

# Aberdeen City Council's Chief Social Work Officer's 2023/24 Annual Report

## 1. Foreword

I am delighted to present my sixth Annual Report as Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO) for Aberdeen City, for the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. The Scottish Government's Chief Social Work Advisor has requested this report to ensure key issues are highlighted on a national basis, and information and learning shared. Upon receiving reports from all CSWOs, the Chief Social Work Advisor prepares a national overview.

In recent years, unprecedented and unforeseen challenges - a worldwide pandemic, global conflict, austerity cuts and a cost-of-living crisis have led to increased need for our most disadvantaged citizens. The increasing complexity of presenting need requires more resources to respond and effectively support children, vulnerable adults and families. At a time when the needs of our families have escalated, the financial climate is dictating that we must deliver more, with less.

Social work has always excelled in dealing with uncertainty, ambiguity, and crises. Our communities have never needed the professional knowledge, skills, and experience of social workers more. I am acutely aware of the significant pressures social workers face due to increasing workloads and the more complex needs of those they support.

This operational context coincides with noticeable changes to the legislative and policy context relating to social work. In particular the proposal to establish a National Care Service, and the potential structural changes this will require, creates much uncertainty. These changes are occurring at a time when the overall size of the profession, particularly in children's services, has decreased due to continuing budget pressures.

The publication of Social Work Scotland's 'Setting the Bar' (2019) and subsequent report 'Taking the Wheel' report (2022) highlighted the need to train and employ more social workers, provide enhanced professional and wellbeing support throughout social work careers, and ensure the voice of practitioners influences and shapes service design. Recruitment and retention challenges are widely recognised, so it perhaps not surprising that there has been a reduction in the applications to study social work. These obstacles are faced whilst adapting to key legislative changes, notably the Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Act 2019, Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024.

It is therefore unsurprising that Aberdeen City, like other local authorities, has experienced challenges in recruiting and retaining social workers. While Justice Social Work frequently reports a lower level of vacancies, this is not the case for key services; Mental Health and Learning Disability within Adult Social Work and across Children's Social Work. Social Work teams often carry vacancies for extended periods, placing added demands on the remaining staff who are already carrying full caseloads.

Despite these challenges, I continue to be hugely impressed by the capacity and skills demonstrated by colleagues working across all social work areas. Social Work staff in Aberdeen City continue to show genuine compassion, empathy, and resilience to protect and promote opportunities for children, young people, and adults to improve their lives and outcomes. As Chief Social Work Officer, I am extremely proud, grateful and inspired by their endeavours.

## **2. Governance, Accountability and Statutory Functions**

### **The Role of the Chief Social Work Officer**

There is a statutory requirement for all Local Authorities to appoint a professionally qualified Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO) registered with the Scottish Social Service Council (SSSC). The CSWO's role includes providing professional advice and guidance to Local Authorities, Elected Members, and Officers in the provision of Social Work Services, managing overall performance and improvement, and identifying and managing corporate risks related to Social Work Services.

The CSWO promotes professional practice values and standards, ensuring that only registered Social Workers undertake functions set out in legislation. The role helps ensure the local authority and its partners understand the complexities of social work service, including corporate parenting, child protection, adult protection, mental health and managing high-risk offenders

Social work services in Aberdeen City are governed across two structures: Children's Social Work within Aberdeen City Council's Children's Social Work & Family Support Cluster, and Adult Social Work, including Criminal Justice, within Aberdeen City's Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP), overseen by the Integration Joint Board (IJB).

Audit Scotland noted the complexity of the CSWO's role following the establishment of HSCPs, identifying challenges in providing independent, professional oversight and challenge across two complex structures. These challenges have been highlighted in Inspection Reports undertaken by the Care Inspectorate as well as via the Scottish Governments intimation to undertake a Thematic Inspection of Social Work Governance in 2024/25. The CSWO maintains very close working relationships with the HSCP Chief Officer, Chief Officer for Adult Social Work, and other managers across Adult Services.

Following the publication of the National Care Service (NCS) Bill, leaders from Aberdeen City Council and the HSCP continue to proactively plan for the anticipated NCS and its implications for existing governance arrangements. They have engaged with the Scottish Government to share local progress, particularly on the public protection agenda.

### **Adult & Child Protection**

Aberdeen City continues to engage a single Independent Chair for its Adult and Child Protection Committees. Through this, we have deliberately sought to better align governance, structures and system oversight as well as our approaches to risk assurance. We continue to seek ways to further extend this approach in order to ensure greater consistency across all public protection forums, including our Violence Against Women and Alcohol and Drugs Partnerships.

The activity of the Chief Officer Group is data and risk led, with Risk Registers and data reports being presented to and considered by them consistently. We continue to build on the strength of this activity and our collective leadership in relation to public protection, following our positive evaluation within the latest Adult Support and Protection Inspection in 2022.

### **Quality Assurance**

Across all aspects of social work, we actively promote a culture of continuous learning. We ensure feedback from the people we work with informs our planning and development of staff and services. This includes utilising complaints resolved at stage 1 or those that escalate to Stage 2 of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

There remains commonality in the areas of complaints across children and adult social work with the majority being in relation to the complainers views on the quality of service and staff communication. We have worked hard to address the challenges in engaging with a small group of our service users by noting that services are finding it difficult to engage with them, instead of using the previous term

"non-engaging family/adult". Progress has been reported over this period with a sustained reduction in number of families with whom we have found it harder to engage with as shown in our child protection statistics.

Significant progress has been made in the year to 31 March 2024 in relation to the monitoring of service quality and performance across the Service. The extended use of data, risk registers, service standards and the continued use 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.

The multi-agency Quality Assurance Framework, led by Children's Social Work, continues to provide 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 Child Protection Committee (CPC) and Children's Services Board (CSB). They utilise The Care Inspectorate "A quality framework for children and young people in need of care and protection – November 2022" to support self-evaluation.

The focus of audits is data led. This year multi agency audits focused on:

1. The transition between Nursery and Primary 1 - The purpose was to seek assurance as to the quality of information shared between NHS Grampian (NHS-G) and Education at the transition point into primary 1. This reflects the remit of the 'Best Start in Life' Group. It links to the Children's Services Plan 2023 – 2026 with this transition being a persistent issue which has arisen in Initial Case Reviews and Serious Case Reviews both locally and nationally.
2. In response to a spike in the number of children who become 'looked after' in the autumn of 2023 an audit sought to understand the reasons and any learning. This audit highlighted that there was strong embedding of GIRFEC processes and intervention focused on keeping children within their family network where safe to do so. However, it also highlighted a need to consider how the mental health needs of parents were supported by services. Learning we will take into our developing approach to whole family support.

### **Risk Oversight**

Risk management is a fundamental aspect of social work, and in Aberdeen City, managers across the service are all committed to ensuring the ongoing protection, welfare and wellbeing of those we serve. Both adult and children's social work services monitor and report risks using Risk Registers, which are then presented to either the Council Committee or the Integrated Joint Board (IJB)'s Clinical and Care Governance Board. In addition, and as part of the Council's Risk Management arrangements, the Council's Risk Board reviews the Children's Social Work and Family Support risks and the Aberdeen Health and Social Care Partnership's Strategic Risk Register on a quarterly basis.

Chief Officers own the cluster risk registers and Directors review them monthly. These registers outline risks that might hinder the delivery of essential services, commissioning plans, and strategic goals. Operational risk registers are managed by individual teams within Clusters, containing risks specific to those teams, and are overseen by team managers and leaders. Should risks on the Operational risk registers escalate in severity, they can be transferred to the cluster risk register.

The IJB has implemented a Board Assurance and Escalation Framework to ensure there are structures, behaviours, and processes in place for setting risk appetite, identifying significant events and trends, assessing and mitigating risks, and establishing effective controls and assurances.

The Strategic Risk register, primarily owned by the Chief Officer, assigns specific risks to members of the Leadership Team as appropriate. This register is reviewed quarterly by the Risk, Audit and Performance Committee (RAPC) before being updated and presented at the next IJB meeting, ensuring regular, thorough scrutiny of identified risks and mitigation strategies. The pandemic and financial pressures have intensified this scrutiny, promoting a holistic approach to managing risk within our social work services.

The Council and its partners have robust public protection arrangements in place. These have been positively evaluated by external scrutiny arrangements. The Chief Officers Group take an evidence-based approach to deliver on their oversight of these arrangements. They receive relevant data, risk registers and reports from the Child Protection Committee, Adult Protection Committee, Alcohol and Drug Partnership, Violence Against Women and Girls Partnership and from Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements.

Under the oversight of the Independent Chair of our Adult and Child Protection Committees along with the CSWO we have brought together the Lead Officers for our public protection forums to bring a greater level of connectivity and consistency to our public protection activities. In doing so we have identified opportunities to collaborate and integrate these activities, this reflects that rarely do the needs of vulnerable children, young people, adults and families fall under one public protection forum. It is our intention to further develop this approach during the coming year.

### **3. Service Quality and Performance**

#### **CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORK**

As noted above Children's Social Work sits within the Council's Children's Social Work and Family Services cluster. A restructure of the Council structure early in 2024/25 saw this change. The cluster sits under the 'Families and Communities' Function and includes the Education & Lifelong Learning cluster, Housing cluster and Corporate Landlord cluster.

This arrangement enables opportunities to integrate to be maximised particularly in relation to supporting our most vulnerable children and families with a variety of complex needs, but also how we provide early and preventative support to families that mitigates the need for children to be referred to social work. Children's Social work provides support from pre-birth through to 26 years of age for our care experienced young people.

Our data tells us that locally the demand for social work assessment and intervention remains high. Work within our Intake Service, comprising our Joint Child Protection Team, Children's Reception Team and our Aberdeen Maternity Hospital team, responds to all new referrals. The largest number of new referrals is received from Police Scotland followed by Education. Initial assessment and intervention is offered, aimed at allowing families to exit any statutory social work service at the earliest juncture. This year has seen an increase in new and increasing areas of work including –

- migrant families/UASC who arrive spontaneously or with minimal time for planning
- increasing numbers of young people arriving in Aberdeen, due to criminal exploitation,
- high levels of substance misuse amongst young people and parents
- Increased numbers of children with additional support needs (ASN), significantly those who are neurodiverse and are often referred at a point of crisis.

#### **Child Protection**

Child protection processes and administration are well embedded, understood and utilised across all partners in Aberdeen City. Our last Joint Inspection in 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". We continue to strive for the very highest standards of service delivery in this area, despite challenges particularly at a time of economic crisis and many associated issues, not least child poverty and displaced persons, which have continued to be evident throughout 2023/2024.

Aberdeen City's Child Protection Committee follows the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021-23. After using a national self-evaluation tool, we found that we broadly align with the new principles. However, we acknowledge the need for better child-friendly communication materials

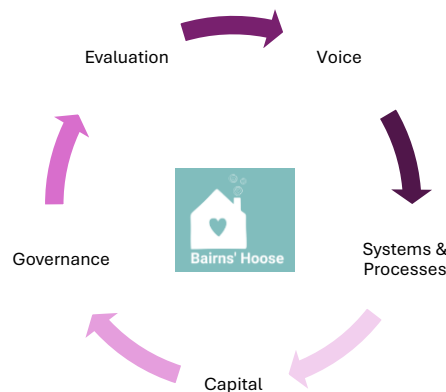
and greater focus on contextual safeguarding. The [Child Protection Committee's annual report](#) illustrates some of the improvement activities that have been undertaken in 2023/2024.

## Key Priorities for the Child Protection Committee

### Bairns Hoose

In November 2023, the Aberdeen City Partnership was awarded Pathfinder status to be one of six pathfinder sites in Scotland for a Bairns' Hoose. The objective of a Bairns' Hoose is to provide integrated support tailored to the needs of children and young people who have been abused or have witnessed violence, as well as children under the age of criminal responsibility (currently 12 years old) whose actions have significantly harmed others. A central goal of this model is to minimise the number of times children must recount their experiences whilst ensuring aligned support from the point of investigation of harm through to recovery.

A Bairns' Hoose Delivery Group was established in 2023 and has 5 workstreams,



Some key achievements by the group include:

- Successful bid for Scottish Government Funding
- Identifying a location for our Bairns' Hoose
- Inviting young people to help inform the design with the Council's architects and partners,
- The development of a pathway to recovery services
- Journey mapping with children/families to better understand their experiences

As a pathfinder site, we have much to develop and learn in creating a Bairns' Hoose. Our goal is to provide children and young people with the recovery support they need and integrate Bairns' Hoose principles into our practice. We plan to open our Bairns' Hoose in July 2025 but much of the work has begun already and builds on improvements we have made in relation to our child protection processes. Pivotal to this, is ensuring proportionality in relation to our use of formal information sharing and decision-making fora such as our Interagency Referral Discussions, our progression to Child Protection Planning Meetings and our referrals to SCRA.

### Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM)

In response to Scotland's commitment to implement the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) for children who are victims of, or witness to abuse or neglect, staff in Aberdeen City have worked with colleagues from Aberdeenshire, Moray, Police Scotland 'A Division' and NHSG to make improvements to key child protection processes in preparation for a North East roll out of SCIM. This included a refreshed IRD template, furthering enhancing the way we elicit and record essential preliminary information, building on the strength and learning gleaned from our IRD quality assurance measures. An options appraisal over 2022 determined how one SCIM model could operate across the 3 local authorities, taking account of the differing governance arrangements but also the diversity of geographical and demographical challenges. The North East SCIM team went live in November 2022.

In 2023/2024, the SCIM team undertook 91% of interviews for children requiring interview. This greatly exceeds the initial commitment to undertake 60% of all Joint Investigative Interviews using this improved model. Our work on SCIM will form the backbone to future planning in relation to Aberdeen City's adoption of a Bairns Hoose. The COG committed to this in November 2022 and a Delivery Group was established in March 2023, to drive forward our planning and implementation.

### **Learning Event – Parental Substance Use & Safe Sleep**

Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, and Moray's Child Protection Committees identified an increase in the number of deaths of babies over the last 2 years, associated with parental substance use and unsafe sleeping practices when using substances. A learning event was delivered for practitioners across the North East. Its purpose was to help prevent significant harm to children and young people, and further adopt a culture of collaborative multi-agency working. The learning objectives for the event were to:

- more consistently consider and involve male carers in the plans for children.
- increased knowledge of parental substance use, particularly cannabis, and the impact parenting on parenting capacity.
- understand safe sleep practices, particularly where there is known parental substance use.

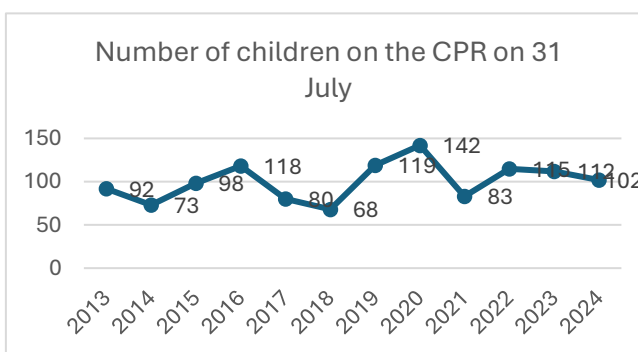
The event was attended by over 200 practitioners, and nearly 100 watching live online. The event was recorded and has also been viewed by many practitioners unable to attend. Learning from this event has been factored into our continually evolving Child Protection Improvement Plan.

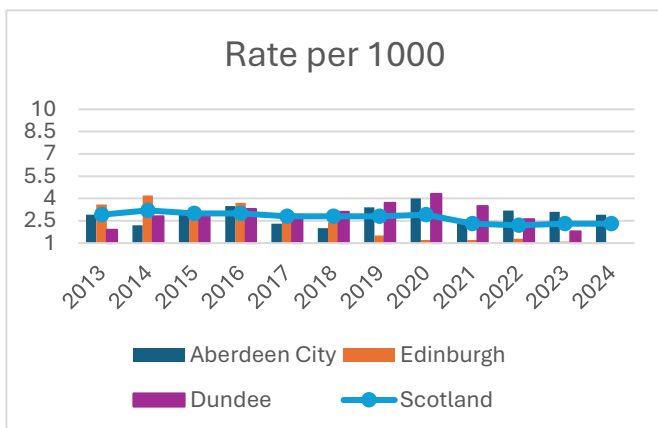
Capacity for improvement is a fundamental pillar of our Child Protection Committee, and our improvements are driven by our Child Protection Improvement Programme. The CPC have begun to look ahead to our programme for 2024-2026, where some of our priorities will be child protection & parental substance use, exploitation, and child protection and domestic abuse. The CPC have developed a more collaborative and integrated approach with the Alcohol & Drug Partnership and the Violence Against Women Partnership to deliver on our priorities.

### **Child Protection Registration Data**

We continue to make improvements in relation to the identification, collation, reporting and analysing of child protection data both on a single and multi-agency basis. We adhere to, and go beyond, the requirements of the national minimum data set for CPC. Detailed consideration of our data takes place at service level and in the multi-agency CPC environment where data reports are scrutinised quarterly.

Numbers of children whose names feature on the child protection register in Aberdeen City has remained relatively static (see graph on the right). The published Children's Social Work statistics contains extensive local and national data up to July 2023. Aberdeen City are broadly in line with the national average in relation children registered on the Child Protection Register with a previous registration period which occurred more than two years ago. Neglect and Parental Mental Health are the predominant concerns recorded when a child's name is placed on the Child Protection Register. Where Aberdeen City differ from the national averages is in the rate of registrations on the Child Protection Register.

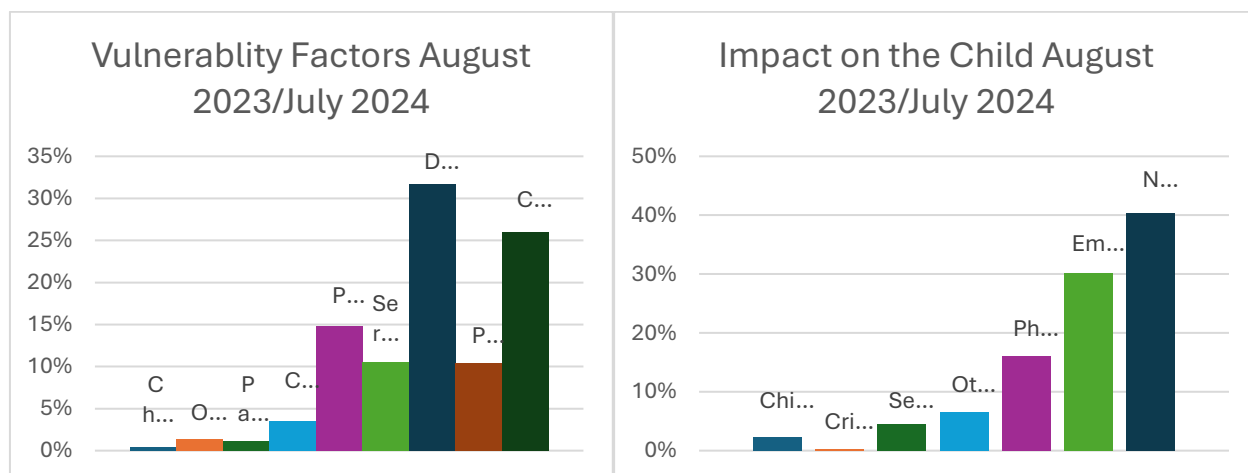




Placing a child’s name on the Child Protection Register (CPR) is a significant decision in a child’s life. Such a decision is always based on individual circumstances and the professional judgement of the multi-agency team around the family. Local data tells us that in 2022 – 2023, 93% of children subject to an initial Child Protection Planning Meeting (CPPM) were placed on the CPR. The high conversion rate demonstrates our threshold for deciding to convene an initial CPPM is aligned to our thinking within that subsequent meeting,

The concept of significant harm is one which is framed by professional experience and judgement. We recognise that within discussions focussed on risk, professionals seek to do all they can to mitigate against future harm. Whilst registration is a recognition of the need for multi-agency child protection planning it is not the process in itself that reduces risk. We also know that parents can feel shame and feel judged by the decision to place their child’s name on the CPR. In recognition of this and Aberdeen City’s higher rate per 1000 children on the CPR (see bar chart above), we continue to challenge all professionals across the wider partnership to be clear that registration is necessary, i.e. that we are only utilising CPR for children where there is a clear risk of ‘significant harm’ and a multi-agency child protection plan is required. Understanding this variation this will be a focus in 2024/25.

Across Scotland, domestic abuse, neglect, and parental mental health are most recorded concerns at registration, and the same trend is seen in Aberdeen City (see Bar Charts below). The data in the charts, in addition to our learning and self-assessment will inform the activities to deliver on our priorities set out in the CPC’s Child Protection Improvement Programme 2024-2026.



### Trauma informed practice

Children’s Social Work has continued to carefully consider the psychological trauma in the lives of children who use our services. Such recognition emerges from the understanding that while Children’s Social Work provides services to support children’s recovery, they equally possess the risk of exposing children, parents and carers to processes, approaches and interventions that may cause them to re-experience earlier adversities. The workforce is committed to ensuring that positive supportive relationships are at the heart of interventions.

We have a) conducted a self-assessment of staff knowledge and confidence revealing most of the workforce feeling they were at least *Trauma-informed* or *Trauma Skilled* and b) completed a literature review on supporting implementation of these approaches to Social Work systems. As a result, we recognised that the workforce needs to be supported to be at least trauma skilled and informed. Therefore we:

1. Supported the workforce to undertake the *Trauma Skilled and Informed* level training as a core requirement. NQSW's are supported to undertake this training as part of their induction.
2. Developed a bespoke pilot trauma programme for the *Trauma-Enhanced* level. 11 practitioners undertook this during 2023/24. An evaluation of this pilot and the findings were aligned with our workforce development plan, including supervision.

A primary driver for this model is to enable staff to articulate the difference between risk and actual harm, and to understand that risk is not static but can be reduced by the skilled intervention of knowledgeable and confident practitioners. Feedback from families and professionals has illustrated that this approach has encouraged a more ethical and empowering collaboration between service users and professionals.

### Corporate Parenting

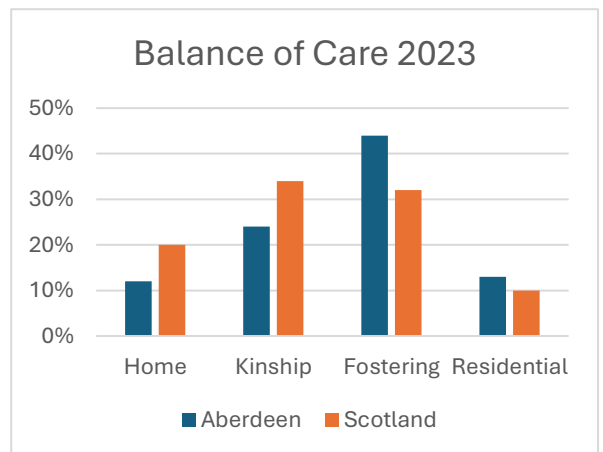
In Aberdeen City, we believe that corporate parenting is not merely a responsibility but also a privileged opportunity to enhance the futures of our children and young people, ensuring they receive the love, security, and opportunities every child deserves.

Aberdeen City's Corporate Parenting Group has responsibility for:

- 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 Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP)
- driving the implementation of The Promise across the Partnership.

The Corporate Parenting Group engages with our children, young people and young adults with care experience and seeks to ensure all improvement activity takes full account of their voice, views and lived experiences. Specifically, the group has oversight of LOIP Improvement Project Stretch Aim 5; *“By meeting the health and emotional wellbeing needs of our care experienced children and young people they will have the same levels of attainment in education and positive destinations as their peers by 2026”*

In 2023/24, Aberdeen City had an average of 500 infants, children and young people who were 'looked-after' in various care settings across the year. We are committed to reducing the number of children and young people coming into the 'care system' and are working to support more children and their families to remain together within their own community.



In 2023/24, the diversity of children and young people with care experience has grown, as seen in those placed by the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). Locally, we've formed a best practice group to address the cultural, language, and trauma needs of our New Scots. 53 young people who came from either the NTS or were 'Spontaneous Arrivals' are either in care or receiving Aftercare support. To maintain inclusive support, we set up a two-year New Scots/Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers Project Team to build infrastructure and undertake age assessments – 22 age assessments have been undertaken, with the majority (16) confirmed as children.



We have been supported by partners to build an infrastructure which has included:

- North East of Scotland College offered an 'English as a second language' short course
- a designated contact point in CAMHS;
- 30 new Scots attended a health assessment/clinic session, where they received updated immunisations and health advice.

This remains an area of high demand, and we are building confidence and expertise, with 12 members of the CSW workforce undergoing Age Assessment Training to improve our response to anticipated legal challenges arising from disputed age assessment results.

In 2023/24, we successfully supported care-experienced young people outside formal systems. We worked on improving pathways and increasing diversions from prosecutions for 16/17-year-olds, resulting in a 26% rise in Diversions from Prosecution (DfP), with 95 diversions completed. Available data indicates that children have continued to be held within the Children's Hearing System which is appropriate for their age. For the period May 2023 to April 2024, of the 39 jointly reported 16/17-year-olds, only 2 were retained by the Procurator Fiscal (PF), marking this as a significant improvement from previous years.

Workforce development sessions aimed at improving practitioner's understanding of pathways, systems, and interventions for children in conflict with the law, were conducted throughout 2023/24. Over 60 members of the multi-agency workforce attended awareness-raising sessions regarding jointly reported young people.

Local preparations for the Children's (Care and Justice) Act 2024, have started. The key initial focus is stopping under-18s from being placed in Young Offender Institutes. Presentations have been made to the Children's Services Management Team, and guidelines have been shared with the multi-agency workforce through roadshows and written materials. We continue to explore across Justice SW and Children's SW, how we can best implement the changes to the legislation to ensure those children and young people who come in conflict with the law are best supported and protected.

## **Secure Care**

After an extended period where no child or young person from Aberdeen City had been placed in secure care, we have this year had four young people who have met the stringent criteria for secure care. All four children had, prior to their move to secure care, been living at home or within wider family networks, or in the case of one, living semi-independently in the community. Due to their complex needs and associated risk, in the period preceding their move to secure care, none of this group had been able to access mainstream/specialist education provision. All were open to CAMHS &/or specialist health services. The majority of intervention was by way of intensive wrap around social work support. For all four individuals, the lack of sufficiently safe therapeutic environments was identified, which might have avoided the need for secure care.

This context strongly aligns with the findings of the Thematic Inspection – Secure Care Pathway Review, autumn 2023. We are challenging ourselves to consider the supports that might be needed to minimise the need for restriction of liberty measures for any of our young people as we continue to develop practice in light of the Thematic Inspection.

## **Family Support**

Reducing the number of children we place in out of authority placements remains a service priority, reflected in our Children's Services Plan and the LOIP. In addition to the statutory reviewing processes, senior managers in Education and CSW scrutinise the quality and planning of individual placements. In addition to our in-house targeted resources, we commission Includem who work in partnership with our Craigelea Intensive Support Service to provide intensive support to prevent children being placed out with the city but also to support young people who return to the city

Over the past year we have developed the Northfield and Lochside Pilot Projects. These two projects have been established within two designated secondary schools where there was an identified need

to provide targeted whole family intervention. Multi-agency Teams including Family Learning, Social Work and Youth Work and Education, provide targeted intervention to meet identified needs and to improve overall outcomes in relation to engagement and achievement. The projects are funded by the 'Whole Family Wellbeing Fund' and are in their second year of evaluation.

PEEP (learning programme) has marked 20 years of service in Aberdeen. Working to deliver a LOIP outcome to increase by 40% the number of PEEP programmes delivered by multi-agency partners by 2025. The Peep team, along with other trained practitioners and volunteers, provides around 26 universal and peer support groups for families with children aged 0-5 years. These groups encourage attachment-based activities to improve relationships and enhance the home learning environment.

The peer support groups offer antenatal assistance and aid to families where English is an additional language, refugees, mothers experiencing low mood or anxiety, and children who need extra support. The PEEP programme includes assisting families with care-experienced children and groups for adopters, kinship carers, and foster carers. This has been extended to include individual sessions during family time contact to support a rehabilitation plan for returning to parental care. PEEP has innovatively broadened its offerings to families in Aberdeen by collaborating with multi-agency partners to develop and deliver Intergenerational Peep and a new programme called Healthier Families Peep.

## **Family Time**

Our Family Time Hub offers a supportive and trauma-informed environment where supervised or supported family time (contact) sessions are assessed, to contribute to wider decision making for children, young people and their families. The service provides tailored assistance and support to individual children and their families. In response to feedback from kinship carers a new post was created to focus on developing resources and support available to kinship carers who are supporting family contact arrangements. This post funded by the 'Whole Family Wellbeing Fund' offers the opportunity to develop a service that meets our commitments to The Promise, contributing to the intensive support available to kinship families and supporting children and young people to sustain meaningful and loving relationships with them.

## **Kinship, Fostering and Adoption**

Reflecting our priorities the Kinship, Fostering and Adoption Service provides loving and nurturing care for children and young people where they are unable to remain with their birth parents. At present the Service currently support:

- 281 children and young people living with 227 kinship families. Of this 104 families caring for 123 looked after children. There are 129 families caring for 152 children, of whom, 28 have secured Kinship Care orders and no longer have active social work involvement.
- 90 children and young people are currently living in 74 registered ACC fostering households. There are a further 140 children accommodated with Independent Fostering Agencies. We recognise this imbalance and continue to make every effort to grow our fostering capacity.

Our priority remains keeping children and young people within their family network and as such, continuing to scaffold and support Kinship families is a priority. Collaboration between the service and third sector agencies, including a partnership with CAMHS, has bolstered the provision of skilled, trauma-informed support to Kinship families. This effort follows the successful completion of 2023 LOIP activities aimed at enhancing multi-agency support for kinship families, which in turn has created additional opportunities for collaborative work.

An ongoing emphasis this past year has been promoting wellbeing across all who deliver intervention and support to those who need our services. We ensure that our carers are well supported and that they have access to a range of training and knowledge hubs to help them meet the needs of the children they care for.

Despite nationwide challenges in recruiting new foster carers, our Fostering recruitment has experienced a slight rise in applications this year. There are 9 assessments currently being undertaken and a further 5 households attending the 'Skills to Foster' training which forms part of the pre-assessment stage of the recruitment process. A new position has been established within the team to enhance connections with external placements and foster stability. Despite being introduced just 6 months ago, there is clear evidence that early intervention during placement instability has effectively prevented breakdowns.

Over the past year Permanence plans were made for 24 children: 16 for adoption (including one sibling group of 4 children) and 8 children with permanent foster care plans (including 1 sibling group of 4 children). There have been 14 adoptive matches made. No sibling groups were matched. 5 permanent foster care matches have been made (including 1 sibling group of 3 children).

### **Children's Residential Care, Care Leavers**

Our residential care service continues to focus on promoting recovery from trauma. Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) continues to be our primary framework. Our residential service is founded on a strong ethos of care, which informs our admissions process and includes comprehensive, systemically based matching considerations. Young people are supported to 'Stay Put', reflecting their Continuing Care Status. As of 31 March 2024, half of our young population was comprised of 16 and 17-year-olds, and an additional 6 individuals were aged 18 or above.

It is normal for young people in our care to have an average stay exceeding 24 months. We have maintained high levels of sustainment with minimal disruption. We employ a systemic planning method to ensure that transitions to and from our services are neither traumatic nor anxiety-inducing. Our establishment of the Residential Aftercare support team, which assisted 16 young individuals in transitioning, offers an enhanced level of relationship-focused Throughcare and Aftercare services.

The demand for local residential children's home provision in 2023/24 has remained consistent with that of 2022/23, continuing to exceed our available supply. Twenty four referrals were made in 2023/24 (20 children) for matching considerations, and 10 of these children were matched with available provisions. Among the young people placed locally, 40% were returning to Aberdeen from out-of-authority placements. In 2023/24, all our children's homes reached full capacity.

The demand for placements consistently exceeds both availability and the capacity to adequately care for children with increasingly complex psychological and trauma needs. Without careful matching to suitable provisions, there is a risk of overwhelming staff teams and disrupting children who are already well-placed. Staff recruitment remains an ongoing challenge with only 50% of vacancies filled. At this point, 5 positions remained unfilled for 2023/24, resulting in a capacity shortfall. This is in line with other 'hard to fill' areas of children's social work being picked up in our workforce development planning.

We maintain a relational approach to recruitment, incorporating lived experience as part of our established model. Efforts to provide workforce support and ensure residential practitioners are well-prepared for their roles continue to advance. Reflecting our workforce's dedication and our investment, we support practitioners to enrol in the Strathclyde University MSc in Residential Childcare. One worker achieved this qualification in 2023/24, and four others are in the process of completion.

The Care Inspectorate transitioned from annual inspections, with the single inspection in 2023/24 resulting in a very good grade. In 2023/24, we cared for 6 young Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People (UASYP) across our children's homes, with 4 still in provision. Those who moved on have robust Aftercare support and individual care and pathway plans, mostly managed by the Youth Team (Care Leavers) and our partner, Action for Children. Overall.

As the need for children to be safe and protected within their communities keeps increasing, local assessments have been conducted to explore the possibility of adding another children's home to our current provision. The former children's home in the city's south has been deemed unsuitable due to high refurbishment costs and recruitment challenges. Approximately 12% of young people in care are placed in residential settings, with local children's homes making up about 4% of this group.

## **Youth Justice**

In spring 2023, the LOIP stretch outcomes were updated, assigning the Youth Justice Improvement Group to new stretch outcome 8: "83.5% fewer young people (under 18) charged with an offence by 2026" and its related charters. We continue our collaborative commitment to support the number of care experienced young people (CEYP) who are in conflict with the law by agreeing the following:

- Reduce by 15% the number of CEYP reported missing from Children's homes to Police Scotland by 2024. This has been effectively completed.
- 90% of 16/17-year-olds appearing at Sherriff Court will have had an assessment of their community support needs by 2025. This is ongoing and is facilitating consideration of practice in anticipation of CCJ legislation.
- Increase by 5% the number of 16/17 year olds who are diverted from prosecution by 2025. We are on track to exceed this target with an almost 30% increase within this timeframe.
- By 2025 reduce by 15% the number of in youth anti-social behaviour calls to Police Scotland

Brief guides to the Children (Care and Justice) Scotland Act 2024 were distributed through Children's and Justice Social Work. They are intended to be quick reads that highlight important practice changes and developments, and nearly half of the Children in Need teams have attended accompanying presentations.

We work closely with Police Scotland for our young people who come into conflict with the law, with particular focus on those cared for in our local children's homes. Our collaboration includes support sessions for about 20 police personnel over 2023/24, focusing on developmental trauma awareness. The Youth Justice Management Unit's report shows an overall trend in a decreasing number of crime files linked to our children's homes in the past two years, with 7 recorded in 2023/24, (up from none in 2022/23 but down from 13 in 2021/22).

## **Throughcare & Aftercare**

Approximately 150 young people open to our Youth Team are entitled to statutory Aftercare, out of a total of around 223 in Aberdeen. Some do not need or want the support. Most of those receiving support are aged between 18 and 24, with 63% living in rented social housing.

The recent inclusion of a Housing Support Officer co-located within our Youth Team structure has enabled earlier identification of housing needs, helped prevent housing crises, and resulted in a low number of unsustainable tenancies. Young People transitioning and moving on from care have been part of a national focus within Plan 21-24, with 100 days of listening taking place early in 2024, a number of Aberdeen young people shared their experiences within these national forums.

Ongoing challenges related to poverty, living expenses, and fair access to opportunities continue to be prevalent among our care leavers, so this remains a key focus of improvement work. We have provided young individuals under 18, and a few over 18, who depend on the Local Authority for their income, a rate slightly higher than the DWP allowances. We note however our food pantry and essential provision services are overwhelmed due to the high demand from this group. Monthly connection and belonging groups are co-hosted with the Aberdeen Care Experience network where care leavers keep in touch and are invited for a meal.

Health and wellbeing issues are significant, evidenced by self-reports and a high engagement level with Adult Health Services for mental and emotional support. The service also promotes digital inclusion and access for the group through the following:

- Digital Inclusion needs are assessed as part of Pathway planning. In 2023/24, 22 Wi-Fi/MiFi devices, 33 iPads, laptops, and 30 mobile phones were distributed to care leavers.
- The ACE Facebook page continues to be utilised for communication, boasting 581 followers, while the Youth Team Facebook page has 555 followers.
- 146 young people with care experience and 200 professionals have Mind of My Own (MOMO) accounts.
- The bidding process for Choices Housing is dependent on digital access and is encouraged.
- The Youth Team successfully completed Circuit Digital Inclusion Training, which provides Digital Inclusion Rights Training for professionals.

## **Children with Disabilities**

Our dedicated Children with Disabilities Team, hold case responsibility for children with the most complex of health and disabilities needs. The team provide social work support to 130 children with complex and enduring needs. The needs within this group are multi-faceted, including assessing need in relation to Self-Directive Support being provided or those of unpaid carers (family members) and/or for care and protection concerns.

Fundamental changes have been made to the processing of referrals in relation to children with disabilities. Previously, all new referrals were triaged by the Children's Reception Team. It was recognised this arrangement saw families waiting before a detailed assessment was carried out. The expertise within the disability team ensured a more timely assessment being undertaken, enabling the earlier provision of intervention, support, or signposting to services. These changes have seen a significant improvement in the time between initial referral and needs assessments being completed.

We recognise that autism and neurodiversity are incorporated within the spectrum of disability. To support these children and their families, many of whom experience extended periods on a CAMHS waiting list. Our local partnership secured Scottish Government funding in relation to the implementation of the National Neurodevelopmental Specification. A Test of Change was developed to implement aspects of the Standards and Principles of Care and has focussed on engaging with children and families alongside key stakeholders who have a role to play in referral, assessment, diagnosis, and support. This has seen families signposted to appropriate community supports at the earliest juncture.

The Care Inspectorate initiated a Thematic Review of Disabled Children and Young People's Experience of Social Work Services across all 32 local authorities. Aberdeen City was one of four local authorities, who experienced 'a deeper dive' as part of the inspection. A small selection of children, families and carers, were interviewed as part of this process. We await the findings of the inspection but initial feedback from Inspectors comments upon the high level of commitment from practitioners across children's services. Undoubtedly there will be learning for us to take when the report is published later in 2024. These will be incorporated into our improvement planning.

Children and families continue to tell us that the transition for children 'aging out' of children's services remains a time of anxiety. We recognise further improvement is required. The Scottish Government's Transition to Adulthood Strategy, September 2023, has captured the recent research, and engagement, on the experiences of children transitioning to adulthood. Close collaboration is taking place between Adult Social Work and Children's Services, as well as partners, to understand the challenges fully and to implement improvement.

To support families better understand the available resources, an information evening was arranged. This offered insight into the transition phase, services available during this process and beyond. Feedback from families highlighted the success of the event. The Education Service, as part of their Improvement Plan, has a focus on improving Pathways for children which has seen the introduction

of parents information evenings at Bucksburn Academy, Additional Support Needs Wing. The Children with Disabilities Team support these events cementing growing collaboration.

## **Rights, Voice & Participation**

Aberdeen City Council's promotes a rights-respecting approach in its practice. The concept of 'Voice' is fundamental to this approach, as evidenced by the advocacy and support offered by our 'Young Person's Rights Service.'

Building on the input from children, young people, and young adults regarding what is important to them, two priority improvement areas for the Rights Service have been carried over from the previous year. These priorities (below) were further emphasised during my 2023 engagement with the workforce to discuss the aims and consequences of the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024.

- Further develop inclusive ways of observing and communicating with, and/or on behalf of children, young people, and young adults which support their rights, participation, and voice.
- Further raise awareness and promote rights through the provision of learning opportunities that translates rights into practice.

Improvement efforts include more individualised, non-instructive advocacy for the voices of pre-birth babies, infants, and neurodivergent individuals. This not only protects their rights and involvement, but also captures a meaningful snapshot of their lives. An inclusive communication workshop is provided 3-4 times annually. The workshop combines theoretical and experiential learning with a 'take-away starter pack' to build on. Both examples will feature in the UNCRC National Learning Framework materials due for publication later this year.

Participation grants children, adolescents, and young adults their basic rights. We have continued to use a broad range of methods to engage with, listen to, and act upon what our children, young people and young adults tell us. This informs the work of the Corporate Parenting Group to bring about change. We achieve meaningful engagement through our Aberdeen Care Experienced (ACE) network and with our practitioners in various ways, from raising awareness and providing guidance daily to offering active individual and group participation opportunities and experiences, such as:

- Continuation of themed events including 'Warm Space' gatherings, an advent countdown leading up to Christmas, and a sit-down Christmas lunch before the big day.
- Annual Care Day celebration in February 2024, with the theme of 'Participation'. Attended by over 30 young people and their supporters as well as others from across the workforce. This simultaneously launched the Bright Spots research Programme.
- The SPSO launched their child friendly complaints Principles and Guidance. Aberdeen was the only local authority to take part in the pilot from July 2023 to test the process, review the guidance and to provide feedback.

In 2023, we decided to create an Engagement and Participation Officer post. This will develop our focus on CEYP as part of developing our Rights Service. Previously, this role was provided by Who Cares? Scotland. The goal of the post is to ensure that people with care experience have meaningful interactions that boost their capacity and sense of belonging. The post also has a specific focus on workforce development, supporting increased understanding of how the UNCRC applies in practice, through providing learning opportunities in relation to the principles of participation, and empowerment. The post started in March 2024, and I am looking forward to seeing how this evolves.

## **ADULT SOCIAL WORK**

2023/24 has been a busy year for our adult and justice social work services. These services support adults from age 18 to end of life. We work to ensure that everyone we support is treated as an individual with their own experiences and personal challenges. Adult services is a complex landscape but staff

strive to work to our overall vision for adult social work - ***“The vision for adult social work in Aberdeen is based on a prevention and early intervention model, working in collaboration across sectors and services to prevent, intervene and deliver services to those who require it.”***

This is in line with the challenge set by Derek Feeley to shift the paradigm of care. As we continue to fulfil our statutory responsibility to address the needs of people in crisis, we encounter increasingly complex needs that necessitate statutory interventions, care, and support.

The Aberdeen City Health and Social Care Partnership's (ACHSCP) Strategic Plan outlines the actions being taken as a partnership to tackle these challenges. The dedication of our justice and adult social work teams has a significant impact on achieving the overall aims of the ACHSCP. We are engaging well with individuals and their families who need assistance, fulfilling our statutory obligations, delivering positive outcomes and supporting the recruitment and ongoing development of our capable, effective and professional workforce.

To achieve our Strategic Plan ambitions, we needed a shift in care balance and a targeted approach to prevention and early intervention. Integration and community planning have supported more joined-up working, but further efforts were required to fully integrate our services and embed our shared vision. This involved team ownership, collaboration, and system-wide working. We viewed adult social work as a whole system to align resources, deliver services, achieve outcomes, and meet strategic ambitions. The first step was redesigning services through early intervention, prevention, and community empowerment. Over the past year, we have continued to design future adult social work services by aligning teams into localities, fostering locality ownership, multi-agency and multi-disciplinary collaboration, and true system-working. Our goal is to have teams that protect, promote, and ensure a human rights-based approach within our communities, empowering those who need support, utilising community assets, and placing supported individuals at the centre of care planning to achieve their goals and desired outcomes.

Within Aberdeen City we consider ourselves to be at the forefront of developing our digital ambitions and technology enabled care (TEC). This supports us with developing and delivering high quality, reliable and efficient services into the future. ACHSCP are committed to promoting the use of digital technology to explore alternative methods of care provision within the city. Using a “TEC First” approach during the assessment process, consideration is given to the use of technology to either replace or compliment in person care.

#### Key Successes in 23/24

- In September 2023, we held a TEC 'Meet the Suppliers' event with attendees from Grampian and the Scottish Government Digital Office, featuring talks, workshops, and demonstrations on TEC and social care.
- We launched Aberdeen City's TEC Delivery Plan 2023-25 and established a TEC Project Board to oversee its implementation.
- In 2023, we launched the Digital Support Hub pilot project, testing a new model combining technology and face-to-face care.
- A TEC library opened in Aberdeen, allowing the public and professionals to borrow equipment and receive support for their health and care needs. Road shows and staff training were also conducted. You can find a short information video here - [TEC Library](#).

This collaborative approach to TEC has delivered positive outcomes in relation to the resource demands on care services through effective use of technology in new models of care delivery.

Significant efforts have been made to provide national reporting data and ensure practitioners are skilled in using the system. This area will continue to evolve with changing requirements and data

needs. An example of this being to add ability into the system to meet the requirements of the new Adult Support and Protection National Minimum Dataset introduced in April 2023.

We continued to experience increasing demand and high levels of need across all adult social work services in 2023/24 with 2153 new assessments of need completed across all client groups. This need varies and requires different support for each client group.

Our learning disability teams are seeing more children with complex care requirements transitioning to adult services. There is also an increase in Local Authority and Private Guardianship orders, indicating higher complexity and the obligation for social work staff to monitor these orders. We participated with other HSCPs and the Scottish Government as a pilot site for the Dynamic Support Register (DSR), recommended by The Coming Home Implementation Report. The DSR will improve monitoring of people with learning disabilities and complex care needs, providing robust data for current and future demands with greater visibility for strategic planning. We are already seeing benefits through our commissioning of new builds.

Within Aberdeen city, as is seen across the country, people are living longer. However, evidence shows that there is a significant gap between healthy life expectancy, the period of life where we live in good health, and actual life expectancy. There is also variation in life expectancy for those living in more deprived areas whose health outcomes are poorer. In 2022 Dementia was the leading cause of death for women in Aberdeen and the second most common for men. These factors have implications for the delivery of social work and social care services for older adults in Aberdeen.

As with Children's Services, the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis continue to impact on the health and wellbeing of our population. 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.

Our Justice service experienced challenges in meeting the demand for increasing statutory supervision orders because of the court backlog during the COVID-19 pandemic however we are beginning to now see this return to pre-pandemic levels. The increased prison population has reached crisis levels during this year with an increasing percentage of remand prisoners. Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service continue to reduce numbers by promoting Supervised Bail as an appropriate alternative. There is evidence that the use of Bail Supervision, whilst not reducing the number of Aberdeen remand prisoners, is preventing an increase.

Self-directed Support (SDS) underpins social work activity across a significant proportion of our children's and adult services. We are cognisant 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. We aim to proactively develop adult social work, social care, and justice services to reduce risk and need, prevent harm, and help people live healthier for longer. I am pleased to outline a number of areas of work where we have been able to progress this during 2023/24.

**The Grampian Gathering** - We collaborated with partners across Aberdeen to deliver the 'Granite City Gathering 2023', attended by 29 community groups and 167 people aged 45+. The event promoted active ageing, lifelong learning, retirement planning, end-of-life planning, and ensuring wills and Power of Attorney are in place. It also highlighted our 'Stay Well, Stay Connected' programme, helping people remain healthy and connected as they age.

**Power of Attorney (POA)**- We recognise the importance of having POA in place and have increased promotion via online platforms and across council and NHS premises. We have promoted POA at the Aberdeen City Vaccination Centre (ACVC), Aberdeen GP practices, hospital sites, and within wards. Posters in Council buildings and workplaces are updated periodically. Our service manager POA lead



is active in the national strategy group, with a local action plan to increase awareness. National POA Day on 21st November 2024 will be promoted at the Aberdeen Community and Vaccination Centre and across community groups, as well as at 'The Gathering' and the local carer's group.

## Carers Support

The ACHSCP Carers Strategy 2023-26, developed with unpaid carers, aims to ensure that they receive the right advice and support when needed. Recognising their vital role, we collaborated with Quarriers to support carers. This led to a 10% increase in those feeling supported by 2023, through a range of projects including those within the Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) like the 'Respite Bureau' and 'Time to Live.'

Over the past year, the Older Adults Care Management team worked to increase day opportunities for older adults in locality settings, reducing social isolation. A stakeholder group co-designed "The Wee blether," a model offering companionship, meals, and various activities, which has positively impacted mental health and community connection. This model is now being expanded with additional funding.

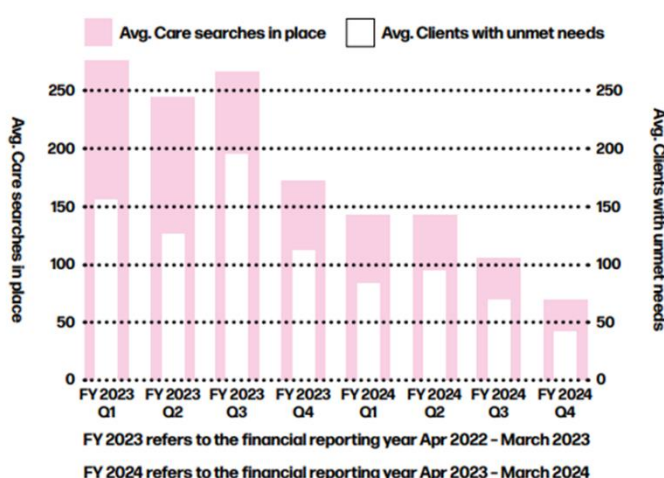
Under the strategic umbrella of "Stay Well, Stay Connected," we reviewed and commissioned residential respite and day opportunities to address gaps in services for those under 65 and those needing specialist dementia care. The Kingswood day centre, run by Bon Accord Care, provides a specialist environment for older adults with dementia, while the Chapelton respite flat offers flexible support options in a retirement village setting.

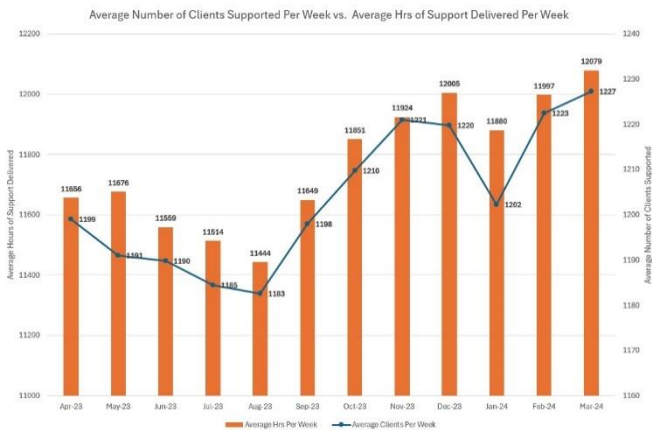
## Supporting our older people and those with physical disabilities

As part of our ACHSCP delivery plan commitments, we have taken a programme management approach to our strategic review of specific social care pathways. We did this utilising the Getting it Right for Everyone (GIRFE) multi-agency approach, and have developed an implementation plan for improving accessibility and coordination. The Programme Board leading this is a multi-sector group chaired by the Chief Officer for adult social work, who is responsible and oversees various projects that contribute to the strategic review including.

- Reviewing the approach to Social Work assessment within the hospital.
- Working collaboratively with multi-disciplinary teams, and independent and third sector partners. This has included being a pathfinder area for the Scottish Government's GIRFE approach.
- Incorporating Technology Enabled Care (TEC) as a project with its own project board structure.

There has continued to be a strong and sustained emphasis on addressing the waiting times for an assessment and the subsequent levels of unmet need within our older people and physical disability teams. Practitioners are utilising an enablement approach and encouraging TEC first. Through targeted screening and intervention our goal is to complete assessments within 4 weeks of referral. System pressures can make this challenging to achieve however we consistently meet the 6-week national standard for those deemed high.





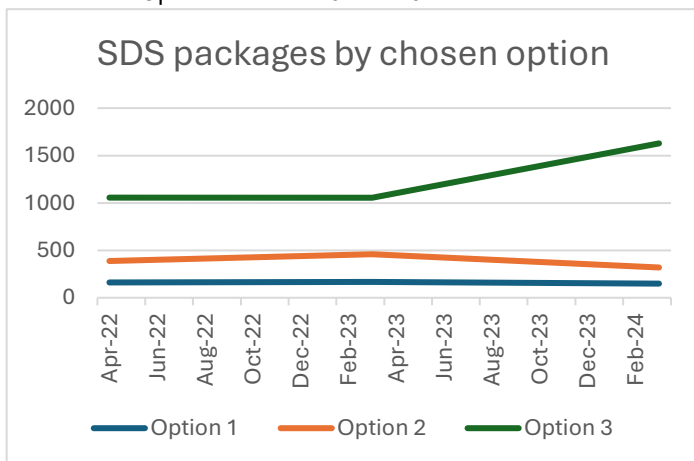
We recognise the importance of early intervention and preventative care to keep people at home longer, and the negative impact if care is delayed. In 2022, an Aberdeen study showed that 30% of those waiting for assessed care had at least one hospital admission. Many clients eligible for social care continue to choose SDS Option 3, reflecting the national trend.

Graph: SDS Option 3 provision from Granite Care Consortium

We have also seen a marked increase in the requirement for complex care and the number of hours that is required to keep people safe in their own homes. Due to this our unmet need increased last year, so additional providers were sourced to address the waiting list. Although this was positive in terms of reducing unmet need, this is no longer a viable option due to budget constraints and our now laser focus on using TEC to create capacity.

The impact of this additional capacity is demonstrated in the graph below. It can however also be noted that significant work has been undertaken with care at home providers and by changing contracts to give them much more control in terms of step down and step up in care, this has resulted in more capacity being created within the system. We have also used our TEC first approach to ensure that needs can be met in alternative ways rather than traditional face to face care.

Table: SDS Option Volumes 2022 – 2024 <sup>1</sup>



Our SDS option 1 packages remain steadily at approximately 150 packages. SDS Option 2 packages increased in 2023 to 459 but have reduced in 2024 to 319. This may be linked to the increased capacity within Option 3.

The hospital social work team has prioritised addressing significant and sustained flow pressures over the past year. We are committed to balancing hospital flow with the needs of vulnerable individuals in the community, by exploring new activities and initiatives to tackle admission avoidance and

<sup>1</sup> Information based on adult social work packages only. Option 3 packages only include those delivered by Granite Care Consortium for Care at Home and inclusive of Additional provider contract to address unmet in 2024. This includes double-up care packages which are on average 95 packages per year.

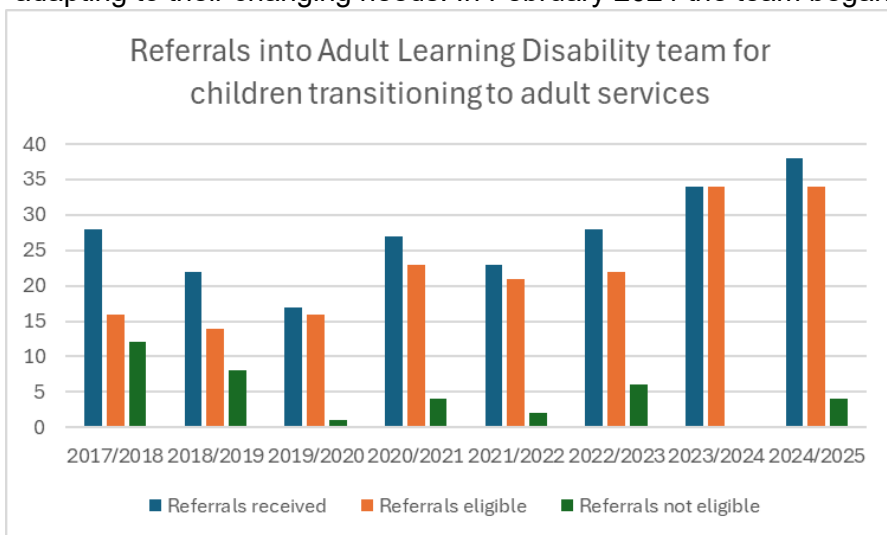
hospital discharge challenges. While our delayed discharge numbers remain below the national average, we acknowledge the ongoing capacity and financial challenges faced by NHS Grampian.

We maintain a collaborative approach with care homes by setting broad terms of reference and high-level priorities, enabling our Collaborative Care Home team to support providers when needed. Regular conversations help us understand capacity and ensure beds are fully utilised. If beds are not utilised, we identify the reasons and necessary support. We work through care home waiting lists to ensure accuracy and quick admissions. Care home occupancy levels have remained high (>90%) over the past year, with swift placement into vacancies and very few enforcement actions.

Unfortunately, one of our Care Homes, informed us that their landlord was not renewing their lease, leading to the closure of a nursing home. Although this presented us with a challenging and distressing situation for residents, families and staff at the home, thanks to the joint working between ACHSCP and the Care Home management and staff, the closure and resident transition to other homes was completed efficiently, and with dignity for all involved.

### Supporting adults with learning disabilities

The Learning Disability team has faced increased demand and complexity over the past year, resulting in high caseloads for social workers. We support adults with learning disabilities throughout their lives, adapting to their changing needs. In February 2024 the team began to encourage and support clients



and providers to work collaboratively in preparation for Learning Disability Awareness week which recognises the contributions and achievements that adults with a learning disability make to society.

We work closely with Children's Social Work to ensure smooth transitions to adult services, starting engagement from age 14. Since 2021, there has been a steady increase in young

individuals transitioning to Adult Services. We are also working to improve service provision for young adults with complex health conditions, recognising that current housing and support models may not meet their needs.

Despite pressures on service delivery and waiting times, we have maintained a 2-5 day waiting time for critical assessments, and 2 weeks for urgent referrals. 'High needs' referrals are prioritised, while medium or low needs may wait up to 12 weeks. Social work students help us meet these targets. We continue to support our commissioned Learning Disability Providers as they too face challenges whilst delivering services. Towards the end of 2023, a National Provider chose not to renew three contracts, leading to the transfer of supported individuals and staff teams to other social care providers under Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) or TUPE. This process, which took six months, required support from the Care Management and multi-disciplinary teams due to the complexities and communication needs of those involved. The care and support safely transferred over to other social care providers successfully.

Over the past two years, the increase in private and local authority Guardianships has challenged our statutory reviewing responsibilities. This year, we have over 300 Guardians, with 61 being local authority. We currently allocate Private Guardianship supervision on a duty basis, aiming to review

235 by the end of 2024. Our goal is to complete all Guardianship supervisions by the end of 2026 as per our statutory responsibilities. We expect the number of Guardianships to rise annually due to the increasing complexity of our clients' needs.

## Mental Health

The Social Work/Mental Health Officer teams are now embedded within the new mental health locality model based at Royal Cornhill Hospital. The service continues to deliver on its statutory responsibilities under a variety of legislations including the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 and Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000.

The level of mental health high acuity cases remains high. This is evidenced by the overall workload of our Mental Health Officer service. Although there is a national shortage of MHO's, we remain fully staffed and continue to invest in the MHO Training with 4 new MHO's qualifying in September 2024.

Due to sustained investment in our MHO service, we have been able to continue to fulfil our statutory obligations to the required standards and within the required timescales.

Table: MH Hospital Detentions 2016-2024

| Detention in hospital intervention | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 | 2021-22 | 2022-23 | 2023-24 |
|------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Community Treatment Order (CTO)    | 82      | 53      | 70      | 57      | 106     | 113     | 119     | 112     |
| Emergency Detention in Hospital    | 40      | 50      | 53      | 42      | 34      | 31      | 28      | 56      |
| Short-Term                         | 241     | 203     | 209     | 245     | 222     | 228     | 218     | 222     |

We now have two part-time MHOs within the Hospital Social Work Team, to oversee Guardianship applications affecting discharge. Involving Social Work from admission allows for early collaborative discharge planning for those lacking capacity. The aligned MHO streamlines this process. The Scottish government has recognised this as excellent practice and a model which other areas are keen to replicate. This model is successful and means there is no MHO waiting list for AWI Delayed Discharge cases.

A new Aberdeen Suicide Delivery forum has been established which feeds into the Northeast Suicide Prevention Leadership Group. This group is chaired by Mental Health social work representatives. This group is in its infancy but takes its lead from Scotland's Suicide Prevention Strategy (Creating Hope Together). Part of this group is also implementing elements of Scotland's self-harm strategy (Supporting with Compassion).

The Mental Welfare Commission (MWC) presented their 2023 end of year scorecard and highlighted several areas for improvements. One area was to improve the number of Emergency Detention Certificates (EDC) that were being granted. A short life working group has been established and is working with all stakeholders to consider how EDC numbers can be reduced. Another working group has been created to look at increasing the number of Social Circumstances Reports (SCR's) that are submitted.

In early 2024, the MWC carried out an AWI audit looking at Private and Welfare Guardianships. This highlighted areas of improvement for the MHO service. A Short Life working group was created and continue to work on their action plan.

The MHO service also carried out a service wide training event to promote good AWI practice. This was delivered over 12 sessions and was attended by all adult social work staff. This coincided with the MWC's AWI Masterclass roll out which complemented our own training sessions.

### **Substance Misuse Services**

Social work staff continue to support the Substance Use Service's (SMS) implementation of the Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) standards across various sites in Aberdeen. In line with the standards, social workers have adapted elements of their practice to support and enhance the service managing to deliver these standards daily.

Social Workers within SMS lead on the new Residential Rehabilitation (RR) Panel. This has led to 22 supported individuals entering different residential rehabilitation sites across Scotland. The panel members have also been working closely with the new Phoenix Futures (RR) development in Alford which is due to open in November 2024.

Social Work staff continue to be instrumental in the implementation of various SMS training events including Naloxone training for various professions across the health and social care partnership. SMS social work staff are also leading the Trauma Informed Champions and Motivational Interviewing leads in the northeast.

### **Adult Support and Protection**

The revised National Code of Practice for Adult Support & Protection came into force on 28 July 2022. In response, we have updated our local procedures, processes, and training. We conducted a self-evaluation to identify necessary changes and actions, developing new guidance in consultation with key stakeholders.

Our participation in the National Code of Practice Implementation Group has influenced our local policies, including advocacy, the use of chronologies, self-evaluation, and clarifying Council Officers' roles in inquiries

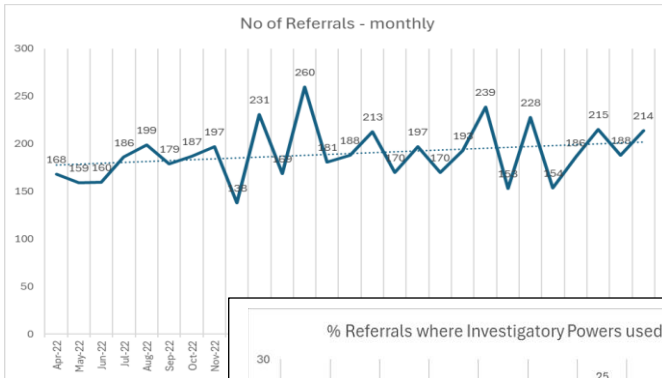
Several actions have been taken to improve responses to people at risk of harm. This includes development of systematic audits of casework to benchmark and evaluate the status of current adult support and protection performance. This includes a revised quality assurance tool that will increase efficiency and build confidence in practice standards, as we identify areas for further improvement.

We have taken several actions to improve responses to people at risk of harm, including developing systematic audits and a revised quality assurance tool. A Grampian-wide Capacity Pathway, endorsed by NHS Grampian's Public Protection Committee, has been designed for professionals involved in capacity assessments. This pathway includes the Grampian Decision Specific Capacity Screening Tool, with awareness-raising resources and training being developed.

Trauma Informed Practice is now included in Adult Support & Protection training and is a standing item on the Grampian Adult Support and Protection Group Agenda. Further training opportunities are being explored.

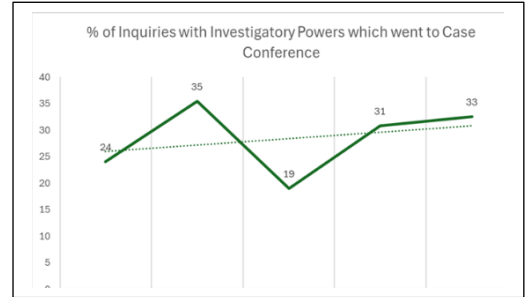
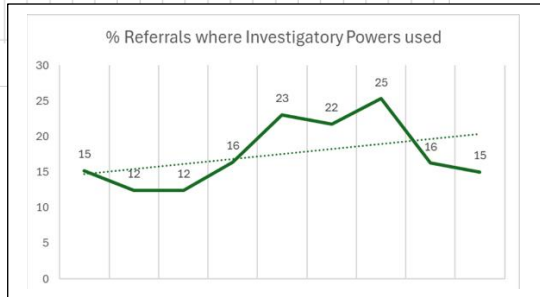
### **Adult Protection Social Work Team (APSW)**

The APSW team is the first point of contact for adult protection referrals and police welfare concerns. They handle crisis intervention, the rights and welfare of vulnerable adults in police custody, those with no recourse to public funds, and immediate safeguarding needs. The team collaborates with other



services to ensure the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable adults. Since April 2022, ASP referrals have increased, likely due to greater awareness, the cost-of-living crisis, rising poverty levels, and reduced availability of other services due to over-arching increases in demand on services across the board.

Health services submitted the highest number of referrals in 2023-24, followed closely by Care Homes.



From Q1 2022-23 to Q1 2024-25, there has been an increase in referrals requiring Investigatory Powers, reflecting their complexity, and more cases are moving to Case Conference. A higher proportion of cases resulted in ongoing Adult Support and Protection work where Investigatory Powers were used, indicating that this intervention was often the most appropriate action.

### Local Learning

We are very keen to showcase any and all of our initiatives and developments with local and national partners. We recognise the value of these collaborations given the common challenges that we all face.

Our Care at Home commissioning model, the Granite Care Consortium (GCC), is a collaborative group of providers meeting care needs across the city. Established in 2020, it focuses on improving outcomes, building a skilled workforce, and ensuring market stability. We frequently receive requests to share the GCC journey and achievements, which emphasise relationship-building and trust. In May 2023 Aberdeen City HSCP and Aberdeen City Council welcomed officials from Scottish Government for a study visit as part of the planning for the proposed National Care Service. There was particular interest in the consortium model which is line with commissioning recommendations made in the [Independent review of Adult Social Care in Scotland](#).

### New ways of working

Adult social work is an essential part of the wider health and social care system. Many of our developments in new ways of working have involved us taking a proactive stance in building relationships across the sector for the benefit of the community we serve.

During 2023 we reviewed our Hospital Social Work Team. The Hospital Social Work Team operate across Aberdeen Royal Infirmary (ARI), Woodend Hospital and Rosewell House. The aim of the review was to explore the demands and requirements for the service with a more embedded whole-system response to hospital admission, assessment and discharge planning. Several challenges were identified by Social Work and ward staff during the review with one of the main challenges being communication and developing relationships between Social Work and ward staff.

In October 2023 the Hospital Social Work Team were realigned to identified areas within the hospital. This change aims to make Social Work staff more visible and integrated into the ward team as well as

encouraging a more preventative, whole-system approach. This change has been welcomed by both the Social Work team and their colleagues on the wards.

“With [social work] attendance at the MDT the information is free flowing and care input can be confirmed quickly. Excellent... team working, very much seen as part of our team”  
(Hospital ward staff member)

“We have a more in depth understanding of patients’ needs and health status whilst embedded in the Multi-disciplinary Team”  
(Hospital Social Work Staff member)

In 2024 we established Support Worker roles within the Learning Disability team. This was primarily to enable us to focus on early intervention in relation to young people who were or would be transitioning into adult services. However, due to service pressures, this role has evolved and become essential in enabling us to be able to respond at short notice to crises, Adult Support and Protection, prevention of hospital admissions, and minimising the demand on other essential services such as Police Scotland and A&E.

Over the past year, Support Workers have provided vital care to individuals without family support, assisted clients at home due to reduced care capacity, and taken on community support roles for young clients. They have attended court, supported homeless clients, and provided additional support during assessments and funding processes. These roles have been crucial for crisis intervention and ensuring safety.

In February 2024, we restructured the adult support and protection service to better communicate the value of learning and development and involve stakeholders in planning high-quality, adaptable training. We recruited a Practice Development Officer to develop and deliver training, support the Adult Support & Protection Learning & Development Framework, evaluate current practices, and contribute to strategic developments.

Aberdeen City HSCP is one of nine ‘Getting it Right for Everyone’ (GIRFE) pathfinder HSCPs in Scotland. GIRFE, a Scottish Government project, aims to develop a multi-agency approach to support from young adulthood to end-of-life care, linking with GIRFEC and any future National Care Service. As a pathfinder, we work with practitioners and clients to identify strengths and areas for improvement locally and nationally. Using the Scottish Approach to service design, we are developing ideas for the multi-agency approach, positioning us at the forefront of development and preparing for the full implementation of GIRFE in 2025.

## Outcomes

There is significant evidence of positive collaborations, effective interventions and good outcomes across adult social work. We strive to develop our approach through listening to the voice of lived experience through engagement, reviews of support and feedback including complaints.

We received a small number of complaints related to “poor communication” from families involved with our learning disability services. We are responsive to learning from complaints and have achieved positive outcomes by doing so including;

- Forming a short life working group to improve the transition process, including creating an information document for parents, schools, and professionals.

- Implementing a risk enablement process in response to a complaint within our inhouse service, leading to a supported person moving to a prompt/assist medication system, which has reduced errors and increased the supported person's autonomy in this area of their life.

In response to unmet need, we identified a gap in services for young people with chaotic lives who struggle to engage positively with care providers. Over the past year, we collaborated with ACC housing and a housing association to design a new building with 24/7 care and support. Dennis Court, which opened in December 2023, supports 8 young people aged 18 to 29. A video describing the impact of the service on the young people is available via [this link](#).

In April 2023, because of recommissioning an existing service, we also opened a new housing support with care at home service, providing 24/7 care and support to five adults. The Dynamic Support Register, as outlined earlier in this report, is an important new tool to aid our planning for future provision for adults with learning disabilities in Aberdeen.

Moving individuals who have been living in hospital into the community also requires meticulous planning. We have been working closely with NHS colleagues and a provider on the transition plan for someone who has been an inpatient for eighteen years. A new home has been identified and the care provider staff are working in the hospital ward, so that they can learn how best to support the person when discharged to their service by the end of 2024.

Our MH services are responsive to user feedback; they get a lot of queries, concerns and complaints channelled through local Councillors/MSPs, but there is robust governance around these issues and weekly learning events are held to take on board all feedback – good and bad – that has been received. We have now introduced 1-day audits on ward sites at Royal Cornhill Hospital. Findings from this help formulate a work plan on issues that the audit has highlighted. A new Delayed Discharge weekly meeting was also set up to ensure people were not kept in hospital longer than they needed to. We have worked hard to ensure our delayed discharge figures remain as low as possible, but this has become more difficult over this year due to the number of those with very high complex needs.

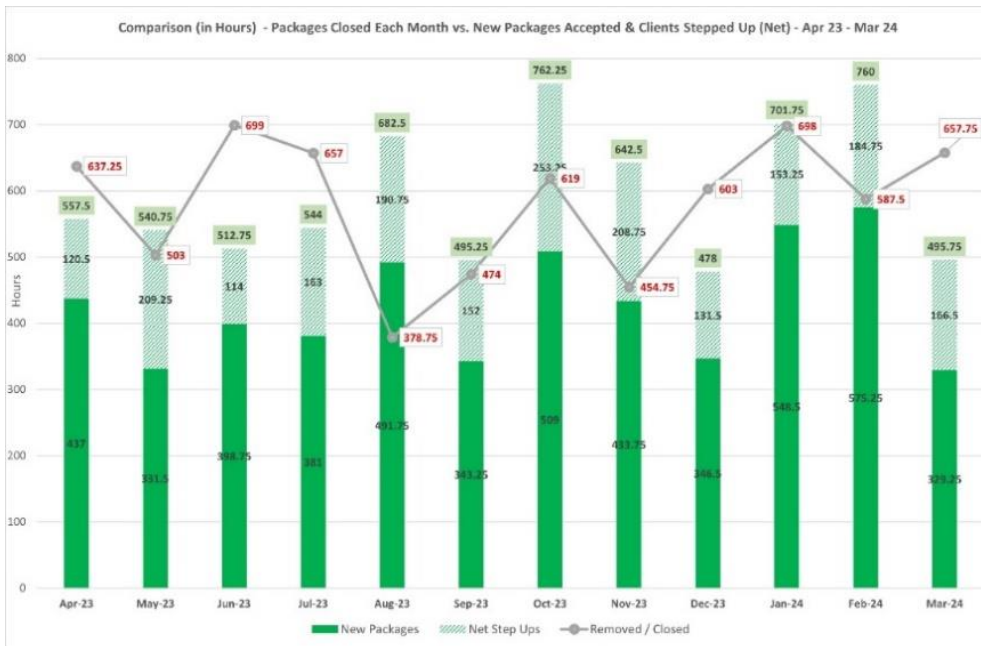
Following our 2020 inspection of Adult Support and Protection, we established a Lived Experience Forum two years ago, to improve advocacy access and gather service feedback. Supported by our independent advocacy service, the forum has developed a 'Best Practice' document, created visual materials, worked on a peer support video, consulted on Learning Review guidance, and participated in academic research by Kate Fennell of Napier University on the voice of the adult in Case Conferences.

From an Oversight and Review perspective, we deliver better outcomes by gaining insights into provider strengths, weaknesses, and service delivery risks. Facilitating provider forums for care home and care at home services has improved relationships and collaborations, leading to quicker issue resolution. These forums also enhance provider and market intelligence sharing, enabling more effective contingency planning.

On an individual level there is more significant and current data available in respect of number of reviews undertaken and outcomes achieved that can be taken with confidence into other discussions about the impact of our social work activity for example, do 6-week reviews show individual's need for step-up/step-down or has care been set at the required level. The graph below demonstrates the responsiveness of our option provider to closure of packages, new packages and step up and step down.

Graph: SDS Option 3 provision from Granite Care Consortium





Winter pressures and the demands that were placed on the workforce in terms of crisis management were challenging. Staff have worked hard to prevent individuals being admitted to hospital, support timely discharges, and keep people safe in the community. Examples of this include adult social work reinstating daily huddles to allow for real time planning and crisis response via

exchange of information.

There are still evident pressures and challenges with respect to the sustainability and resilience of our local care provision, primarily due to staffing and recruitment difficulties. There have been examples of providers leaving the area which then leads to additional demands being placed on the remaining providers. The ability to maintain flow out of hospital for those with complex mental health support needs is also impacted by gaps in resources to meet their needs in the community.

There is an increased number of individuals needing care with increased complexity of need and levels of care required. These challenges are not only the preserve of an older demographic who are living longer with multiple chronic health issues, but also many younger individuals with extreme, complex physical and mental health conditions coming into adult services and for whom significant planning requires to be undertaken so that their needs can be met safely and appropriately.

Work has been undertaken by ACHSCP and ACC during 2023/24 to develop an Independent Living and Specialist Housing Provision Market Provision Statement for Aberdeen City. This aims to provide information to the market on our current and future needs to support development in the sector.

### No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

We have seen an increase in those presenting with NRPF. Single adults and families require support in circumstances where they are not able to access public funds they often present to social work to avoid destitution. This support can last for extended periods. We are also seeing community court disposals being used for those who have NRPF. This results in social work having to provide financial support for the duration of the court order. There is evidence that different local authorities respond to this need in different ways. We are therefore seeking to refresh our local guidance to ensure a consistent and proportionate response.

### Improvement activities

We recognise we need to do things differently by having a stronger preventative emphasis and supporting earlier interventions as well as putting in place alternatives such as self-management, technology enabled care, extended family support networks etc. Our improvement and innovation projects show how committed we are to finding appropriate and effective solutions to these challenges. We are keen to be recognised as an innovative and high-performing social work service that consistently delivers better experiences and outcomes for individuals and their families.

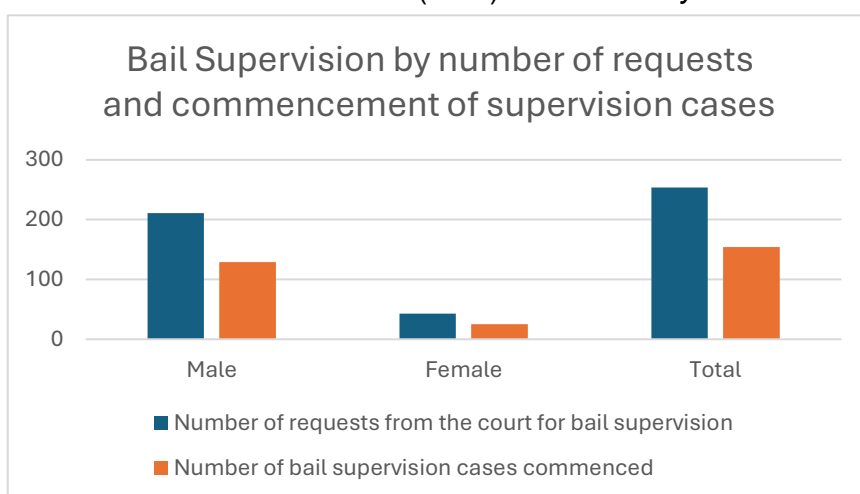
Our portfolio of improvement initiatives and activities in the past year includes:

- Continued promotion of the ‘Home First’ model where possible, ensuring patients are discharged home or to an interim placement as soon appropriate to do so.
- New Corporate Appointee-ship Practice Document to enhance financial practice by social work staff.
- New Adults with Incapacity channel and procedures documents.
- Increased Rehabilitation and Enablement Options – our Bon Accord Care Interim Care at Home service is an enablement-focussed project providing an effective alternative to bed-based rehabilitation, getting the individual back to their home, helping reduce the amount of care they will require.
- Initial Point of Contact project looking to streamline points of referral into community services (including Social Work) to improve client experience and maximise staff capacity.
- Implementation of the Mental Health Modernisation plan aligning Mental Health Social workers and Mental Health Officers to localities.

## JUSTICE SOCIAL WORK

Our JSW Delivery Plan 2021-2024 sets out our Justice Social Work (JSW) vision: *“Every client achieves the best possible outcome because we respond to the needs and risks of our clients in a trauma-informed way, intervene early where possible, are a professional highly motivated team and work in collaboration with partners”*.

The Delivery Plan is currently being reviewed, with the new Plan expected to be in place for 2025-2029, in line with the Health and Social Care Partnership Strategic Plan timescales.



Delivery of statutory supervision was a huge challenge during the pandemic. Following a backlog of cases coming to Court in 2022/23, we are now seeing a return to pre Covid caseloads. There continues to be an increase in Diversion, Bail Assessments and Bail Supervision, as well as an increase in Supervised Release Orders. All of which means an increased level of demand for the service.

The continued increase in Diversion from Prosecution 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. It is very noticeable that Diversion cases are becoming increasingly complex and, due to concerns regarding some of these cases which attracted media attention, this issue is being addressed nationally by the Social Work Scotland Justice Standing Committee. The number of Structured Deferred sentences (including those imposed in the Problem-Solving Court) are now also increasing. Structured Deferred Sentences are similarly intended to be a lower level, albeit intensive, alternative to custody.

‘Unpaid Work’ is requested by the public and often involves ground maintenance of local parks and, more recently, the development and maintenance of smaller community gardens and sustainable food allotments. Referrals are also received from schools, nurseries, youth clubs etc, to help produce equipment, renovating flats for refugee families. We have restarted (since the pandemic) our shopping bus to support some of our elderly and vulnerable city residents.

Currently the service is offering approximately 255 allocated outdoor placements a week. In addition to that, 50 full day and 30 half day placements per week are offered at our Indoor Light Seated Duties Workshops, including Adult Learning and Women Only sessions, totalling approximately 335 allocated

placements a week. Individual placements are also available in charity shops, community centres, churches etc. The number of individual placements has however decreased considerably due to changes in insurance cover and health and safety for some previous providers.

In the fiscal year 2023 / 2024 we received a total of 52 requests for service from the public – 37 requesting removals. 9 related to paint jobs and 6 related to ground maintenance.

The prison population has reached crisis levels during this year as a result of longer remands, longer sentences and recalled prisoners. This results in the increased use of Supervised Bail and/ or Electronic Monitoring as appropriate alternatives to remand. We are required to screen and assess suitability of all those for whom bail is opposed, which is labour intensive as only 60% of assessments result in Bail Supervision. Consequently, the pre-disposal team workload has increased, and we now have a Senior Support Worker, and two Support Workers based in the Court specifically to assess for and manage Supervised Bail Orders. There is evidence that the use of Bail Supervision, while not reducing the number of Aberdeen prisoners, is preventing an increase in those held on remand.

Domestic abuse permeates much of our work. Caledonian assessments and resulting orders are now above pre-pandemic levels. 138 Caledonian assessments were undertaken for suitability of the programme. 41 Caledonian Programme requirements were imposed as part of Community Payback Orders, and we had an average of 90 men undertaking the programme during the year. This is an increase from an average of 80 the previous year meaning just over 10% increase. The service completes Caledonian assessments for most cases of domestic offending and victims are referred to the Caledonian Women's Service for support from a Women's Worker. We are exploring the possibility of developing and piloting a lower-level Domestic Abuse programme.

We continue to provide the Moving Forward Making Changes (MFMC) programme for sex offenders which involves a 3-year CPO Programme Requirement. This programme is currently transitioning to the 'Moving Forward 2 Change' Programme with training being rolled out. 87 assessments were undertaken for the programme, 18 were imposed, 34 had the 'Aberdeen Sex Offender Programme' imposed as an alternative, and 35 had no requirement imposed as a result of the assessment. On average we have between 30 and 35 people on the MFMC programme at any time due to it being a three-year programme and people joining and leaving the programme throughout the year.

The majority of lower level/non-contact sexual offending will not meet the criteria for the MFMC programme and, where this is the case, the lower level/shorter programme, the 'Aberdeen Sex Offender Programme' will be proposed to the Court.

Justice Social Work continue to work in close collaboration with the Multi-agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) Co-ordination Unit and with our partner agencies such as Health, Housing, Police Scotland, Scottish Prison Service, Care Management and Children's Services. The revised guidance implemented in May 2022 has been incorporated into practice resulting in clearer processes and co-ordination of multi-agency services being taken forward. Thus, ensuring that access to appropriate housing and primary care services are in place when prisoners are released.

Throughout the year 2023/24, Justice Social Work reported 10 initial notifications of potentially serious incidents between MAPPA and the Care Inspectorate with none of those reported proceeding to a Serious Case or Learning Review which indicates the ongoing appropriateness of our interventions and balancing statutory obligations, public protection and the needs and rights of those we work with.

The Alcohol & Drugs Partnership /Justice Social Work (ADP/JSW) Development Worker has continued to work closely with the commissioned Assertive Outreach service to support individuals who leave prison, and to reduce the risk of drug related deaths. This colleague has also been involved in the collation of information and representation of JSW on the Drug Related Death reviews forum, SURGE and facilitated substance misuse training for JSW staff, regular and mandatory Naloxone training for staff, service users and across other services where appropriate.

The JSW service was involved in the pilot of the new Court Report template for shorter and more concise reports which has now been rolled out nationally. Aberdeen JSW now has a Senior Social Worker participating in the working group with the Scottish Government to review the National Guidance for Community Payback Orders.

### **Challenges**

Last year we reported on the difficulties for the Justice workforce due to post-pandemic related backlogs and managing the increasing demand for services. Staff were tired and this was further compounded by the national risk management tool (LS/CMI) being off-line and paper based for 18 months. There were also challenges implementing a new data recording system. As reported earlier, whilst the use of D365 has greatly improved, with support from a dedicated product owner, it remains a challenge to practitioners and managers.

New Bail Supervision legislation has resulted in a very significant increase in workload for the Pre-Disposal Team and more widely across the JSW service which we are still coming to terms with. Release from custody via virtual Courts, whilst a good innovation, presents some difficulties for those on whom CPOs are imposed in respect of meeting with, engaging and inducting individuals being released from establishments across the country.

Numbers of Unpaid Work Requirements have now surpassed pre-pandemic levels. The service is already having to cope with changes in premises, problems with the vehicle fleet, difficulties in recruiting Task Supervisors, reduced availability of individual placements, and an increasing number of clients who can only undertake indoor or seated tasks. Increasing workload is yet another challenge.

### **4. Resources**

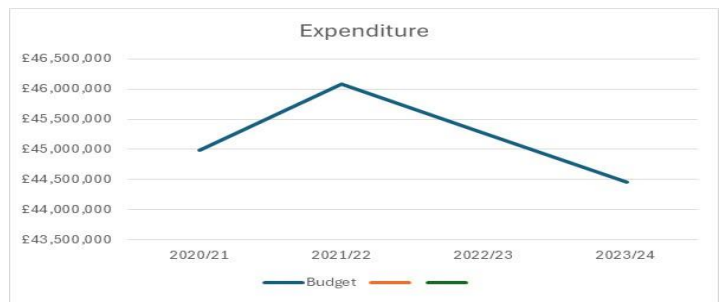
Aberdeen is the third largest city in Scotland with an estimated population of circa 230K. It is, per head of population, the second lowest funded council in Scotland. The significant downturn in the oil industry as well as the impact of austerity and the cost of living crisis has significantly impacted on the economic wellbeing of the city.

In recent years, the City's population has increased. As a result of world events, Aberdeen City has welcomed significant numbers of displaced persons from war affected countries. Aberdeen being a city with two universities, our population has been impacted by a high volume of international families coming to the city to study. Since 2019 there has been a 14% increase in the school roll. This change has unsurprisingly seen an increase in the demand for social work intervention.

As a result of high inflation, increases to employee salaries and commissioned services as well as increasing demand, all aspect of the Council and HSCP budgets continue to experience unrelenting pressure. The Council's medium term financial plan shows these pressures are likely to persist, impacting our ability to meet the needs of service users. We also recognise the continuing impact of the COVID pandemic - increased family fragility, poor mental health, delays in the Court system, and pressures on the health system, are all continuing to directly impact on social work services.

Given this context, it is crucial that new national policies and legislative duties receive full funding. In order to fulfil its statutory duty to deliver a balanced budget, all Council Services in 2023/24 were required to identify savings across head count, contracts and assets.

We continue to acknowledging the interconnected nature of social work. Most children come to the attention of social work due to care and protection issues arising from difficulties in their parents' lives. This reinforces our continuing efforts to explore opportunities to integrate planning and delivery of services that support the whole family. This concept will be core to our developing Family Support Model. The graph shows changes to the Children's Social Work budget over the past four years.



2023/24 - Gross expenditure on Adult & Justice Social Work was £184.5m

### Critical Service Pressures

The welcome progress in medical treatments and medication has resulted in individuals living longer with more complex needs. This complexity necessitates higher levels of care and support, which require greater resource. Service providers are also facing heightened expectations from clients, driving performance metrics such as waiting times. The ongoing cost-of-living crisis in 2023/24 has highlighted the link between poverty and the demand for social work intervention. Those accessing money advice services and emergency food provisions report daily survival struggles and the detrimental impact on their confidence and mental wellbeing.

Having enough practitioners in all service areas to undertake statutory social work tasks is essential. It is crucial to focus on person-centred interventions to keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home for as long as possible.

Our [Children's Services Strategic Plan 2023-26](#) reinforces the continuing need to ensure families have access to early and preventative support that mitigates the need for social work intervention. Building a strong Family Support Model is a multi-agency responsibility. The varied funding for Tier 2 family support services brings both challenges and opportunities. Families have told us they want to more easily access early and preventative support without relying on professionals. These principles will be at the core of our developing Family Support Model.

Our Children's Services Strategic Plan is closely aligned with the HSCP's Strategic Plan. As a partnership, we have made significant efforts to align various strategic documents including the Local Outcome Improvement Plan, Child Poverty Plan, Carers Plan, and Corporate Parenting Plan. This endeavour enhances our strategic coherence and optimises our resources to achieve crucial shared priorities.

As a service we are committed to supporting children to remain within their family, where it is safe to do so, without the need for compulsory measures. However, to do this on a sustained basis can often require significant and sustained multi-agency resource to scaffold around families. As a consequence of these efforts our care population has reduced by circa 15% over recent years. This reduction is welcomed but we strive for it to reduce further. There has been a noted reduction in our foster care population and those looked after at home. As we continue to enhance support for children to remain within their family network, we have seen an increase in children placed in a kinship arrangement as well as a marginal increase to those in residential care. Given the average cost of a specialist residential placement is circa £300k per child annually, any increase has a significant budgetary impact.

The single biggest cost pressure for Children's Social Work continues to be the cost of specialist care for children who have experienced significant harm and abuse. The national shortage of foster carers is a challenge. We are working hard to build our internal fostering capacity. The cost of specialist residential care has increased well beyond Council budgets. This contributed to an overspend of circa

£2.5m in the year 2023/24. Internal Audit identified that there was robust governance to the decision making and review of placing children in specialist residential care.

While the level of protection afforded by the Scottish Government to the funding of adult social work services is welcomed, there are recognised and significant cost pressures within the system as a result of service demand and inflationary pressures. The primary areas of budget pressure relate to the growing demand and complexity of demand to support older adults, as well as those with adults with complex mental health needs and with complex learning disabilities. Work is progressing at pace to develop local community housing options that will enable several adults living out of the authority to return to be near family members and their local community whilst also mitigating budget pressures.

### **Use of Technology**

Recognising that budgets will remain challenged, the use of technology has to be part of planning to do more with less. This report references examples of this already in place – Technology Enabled Care; Mind of My Own apps are already positively contributing to service delivery.

In October 2022, in partnership with Microsoft, Aberdeen City Council launched ‘D365’ - its own data system across social work. This system was designed by social workers for social workers. It utilises the existing suite of Microsoft tools but has added functionality and capacity to support real time data reporting. The system has an iterative development programme directly informed by the experiences of those who use it. This flexibility ensures the system can respond at pace to legislative and policy change.

One of the key benefits of D365 is its capability to deliver on the Scottish Governments aspiration, as outlined in the NCS Bill - that there is a single health and social care record. The realisation of this for frontline practitioners cannot be understated. At a time when we all need to do more with less the integration of key client data in real time will improve planning and decision making and potentially save lives.

Our partnership with Microsoft will continue to allow us to explore evolving opportunities. Currently we are exploring how the use of Microsoft’s digital tool co-pilot can support us to reduce the administrative burdens faced by frontline practitioners.

### **Charging policy**

Within Adult Social Work application of charging policy for chargeable services is an important means of generating income. This year we have carried out a review of how our charging policy works, which identified instances where charges were not applied when they should have been, e.g. Housing support services and meals provision. We have worked with finance colleagues, social work staff and clients to understand the reasons for this and the changes needed to ensure that charging policy is always applied in a fair and consistent manner. This will inform a revised charging policy and contribute to ongoing sustainability of care provision in 2024/25 and beyond.

## **5. Workforce**

The Setting the Bar Report (2019), and its sister report ‘Taking the Wheel’ (2022) whilst welcomed, brought no surprises emphasising that effective social work provision is going to need an increase in social workers who are suitably skilled and trained to undertake the complex roles that they fill. We are aware of the increasing pressures on 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 further explore 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.

I held a number of engagement sessions with the workforce in March 2024, coinciding with World Social Work Day. Practitioners told me of the emotional toll the work took on them. This was not said in a manner that was bemoaning, but reflective of the internal conflict they felt, undertaking a role they were proud of, but not always feeling they had the time to fully meet their client’s needs. Some workers

cite this issue as being a reason they have changed careers due to burnout/work stress. Aberdeen sits marginally higher than the national data which illustrates one in four social workers do not make it to 6 years in the profession, with a high percentage of newly qualified workers only remaining with us for between 1 and 4 years. We will work hard to ensure that our NQSW programme is meeting the needs of early years social workers, who we would wish to nurture at this crucial phase of their career.

Efforts to support and develop the workforce include creating a climate and culture conducive to social work values, which helps preserve and protect the workforce. Enabling a culture that encourages the agency of social workers, to learn from our mistakes and willing to take risks. To promote a relational approach to our practice, ensuring we give authentic effect to listening to the voice and views of our service users are important expectations we ask of all our staff.

Recruitment and retention in social work, particularly in some areas of Adult Social Work and across Children's Social Work present significant challenges. We want to continue to develop our 'grow our own' approaches to recruitment and to succession planning, providing opportunities for non-social work qualified staff to undertake professional learning to obtain a social work degree as well as supporting staff interested and able to take on "acting up" duties.

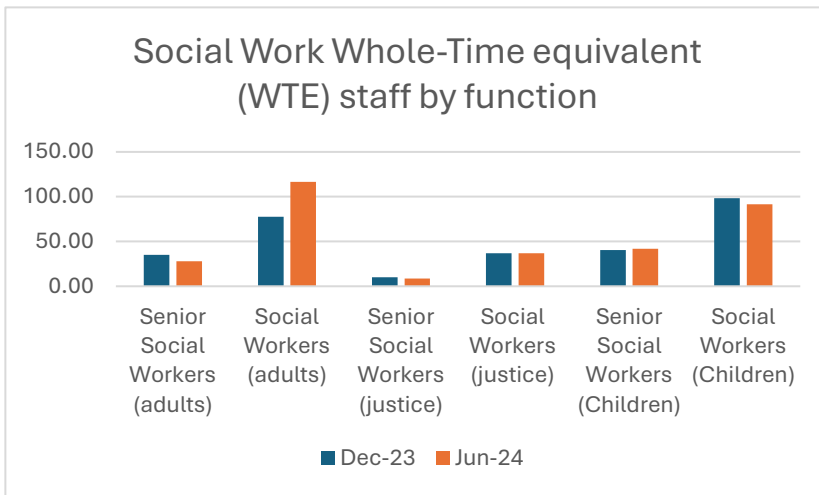
In April 2024, our [Equality, Diversity & Inclusion policy](#), was refreshed to reflect changes in legislation and the expectations of our citizens. As a significant public sector employer in our city, we want to lead the way in our commitment to diversity and inclusion. While the majority of our workforce identify their ethnicity as 'white-Scottish', the next highest category being 'white – other British' our data also tells us there is a growing diversity to our workforce. This data largely mirrors the ethnicity of those we work with.

We recognise the benefits of this greater diversity across our workforce as it enriches and enhances service delivery. We are clear that social workers who share cultural backgrounds with their clients can better understand and address specific challenges, fostering trust and effective communication as well as creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for those we serve to protect. We are conscious of national reports reflecting on the racism challenges that minority ethnic social workers continue to experience at work, and are committed as a service to ensuring that everyone is included, empowered, and treated with respect. Our [Diversity in Recruitment](#) report will be taken to the appropriate Council committee for approval in the early part of 2024/25.

### **Professional Learning & Development**

In November 2022 the IJB approved the [HSCP Workforce Plan 2022 – 2025 - Aberdeen](#) with its key priorities for recruitment and retention, mental health and wellbeing, and growth and development opportunities. We recognise the need to ensure the needs of our social work workforce are aligned to this plan, and that the voice, experience and needs of social workers are considered in wider HSCP workforce discussions.

The above priorities are similarly reflected in the Children's SW Workforce Plan which will be formally approved in 2024. We continue to celebrate the achievements of our staff both externally through further development as Mental Health Officers, Practice Teachers and the MSc in Residential Childcare. Internally through ceremonies like the Star Awards where we have seen social work staff winning awards including for Inspirational Leadership and whole system transformation activities.



All areas of social work continue to experience high demands. For this reason, recruitment and retention of our workforce continues to present challenges.

Moving more experienced social workers to areas that are harder to recruit to is not deemed to be feasible as ultimately it results in leaving another area with need. Social work vacancies are often attracting NQSW, and we recognise the first 2 years in these posts are a steep learning curve.

Our priority is to ensure our NQSW's are afforded the necessary support and mentoring whilst they put knowledge into practice and build up their skills. Doing so is essential if we are to keep them in this demanding area of work beyond these early years of qualified practice. Success in doing so also needs to ensure their learning is paced appropriately, with a focus on supervision (formal & informal), learning and development and peer support. As reported, if our staff remain with us over those challenging initial years many remain with us for much of their career. With most of our workforce being female and many also becoming parents, maternity leave and requests for flexible working are commonplace and require sufficient staff to ensure services continue to be safe and effective.

That said, our recruitment and retention work continues to pay dividends with our vacancy factor having slightly reduced across fieldwork services over the past 2 years. Whereas some areas previously required to rely heavily on the additional skill base and experience brought about by agency social work staff, we have made considerable improvement to reduce this reliance. This shift is part of a broader strategy to create a more stable and consistent workforce, which is essential for building trusting relationships with service users. This was not only a budget driven change but one influenced by our service users and their families, who told us frequent changes in worker was detrimental and unhelpful in planning their care and support.

We recognise the interconnectedness of our Social Work staffing challenges with those of our health, independent and third sector partners we engaged in a broader HSCP job fayre in November 2023. The event included "How to" sessions to encourage awareness of completing applications, including hints and tips for applications and interviews. These events were held every hour and fully booked throughout the day. There were over 260 attendees at the fayre and 100 direct applications made to organisations on the day.

To promote career opportunities, we continue to host an open day for final year students studying at Robert Gordons University. Practitioners from across the service, including early career social workers, are available to share their experiences of working in social work. We are clear these events continue to support recruitment activities and dispel continually held myths of working in a statutory social work setting.

As welcome as these developments have been, we are mindful that many colleagues continue to hold large caseloads with an increasing complexity of need. They also have significant statutory obligations that require appropriate decisions and effective interventions, to ensure that needs are met, and associated risks are reduced. We support staff with their wellbeing in different ways including:

- flexible working opportunities to support staff wellbeing, while ensuring service delivery
- service and team wellbeing events
- signposting to psychological resilience supports.
- refresh of our Staff Supervision Policy
- counselling support to staff who have experienced particularly traumatic events



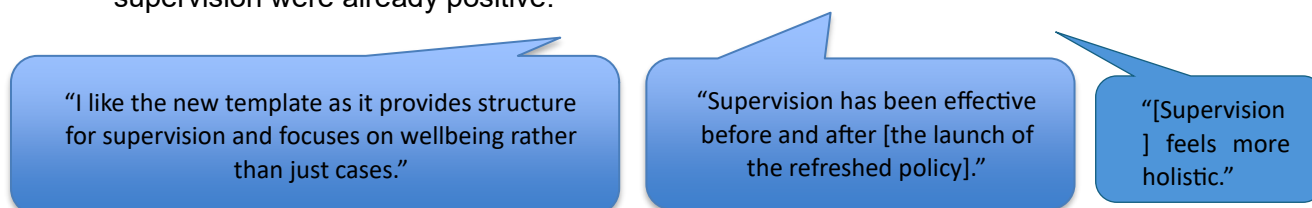
- continuing to give effect to the “Roadmap for Creating Trauma-Informed and responsive change” and adopting trauma-informed and staff wellbeing supports.

The HSCP and CSW workforce development plans emphasise the importance of quality professional supervision, learning and development opportunities, and peer support. Frontline practitioners directly contributed to refreshing the supervision policies for children’s and adult services. Subsequently this was highlighted as a Case Study available via [this link](#) on the Improvement Service website.

Feedback from adult social work staff in January/February 2024 was highly positive.

82% of those who responded indicated that they had looked at the policy:

- 89% had used the revised Supervision Template.
- 33% of those who responded indicated that they felt it had improved their experience of supervision. 66% felt it had no impact, however comments indicating their experience of supervision were already positive.



The weekly online staff Forum for all adult Social Work staff, together with the weekly staff bulletin, continues to be a real strength. It provides 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.

Across all social work domains over the past year, there has been a continuing focus on staff wellbeing. This has included:

- Utilising Scottish Government Adult social work funding to develop a partnership with our local college to offer access to appropriate training courses, e.g., pre-MHO development training, well-being treatments.
- Facilitate access to yoga for staff to take a break for their role during the workday.
- Journalling workshops
- Enabling staff to self-identify wellbeing activities to support their wellbeing.
- Council led wellbeing events and opportunities.

We have a well-established multi agency child and adult protection learning and development (L&D) programme. The programme is consistently quality assured which helps to measure the impact training has had on practitioners’ confidence and capabilities in supporting and improving outcomes.

Efforts to improve our learning and development offerings across children’s social work services have persisted throughout 2023/24. These efforts include providing L&D opportunities for all staff, facilitating and supporting student placements, establishing a comprehensive learning programme for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW), and spearheading improvements in whole service induction, supervision, and implementing the NQSW Supported Year.

A training needs analysis undertaken with service managers, identified key learning and development priorities for the year as:

- Risk assessment and management of harmful sexual behaviour
- Recommencement of the Post Graduate Certificate in Child Welfare and Protection
- Trauma awareness and recovery principles
- Supervision skills
- Leadership and Management

The development of the Children's Social Work Events and Training Calendar on the Intranet and Learning and Development site makes it simpler for staff to see available L&D opportunities and to book a place.

At the beginning of 2023 the Adult Support and Protection Team set up a multi-agency Practitioner Forum to support practitioners working with people at risk of harm from self-neglect and hoarding. A range of professionals attend this forum and an in-person workshop, involving approximately 25 members was in September 2023. The aim of this was to consider our 'pathways' for support around this complex area. The output from this workshop significantly informed a refresh of our Aberdeen City Self Neglect & Hoarding Guidance which is due to be considered by the Adult Protection Committee in April 2024. Evaluation feedback following the workshop evidenced it had been well received, and that specific learning had been taken away by practitioners.

Teams across adult social work have collaborated to develop a programme of Induction and Core Skill training and this is available to new and existing team members. The training incorporates a number of key areas including finances, trauma informed practice, TEC, supporting carers in addition to specific content on each individual service area. It is hoped this will have a positive impact in terms of core learning for all staff and improve staff retention as all team members will have a basic understanding of the functions of each service area.

We are consistently ensuring the addition of new Mental Health officers with four completing the PG Cert with Robert Gordon University in 2023/24 and three further trainees identified for 2024/25. This additional capacity will mitigate the widening MHO shortage that we foresee over the coming years.

## **6. Looking ahead**

The policy and legislative landscape as it relates to social work is a fast changing one. This brings opportunity and challenge in equal measure. Opportunity to develop and evolve practice to support delivery of improved outcomes for those we support. However, the capacity of the workforce to absorb the pace of change and deliver on the policy changes, in addition to the resource pressures, is a real and significant challenge. As I look ahead this reality is likely to persist:

### **A. National Care Service**

The Scottish Governments intention to establish a National Care Service is potentially the most significant change to directly impact on social work for many years. Whilst a National Care Service has the potential to offer new opportunities, it will also bring a significant upheaval for the social work and social care landscape.

The findings of the Independent Reviews commissioned by the Scottish Government perhaps unsurprisingly don't provide clarity on the way ahead. The Reviews reinforce it is the capacity of local leaders that is key to delivering system cohesion and improved outcomes as opposed to structural arrangements. Aberdeen City established a multi-agency National Care Service (NCS) Board in 2022. The NCS Board will continue to engage with the development of the NCS, associated legislation, and policy development to help influence the final shape in a manner that supports the delivery of better outcomes for Aberdeen's citizens. It will also work to ensure that the transition to an agreed NCS is done in as considered a manner as possible.

As CSWO I welcomed the opportunity afforded to practitioners to contribute to the Independent Reviews and the workshops held in relation to establishing a National Social Work Agency. I know they did so honestly and with thought. The continuing uncertainty as to the final shape of a NCS is creating uncertainty and confusion for the workforce. This lack of clarity is unhelpful.

## **B. Workforce**

I have unstinting respect for the commitment and dedication social work practitioners demonstrate on a daily basis support to our most vulnerable citizens despite significant and sustained operational challenges. I do not take their efforts for granted.

The volume and complexity of the work as well as the emotional toll impacts on the resilience of the workforce. The risk of burnout is high. Managers and leaders work hard to mitigate the effects of these through high quality professional supervision as well as other measures to support wellbeing. While this has mitigated some risks, the length of a social work career for some is worryingly short.

Critical vacancies continue to be experienced particularly in Learning Disability, Children's Fieldwork, Residential Services and Mental Health services. I share the aspiration of the proposed National Social Work Agency (NSWA) to promote the role of social work and consider what kind of social work service we want for Scotland going forward.

We welcome the intention to develop an Advanced Social Work Practice Framework. This will hopefully ensure greater access to high quality learning and development opportunities for practitioners. In turn this will hopefully contribute to retaining social workers in the profession and to ensure we have a pipeline of future social work leaders.

The major pipeline for staff to join the social work profession comes from Robert Gordon's University (RGU). There has been a noticeable reduction in applications to undertake the Social Work degree courses in the current year. Additionally, financial pressures have seen a restructuring at RGU this has seen a dilution of profile of the social work school. This presents a concern for future recruitment opportunities reinforcing our efforts to "grow our own".

## **C. Social Care resilience**

Significant work has been progressed to support and strengthen the resilience of the social care market in Aberdeen City. However, we continue to recognise its vulnerability. Demand for care homes, care at home support and personal assistants outstrips capacity. The national spotlight on how we value carers reflects remuneration as well as the societal status given to caring roles.

A number of care contracts have been under review in 2023/24 including supported living, care at home and our contract with our arm's length organisation (ALEO) Bon Accord Care. All new contracts are being developed with consideration of ethical commissioning, TEC and GIRFE principles in mind. We are working collaboratively with providers, our workforce and service users to focus on sustainability and resilience in the sector.

We continue to respond proactively to the system challenges of hospital discharge delays. The Scottish Government continues to place a strong focus on this area due to the potential for negative impacts on patients who experience unnecessary delays in hospital. Any noticeable changes in delayed discharge numbers, both positive and negative, are heavily scrutinised for the purpose of gleaning learning to understand and support practice across Scotland.

We remain mindful of overly focusing on one area at the expense of other equally important areas that don't demand the same level of Government scrutiny. Working through this over the forthcoming Winter and beyond will continue to challenge.

## **D. Legislative & Policy Landscape**

The current policy and legislative context in which social work operates is fast changing with increasing complexities for the workforce to navigate. The pace of change is daunting for social work professionals. As leaders we need to ensure that our support to them responds with equal

pace. For a range of reasons including reduced funding, resource capacity and policy clarity this is not always possible to the extent we would want.

The Independent Care Review, [The Promise](#), and the Adult Social Care Review acknowledged the complexity of the social work task, and the challenges faced by staff delivering services to vulnerable individuals and families.

The incorporation into Scots Law of the UNCRC is welcomed as is the proposed Human Rights Bill. Enabling vulnerable children and adults to fully claim the rights they are entitled is central to social work values. (*“Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to work with vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion.”* (BASW Code of Ethics) The implications for social work of this legislative policy agenda are still to be determined. Similarly, while we welcome Children’s (Care and Justice) Bill, clarity on the Bill and the funding that is required to delivery this is uncertain.

I note the intention to establish a National Public Protection Leadership Group in 2024. Bringing an enhanced level of multi-agency leadership to the public protection landscape is welcomed. Reflective of social work activity the public protection policy agenda is by its nature is cross cutting and reflects we need to see public protection through the lens of the whole family. Moving from a siloed policy approach to one which is more coherent and integrated is welcomed.

## **E. Financial Constraints**

The increasing complexity of service demand alongside increasing budget pressures are likely to escalate in the coming year(s). This is compounded by the cost-of-living crisis and the impact of poverty. The fiscal pressures on Local Authorities and Health and Social Care Partnerships are unrelenting. Reflecting the cross sectoral needs of individuals and families reinforces the importance of closer collaboration/integration across social work services.

Work at a local level continues at pace to develop early and preventative support to children, young people, vulnerable adults and families that mitigates the need for social work intervention. Unsurprisingly, these have yet to evidence the full intended impact. Demand continues to outstrip the capacity of social work services. Inevitably this causes frustration for families which can lead to complaints. It also causes frustration to the workforce and an internal conflict with their professional values.

Given the fiscal pressures on social work will continue over the coming years, it is essential we retain a clear focus on our strategic priorities. Ensuring we to listen to our children, young people, families and vulnerable adults will continue to ensure we develop and design our services according to their needs. It will also ensure individuals and families are able to access support in a manner that feels more integrated and relevant to their needs.

I have highlighted throughout this report many examples of effective, innovative, and creative ways of working and service evolution which are delivering high quality care and support to Aberdeen City’s most vulnerable citizens. The success of these is down to the commitment and determination of social work colleagues delivering social work and social care, despite the challenges, on a day-to-day basis. Their passion to empower and support others to improve their lives of others and improve our communities inspires me as their Chief Social Work Officer.

**Graeme Simpson**  
**CSWO/Chief Officer Children and Family Services**  
**October 2024**