

Aberdeen City Council's Chief Social Work Officer's 2021/22 Annual Report

Foreword

Every local authority is required to have a professionally qualified Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO), as set out in the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1994. The role of the CSWO is to ensure that the Council and Aberdeen City Health & Social Care Partnership (ACHSCP) receive effective, professional advice and guidance in the provision of social work services, whether provided directly or purchased on behalf of the local authority.

The CSWO has responsibility for performance improvement, as well as the identification, management and reporting of corporate risks as they relate to social work services. To fulfil these responsibilities, the CSWO has access to elected members, reporting through various Committees, and to the Integrated Joint Board (IJB), the Chief Officer of the HSCP and the Chief Executive of the Council. The CSWO provides professional leadership and promotes values and standards of professional practice, ensuring only registered Social Workers undertake those functions reserved in legislation and meet the requirements of the SSSC Codes of Practice.

Audit Scotland have noted the establishment HSCP's, made the role of the CSWO increasingly complex. In Aberdeen, Children's Social Work (CSW) is located within the Council, whilst Adult and Justice Social Work (JSW) is located within the HSCP. This provides two challenges. Firstly, the CSWO has to retain oversight, professional leadership and provide assurance of safety and quality of all social work services across two large and complex organisations. Secondly, the CSWO has to step back from the role of Chief Officer to provide independent, professional oversight and challenge of CSW.

Delivery of the CSWO responsibilities requires close professional collaboration with the Lead for Social Work within ACHSCP who has operational responsibility for Adult and JSW services, and the management teams for whom we each have responsibility. Never has this been more critical than in the past year.

As Aberdeen City's CSWO, it is a privilege to present this report which recognises the excellent and dedicated commitment delivered day in day out by social work staff in a wide range of roles and with a diversity of responsibilities. This work is challenging and complex. I sincerely thank everyone of them for the professionalism and sacrifice they have shown during the year 2021/22.

1. Governance and Accountability

Whilst adult and children's social work have different governance arrangements, alignment is achieved through the governance and scrutiny of the Executive Leadership Group for Public Protection, Community Planning Partnership, Council Committees and the role of Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO) itself.

Children's Social Work Services

Governance of Children's Social Work services is through Council Committee structures, in particular the Operational Delivery Committee and the Public Protection Committee. Strategic improvement and partnership delivery is governed by the Executive Leadership Group (referred to as the Chief Officer Group or COG) in relation to child protection and by Community Planning Aberdeen (CPA) in relation to GIRFEC, Corporate Parenting and Children in Need. Strategic plans are driven forward by the multi-agency partnerships of the Child Protection Committee, who report to the COG, and the Children's Services Board (CSB) who report to CPA. The CSWO is a member of the COG, CPC and CSB and ensures interface across these governance arrangements.

The CSWO leads and works closely with a Children's Services Management team who have operational responsibility for delivery across the range of services.

Adult and Justice Social Work Services

Aberdeen City Council delegates a range of statutory functions in respect of social work and social care services to the Integration Joint Board (IJB) which sets out its ambitions and priorities through the preparation and implementation of its **Strategic Plan 2022-25**. The CSWO is a statutory member of the IJB. The CSWO is also a member of the Adult Protection Committee (APC) and is uniquely placed to provide an overview of the leadership and governance around the discharge of the local authority statutory functions in adult support and protection. ACHSCP has appointed a Lead for Social Work as part of its Leadership team. The Lead for Social Work works closely with the CSWO in respect of statutory responsibilities, governance arrangements, quality assurance and continuous improvement.

Additional governance oversight is exercised through the Executive Programme Board, chaired by the HSCP's Chief Officer which met weekly throughout the past year. Daily/weekly leadership and portfolio huddles were established to ensure that our decision-making was swift and the implementation of subsequently agreed actions was thorough and effective. The effectiveness of this huddle model is such that it has continued to be utilised to lead and direct our post-pandemic recovery albeit on a reshaped and less frequent basis.

The experience of delivering a critical service during the pandemic has highlighted the value of social work to individuals and families in our local communities. We are very mindful that there is still much to do and achieve as shown by the publication by Community Planning Aberdeen of its refreshed **Local Outcome Improvement Plan 2016-26** and the HSCP's Strategic Plan. The publication of the Independent Review of Adult Social Care (Feeley Report) last year, the recent introduction by the Scottish Government of the legislation to establish a National Care Service that incorporates a Social Work Agency and the ongoing debate and discussion about this significant development give an

added impetus to the social work function and highlights the difference that it makes to those in our local communities who are most disadvantaged, most vulnerable and most in need of our support.

2. Service Quality and Performance

Our delivery of service in the year 2021-22 and the effectiveness of this was again impacted by the COVID pandemic and the different public health measures that were in place at different times. Looking at the national health and wellbeing indicators from a city perspective ([IJB Annual Report 2021-22](#)), there was a decrease in the number of carers who felt supported in their caring role, the percentage of adults who felt safe at home and the proportion of care services that were graded as 'good' or 'better'. There was also an increase in the number of days that people spent in hospital when they were ready to be discharged. We recognise the importance of ensuring that individuals and their families have positive experiences and outcomes from our interventions and are committed to improving these where necessary.

A) Justice

As reported last year, the justice social work (JSW) service was inspected by the Care inspectorate in 2020. The two requirements in the [inspection report](#) that firstly, the service Delivery Plan and Performance Management Framework should be agreed and implemented and secondly, quality assurance of risk assessment and management should be strengthened were fulfilled. The pandemic however had a significant impact on the JSW ambition to build on that positive inspection outcome and put in place further developments and improvements for the benefit of the individuals that the service works with, the service workforce and other stakeholders.

Continuing to manage and support people to complete their statutory orders during the pandemic was challenging (see Table below) due to service limitations which meant that we had to be even more creative and flexible in developing suitable alternatives.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Justice Social Work Reports	1,126	715	935
Community Payback Orders	1,055	506	667
Diversion commenced	114	150	168
Bail Supervision commenced	45	4	26
Structured Deferred Sentence	25	11	30
Throughcare cases commenced in the community	32	38	40
Total no. of hours of Unpaid Work completed	52,854	32,153	36,683

The continued increase in Diversion from Prosecution however is very positive as it enables individuals who have committed offences and have significant underlying needs to be diverted into support and, ideally out of Court involvement and further offending at an early stage. Structured Deferred Sentences are similarly intended to be a lower level, albeit intensive diversion from custody with last year's figures higher than those pre-pandemic.

There has been an increasingly high percentage of remand prisoners with the Government and the Scottish Prison Service taking steps to reduce this pre-Covid by promoting Supervised Bail as an appropriate alternative. We successfully increased the number of Bail Supervision Orders imposed in Aberdeen to 45 in 2019/20 but pandemic-related Court closures reduced that to 4 in 2020/21 before increasing to 26 last year. This remains an area where we want to see sustained improvement in the years ahead.

It is believed that domestic offences increased during the pandemic, but this has not increased the number of Caledonian Programme assessments undertaken nor requirements imposed. There is, however, a 35% increase in the number of Caledonian cases on workers caseloads which is reflective of the difficulty in delivering programmatic groupwork in the last two years and the timescale of orders having to be extended to complete. This has put considerable pressure on the service and is compounded by the loss of Caledonian trained workers and the challenges in recruiting already trained workers and accessing training for workers that are either new to Justice Social Work or recently qualified.

Delivery of JSW statutory supervision was a huge challenge during the Covid pandemic. Workloads were prioritised in respect of risk and need with those assessed as being either highest risk, most vulnerable, released from custody and those who did not have telephones being seen face to face. Wherever possible contact was maintained virtually with everyone else but many of the client group are “digitally poor”, so mobile phones were provided where necessary to maintain contact in addition to food parcels and practical support as and when required.

In 2020/21, 75.6% of Community Payback Orders (CPOs) were completed successfully – higher than the Scottish average of 73% - and we were able to increase this to 78.5% for 2021/22 (Scotland data not yet available). It is however difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from CPO data as the imposition of orders was significantly lower compared with pre-pandemic years.

Covid legislation allowed for a number of unpaid work hours to be written off in certain circumstances and for orders to be extended beyond initial completion dates. Even so, lockdown measures, and the impact of these meant it was more difficult than usual to get people through their orders. The Unpaid Work Team therefore developed some creative solutions such as Blended Learning Packs, to enable unpaid workers to undertake their orders at home. This evident creativity and flexibility have enabled some individuals to complete their UPW Requirements despite these challenging circumstances and, unlike many other authorities, Aberdeen City JSW does not have a backlog of Unpaid Work Requirements.

In 2021/22, 90% of JSW clients reported through their Exit Questionnaire, improvement with at least one of the ten possible intervention domains. It is also significant that, in a time of considerable stress for everybody, clients reported improvements in their Mental Health, Coping Skills and Self-Esteem, likely due to the support they had received, and in Education – possibly attributable in part to Unpaid Work’s Learning Packs mentioned earlier.

B) Older People and Physical Disability, including Hospital social work

A redesign of the Older People/Physical Disability service resulted in the enhancement of the Care Management Response Team to provide individuals and their families with a consistent entry point for screening, assessment, and care planning. There is a strong and sustained emphasis on addressing the waiting times for an assessment and the subsequent levels of unmet need. Staff are being encouraged to take an enablement-focused approach which involves a consideration of technological support and the appropriateness of risk assessed care.

In 2021-22, care management recorded on average forty-one referrals a week compared to thirty-six in 2020-21. Unmet need was also, on average, higher last year (147 clients) than in the previous three years (82;135;135) however this number would be higher still (226) if not for the Bon Accord Care Interim Project which provides emergency support for eligible individuals. There has been significant focus placed on building relationships with our Care Home and Care at Home providers and their support with hospital discharge in particular has been invaluable as we strive to deliver a flexible and responsive service.

The flow pressures across the hospital system have been significant and sustained over the past year and it has not been uncommon for the hospital social work team to be asked regularly, and sometimes at short notice, to intensify its efforts to meet spikes in demand. The team have been able to retain staff, with minimal vacancies arising compared to other areas of adult social work, which has enabled staff to be aligned to busier areas of the hospital particularly Frailty Pathway areas and provide swift, effective responses to emerging challenges. Facilitating a consistent social work approach has strengthened Multi-Disciplinary Team relationships and discharge planning collaborations to secure good outcomes on an individual and system-wide basis. Having an MHO whose sole focus is Hospital Guardianship applications has also helped avoid unnecessary and lengthy delays.

C) Learning Disability

In 2019, the **Learning Disability Strategy - "A'thegither in Aberdeen"** was published and supported by a robust action plan to ensure that the identified outcomes in the plan remained our priority and focus. We committed to reviewing our Action Plan in 2020-21 however this was impacted by the pandemic and the need for the service to focus on firstly business continuity and then recovery planning. That said, our strategic outcomes – “Learning, Living and Working” have continued to be at the forefront of how we create, develop, and implement support services and community opportunities which enable adults with Learning Disabilities to live a full and active life.

We have continued to provide safe, stimulating, person centred services to vulnerable individuals throughout the pandemic following all the relevant guidance and legislative requirements. Our annual Quality Questionnaire had a good return this year with positive feedback gathered from supported individuals, their families and other health and social care professionals. All services have completed an action plan to improve in areas where comments and suggestions were made.

Over the past year we have worked collaboratively with our third sector providers who provide Training, Skills, and Development services to co-produce our **Market Position Statement 2021-2026** which outlines our future commissioning intent in this area. We continue to encourage and support providers to work collaboratively to ensure that they provide a variety of different learning opportunities for individuals to effectively develop their skills and self-confidence in readiness to engage in supported employment placements, volunteering roles as well as “peer support” modules.

D) Mental Health

The implementation of the **Mental Health Delivery Plan 2020-23** has been impacted by the pandemic and the need for the service to focus on firstly business continuity and then recovery planning; some progress has been made as circumstances required us to implement some particular actions at pace. The plan has a clear focus on prevention, self-management and self-help and the enhancement of our digital provision and the use of apps to provide an accessible, personalised response to emerging and enduring mental health needs.

There continues to be an increase in referrals to our community mental health services. Moving into a new phase of living with Covid has affected different people in different ways however the main themes that impact on people’s mental health and wellbeing continue to be around social isolation, financial concerns, and lack of community engagement. We foresee these issues continuing to be prevalent in the coming years.

Figures for 2021/22 suggest there has been a continuing increase in the overall workload of our Mental Health Officer (MHO) Service which is very much in keeping with the national picture. It is reasonable to suggest that the pandemic has impacted on everyone’s mental health wellbeing over the past year and for some this impact has been greater than for others giving rise to a significant increase in numbers of Community Treatment Orders (CTO) applications. Due to an increase in hospital-based staffing, there has been a shift in service delivery in the community over the past year which has directly affected admission and discharge numbers.

Detention in hospital intervention	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Community Treatment Order (CTO)	56	52	62	82	53	70	57	106	113
Emergency Detention in Hospital	36	36	28	40	50	53	42	34	31
Short-Term	180	157	170	241	203	209	245	222	228

There are 15.3 FTE MHOs within our service not including other qualified MHO practitioners working in areas outwith mental health who are able to provide some limited but welcome input to the

service. The future MHO workforce is currently being shaped by the modernisation of the service as a whole and in particular our learning from interim workforce changes and the move to locality-aligned service delivery.

Due to the increase in workload, as in many other local authority areas, a waiting list for MHO allocation is in place. This is regularly reviewed and prioritised. Three relief MHOs are utilised to work on the waiting list with an intention to recruit more to focus on specific Adult with Incapacity Guardianship Orders and to assist specific cases open to the Learning Disability Team. An additional part-time MHO post has been created using funding provided by the MHO Capacity Building Grant Scheme to provide input into the delayed hospital guardianship work. A new Adult with Incapacity/Mental Health Adviser Co-ordinator's post will train, develop, review, and evaluate the ever-changing role of the MHO service within the context of current statutory demands and proposed legislative changes.

All guardianship orders are now being considered by the courts post-pandemic. There has been an overall increase in the number of Guardianship orders over the past 12 months. There has been 87 referrals and the granting of 113 guardianships (67 private and 46 on behalf of the CSWO).

E) Care Home and Care at Home Oversight

Over the past year, the Oversight Team has continued to provide ongoing assurances in respect of the care home sector by assessing available information and facilitating immediate action or support as required. The joint assurance visits undertaken with nursing colleagues have also enabled instances of harm or poor practice to be identified and responded to quickly due to the more substantive relationships that the multi-disciplinary team have with care home providers.

In January 2021, the Scottish Government required all eligible care home placements to be reviewed by July 2021 and so this team was extended – using available funding - to undertake these reviews for all individuals residing in care homes including those who were placed outwith Aberdeen. This initiative was very successful, leading to the Oversight team becoming formally known as the Oversight and Review team with its remit extending to include care at home providers. Reviews of all older people and physical disability service users are now planned to ensure that their care provision is meeting their assessed needs and delivering desired outcomes.

There is a consensus that the introduction of the multi-agency Care Home Oversight Group - which is now a permanent part of our governance arrangements - and joint assurance visits has had a positive impact in respect of Adult Support and Protection awareness across the sector and the response from our health partners. There has been very positive feedback from stakeholders including many providers that the team has engaged with.

F) Self-directed support

Self-directed Support (SDS) is not a separate activity but is instead something that underpins operational social work activity across our children's and adult services. We are very aware of the

fundamental aim of giving individuals greater choice and control over their social care support. We strongly believe that a pragmatic, person-centred approach is key to fulfilling this outcome and that we should always, be seeking solutions to the many challenges, sometimes complex, that are presented to us in respect of meeting client needs and fulfilling outcomes. Our SDS team has an enabling function to develop an evident consensus across our stakeholders from practitioners to individuals and their families to providers that 'SDS works'.

There has been an increase in adult protection concerns reported in relation to Option 2 providers which has led to formal proceedings under the Adult Protection legislation for some of them. We are currently exploring how best to provide support and assurance with regards to this wider group of providers who are not contracted by the partnership but still chosen by individuals to deliver desired services.

The pandemic resulted in practitioners working in emergency response and not having the same opportunities for development and training around SDS. It is recognised that some of our newer colleagues require training to fully understand the benefits of the SDS legislation. The SDS work closely with all colleagues, whatever their role, to answer any queries that they might have about the implementation of SDS to ensure that it remains a values-driven and outcome-focused activity. There is however, training planned for all care managers for SDS, utilising the learning we have gained so far in terms of the positive outcomes for individuals.

G) Carers

We recognise that Carers have been disproportionately affected by the reduction of access to services as a consequence of the Covid-related restrictions. Carers previously had access to a dedicated respite facility however this transitioned to an integrated, Intermediate Care Facility therefore different respite resources were needing to be developed.

A survey of Carers was undertaken to establish their priorities when seeking respite and the key theme that emerged from this was access and availability to local respite provision. Under the strategic umbrella of "Staying Well, Staying Connected", we subsequently reviewed and then commissioned residential respite and day opportunities in line with those identified carer priorities and also to address a long-standing gap in the city's provision of respite for those aged under 65 and dementia specialist services. We recognise that post-Covid, it will be necessary to revisit these respite arrangements due to the increase in demand for Carer support services.

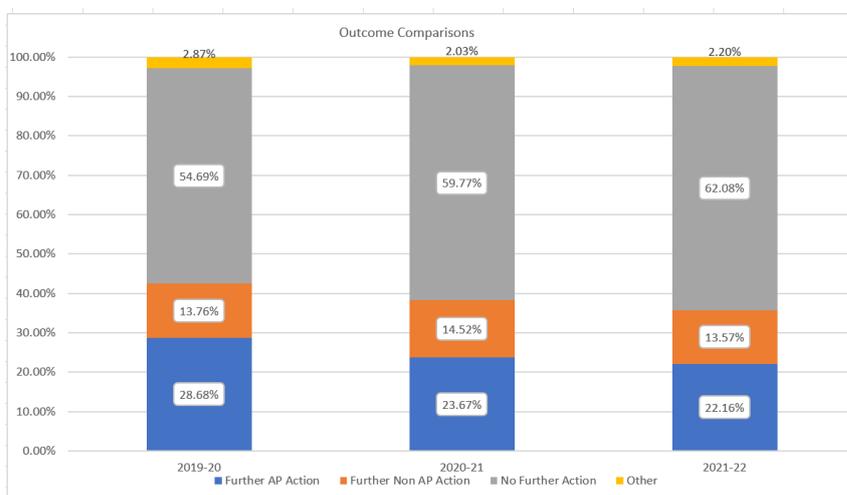
H) Adult Support and Protection

Governance of our adult support and protection activity is overseen by the Adult Protection Committee (APC) whose vision statement is "**Partners in Aberdeen are committed to an inclusive approach to preventing and responding to harm and protecting adults at risk**". In December 2021, the APC approved its **Strategy 2022-24** which sets out the vision and key strategic priorities for reducing the risk of harm and improving outcomes for adults at risk of harm.

A joint inspection of adult support and protection covering the period February 2020 – February 2022 was undertaken by the Care Inspectorate and other regulatory partners earlier this year – see [Position Statement](#) . The subsequent **inspection report** noted that in respect of supporting positive experiences and outcomes for adults at risk of harm, the partnership’s key ASP processes were effective and that its strategic leadership was very effective and demonstrated major strengths.

The Adult Protection Unit and the Duty team merged in September 2021 to become the Adult Protection Social Work (APSW) Team which is the central point for all ASP referrals, Police concern reports and emergency/crisis situations including the immediate safeguarding of adults at risk of harm. This significant shift in our ASP operational practice is in its infancy but we are already beginning to see positive outcomes from this development. The Care Inspectorate could already see how the new team had created consistency and an effective framework for the triaging of referrals and it was commended that we had transformed our ASP operations during the pandemic to ensure a strengthening of our ASP arrangements.

- ASP Referrals: Physical Harm remained the highest in terms of numbers of ASP referrals made, although this had not increased back to pre-covid levels. Increases in referrals relating to Psychological Harm, Self-Harm and Self-Neglect were likely to be linked to the impact of the pandemic.
- Outcome of Referrals: The highest proportion of referrals resulted in an outcome of ‘No further Action’ which was consistent with previous years – see chart below.



- ASP Referrals which progress to Investigation: Adult Protection Investigations increased from 227 in 2020-21 to 248 in 2021-22, although the proportion of referrals that go on to Investigation has clearly been reducing since the introduction of the new APSW team and a more consistent approach to the screening of all referrals.
- ASP Case Conferences: There was a total of 61 Case Conferences in 2021-22 compared to 34 in 2020-21. One explanation for this increase is that the first pandemic year significantly impacted on all off our social work delivery including adult support and protection but the

workforce subsequently made the necessary adjustments to their working practices, virtual meetings etc, to ensure that required meetings or activities took place.

- Case Reviews: During the period 2021-22 there were five Initial Case Reviews (ICRs) one of which is currently under Police investigation with the other four progressing to Multi-agency Review. The findings are expected during 2022 when consideration will be given about how best to implement the learning from these reviews as part of the local improvement plan.
- Large Scale Investigations (LSIs): Over the last year, concerns were raised regarding four care homes and one care at home provider, resulting in one Large Scale Investigation and the potential for a second LSI following discussion with other relevant agencies.

Lead agency quality assurance undertaken in April 2021 showed that 82% of scrutinised cases evidenced good quality investigations and in 100% of cases, partners were appropriately involved. This is an acknowledged area of strength with Council Officers reporting that they get appropriate and positive co-operation from partners as and when required. Significant resources have been put in place to ensure that relevant information and expert advice is accessible to support all adult support and protection investigatory activity.

Key risks to delivery – highlight key risks and action being taken to mitigate these.

The IJB has in place a Board Assurance and Escalation Framework to provide the necessary assurance that the partnership has put in place the structures and processes necessary for setting its risk appetite, for assessment and mitigation of risk, and for putting in place effective controls and assurances, properly owned and actioned.

The Strategic Risk Register is owned primarily by the Chief Officer, with individually identified risks assigned to different members of the Leadership Team as appropriate. It sets out those risks which may threaten achievement of the IJB's strategic priorities, in order for the board to demonstrate its attention to key accountability issues and to ensure that appropriate and effective mitigating actions are in place. The Register is presented to the Risk, Audit and Performance (RAP) Committee on a quarterly basis and then presented, with appropriate RAP comments included, to the following IJB meeting thus ensuring regular and robust scrutiny of the assessed risks and the mitigating activities and interventions. The IJB and its Leadership Team have always had an appropriate focus on its Strategic Risk Register, the identified risks and the controls and mitigations required to manage these. The pandemic arguably brought a greater intensity to this scrutiny and encouraged a whole-system approach to the management of risk in our social work services.

The resilience of the service was again tested last year by the pandemic as it directly or indirectly impacted on staff wellbeing and that of their families and friends. Similarly, the many third and independent sector providers that we work with experienced similar staffing challenges. In response, the service, across the different client groups, adjusted its working practices to ensure that appropriate access to required services was maintained. Risks to business continuity across all sectors and services – in whatever form they manifest themselves - are an on-going matter for discussion, mitigation and monitoring.

Children's Social Work Services:

Overview of Service performance and delivery of statutory functions

Child Protection

Child Protection processes and administration are well embedded, understood and utilised across all partners in Aberdeen City. The Joint Inspection 2019 noted ***“Recognition of, and responses to, children and young people at immediate risk of harm were very effective and staff were confident in their role, leading to a positive impact on children’s and young people’s safety”*** and that has continued throughout this challenging year.

Adherence is strictly to the National Guidance for Child Protection and to the Scottish Government’s Guidance issued in February 2019 “Protecting children and young people – child protection committee and chief officer responsibilities”. The new National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 was published in September 2021. Aberdeen City Council (ACC), in collaboration with our multi-agency partners, are working to implement the changes identified in the new guidance.

The Partnership appointed a new independent Chair of our Child Protection Committee in November 2021. This appointment also covers Chair of the Adult Protection Committee. This appointment supports our continuing drive to, as far as possible, across both areas of partnership working. The Independent Chair provides strong assurance and supports our continuing self-evaluation and improvement journey.

In January 2022, following the publication of the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021, Aberdeen City implemented the changes in relation to Child Protection Planning Meetings (formally Child Protection Case Conferences). Aberdeen City adopted the change in language, and the timeframes for which Child Protection Planning Meetings (CPPMs) should be convened. Aligned to the changes in language, the implementation of the Age of Criminal Responsibilities Act 2019, in December 2021 has further ignited our awareness that there is no place for younger children in an adult justice forum. The collaboration particularly between social work and Police colleagues in readiness for this legislative progression has allowed a healthy challenging and further cultural shift.

It is important that CPPMs are held in a timely manner to assess the risks and agree a multi-disciplinary Child Protection Plan to minimise risk of harm to the child. In 2021/22, 86% of initial and pre-birth initial CPPMs were held within timescale, exceeding Aberdeen City Council’s target of 80%. This illustrates a concerted effort across all agencies to meet with the family and to co-ordinate a plan for the child as expeditiously as possible.

Child Protection Planning Meetings (CPPMs) are conducted utilising a strength-based approach; family attendance at initial and pre-birth initial CPPMs was 95% for the period April 2021 to March 2022. Family attendance at initial core group meetings for the same period approached 94%. This data indicates the respectful relationships among professionals and families involved in what can by nature unavoidably be a somewhat tense process. This was commended by the Care Inspectorate in the Joint Inspection 2019 - ***“Strengths-based approaches and relationship-based practice models were having a positive impact on helping to build trusting and respectful relationships between staff and families”***.

New referrals into service of a child care and protection nature are received through our Joint Child Protection Team, Reception Team or the Aberdeen Maternity Hospital Team. These are well

established and experienced teams. We regularly review and quality assure familiar processes such as Inter-agency referral Discussions (IRD), Joint Investigative Interviews (JII), and Child Protection Case Conferences (now known as Child Protection Planning Meetings). Throughout this period, IRD processes have routinely included Health and Education colleagues, with all agencies striving to ensure that discussions are conducted timeously, with the target being this is within one hour of referral. The quality assuring of JIIs and IRDs continues to be an essential part of our child protection processes with five IRD records and two JIIs per month being quality assured by all involved agencies, to offer partnership wise scrutiny. Very good use of forensic questioning is consistently demonstrated by social workers eliciting essential details and indicating a good level of planning for JIIs. The consistently high quality of IRD recording and of JIIs has formed an excellent basis from which to build on our implementation of the Scottish Child Interviewing Model which will commence in November 2022. To prepare for this we have been collaborating with colleagues in Aberdeenshire and Moray towards implementing a Grampian-wide IRD as the cornerstone for the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM), ensuring gold standard practice which will be consistent for children and their families regardless of where in the north east, they reside.

282 Child Protection Planning Meetings were held in the year, a reduction from 308 in 2020/21. Over the course of the year, the average number of children on the Child Protection Register (CPR) was 90. This is a reduction in comparison to an average of 123 children in 2020/21 when, as outlined in my report last year, this number was particularly high to ensure appropriate professional support was provided to families during the height of the covid pandemic. Numbers have reverted to a more usual pattern although they fluctuate throughout the year as we would expect, reflecting the appropriate identification of, and response to, risk and need. The registration rate per 1000 at 31 March 2022 was 3.1%, with 105 children registered. This is slightly higher than the Scottish average of 2.9%. The average rate of re-registration is consistent with the national picture. Very few children remained on the CPR for more than one year in the period reflecting improvement activity in this respect. This would indicate practice characterised by effective and appropriate interventions.

Local practice is for children on the Child Protection Register (CPR) to be seen weekly, a task that in the main rests with allocated social workers who are therefore familiar with the child and family. The infrequent return of children to the CPR in short timeframe is indicative of the effectiveness of operational professional's interventions with children and families in order to keep children safe.

Monthly referral rates remained stable throughout the year, with some fluctuations around school holidays. The volume of referrals received into the Service have fallen somewhat from around 9,000 to 7,328 referrals being received. Of these, 42% progressed to a level of social work assessment, ranging from initial enquiry to more comprehensive assessment and intervention taking place. Whilst the nature of incoming referrals has been consistent with previous years, it is apparent that the pandemic, economic pressures and of recent global unrest have disproportionately impacted on the most vulnerable in our society and in turn therefore on those who serve to support them. Work continues with partners to ensure an aligned understanding of thresholds for social work service intervention as well as maximising opportunities for support opportunities for families at an earlier juncture than when specialist social work support is necessary.

A campus school for children with a disability has been operational since 2017. The Children with Disability social work service along with health professionals are hosted within the school. The benefits of this co-location continued to be recognised, not only in relation to professional relationships but also in relationships with families allowing for more natural, responsive and supportive engagement

opportunities. Improving transition of children with a disability to adult services remains a focus for the coming year, particularly with the challenges that have increased since the onset of the Covid pandemic. Aberdeen City continues to work alongside Association for Real Change to embed the principles of good transitions for this group of young people and their families.

Maintaining a clear focus on risk is critical to all social work teams. The continuing utilisation of systemic practice which is trauma informed and relational in its delivery allows for the effective management of risk across all areas of operational fieldwork in the city. The challenge remains ensuring the staff team have the requisite skills and support to deliver this complex task.

There has been a helpful coordination of our public protection fora which has seen greater interface of child protection with other strategic partnerships such as the adult protection, alcohol & drugs, and violence against women partnerships. The [Aberdeen City Child Protection Committee Annual Report 2020/21](#) illustrates the multi-agency work across all child protection services. The CPC and APC share the same Chair.

Leaders of Public Protection have continued to ensure there is a strong focus on delivering preventative support to individuals and families in Aberdeen. Additionally ensuring the partnership has a strong learning approach has been a focus of action over the past year. Learning from Drug Related Death's and from the deaths of individuals who have taken their own lives continues to explore how agencies can collaborate more effectively.

Our areas for development remain predictable; neglect, parental substance and alcohol misuse, parental mental health and domestic abuse. These are all addressed in improvement plans, particularly the Child Protection Improvement Plan 2021-2024. There has been some escalation of referrals on the grounds of physical and emotional abuse which is indicative of family tensions indicative of the longer-term impacts of the Covid pandemic.

Ongoing self-evaluation includes implementation of the Independent Care Review articulated in "The Promise", with a particular drive to better enable children, young people and families to participate and influence our child protection culture and processes.

Corporate Parenting

The role of corporate parent continues to embed and develop. Improvement activity in relation to Corporate Parenting is prioritised and is embedded in the [Local Outcome Improvement Plan, Children's Services Plan 2020-2023](#) and [Corporate Parenting Improvement Plan](#). Our [Corporate Parenting Plan 2021-2023](#) and [Champions Board](#) plans remain congruent with LOIP priorities. The vision for the Champions Board Plan for 2021-2023 remains unchanged; 'our care experienced children, young people and care leavers have a right to participate in decision-making about their own lives and have their voices heard'.

All strategic plans relating to corporate parenting are overseen by the Children's Services Board (CSB). The Quality Assurance Framework has been adopted by the CSB and a multi-agency data suite is in place although remains an ongoing focus for iterative improvement. Corporate parenting responsibilities span many agencies with varied approaches to what and how data is collected. This can make it challenging to establish baseline data and monitor improvement.

The number of children and young people who are looked after by Aberdeen City Council has decreased slightly from 566 in 2019/20 to 516 in 2020/21. There is a nominal positive trend in the numbers of children and young people being looked after at home versus away from home in comparison to 2019/20 data, however, multi-agency efforts on shifting the balance of care toward how we can safely care for children and young people at home or in kinship arrangements is still crucial if we are to **#keepthepromise** and meet our own local aspirations.

The Partnership's Corporate Parenting Performance and Improvement Group has responsibility for the delivery of the Corporate Parenting Improvement Plan, collation and monitoring of data and quality assurance in relation to care experienced children and young people, delivering on identified aims set out in the LOIP and driving the implementation of The Promise across the Partnership.

Aberdeen's Lead Officer for Corporate Parenting post was appointed to in September 2021. This post sits within the wider Improvement and Development Team in Children's Social Work, has responsibility for the strategic direction of Corporate Parenting improvement work across the partnership. The post is also closely aligned with the Champions Board in relation to the delivery of strategic aspects of their agenda.

A self-evaluation of our current improvement activity against the recommendations set out in Plan 21-24 has set the scene for establishing a baseline and focus on local delivery of The Promise across the partnership. This work will continue to be implemented and monitored and it is anticipated that we will recruit to the role of Promise Lead Officer in the coming months and create a Partnership Promise Group which reports to the Children's Services Board to support the implementation, delivery and monitoring of Partnership activities to #KeepthePromise.

The new [Aberdeen Protects](#) website went live in March 2022. The Corporate Parenting content on the site seeks to increase understanding and awareness of Corporate Parenting with our workforce and the wider public, as well as provide a platform for routine and accessible reporting on improvement activity.

Alternative Family Care

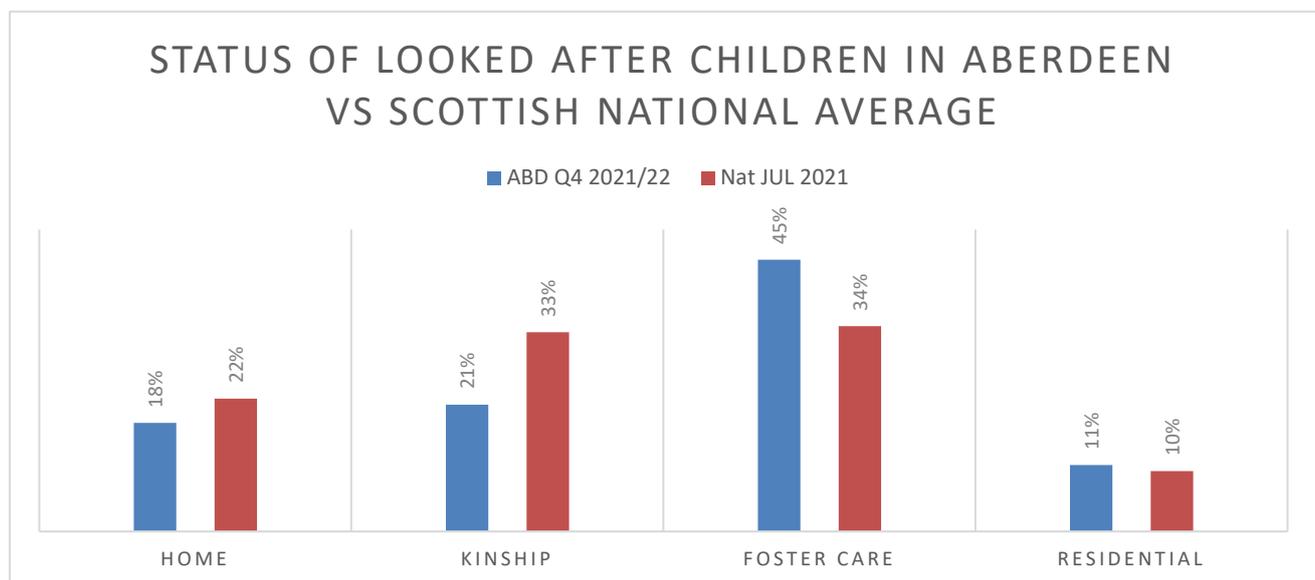
For those who cannot stay with their parents, the Alternative Family Care service provides children and young people with safe and nurturing home environments. There is a strong focus on improving outcomes for children and young people supporting them to continue to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness, enabling them to remain in their care setting and experience continuity of care. Our staff and carers are trained and supported to understand the impact of early childhood abuse, neglect, trauma and insecurity of attachment. The Alternative Family Care Service ensures our carers are well supported and have access to a range of training to help them meet the needs of the children they care for.

The number of children placed in residential settings out with Aberdeen City has for the second year running fallen slightly. The cost of such placements are prohibitive and the outcomes for young people can be variable. In addition to the statutory reviewing process, we have a forum where senior management staff in Education and Children's Social work scrutinise the quality and planning of individual placements on an annual basis at least. We have commissioned **Includem** to work with in-house resources to provide intensive support to prevent children being placed out with the city but also to support young people who return to the city.

The overall number of children in secure accommodation between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022 has remained low, at an average of less than one child in total over the course of the year. This is consistent with 2020/21, with two months when no children were in secure care.

Despite recruitment efforts, the need for foster carers continues to outweigh the number coming forward. A new payment for skills scheme was approved and commenced in April 2020. It provides incentives to current carers to provide additional placements especially sibling groups where there is national acute shortage and to attract individuals that have wanted to foster but were not in a financial position to stop working. Although challenging growing our internal capacity remains an ongoing focus for the service.

Aberdeen City Council foster carers currently care for 91 children in 80 households. There are a further 150 children accommodated with agency foster carers. Kinship carers care for 277 children in 221 households of whom 115 young people in 95 households are in a formal kinship arrangement.



Permanence plans were made for 41 children; 14 for adoption (10 for individual children and 2 sibling groups of 2) and 27 for permanent foster care (2 individual children, 1 sibling group of 2, 5 sibling groups of 3 and 2 sibling group of 4). Adoption matches were approved for 18 children. With the exception of 3 sibling groups of two, these were all individual children. In common with other local authority areas, recruitment of foster carers remains a challenge as does fulfilling the aim to place sibling groups together.

Children’s Residential Care

The refurbishment and review of our children’s residential estate has clarified options which could enhance the numbers of children we care for and reduce need for externally purchased provision. Service redesign proposals have been consolidated and ensure residential roles are fit for future purpose, i.e., trauma enhanced, Staying Put and recognition that Aftercare is a core function of their role. In support of these functions a new Team Leader role and associated workforce resource across our homes has been developed to ensure these pathway transitions are relationally based and offers continuity.

A therapeutic approach to provision, based on [Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy \(DDP\)](#) is embedded across our service. Our residential service has a clear ethos of care that underpins our admissions procedure, including robust matching consideration. Service focus is on the development of safe and trusting relationships understanding that this is fundamental to change, development, and trauma recovery. This includes avoiding and challenging practices which seek to further stigmatise and marginalise our children.

The needs of our children are increasingly recognised to reflect neglect and the traumatic impact of this on their development. Care provision is generally not short term, offering long term or permanence to many of our children, most of whom have been in foster care which has disrupted. We have supported high levels of sustainment and associated low level of care disruption.

Care provision has had to be adaptable, to ensure the workforce is supported to respond therapeutically and lovingly. The workforce values and promotes ongoing learning and development, effective supervision and a reflective, supportive debrief procedure. We have invested in a workforce skills development strategy lead by a Clinical Practitioner within Residential and Youth Services.

Positive outcomes have been recorded following practice change in the partnership approach between Police Scotland and local Children's Homes. This has evidenced positive progress to avoid early criminalisation, recognising that early trauma has a direct impact on brain development, resulting in some impulsive and risk-taking behaviours. These outcomes are demonstrated in data shared by Police Scotland Youth Justice Management Unit, Comparative Report on Juvenile Offenders 2020/21 which indicated the reduction in crime files recorded against local children's homes reducing from a high of 122 in 2014/15; 10 in 2018/19 ;3 in 2019/20; 2 in 2020/21; 13 in 2021/22.

Collectively these approaches have contributed to a grading by the Care Inspectorate of good or very good for our Residential, Foster Care and Adoption Services.

Young people placed in alternative to family care are being encouraged to stay put in care placements on a Continuing Care basis. This has a beneficial impact on future success. There continues to be a significant number of young people aged 18 years and over remaining in our children's homes as well as in the two targeted services we have commissioned in the city.

Data highlights that at 31.03.2022, 32% of our young people within residential homes within the city are 18yrs or older. In addition, 22 young people are in Continuing Care with foster carers. This is an investment in future capacity and is considered preventative in reducing future dependencies and demand. It also contributes to decreased homelessness. This has previously been recognised in our joint inspection 2019 which commended the quality of this service noting that children and young people enjoy sustained positive relationships with staff and carers. The benefits of trauma informed approaches were apparent and almost all care experienced young people reported they felt settled and safe where they currently lived.

In line with the strategic review of Throughcare and Aftercare provision October 2021, across the city there has been a continued focus on our throughcare and aftercare support to young people this year. This has included ensuring that since October 2021 when the additional Covid enhanced payment was removed from universal credit, all young people entitled to a weekly aftercare allowance have

continued to receive an additional £20 a week. This pre-empted the govt cost of living payment issued in July and September this year.

Within our services, the addition of the care experienced Housing worker in 2021 has significantly streamlined processes for those young people moving into their own homes or becoming homeless, allowing a single point of contact and a liaison. They directly work with young people helping them understand sometimes complex processes and improving the experience for them which appears to be having an impact on tenancy sustainment. In October 2021, an Assertive Outreach project for care experienced young people began with a social worker seconded to focus on prevention and reduction in harm, in light of the increasing drug deaths in Scotland. They have begun identifying gaps in services and offering direct support to young people.

Following on from the increased use of digital communication over lockdown period, a wider arena of participation opportunities remains in place to date. The care leavers team Facebook page continues to be cited by our young people as a useful means of networking. In acknowledgement of the impact of digital inequality on those with care experience, a range of direct support has been made available. Following council's approval, all care experienced young people when moving into their own tenancy are now being provided with their own mifi and data sim as part of the continuing development of digital inclusion for care experienced young people.

Rights, Participation and Voice

The Aberdeen Young Person's Rights Service remains a key supporter of those with care experience in the promoting and upholding of their rights, participation and in their relationships with corporate parents and the Champions Board. The Rights Service, through its expanded remit, now provides advocacy, guidance and support to Aberdeen's children, young people and young adults aged 0-26, who are care experienced or are or have been involved in child protection processes.

The Service continues to be well utilised, with an increase of around 39% in new or returning referrals from the year previous. This growth includes its intended percentage increase, in line with Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) 'Balance of Care' priorities, to offer support to children and young people who are looked after at home or in kinship care and to those young adults living in their own/supported tenancy.

Environments for linking in and meeting with children, young people and young adults continue to be variably affected by Covid19, but the Service has developed creative and inclusive ways to build relationships and to connect. The Service is becoming increasingly more adept at using social media and digital technology but has not lost sight of the importance of face-to-face contact, which remains the most preferred option of those it supports. The Service is involved in a range of single and multi-agency improvement charters and associated activity, with focus on rights, participation, and voice.

Safeguarding rights and wellbeing is not an exclusive obligation of the Rights Service; rather this requires a whole workforce approach. Many children, young people and young adults will not need or wish to access the Rights Service and those professionals with whom they have relationships are best placed to advocate for and support them. This is something that the Service actively promotes through its digital information, its monthly 'Voice Snapshots' and through activity such as its established monthly virtual rights and participation awareness raising drop-in sessions. These 'drop ins' meet, in part, the objective, noted in the Corporate Parenting Plan, about the Service providing workforce skill development sessions each year of the plan.

The [Aberdeen Young Person's Rights Service Annual Report 2021](#) gives fuller detail about its activity and the main themes related to what children, young people and young adults said matters to them. It further sets out priority areas for development, leadership, and improvement for 2022.

The Mind Of My Own app supports our children and young people to have a voice and for their views to be recorded accurately. It is the only digital tool that comprehensively supports Article 12 of the UNCRC. In 2022 we saw an increase to 232 Young Person Accounts and 423 Worker Accounts. The main themes young people used the app for in 2022 were when they wished to discuss a topic prior to worker's visits, when they wanted to prepare for meetings/conferences and when they had good news and wished to share it.

Quality Assurance

Significant progress has been made in the year to 31 March 2022 in relation to the monitoring of service quality and performance across the Service. The extended use of data, risk registers, service standards and the development of a quality assurance framework have all supported the identification of what is working well and what needs improved. We have a well-established practice of quality assurance across social work teams, which is supported by service wide quality assurance data reporting and analysis.

A multi-agency **Quality Assurance Framework**, led by Children's Social Work, continues to operate and provides a multi-agency approach to quality assurance across services to embed a culture of service improvement and learning which is consistent and strong across partner agencies. These audits are commissioned by the CPC and the CSB. They utilise The Care Inspectorate "[A quality framework for children and young people in need of care and protection – August 2019](#)" to support self-evaluation.

Two audits were completed during the year in relation to Youth Homelessness and Children with Disabilities and recommendations were passed to the CPC and CSB to support longer term strategic and financial planning as well as identifying areas for short term operational support. The total audits carried out successfully is now four and the recommendations are being tracked to ensure progress is made.

Key Risks to Delivery:

Managing risk is an integral element of the social work function and is a responsibility that our Managers and Senior staff take seriously to ensure, as far as is practicable and reasonable, the continued wellbeing and welfare of the individuals with whom we work.

Both adult and children's social work services actively track and report risk via Risk Registers which in turn are reported to Council Committee or the IJB's Clinical and Care Governance Committee.

Children's Social Work records and reports risk on the Aberdeen City Council Cluster and Operational Risk Registers and the multi-agency CPC Risk Register.

Cluster risk registers are owned by Chief Officers and reviewed monthly by Directors. Cluster risk registers set out the risks that may prevent the delivery of critical services, commissioning intentions and/or strategic outcomes whereas Operational risk registers are risk registers owned by individual teams working within the Clusters. The risks contained within these registers will be localised to individual teams and are owned by team managers and leaders. Risks contained within Operational risk registers may be escalated to cluster risk register when the level and severity of risk increases.

The risk register held under the CPC represents one element of the multi-agency system of managing the risk of significant harm to children in the city and is reviewed at every CPC quarterly meeting. Recognising their interconnectedness, the Risk Registers of all public protection forums (CPC, APC, VAWP and ADP) are considered by the Executive Leadership Group for Public Protection (COG) at their bi-monthly meetings.

The IJB has in place a Board Assurance and Escalation Framework to provide the necessary assurance that the partnership has put in place the structures, behaviours and processes necessary for setting risk appetite, for delegating the identification of both significant events and trends, for assessment and mitigation of risk, and for putting in place effective controls and assurances, properly owned and actioned.

The Strategic Risk register is owned primarily by the Chief Officer, with individually identified risks assigned to different members of the Leadership Team as appropriate. The Strategic Risk Register is presented to the Audit and Performance Systems Committee (APS) on a quarterly basis and then presented, with any required revisions, to the following IJB meeting thus ensuring regular and robust scrutiny of the assessed risks and the mitigating activities and interventions. The pandemic has arguably brought a greater intensity to this scrutiny and encouraged a whole-system approach to the management of risk in our social work services.

From an operational social work perspective across both children's and adults services, the key risk to service delivery was the continuing challenge of the ongoing pandemic on the capacity and resilience of our social work-trained workforce and also the wider social care workforce. Illness, family illness, infection outbreaks at a service level, the need to self-isolate and other lockdown impacts all had an impact on the availability and wellbeing of our colleagues with daily monitoring and interventions needed to ensure the continuity of our services through very critical and challenging times. As noted in last year's report, it is commendable that services adapt and continue throughout the ongoing waves of the pandemic, with considerable positive feedback from those accessing our services.

3. Resources

Aberdeen is the third largest city in Scotland with an estimated population of circa 225K with a significant population increase anticipated in the next 10 and 20 years, particularly among the 65 to 74 and over 75 age groups. Rising expectations and demand for our services, in both children and adult services, coupled with rising costs and reduced funding presents a significant challenge to our ambitions to deliver effective interventions that lead to improved individual experiences and outcomes.

Additional resources have been provided by the Scottish Government to recognise the impact of the Covid Pandemic. While predominantly target on adult social work and social care children's social work and justice social work have also received some additional funding to support recovery

from the impact of the pandemic. Evidence suggests that the impact of the pandemic will continue to be felt by all aspects of social over the coming years with increasing demand for services.

Demand for our adult social work services is expected to continue to rise given these projected population increases. At the same time the complexity of the care required is increasing due to improvements in medicine and the increased average life expectancy evidenced over the last few decades. Also, there are greater expectations being placed on our services by clients and this, along with expectations from our other stakeholders, continues to drive performance on targets such as waiting times.

During the past year additional costs have been incurred, largely in relation to providing supplier sustainability payments to social care providers, purchasing additional surge capacity, additional staffing, and Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). These costs were all funded through the Local Mobilisation Plan. There were also indirect Covid costs, such as additional care at home costs to keep people in their own homes and lost income through client contributions. There is a slight risk that the whole health and social care system has become increasingly reliant on the additional funding provided to cover these additional costs.

Council budgets continue to face significant pressure and children's social work has had to collaborate on a cross council basis to ensure a balance budget. The Council's medium term financial plan indicates that the pressure on budgets will continue to be considerable over the coming years.

Ensuring there are sufficient staffing across all service areas to undertake statutory social work tasks remains key. In doing so a focus on delivering person centred interventions that aim to keep children and vulnerable adults in their own home for as long as it is safe to do so remains key is critical. Additionally working with partners to deliver early and preventative support that negates the need for crisis and high-cost intervention has to be a focus to drive up outcomes and deliver a sustainable budget position.

The additional funding targeted at adult social work to increase staffing and to support their wellbeing was hugely welcomed. However recruitment in the North East of Scotland across all aspects of social work and social care remains extremely challenging.

Whilst financial planning is as robust as possible, new risks have emerged and will require management. These include:

- Whether some of the changes in cost profile and services as a result of COVID are recurring and will require additional funding,
- The impact of the health debt caused by COVID on our delegated services. More certainty on these risks will start to materialise early in the new financial year.
- The impact of the war in Ukraine and the displacement of families
- The impact of the war in Ukraine on the cost of living.

As of April 2022, social work services await the clarification on the provision of financial support to implement the findings of the Independent Care Review – The Promise. Without additional funding

the Partnership will struggle to deliver the transformational changes to how services are delivered to support families. Utilising and enhancing our data the partnership is working to develop a Family Support Model that is targeting four family groups (Children with a disability; children exposed to the risk of trauma; children in conflict with the law and children on the edge of care).

Our new Family Support Model(s) by adopting a whole family approach will identify change activities that will aim to deliver targeted early intervention that enables more children to be supported within their family. However without clear financial support to core social work services, and partners, the aspirations of The Promise to delivering preventive and early intervention support to children and families enabling more children to be cared for within their families will remain an aspiration.

The Scottish Government have announced a commitment to a Wholer Family Wellbeing Fund of £500m over the course of this parliament. This will support implementation of The Promise and deliver whole family support. There are five priorities for this fund:

1. Improved family wellbeing,
2. Reduced inequalities in family wellbeing
3. Reduction in families requiring crisis intervention
4. Reduction in the number of children and young people living away from their families,
5. Increase in families taking up wider supports

At this point in time it is unclear how the government intends to distribute this fund and what Aberdeen City's proportion will be. Children's Social Work and partners are working to develop planning how to use this fund when the details are announced.

The [Adult social care: Independent review](#) has proposed significant change to the arrangements and delivery of social work and social care services. It also recognised the significant and long standing under investment in social work/social care. The Scottish Government's response to the Review was published in late summer 2021. The Council, with a strong social work voice responded constructively to the consultation. The Scottish Government's response proposes a fundamental rethink of where social work sits within our structures. Given our duties to support the most vulnerable children and adults in our society as well as the impact of the pandemic on our staff the transition to a new operating structure needs to be carefully considered.

We await the publication of the National Care Service Bill later in 2022.

4. Workforce

Workforce Planning - staffing and recruitment issues

Across both Children's and Adult social work services, staff have continued to rise to the challenges of the past year. The height of the pandemic in 2020 may be behind us but ongoing challenges remain. The duration and extent of these has seen an impact on the morale and the

resilience of our social work staff, yet I continue to observe their commitment, resilience and professionalism.

Children's Social Work Services

During the first quarter of 2021/22, most non-frontline employees continued to work from home, where this was feasible for service delivery. This mode of working was in place for all social work staff who were unable to work as previously. Where appropriate, this arrangement has continued as the year progressed. Frontline operational staff continued to, as they did throughout the pandemic, work out of offices and community settings to undertake face to face visits to our most vulnerable children and adults, ensuring that they could be supported as robustly as required. As lockdown restrictions were eased over this year, managers have worked closely with their staff to establish hybrid working arrangements aiming to ensure that the benefits from more flexible working arrangements could be maximised whilst increasing the number of staff who could come together for collaboration.

In most cases where working from home was not possible, this has been due to lack of ICT equipment, quickly resolved by Bring Your Own Device or by the Device Refresh programmes which ensured nearly all workers had a corporate device. Flexible working arrangements over this year have ensured that only a very small number of employees have been unable to undertake their role from home, such as our residential workers, who were subsequently required to take special leave. At the end of the financial year there was a small spike in the number of employees unable to work from home whilst isolating, due to a COVID case in a one of the Homes.

Recruitment

Recruitment remains a challenge across all areas of the Service with notable vacancies in our Residential Care and Children in Need teams. Secondment opportunities or internal recruitment enables staff experience to grow but will often leave gaps which can be hard to fill. The Council is moving to enhance a "grow our own" scheme supporting interested staff without a social work degree to undertake distance learning development.

We have struggled to fill our Learning and Development Co-ordinator post which has been felt by our staff through reduced opportunities. This has now been filled and we look forward to seeing a more robust and coordinated professional learning and development offer for our staff. Social work services offer extensive learning and development opportunities to social work students who predominantly undertake their training via Robert Gordon's University. In collaboration with SWEP (Social Work Education Participation) we want to explore further with RGU how we can ensure a more productive pipeline of social workers joining Aberdeen City.

This recognises the need for a strong supply of newly qualified social workers entering the profession. In order to take account of the fact that student experience had been significantly compromised through COVID, we have undertaken a review and enhancement of our programme of training and support for newly qualified social work staff.

Whilst locally retention of staff is good, we have been aware of the increasing pressures on our social work staff, as they strive to offer high quality service to our most vulnerable groups of children and adults. This recognition has prompted us to begin exploring with our People and

Organisation colleagues how to build increasing psychological resilience in a workforce who are at risk of vicarious trauma on a day to day basis whilst undertaking statutory duties.

We are aware the recruitment and retention issues are not unique to Aberdeen or the North-East. Staff from across Aberdeen City have contributed to a research piece of work commissioned by Social Work Scotland. This research is due to be published early into the coming year and will hopefully inform our collective thinking about the recognition and value placed of social work and social workers.

Adult & Justice Social Work

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the personal wellbeing and resilience of our workforce and their subsequent availability to fulfil their roles and responsibilities. It has caused us to reflect on the robustness of our workforce planning and the assumptions we may have previously made about the availability of a suitably qualified labour pool that is either available locally in sufficient depth or willing to relocate to the area.

Recruitment processes and timescales were perhaps not as efficient and as effective as they might have been with recruiting managers becoming frustrated at their inability to recruit staff as quickly as they would wish to. Strong collegiate relationships have been required from our service managers and their seniors to ensure that everyone has felt sufficiently supported with these issues as they have impacted on every service at some point in the past year. A member of the adult services Senior Management Team was subsequently asked to co-ordinate significant recruitment activity across all services using the Scottish Government funding to increase social work capacity. This resulted in a successful recruitment campaign which succeeded with support from colleagues from across adult and justice services in filling vacant and new posts at all levels.

We are developing our workforce through the introduction of Trainee Social Worker posts which will allow the service to have meaningful progression structures. Our LD service has also supported student placements from the Kickstart Programme, Career Ready, Foundation and Modern-Day apprenticeships as well as supporting staff to undertake their Social Work qualification through distance learning.

Staff wellbeing has fluctuated throughout the pandemic, particularly over the last 12 months with an increase in absenteeism due to stress related illnesses. We have attempted to support staff in this area with several approaches including, Organisational Development facilitated team building days and sign posting to psychological resilience supports. The weekly online staff Forum has evolved to include all adult Social Work staff and has provided an opportunity for directed learning as well as creating a culture of peer support and advice. The success of this has been evident through positive feedback from staff and the cross-service support via the Forum chat.

Workforce Development

Children's Social Work Services

We have a well-established multi-agency child protection learning and development programme co-delivered in-house and by a commissioned service. In the period January – December 2021, 74 courses have been delivered on the following 12 topics:

- Introduction to Safeguarding
- Assessing and Planning
- Effective Chronologies
- Risk, Analysis and Thresholds in Safeguarding
- Managing, Recording and Sharing Information
- Online Safety and Awareness
- Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Trafficking
- Emotional Abuse in Children and Young People
- Domestic Abuse and Child Protection
- Neglect
- Female Genital Mutilation
- Parental Substance Misuse

Additional training modules were identified at the beginning of 2021 in line with the Child Protection Programme. These were:

- Parental Resistance
- Child Protection and Disability
- Managers Course (developed to provide up to date information on Children and Young Peoples Mental Health, Early Indicators of Neglect and the impact of Emotional Abuse)

Training courses have reached 901 multi agency professionals. The [Learning & Development Annual Report 2021](#) illustrates the multi-agency training delivered, in partnership with Aberlour Childcare Trust, throughout the year and alignments to the Child Protection Programme. Training has continued to be delivered virtually throughout 2021/22 with the intention to consider hybrid events in the future.

The Children's Social Work Service learning and development programme is delivered through a combination of corporate modules, commissioned courses and through the utilisation of in-house expertise.

All of our local residential staff continue to be trained in trauma-recovery principles and ensuring our workforce is trauma-informed and where necessary, trauma-skilled, is a priority for 2023.

Recruitment to the post of Learning and Development Team Leader for Children's Social Work has revitalised the learning and development offer to staff across the service with particular focus on ensuring that the needs and registration requirements of newly qualified social workers and social workers in training are met.

Improvements to the learning and development offer to all staff is underway with the following key developments expected to be completed in 2023:

- Dedicated NQSW Intranet Page with guidance, details of the NQSW Programme and resources
- Induction Programme for Children's Social Work
- Child Protection for Social Workers Training

- Supervision for Social Work – Training and Guidance refresh

Adult & Justice Social Work

The pandemic has tested our personal, professional and organisational resilience and it is the case that some staff and some services have coped better with the demands of our reshaped social work response than others. Nevertheless, there is an opportunity to review our contribution to wider multi-disciplinary and multi-agency collaborations and reflect on what changes are worth keeping, what staff supports are needed – such as our new digital learning platform, CareKnowledge - and what structural enhancements are desirable.

The Lead for Adult Social Work has been undertaking a review of our services as part of a wider HSCP post-pandemic recovery to fully embed early intervention and prevention across services and also maintain the improved relationships and effective collaborations that have been forged in the face of the pandemic. A key element of this was the Adult Protection Social Work team, the review team and the care management response team. Further work is continuing to strengthen the alignment of our services to the HSCP and community planning 3-locality model.

A Learning and Development Framework and Plan For Practice Improvement for Adult Support and Protection is in place. This aligns to a Grampian Learning and Development Strategic Framework 2021, and outlines the competences required for the workforce at different levels (wider, specific and specialist workforce). Learning and Development is being progressed in line with this Framework.

Conclusion

2021/22 has been a challenging year for the social work profession. It has however highlighted that Aberdeen City can be proud of having a strong, confident and effective social work service. The continuing impact of the COVID pandemic on the citizens of Aberdeen City as well as the social work/social care workforce has continued to be significant. Responding to the constrained demand as well as dealing with the backlog of unmet need is something the health, social care and social workforce will be responding to for the coming years.

In spite of these challenges social work staff have continued to respond with compassion and sensitivity to the needs of individuals, children, young people, and families who required social work intervention. Responding to those in need of care, support and protection has been hugely challenging but social work staff in Aberdeen City can be proud of all they have achieved. As CSWO, it has been immensely rewarding for me to see this dedication first hand and hear the positive contribution made by staff across the profession.

There is no doubt that the coming years will be a period of change and uncertainty for social work and social care across Scotland. The programme for government outlines notes a range legislative and policy changes to be driven forward not least incorporation of UNCRC into Scots Law. However, the proposed establishment of a National Care Service plan is the most significant. This has the potential to provide new opportunities to for social work and its partners to work in a more integrated manner and deliver whole family support. However, given many questions still to be resolved the impact on the workforce of this proposed change cannot be understated.

The need for clear and effective governance arrangements to be in place to ensure the complex public protection agendas are clearly understood and recognised is critical. As social work leaders it will be important that the voice of the profession continues to influence the design and structures of the evolving National Care Service.

The impact of the COVID pandemic shone a brighter light on existing inequalities across our communities. It also resulted in many individuals and families, previously not considered as vulnerable, being so for the first time. The impact of the cost of living challenges that has been intensified by the war in Ukraine will require social work to remain active to mitigate the harmful impacts on vulnerable individuals and families.

Having a strong social work vision and effective leadership is critical to the delivery of a person-centred approach which meets the needs of those who require the intervention of social work in their lives. Working with partners social work is well placed to influence and shape the delivery of rights-based trauma informed services which more effectively meet the needs of our clients. We welcome the continuing opportunities to further develop our approach to bring the voices of children, adults and families to the heart of our service planning and development. They have much to tell us and we are open to hearing and learning from their experiences in the shared pursuit of improving their outcomes.

Graeme Simpson
CSWO – Aberdeen City
30 September 2022