



Executive Summary

# SAFEGUARDING PRESSURES PHASE 8

December 2022

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd



## 1 Introduction

The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) have 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. The latest report draws on evidence from 125 local authorities (LAs) representing 83% of England's child population; 21 interviews with directors or assistant directors of children's services; and a range of relevant literature, policy and nationally available datasets.

## 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<sup>1</sup>. Historic legislation and policy influences continue to have an impact, for example, the excessive costs resulting from out-dated home-to-school transport legislation. New and emerging policy, including a new education white paper: *Opportunities for all, strong schools with great teachers for your child*; the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and alternative provision green paper: *Right support, right place, right time*, and the *Independent review of children's social care*. The latter recommends a significant policy shift with the aim of transforming children's services and the care experience, which has the potential to rewrite how services for children are framed and delivered. Respondents were both hopeful and anxious as these developments have not yet been brought together via a coherent national strategy or overarching vision. There have been difficult experiences in the recent past in implementing national policy reforms which have not been sufficiently funded and have created unintended consequences, for example, the 2014 SEND reforms and the more recent reforms to unregulated placements for children in care.

## 3 Needs and Presenting Factors

Many of the reasons why children and families require early help or support from social care continue to be broadly the same, but with increased prevalence and complexity being seen:

- **societal determinants:** changes to the underlying factors and needs faced by children and families. This includes increased numbers of families experiencing housing issues and poverty, including the impact of the cost of living crisis. 81% of respondents state that population and demographics (including housing and homelessness) make a difference to social care and/or early help activity

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

- **parental factors:** substance misuse, poor parental mental health, and domestic abuse. 77% of respondents stated that parental factors have a high or moderate impact on provision of social care and early help services
- **children’s mental health:** the ADCS special thematic report on children’s mental health published in November 2022 highlights increasing prevalence of poor mental health amongst children and young people along with challenges accessing services in a timely way. More LAs are developing their services to help bridge the gap, and meet the needs of children where they can. However, the availability of the right mental health support, at the right time, and in the right place, remains an ongoing concern to leaders of children’s services
- **extra-familial risks and harm (EFRH):** children at risk of, or already experiencing, radicalisation, child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, serious youth violence, peer on peer abuse, trafficking, and modern-day slavery as well as serious violence, continue to be a focus for children’s services. Respondents shared how they have been, or are currently developing, robust multi-agency responses locally to address these risks and harms.

The most prevalent factors in early help and social care assessments in 2021/22 were:

- early help: child’s mental health (28.9%), behaviour (24.7%) and domestic abuse (24.3%)
- social care assessments: parental domestic abuse (27.5%), poor parental mental health (26%) and emotional abuse (17%).

Respondents assert that there continues to be a ripple effect stemming from external and other factors, such as the increase in the numbers of children and young people with SEND, plus associated costs of meeting such needs.

#### 4 Children’s Services Activity

All respondents stated that there was an overall increase in safeguarding activity over the last two years, despite an initial reduction in referrals linked to lockdowns in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. More children who were not previously known to social care services were presenting at a later stage, with greater levels of need and higher risks, and as a result, more children were immediately becoming subjects of child protection plans or care proceedings. The two charts below, and graphic in Appendix A, illustrate the volume of children’s services activity as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, and over time.

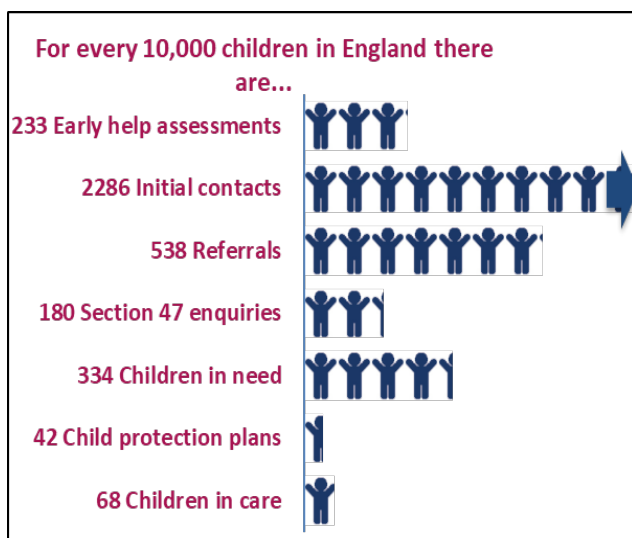


Figure 1: Rates per 10,000 of the 0-17 population

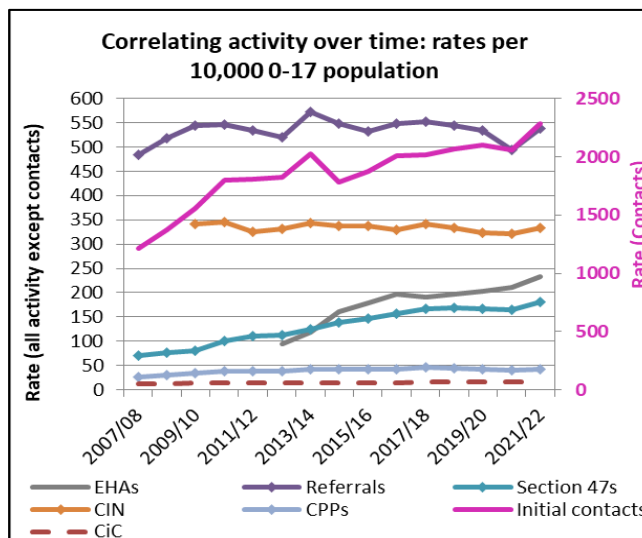


Figure 2: Correlating activity over time (Source: SGP8 – EHAs and Initial Contacts. DfE – referral, S47, CIN, CP, CiC).

**Early help services** have continued, and are being further developed, despite funding pressures within LAs. National programmes which support early help, such as the Departments for Education and Levelling Up’s Supporting Families Programme and Departments for Education and Health’s Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme (2022-2025) are welcome.

**Integrated ‘front doors’** and pathways between early help and children’s social care services have become more common since phase 7 of this research. This is reflected in the increase in initial contacts and reduction in referrals where the outcome is ‘pass to early help’. 75% of responding LAs stated that there have been no changes to early help or social care thresholds, compared to 48% two years ago.

**Children in need and child protection:** whilst fewer social care assessments were completed in 2021/22, the number of section 47 enquiries continues to increase at a significant rate, up 8% in the past two years. Fewer are converting to initial child protection conferences, and fewer children are subjects of children protection plans. The latter is reported to be as a result of implementing of new practice models and approaches in some LAs, such as Family Safeguarding. High profile national child abuse cases have impacted on demand at the front door and fed into negative perceptions of social workers amongst the families they seek to work with, and the general public. Respondents were positive about the learning from child safeguarding practice reviews.

**Legal proceedings:** the social work elements of private law proceedings, care proceedings and applications for a deprivation of liberty order have increased in both number and complexity over the past two years. 75% of respondents report that they have experienced changes in family court decisions which have impacted on their care planning for children and young people and their permanency. The Public Law Working Group’s Best Practice Guidance was

welcomed by respondents as a mechanism to deliver improvements in outcomes and in encouraging closer working relationships with local courts, and other agencies.

**Children in care:** the number of children in care as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 has increased by 3% in the past two years. There are a large cohort of children (41%) for whom the plan is to remain in long term foster care, reflected in a larger proportion are subject of a full care order (58.2%).

The number of **unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)** in England as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 is relatively small at 5,570, but nearly twice as many UASC are in care at any point during the year than captured in the 31<sup>st</sup> March snapshot. UASCs are now cared for right across the country as a result of the government mandating a longstanding voluntary national transfer scheme in 2021. Responding LAs continue to be concerned about the robustness of the age assessments undertaken by the Home Office and the pressures placed on local services via the growing use of hotel accommodation. Respondents reported that Home Office funding for UASC, particularly former UASC care experienced young people, continues to be insufficient to meet the full costs of supporting children and young people to live, learn and thrive.

There are 45,940 **care experienced young people** aged 17 to 21 according to the DfE, and respondents estimate there are an additional 9,810 aged 22 to 25 who are entitled to the extended support duties contained in the *Children and Social Work Act 2017*.

## 5 A Whole System View

There continues to be a shift to older children (aged 16 and 17 years) receiving social care services, including a higher proportion being subjects of child protection plans and entering care.

LAs continue to operate in a timely and efficient manner, with little change in timeliness performance measures for re-referrals, assessments and section 47 enquires, and for duration of child protection plans or duration of care, despite the increasing need. This clearly demonstrates the huge efforts made by LAs, and their staff, to avoid delay and avert drift for children.

The local context in which children's services operate continues to vary significantly, with levels of deprivation, geography, government funding and service transformation programmes, all contributing factors. The focus on new models of service organisation and delivery reported in phase 7 of this research has continued. A number of innovations have been found to be effective and are being adopted by increasing numbers of LAs in an attempt to spread good practice, and to reduce demand for children's social care e.g. Strengthening Families Programme.

The increase in children's social care activity in the past two years should not be viewed as a failure of these actions or programmes. The events of the last two years have been

unprecedented, and the 'shifting sands' and the changing operating context must be considered when evaluating success. Respondents were clear, without these innovations and efforts, the situation for children, their families, and children's services, would be even more challenging than it is at this time.

## **6 Placement Sufficiency, Quality and Cost**

There is a growing body of research and analysis raising concerns relating to placement sufficiency, providers of placements, cost and profit. The majority of children in care are placed with families, or in residential settings, where they do exceptionally well. As more children require specialist support, together with the instability in the placement market, the challenges LAs face to provide the right homes for children in care at an affordable price are becoming ever greater. This is one of the biggest concerns for nearly all LA children's services leaders. LAs reported an unrealistic requirement by the regulator and/or children's homes to move children at little or no notice as a result of inspection or matching decisions. This is further compounding the challenges faced.

Respondents were of the view that there were never, or rarely, enough LA foster placements (35%) or welfare secure placements (91%), and 58% have used an unregulated placement as an alternative. Despite the numbers of foster carers in England being at their highest levels ever, they are not keeping up with demand in the sector. The largest growth is being seen in the independent sector, and amongst family and friends foster carers, with fewer mainstream fostering applications or new provision being seen. This is likely to result in a further reduction in available placements going forward.

Fewer children in care as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 are placed for adoption, and more are placed in independent living, a fostering placement with relative or friend, and in residential accommodation. The proportion placed in own LA provision, notably foster care and residential care, has reduced. LAs are consequently creating costly bespoke packages or paying significantly more for placements, which are often at a distance. The average weekly cost for residential placement increased by 26% between 2017/18 and 2021/22.

Respondents were positive about the future in terms of many 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 fostering placements generally. Many were sceptical that regional care cooperatives were the solution here. Local solutions to the placement crisis are being implemented, where possible, but there was an overwhelming view from respondents that an urgent intervention from national government is required.

## **7 Workforce**

Securing a sufficient, skilled workforce was widely reported as one of the key challenges at present. According to latest published data, although there was a 2% increase in qualified

social workers as at 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021, there was a 3% reduction in the number who were case holding. 108 LAs responding to a recent ADCS workforce survey reported on average 14.6% social worker vacancies and 16.7% of the social work workforce were agency staff. An increased, yet reluctant, use of costly managed project teams was reported as at 30<sup>th</sup> June 2022. These averages mask significant variation between LAs, and do not provide the full picture of capacity shortages as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, or the increasing and disproportionate cost of agency social workers. In the context of increased demand, complexity and impacting factors already evidenced in this report, this means that the size of the workforce is not keeping up with social care demand, and cost and sufficiency issues are a significant concern for leaders of children's services. Sufficiency is also being keenly felt across other professions, including residential care staff, most notably registered children's home managers, educational psychologists and community health professionals.

The *Independent Review of Children's Social Care* 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. It also recognised the need to improve the diversity of leadership in children's services. If implemented, the review will have a significant role in shaping the children's services workforce of the future.

## 8 Finance

LAs total net planned expenditure on education and children and young people's services for 2022/23 is £66.9 billion, of which £10.3 billion (15.3%) is allocated to children and young people's services, with much of the remaining funds allocated to schools and education. Over the past two years, it appears that children's services funding has been largely protected and, in some cases, risen as individual LAs have taken the decision to invest in response to increased need and demand. The continued impact of budget constraints on LA children's services, changes in expenditure plus future funding uncertainty cannot be under-estimated. 65 respondents reported a shortfall of an average of 7.5% of their children's services budget, when extrapolated up to all 151 LAs, the total required now to close the budget gap is £778m in one year just to 'stay still'.

The top four current funding pressures cited by respondents are:

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

Respondents continue to deliver savings where possible and anticipate further budget cuts will be necessary in the future. Additionally, uncertainty relating to central government policy direction and the cost of implementing new reforms for schools, children's social care, SEND plus the emerging cost of living crisis and inflationary pressures add further uncertainty for the future sufficiency of children's services budgets to meet current, and expected, increases in demand for statutory services.

## 9 Future Predictions

Predictions made throughout the different phases of Safeguarding Pressures research have been realised, and respondents were more certain this year about the direction of travel for children's services than in previous years. 60% of respondents predicted a general continued rise in demand in the next two years compared to 48% two years ago. They also predict change or continuation of:

- social determinants, such as the cost of living crisis, which will sadly push more children into poverty and exacerbate parental factors that we know contribute to child harm e.g. parental conflict
- presenting needs, including the ongoing increase in families requiring children's services and/or SEND, the rising number of UASC, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's development and educational outcomes, widening the gap for disadvantaged children
- system factors, such as further challenges in recruitment and retention, reduced resilience of staff, continued budgetary pressures and continuing placement cost pressures and insufficiency. Respondents are hopeful about continued investment in robust early help services and achieving transformation by implementing, or further embedding, new ways of working
- anticipated national legislation and policy changes.

## 10 Conclusion

The research is clear that whilst the large majority of children in England are happy, healthy, safe and do well, there is a small, and sadly growing, minority who are vulnerable and at risk of harm, or who are committing harm, with reduced life chances into adulthood. Children and young people are being safeguarded and services continue to be provided through early help and children's social care in a timely manner, despite increases in demand. The ripple effect of pressures in other service areas, such as health and education, are being felt and there was an overwhelming feeling that the support available from LA children's services has become the last resort for some children and their families whose escalating needs should have been identified earlier and met via effective universal services. This pattern will further increase without urgent attention from national government via a whole systems approach.

As called for two years ago in Safeguarding Pressures phase 7, there continues to be an urgent need for government to draw together the disparate policy initiatives and pots of



funding for unconnected policy intentions, to signal a shift away from private sector profiteering and truly invest in children, young people and the public services that support them in order to make this a country that works for all children.

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## Safeguarding Pressures: Change in children's services activity

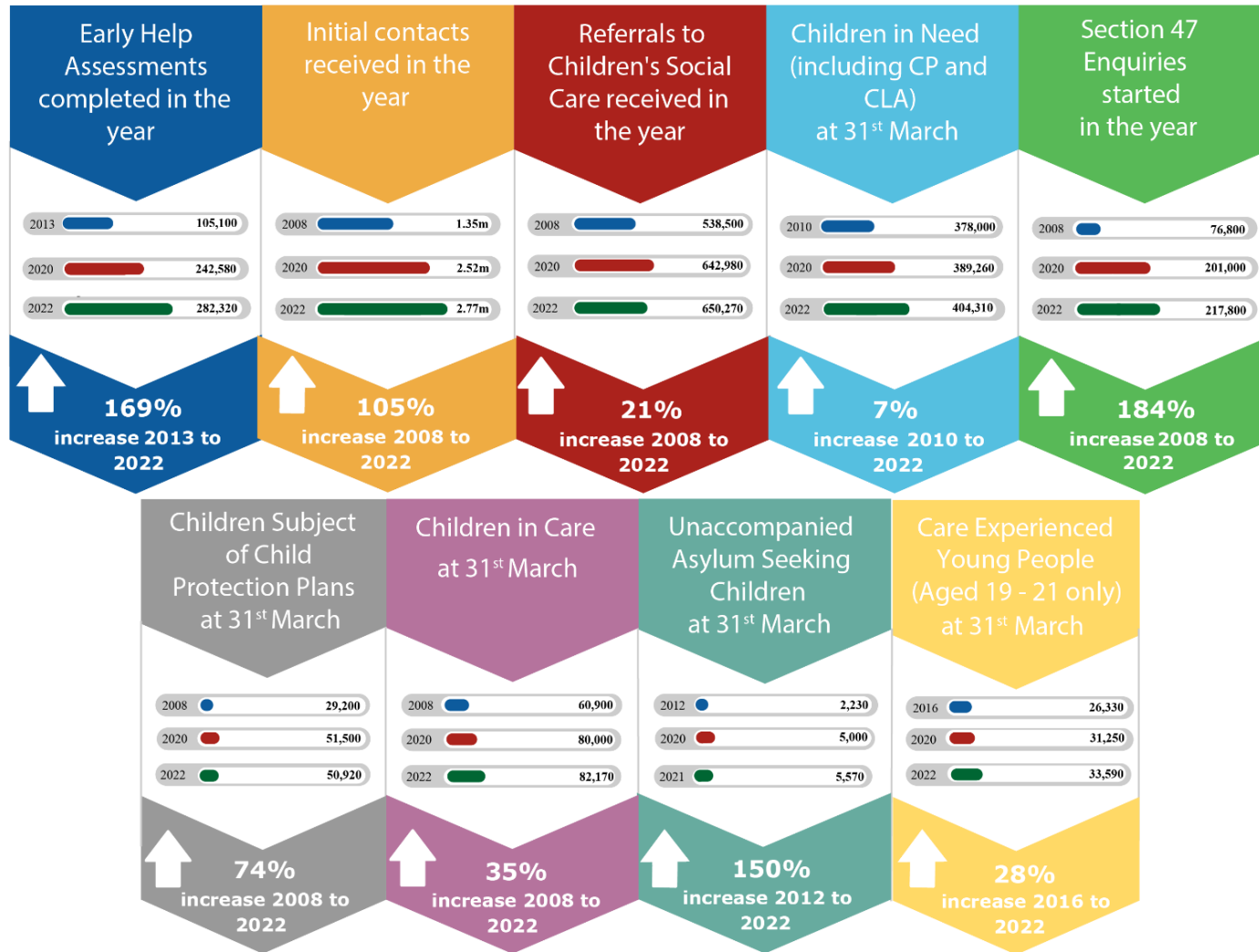


Figure 3: Where nationally available data is not available, results from responding authorities has been extrapolated to an all-England total based on proportion of population covered. Source of latest data: Regional quarterly datasets extrapolated to all England.

## The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd (ADCS)

ADCS is the national leadership association in England for statutory directors of children's services and their senior management teams



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