authorities is significant. In 2019/20, the highest rate of children starting to be looked after was 90 (North East LA) and the lowest was 12 (Yorkshire & Humber LA).

The number of children looked after at 31st March 2020 is increasing, despite a reduction in the number of children who are starting to be looked after. This indicates that the increase in the number of children looked after is not due to more children becoming looked after, but fewer children leaving care.

There were **80,080** children looked after at 31st March 2020, a rate of **67** per 10,000 0-17 population, and a 6% increase from two years ago (DfE, 2020).

29,590 children ceased to be looked after during 2019/20, a rate of **25** per 10,000 0-17 population and 2% fewer than two years ago (DfE 2020).

59.2% of all children looked after at 31st March 2020 in 128 responding authorities are subjects of a Full Care Order, and the proportion has increased year-on-year. Fewer children are subjects of Placement Orders or accommodated voluntarily under Section 20. The reduction in the number of Placement Orders reflects the slowing down of adoption as a permanence outcome for children and young people.

The type of plan for children looked after has changed between 2013/14 and 2019/20. 'Long term foster care' is the plan for more children (from 36.1% to 45% of all children looked after). Fewer children have a plan of adoption (6.5% in 2019/20 compared to 9.8% in 2013/14). 10.3% of children looked after at 31st March 2020 in responding authorities had a plan to return home to their birth family, compared to 7.0% in 2013/14.

The sizeable cohort of children looked after who are in long term foster care illustrates that whilst for some children permanency is the goal, there are a considerable, and growing, number of children for whom the plan will be to remain looked after until their 18th birthday. The implications of this for future planning of services to meet needs and demand is significant and costly and that pressure is also becoming evident in care leaving services.

The proportion of children leaving care through adoption reduced slightly from 12.8% of all children leaving care in 2017/18

to 12% in 2019/20. A greater proportion (12.7%) found permanence through special guardianship orders.

Covid-19 period: April to September 2020

Rate of children looked after at period end						
	2019/20				2020/21	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
England (n=144)	66	66	66	67	67	68

Figure 6: Rate of children looked after at period end per 10,000 0-17 population (Source: regional quarterly data).

The number of children looked after at 30th September 2020 extrapolated to all England is **81,900**.

Regional quarterly data indicate that there were 2.6% more children looked after at the 30th September 2020 than at September 2019, largely as a result of fewer children ceasing to be looked after.

4.11 Placements and placement providers

The profile of children’s placements has changed slightly over the years. A greater proportion of children are looked after in a foster placement with relative or friend (14.6%) than previously, and slightly fewer are in a foster placement with other carer (57%). The increase from 5% to 7% in the proportion of children placed at home with parents under a Full Care Order evidences the change in Court decision making.

DfE (2020) provides a breakdown of placement type by provider, evidencing that 37% of all foster care, and 83% of all residential care are provided by private or third sector providers. This equates to 21,130 and 10,110 placements respectively.

There were 14,995 fostering households within the IFA sector. Around half of these

(7,652) were registered with IFAs that are owned by the six largest IFA providers in England. These top six companies therefore account for 51% of all IFA households, and 18% of all fostering households nationally.

36.2% of all children looked after were in private provision (including fostering and residential). Respondents evidence a deterioration in availability and increasing costs for private provisions, including independent fostering agencies and residential placements over the past two years, and more so since March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. £5,000 - £7,000 a week for a placement is becoming more common as demand increases and availability reduces. The ‘market’ is clearly dysfunctional. Achieving quality and sufficiency of placements, and the right placement for the child at the right time was one of the top three challenges cited by almost every local authority taking part in this research.

To mitigate the placement crisis, most local authorities continue proactive foster carer recruitment, assessment and training; are implementing models such as Mockingbird; are opening new children’s homes and/or supported lodgings for care leavers.

Frustration at the delay in launching the Children’s Social Care Review and lack of action on the part of successive governments to work with local government to tackle the private placement ‘market’ were expressed by all respondents.

Covid-19 period: April to September 2020

The lockdown period and attendant restrictions have had a significant impact for some children looked after, who have been prevented from moving on to permanent arrangements - either discharge from care or moving to adoptive placements (often because of delays with final hearings). And care leavers and UASC have been prevented from moving onto more independent accommodation. For other children, respondents report that they have thrived, forming even closer relationships with their carers, this applies equally across fostering and residential care placements.

4.12 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

There were **5,000** UASC in England at 31st March (DfE, 2020). However, DfE does not report children starting or ceasing to be looked after who are UASC. This information has been collected for this research, and in the 123 responding authorities, **3,238** UASC started to be looked after in 2019/20, and **7,412** were supported at any time during the year. For comparison purposes, **4,260** were looked after at 31st March across the 123 responding authorities.

There is significantly greater variation across the country than previously with significantly fewer UASC in the North and the greatest number in London and the South East. It is important to note however, that the size of the supported adult and family asylum populations in the North of England is larger than elsewhere.

At 30th September 2020, there were 63 different nationalities recorded amongst the UASC cohort, with more young people

arriving from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran and Sudan than other countries

Respondents report an ongoing challenge to ascertain robust age assessments of individuals presenting as UASC. Central to this dilemma is the responsibility of local authorities to those unaccompanied children who have a right to care and support, set against the safeguarding risks of unwittingly placing adults alongside vulnerable children.

The surge of spontaneous arrivals to the south coast following the lifting of the first pan-European lockdown saw the number of UASCs starting to be looked after in Kent in the first six months of this year (352) already in line with the total number of UASC cared for by Kent County Council across the whole of last year (366). This led to Kent County Council reluctantly taking the unprecedented step in August of refusing to collect arrivals from the port of Dover because the local authority could not safely fulfil its statutory duty of care towards these minors. A similar situation occurred in Portsmouth in November. Local authorities across the country pledged placements for new arrivals to help ease the burden on port authorities.

The presentation of young people through local ports and motorway service stations remains as common as receiving transfers through the voluntary National Transfer Scheme, which local authorities continue to report is not working.

Respondents were once again clear that the current rate of Home Office funding is not sufficient to meet the costs of caring for and supporting UASC. Councils spent almost £176 million on supporting UASC in 2018/19 – a rise of 85% on the £95 million spent in 2013/14. Even the welcome uplifted grant

funding provided by the Home Office in 2020 covers at best 50% of the costs of caring for an unaccompanied child. In 2016/17, East Midlands Councils identified that the average cost to a council in the region of supporting a former UASC care leaver is £16,602 per year, compared to the then £10,485 received in government funding.

4.13 Care leavers

There are increased duties on local authorities to offer ‘staying put’ arrangements for care leavers and the support of a Personal Advisor to all care leavers to the age of 25 instead of age 21. These are positive changes in providing greater support for care leavers, but have introduced pressure into the system in terms of reduced availability of foster placements, and a need for more personal advisers.

There were **42,960** care leavers aged 17 to 21 in England on 31st March 2020 (DfE 2020), an increase of 9% in the last two years. We estimate from data provided by 107 research respondents, that there are an additional 6,145 care leavers age 22 to 25 who fall within the scope of the new duties.

Analysis of the 108 returns for Phase 7 of ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research indicates a significant increase in the number of care leavers who are former UASC with an estimated **6,901** being cared for in 2019/20. This is estimated to be a 60% increase compared to 2017/18, with every region experiencing increased numbers of former UASC care leavers.

5 A Whole System View

5.1 Comparing activity

Looking at children’s social care activity over the past twelve years shows clearly the increase in early help assessments, initial contacts and section 47 enquiries. The significant increases in initial contacts and Section 47 enquiries set against other rates of activity, is stark.

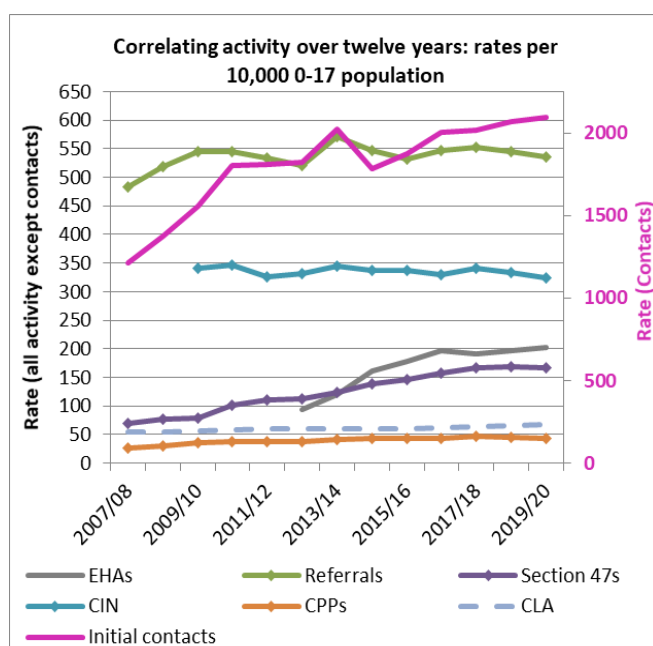


Figure 7 - Correlating activity over twelve years

5.2 Why children and families require services

Information about why children and families require early help or social care services has been categorised into two types of factors:

- **Societal determinants:** changes to the underlying needs faced by the local community and parents. This includes population changes, housing difficulties, in-secure work and poverty
- **System factors:** the way that the system of services responds to families requiring help.

Societal Determinants

5.3 Population

There were 12 million children aged 0-17 in England in 2019, 156,611 (+1.3%) more than two years ago (ONS, 2020). Growth in population accounts for some, but not all, of the increase in demand for services. Both the historical and projected increases in population vary across the country. The 0-17 age population, based on 2018 mid-year estimates, is projected to increase to 12.2m in 2025, again with regional variations.

Respondents told us that population and demographic changes are having a more widespread impact on the demand for services, for example school places and SEND provision.

5.4 Poverty

In 2018/19 there were 2.7 million children and young people living in relative low income and the proportion of children living in low income families in individual authorities varies, from 6% to 38% living in relative poverty.

The continued impact of welfare reforms, families affected by the benefit cap, in-work poverty, and the economic downturn were significant determinants of presenting factors such as, for example, parental mental ill health, domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and child neglect.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was reported by respondents to be extremely concerning in terms of exacerbating disadvantage for children and their families, but also the future impact on children's services in providing the necessary safeguarding and wellbeing support.

5.5 Housing and homelessness

Nationally, there has been a 31% increase in statutory homeless families. Between January and March 2020, there were **6,260** families assessed as being in priority need of housing due to having dependent children. In the same period, there were **62,610** households with children in temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfast, nightly paid self-contained accommodation or private or local authority accommodation (MHCLG, 2020). Strikingly, more than 25,000 families - 40% of families in temporary housing - were accommodated outside of their borough in the first 3 months of 2020 (36% in 2018). These families may have been particularly isolated from the support of family and friend networks during the first period of lockdown.

5.6 Parental capacity and needs

Adults experiencing domestic abuse, mental health difficulties or substance misuse, remain the most common reasons why children come to the attention of early help and/or children's social care services. A range of studies report the prevalence and impact of these factors on children's safety and wellbeing. The evidence gained through ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research robustly identifies the impact on children and services of a lack of parental capacity to provide an adequate caregiving environment, however this lack of capacity is likely to stem from wider socio-economic determinants.

Domestic abuse was cited as the most prevalent, and is a prominent factor in re-referral and repeat child protection plans showing just how difficult it is to achieve

sustainable change in circumstances where domestic abuse is present.

Local authorities reported a variety of ways in which they are tackling the impacts on children of these factors, including meeting the increased need during the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of stresses on families during this time. For example, early help offer flexed to provide additional parenting support virtually for parents struggling during lockdown.

5.7 Needs identified in early help and social care

The child's behaviour, parenting, domestic abuse and the child's learning or physical disability or illness are the most prevalent needs, or reasons for involvement, cited in early help assessments.

Parental domestic abuse, parental mental health and emotional abuse continue to be the most prevalent factors in social care assessment, with significant increases in these factors over the past two years.

Whilst multiple needs can be recorded for early help, this is not the case in statutory reporting of referrals, child protection plans and children looked after plans. There is an increase in the proportion of referrals which have a primary need of abuse and/or neglect to 62.4% of all referrals in 2019/20.

More children are subjects of child protection plans for neglect and emotional abuse, and fewer for physical or sexual abuse. More children are starting to be looked after due to Abuse or Neglect, an increase to 62.5% of all children looked after in 2019/20.

These data illustrate the substantial impact that parenting capacity has on children and on demand across early help and social care. These are commonly issues where children

and families struggle to sustain improvements resulting in repeat episodic interventions.

5.8 Age

The age profile of children becoming subjects of child protection plans and starting to be looked after has continued to shift towards older children. 43.5% of all children ceasing to be looked after are aged 16 and 17, the majority of whom will be going on to be care leavers.

The number of young people aged 16-17 who started to be looked after in 2019/20 continues to show a year-on-year increase. In the 123 authorities providing valid data, the proportion of under 1 and 1 to 4 age groups becoming looked after has remained fairly steady with increases in the 5-9 and 16 and over age groups. Children aged 5 to 9 starting to be looked after has reduced from 39.5% to 26.3% of all children.

5.9 Adolescents

Most authorities report they have seen increased identification of needs around child exploitation for older young people as national awareness has increased longitudinally. Over the period covered by Safeguarding Pressures research (2007 – 2020), there has been a growing awareness and understanding of the risks and harms facing young people outside of the family home. This includes both sexual and criminal exploitation and the harms associated with gang activity, knife crime and serious youth violence.

Since 2018, the number of young people identified as victims of child sexual exploitation has fallen slightly (-7%), while

the numbers of young people identified as involved in gangs or being trafficked have both seen significant percentage increases (70% and 45% respectively). In 2019/20, **33,400** children and young people fell into one or more of these categories as a result of a social care assessment (DfE, 2020).

Local areas have developed tailored responses to manage and reduce these risks, including specialist workers and teams; multi-agency initiatives to disrupt criminal activity; and, the use of sophisticated risk assessment and screening tools to support identification.

5.10 Increase in complexity

Children and young people requiring support from children's services are presenting with more complex and multiple needs. Whilst this has been increasingly evident over the past two years, it has been more acute during the pandemic and is forecast to increase further as the full impact of the pandemic is realised.

System Factors

5.11 Effectiveness of social care activity

Timeliness of activities such as assessments and reviews have not changed significantly over the past six years, despite significant challenges in the system as a result of an increase in demand. Authorities continue to operate in a timely and efficient manner. There has been improvement or insignificant change in the proportion of assessments completed within the expected 45 working days; initial child protection conferences held within 15 working days of a section 47 enquiry; and, child protection plans reviewed within the required timescales.

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 efforts made by local authorities to avoid delay and avert drift for children.

The prevalence of children and young people who are the subjects of repeat activity ('revolving door') does not necessarily mean that there is failure in the system to address the needs of children and young people the first time. Some children require multiple interventions over time as circumstances change.

The proportion of referrals that are re-referrals within 12 months has changed little in the past five years from 21.9% to 22.6%. (DfE, 2020). The number of children who are subjects of child protection plans for a second or subsequent time has increased slightly year-on-year.

11.4% of children who started to be looked after in 2019/20 had been looked after previously (based on 103 local authorities supplying valid data on entry *and* re-entry), a decrease from 12.7% in phase 6 (2017/18) of this research. Just under a quarter of children starting to be looked after for a second or subsequent time are aged 16 or 17.

5.12 Outcomes and reasons for case closure

Outcomes of early help and social care activity such as early help assessments, contacts, referrals, assessments and ceasing to be looked after illustrate, to some extent, the flow between these parts of the system. 'Support or intervention provided' was the outcome in 61% of all assessments; 20%

‘stepped down from early help’ and 11% resulted in a ‘referral to children’s social care’ in responding authorities.

Although the proportion of initial contacts which are ‘no further action’ remains fairly constant at 25%, the proportion going on to social care referrals has decreased from 30.4% in 2012/13 to 25% in 2019/20. ‘Pass to early help services’ has increased from 0% to 15.9% evidencing the rise in provision of early help services and changes to the use in single front doors to early help and social care.

74% of referrals in responding authorities led to a social care assessment; 15.1% led to strategy discussions and/or S47 enquiry and 6.3% ‘no further action’ in 2019/20 (DfE, 2020).

30.2% of social care assessments have an outcome of ‘no further action’, an increase on previous years (DfE, 2020).

‘No further action’ means ‘no statutory social work intervention required’, not that there was no support offered.

More children leave care to return home to live with parents than for any other reason (22%). However, the proportion of children who do so has reduced consistently over the years. Of those children who return home, 18% do so to live with parents/other person with parental responsibility as part of the care planning process, and 4% who return home do so outside of the care plan for the child.

5.13 Other factors

There continues to be evidence of the ripple effect felt by local authority children’s services stemming from changes to other

provision, such as schools, housing and pressures in partner agencies. These include the impact of legislative and policy changes, particularly the requirements of the Children & Families Act 2014 in relation to children with special educational needs and disability (SEND). Meeting the requirements of the SEND Code of Practice (2014) and the cost of provision for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities have placed significant and unsustainable budgetary pressures on local authorities over the past few years.

In Phase 6 (2017/18), we reported a 33% increase in the number of children with either a statement or an Education Health and Care Plan since the Children & Families Act 2014 was implemented. Whilst there has been increased in plans for all age groups, the greatest increases are for young people aged over 16. There are now **52% more** children and young people with an EHC Plan in 2019/20 than in 2014/15 (**149,926 plans**).

67 out of 85 (79%) local areas whose SEND inspection reports were published since 1st April 2018 resulted in Written Statements of Action, an indication of significant weaknesses in the areas’ SEND arrangements spanning provision by the local authority, schools and health services (ADCS, 2020).

6 Workforce

There were 30,720 children and family social workers (excluding agency workers) at 30th September 2019, an increase of 7.8% from two years ago. Of these, 53.5% were case-holders (DfE, 2020).

Recruitment and retention of experienced social workers continues to be a key challenge, more so for some authorities than others, who report having a more stable workforce than previously. Strategies to boost recruitment and retention of experienced and skilled workers are in place and were reported to have resulted in reduced reliance on agency staff.

A resounding comment from respondents to this research was how much value they place on their workforce and the impact that their staff have generally on improving children and family outcomes, but especially in 2020. Many respondents were effusive in seeing staff as their enablers and their greatest asset. Terms such as strong, effective, dedicated, resilient, passionate and committed to improving life chances of children and who can adapt their practice and respond to changing demands, were frequently used.

7 Finance

The impact of budget constraints and future funding uncertainty on local authority children's services cannot be underestimated. Local authorities have for a long time reviewed, restructured, rationalised and realised more effective ways of doing things.

Changes in spend on services for vulnerable children and their families, including early help, varies across the country. 44% of respondents reported a decrease in funding, and those who quantified the reductions did so as being between 15% and 30%. Reduction in the Public Health Grant was cited as one of the reasons for this.

33% of respondents experienced no change in funding, partly due to the continuation of Troubled Families Grant. All respondents agreed that the MHCLG Troubled Families Programme has propped up the delivery of early help in local authorities. Respondents were clear that any reduction or withdrawal of this funding, which is now due to cease in March 2022 after a further year's extension, would decimate their early help offers.

Whilst some authorities have accessed additional funding by bidding for grants, many are not able to do so. This short-termist approach to children's services funding is unsustainable and destabilises the ability to plan and sustain services in the medium to long term.

75 respondents had increased their children's services budgets in the past two years. The reasons have been either needs-led growth where actual or predicted overspends are 'covered' in-year, in recognition of increasing expenditure on statutory social work and growth in demand, or capital and transformation 'invest to save' investment in children's services aimed at reducing pressures, demand and therefore prevent future overspends.

63 respondents reported a total shortfall of £349.3m, an average of 9.1%. Only five authorities projected no overspend and only one reported a projected underspend. Extrapolated to all 151 local authorities, the **total required now to close the budget gap is £824.1m in one year to 'stay still'**.

The top four current funding pressures cited by local authorities have changed since phase 6 of this research and reflect pressures that are largely outside the direct

control of local authorities. Some authorities gave examples of proactive managing and influencing to relieve and mitigate where possible:

1. Placement costs for children looked after, specifically independent fostering agencies, independent residential and secure placements. Section 251 financial returns evidenced that the total spend on children looked after has **increased by 8% to £5.3 billion** in 2019/20.
2. Increase in demand and complexity of presenting needs.
3. SEND and High Needs Block, including transport. Whilst this is not central to Safeguarding Pressures research, this continues to be one of the top three and growing pressures for children's services.
4. Inequity in funding such as bidding for small one off pots of grant funding, 1-year spending review, lack of ring-fenced funding for early help.

Councils are facing significant budget deficits stemming from simultaneously increasing spending and reducing incomes as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The wider economic effects of the pandemic are impacting on councils' income sources to different extents as income generation through leisure and tourism, households and businesses diminishes.

71% of respondents felt that resources are exhausted following relentless increased demand, costs and savings targets. There continues to be a requirement on many children's services departments to make savings, ranging from 3% to 20% of their annual budgets.

17% of respondents stated that future funding needs are difficult to anticipate.

Those respondents who are currently implementing new ways of working, such as No Wrong Door and Family Safeguarding models, are hopeful that once embedded, they will see improved outcomes for children and families, reduced demand and costs, and start to bridge the funding gap, as has been evidenced in a number of authorities where these approaches have been introduced.

There is a sense, however, that unless we can meet the needs of children and families earlier, children's services will continue to face a cycle of funded overspends in order to maintain essential services for children and their families.

8 Direction of Travel

Respondents were less certain about the direction of travel for children's services in the next two years than in previous phases of this research. Of the 99 respondents to this question, 48% predicted a general continued rise in demand, compared to 64% (109 respondents) two years ago.

Fewer predicted a decrease in demand for services, but many were unable to commit to any specific predictions, prefacing their views by 'but it is difficult to say'. The longer term and lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on families remains to be seen, with respondents identifying 'latent need' that is yet unknown. We have not yet seen the full extent of the escalating needs predicted by many respondents. As the pandemic eases, local authorities anticipate significant increases in children's emotional and mental health needs. Moreover, the wider societal determinants of family distress including employment, housing

concerns and poverty will emerge as pressures that plunge families that would ordinarily manage into crisis.

Respondents predicted key changes under four headings, the full detail of which is in the full report:

- **Societal determinants:** including an increase in poverty and worklessness; domestic abuse; parental and child mental health difficulties; parental substance misuse; potential anti-social behaviour; and, community unrest
- **Presenting needs:** impact of school closures on educational outcomes, widening the gap for disadvantaged children; ongoing rise in number of families requiring a service both in children's services and SEND; long term impact for children experiencing hidden harms; an upward trajectory of admissions to hospital and care due to deteriorating mental health including self-harm, eating disorders and drug use
- **System factors:** continued use of working virtually; reduced resilience and retention of staff; lack of suitable affordable placements; increasing numbers of care leavers; authorities continuing to implement new ways of working, continuing transformation plans and aiming to work more effectively and efficiently to achieve greater impact for children
- **Anticipated national legislation and policy change:** Domestic Abuse Bill; SEND Review; Children's Social Care Review; decisions on Troubled Families funding; shaping of the provider market to ensure placement costs are sustainable and meet children's needs.

Recovery and renewal, as we learn to live with Covid-19, will require remedial action and reprofiling of resources to meet the needs of a generation of children and young

people who have lost significant amounts of learning.

9 Conclusion

The increases in the number of children and families supported by local authority children's services, the complexity of the issues families face and potential solutions have been examined in this report.

In the past one to two years, there has been some reduction across England, for example in children in need and children subjects of child protection plans, however the variation between local authorities and regions is more pronounced than previously. Variation is driven by a range of national and local factors such as levels of the supported asylum population, number of UASC, funding, models of practice, and deprivation.

Expenditure on children's social care has been increasing due to increased unit costs (especially for placements), increased number of children coming into care, fewer children leaving care and, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Responding authorities calculate a **9.1% (£824.1m)** budget deficit.

There is evidence that children's services leaders are implementing, influencing or aware of what actions are needed to stem the spiralling factors that contribute to poor outcomes for children, young people and families. Children's services leaders are clear that this needs a national, whole systems approach tackled as an adaptive challenge.

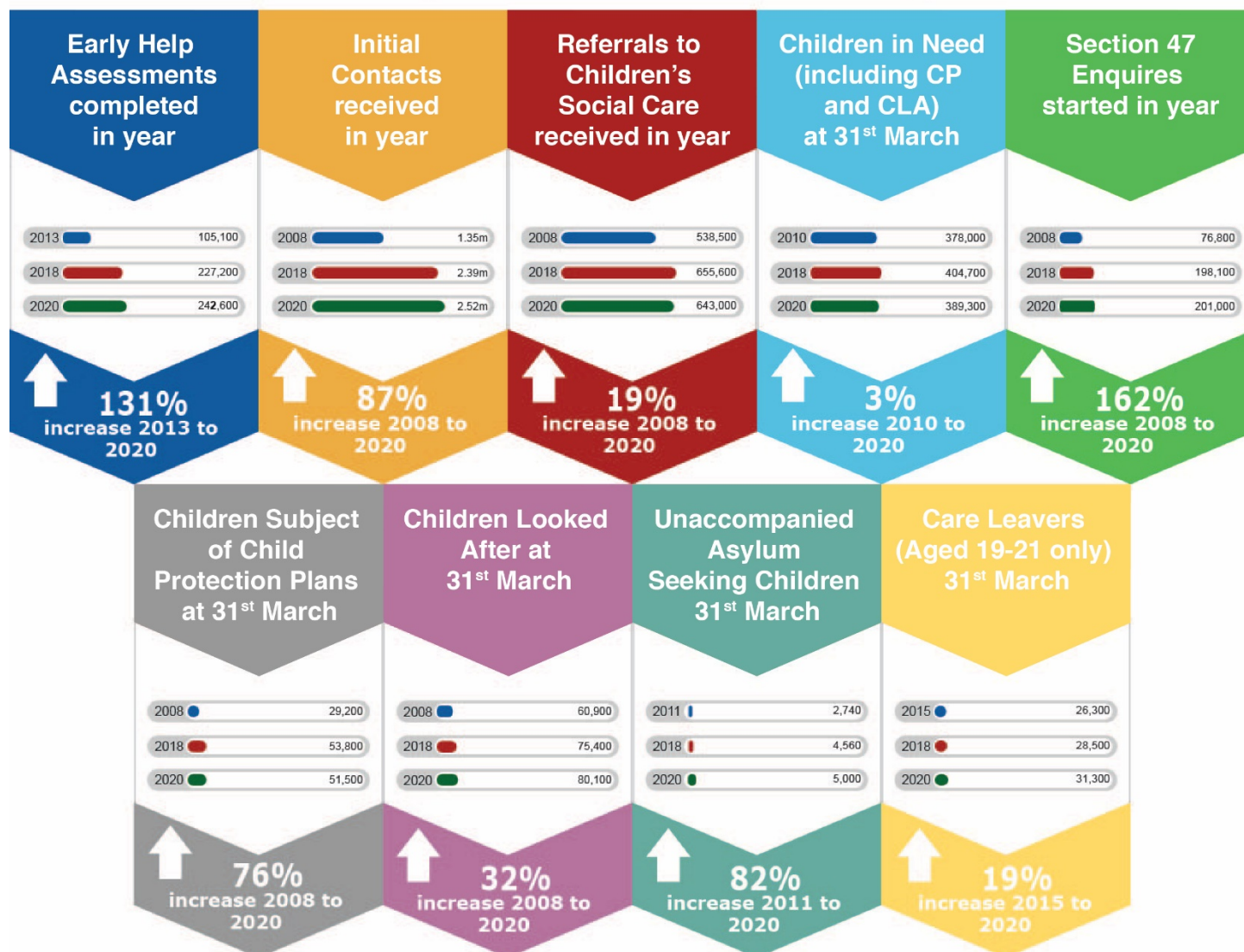
We must now turn our attention to how, collectively across central government departments, schools and local

communities, we can mobilise rapid wraparound support for children and families to thrive, not just survive. Now is the time for government to invest in children drawing together at a national level the disparate policy initiatives and pots of funding for unconnected policy intentions, into one substantial, coherent whole. 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



Latest Data: Number at 30th September 2020



Figure 8: 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: Regional quarterly datasets extrapolated to all England.

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