

TITLE OF REPORT: Demand Pressures, Children in Care and Child Protection

REPORT OF: Report of the Deputy Strategic Director, Children Social Care and Early Help

SUMMARY

This report provides the Committee with key headline activity information relating to children's social care, demonstrating the current demand pressures being felt across the service.

Purpose of Report

1. To provide the Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee with key headline activity relating to children's social care demand pressures.
2. The report focuses on current demand (April to July Q1 2022/23) and comparisons are made to previous periods, including 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22 which will give a sense of demand pre and post pandemic.
3. The report examines several areas of service demand across children's social care, including contacts, referrals, children in need, children in care and child protection.

Background

4. As reported in the performance update at the June 2022 committee, one of the challenges currently faced by children's social care services is the continuing increase in demand for support for children and families in Gateshead.
5. The increase is recognised nationally, and research published by the Association of Directors of Children's Services in February 2021¹, reflected a national picture of increasing demand to social care services. This general trend, which had been seen emerging for several years, has been complicated by the impact of Covid19 and the cost-of-living crisis.
6. Further research is currently underway to bring this evidence base up to date, with the final Association of Directors of Children's Services Safeguarding report (Phase 8) expected to be published at the beginning of November 2022.

¹ ADCS safeguarding pressures phase 7 - <https://adcs.org.uk/safeguarding/article/safeguarding-pressures-phase-7>

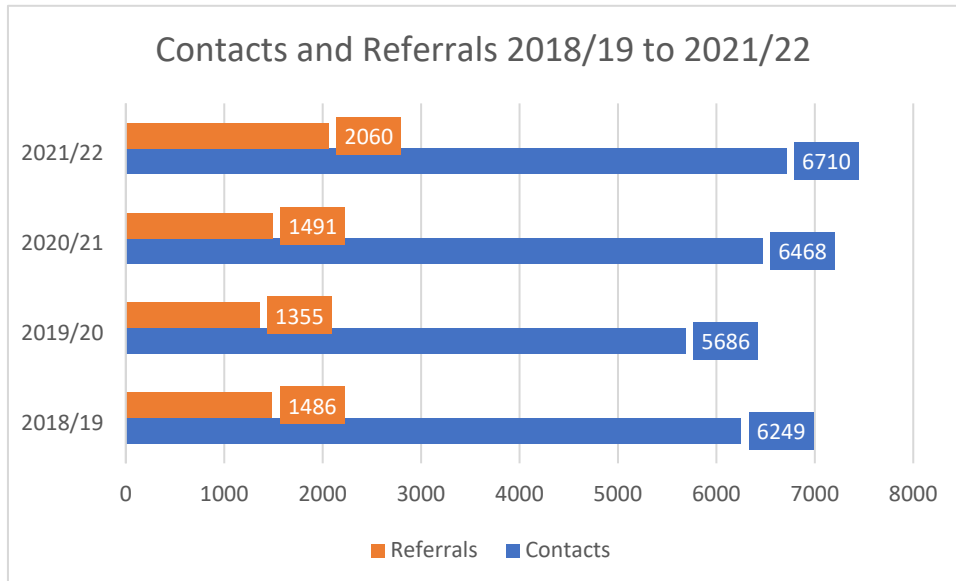
7. The End Child Poverty coalition reports² the North East as having the second highest rate of child poverty at 38% and this has seen the steepest rise in the last 5 years. All 12 North East local authorities feature in the top 20 local authorities nationally that have seen the sharpest increase in child poverty between 2014/15 and 2020/21
8. Around 16% of Gateshead residents live within the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in England and many of the families open to Children's Social Care and Early Help live in the most deprived areas of the borough.
9. The following section of the report looks at the key headline data and examines areas of social care activity, highlighting current demand pressures and compares volume against previous years.

Contacts, Referrals & Assessments

10. The demand experienced at the first point of contact for Social Care Services (the front door) has shown an increasing trend since 2018/19. This demand can be measured by the number of contacts made, and the number of those contacts that are then referred into Social Care services.
11. The number of new contacts received in 2021/22 (6,710) was 7% more than the number received in 2018/19 (6,250) and 4% more than the number in 2020/21, which highlights a year-on-year increase in contacts made at the front door.
12. The first quarter of 2022/23 has seen a decrease in the number of contacts received, however the proportion that were deemed necessary to refer into social services is higher than any of the previous 4 years.
13. There has been no significant change in the source of contacts with the proportions remaining similar year on year, contacts from the police make up the largest source, followed by Health Services and then Anonymous contacts.
14. The proportion of contacts progressing to a referral increased significantly in the last full year (2021/22), from 24% in 2019/20 and 2020/21, to 31% in 2021/22. The trend has continued for the first quarter of the current year (2022/23), with 33% of contacts converting to a referral.
15. Figure 1 illustrates the numbers and conversion of contacts to referrals each reporting year since 2018/19 to 2021/2022 and demonstrates the increase in conversion of contact to referral.

² The End Child Poverty coalition research - <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty/>

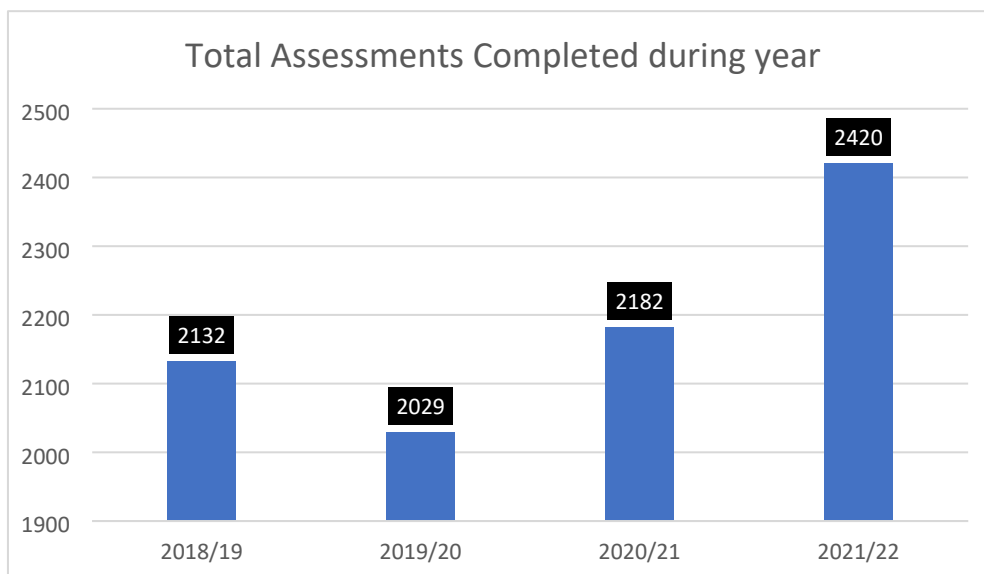
Figure 1 – Contacts and Referrals by year



16. The total number of referrals into Social Care services has increased year on year since 2019/20, with the most significant increase noted in 2021/22 (2060), 38% more compared to 2020/21 (1491). The number of referrals for Q1 of 2022/23 has reduced compared to the previous year but remains higher than the number reported in Q1 2019/20.

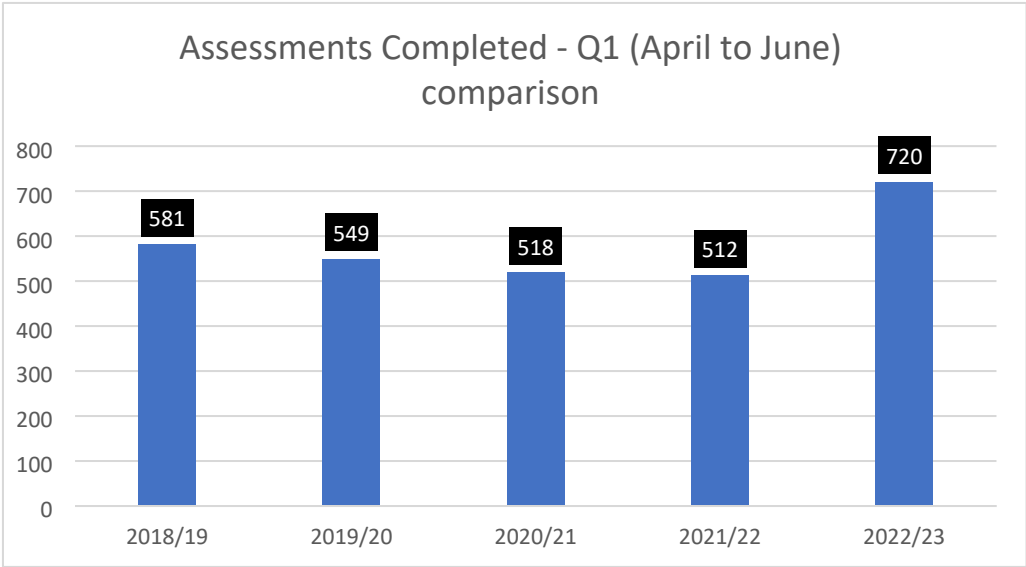
17. The increase in contacts and referrals described has resulted in a similar trend increase in the number of child and family assessments being undertaken each year. This highlights that the children and families subject to these contacts and referrals do require further intervention from Social Care. These increases are demonstrated in figure 2 (below).

Figure 2 – comparison of C&F assessments completed during the year



18. Quarter 1 data for 2022/23 has seen the highest number of assessments completed during the same period since 2018/19. The number of assessments completed in 2021/22 (2420) increased by 13% compared to 2018/19 (2132), shown in figure 3.

Figure 3 – Assessments completed during Quarter 1 Comparison



19. Of the children and family assessments completed, the numbers that then lead to a further safeguarding investigation (Section 47 Enquiry) give another example of the demand pressures resulting from increased contact and referral.

Child Protection

20. Except for the 2020/21 period, the number of Section 47 Enquiries commencing during the year has seen a year-on-year increase. In 2021/22, 747 were commenced, with 602 in 202/21, 640 in 2019/20 and 582 in 2018/19. This is a 28% increase in S47 Enquires in 2021/22 compared to 2018/19.

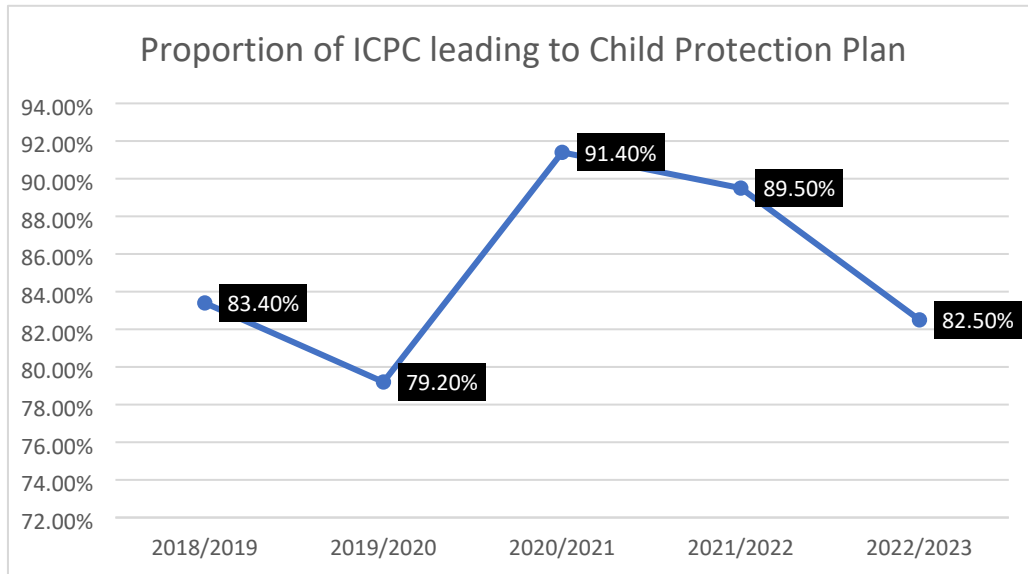
21. For the first quarter of 2022/23 there have been 172 Section 47 Enquiries initiated, which again is slightly lower than the same period in 2021/22 (179) but higher than the previous 3 years.

22. As a result of the Section 47 Enquiry, it may be necessary to progress the case to determine if the child or children in question can be protected without the need for a court order. This takes the form of an Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC), which is chaired by an independent reviewing officer and should take place within 15 days of the initial enquiry.

23. The number of ICPC’s starting during 2021/22 (384) was higher than the number in 2020/21 (319), but slightly lower than the number in 2019/20 (408). However, comparing to pre-pandemic levels, the number is higher than in 2018/19 (377).

24. Examining the conversion rates of Initial Child Protection Conference to Child Protection Plans, figure 4 demonstrates a reducing trend of conversion rate since April 2018, noting a spike during the 20/21 reporting period. This is in line with the reduction of children subject to a plan and more significantly a more noticeable reduction from 21/22 to 22/23 (however the 22/23 rate is only based on quarter 1 data, so this rate may well increase as the year progresses).

Figure 4 – Conversion rates for ICPC to CP Plans



25. The number of children who became subject to a Child Protection Plan (as a result of the outcome of the initial child protection conference) has seen a steady decline overall, since April 2018. The trend data is demonstrated in figure 5 on the next page.

Early Help and Domestic Abuse

26. Another area of demand is around the Target Family Support Team, who provide Early Help services to children and families. Looking at the trends since 2018/19 we can see that the highest number of referrals came in financial year 2018/19 where monthly referral average was 139. The referral rate decreased in 2019/20 and further in 2020/21 however there was a steady rise in 2021/22. In the last 12 months (up to end of June 2022) referrals continue to remain consistent with 1346, compared to the preceding 12 months, indicating a consistent level of demand.

27. Between April 2022 and June 2022, referrals into the Domestic Abuse Team have increased compared to the same period in 2021, with 10% more referrals being received. However, a drop in referrals in 2021/22 was seen, when comparing to the 2 years before this but current demand indicates that the numbers are increasing to levels similar to 2020/21.

Open Social Work Cases

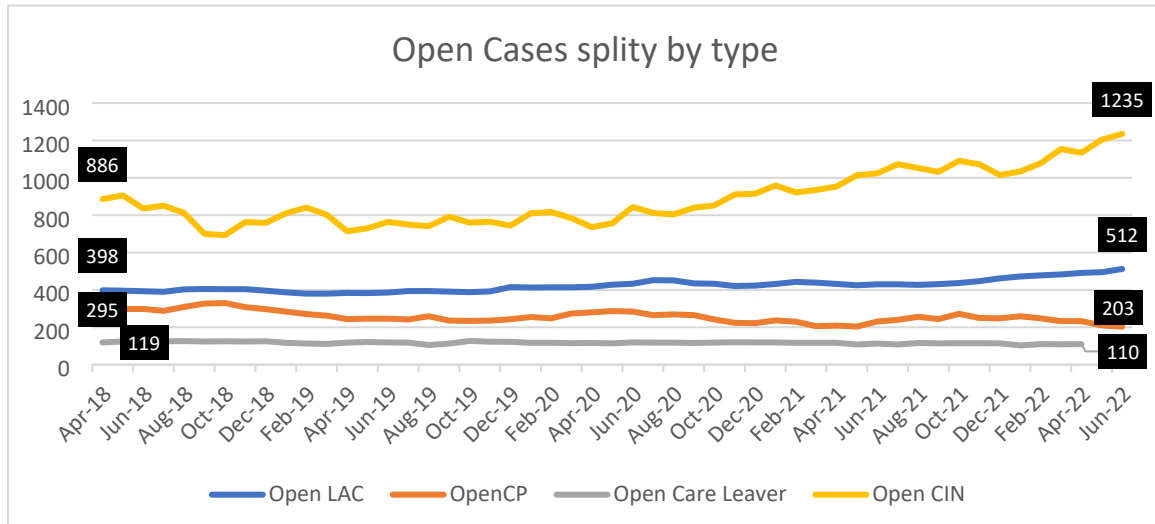
28. With the increase in demand, we have experienced an increase in the number of open cases across the service. The biggest increase can be seen in the number of children in need (who are not LAC or CP) with 886 as at April 2018 compared to 1235 as at June 2022. This equates to a 39% increase in children since April 2018 and a significant increase to social workers case load.

29. For children looked after, there has been an increase of 28% when comparing April 2018 (398) to June 2022 (512). This increase in safeguarding activity has meant additional pressure on the social care workforce, again, resulting in increased caseloads per social worker.

30. The number of care leavers in touch has remained static, and we are aware of the decrease in the number children subject to a child protection plan, which has shown a slow downward trend since April 2018.

31. Figure 5 illustrates the above-mentioned case trends since April 2018 through to June 2022.

Figure 5 – open cases as at month end since April 2018



Looked After Children

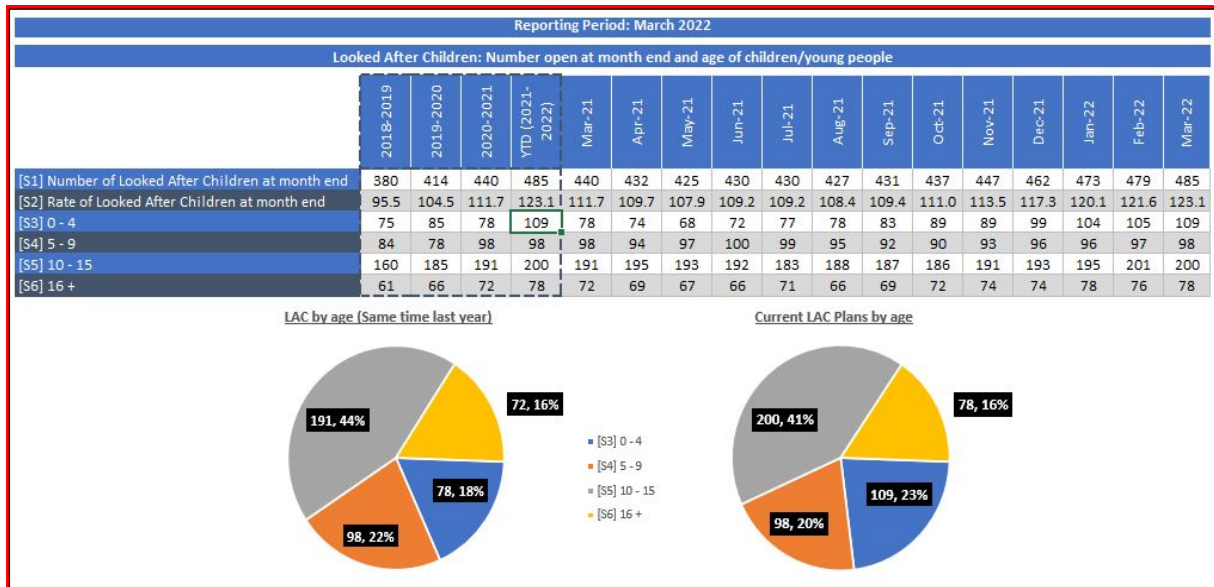
32. As noted above, the number of children looked after by Gateshead has seen a significant increase, especially during the period of April 2021 to March 2022, where the sharpest increase of children looked after has been seen.

33. Since April 2018, there has been a steady increase up until March 2021 from 392 to 440, an increase of 48 children. However, in the 1 year between April 2021 and March 2022, there has been a sharp increase of 51 children, taking the number of LAC to 491. The position at June 2022 continued this trend, with a total of 518 children looked after, the highest level of LAC recorded.

34. Figure 6 shows the majority of Looked After Children continue to be those between the ages of 10 -to- 15 years old, in line with previous years. At the end of March 22 compared with the same time last year there was a big increase in younger children aged 0-4 who were LAC with 23% compared with 18% in March 21 this was also an increase of 31 children.

35. On average, the cost to Gateshead Council for a child looked after is £40,000 per child annually. The outsourcing of placements comes at a higher cost, the most expensive of which costing £30,000 per week currently. This is not only occurring due to increased complexities of need for the children in the system but also due to the increased numbers of children requiring placements. Increased activity set out above has resulted in a significant impact on the social care workforce with caseloads per social worker increasing which will also need to be kept under review.

Figure 6 – Age Profile of looked after children



36. The following table shows the numbers of LAC starting and the number of those ending over the last 12 months from June 2022 and illustrates that the number of children entering care month on month is consistently higher than those leaving.

	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sep-21	Oct-21	Nov-21	Dec-21	Jan-22	Feb-22	Mar-22	Apr-22	May-22	Jun-22
Starting	14	18	19	17	24	29	23	13	12	12	13	31
Ending	14	21	15	11	14	14	12	7	7	5	7	10
Increase	0	-3	+4	+6	+10	+15	+11	+6	+5	+7	+6	+21
As At	430	427	430	437	447	462	473	479	484	491	497	518

37. Further LAC analysis is currently underway, and a number of workshops have been held in recent months to examine the data and formulate a more detailed understanding of the pressures around the increase in Looked after children.

Recommendations

1. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to:
 - Receive the report for information around demand pressures
 - Identify any activities they would like more information about
 - Agree to receive a progress update in 6 months