



COUNTY SPOTLIGHT

Children's Services:

Putting young people
and families at the heart
of care



About County Spotlight

At the County Councils Network (CCN) one of our core objectives as a national representative body is to share the innovative work our councils are doing on a daily basis to provide vital frontline services, support local economies, and create thriving communities.

This regular publication seeks to shine the spotlight on the most recent best practice and innovative solutions being put forward by our member councils across a range of different policy areas. Alongside this, it provides an update on the national policy landscape and commentary from our lead members and strategic partners.

To find out more about future themes, or to recommend a case study, please contact ian.burbidge@local.gov.uk.

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CCN View

Protecting the most vulnerable young people in our society is one of the most important functions local authorities have, and local leaders can be proud of their track record in working with families, promoting wellbeing, and addressing crisis situations for children.

As with many council services over the past decade, it has often been challenging as we grapple with the twin forces of increasing demand at a time when funding has been reduced.

As a result, we have had to focus on children and families in crisis situations, with spend on preventative and wrap-around services reducing over the last ten years. I know that colleagues across the country recognise we are simply storing up problems for the future, but we have had little choice.

Off the back of this then came the Covid-19 pandemic, which exacerbated many existing problems and introduced new ones into the system. Referrals to children's services have been on the increase since 2020 after a few years of decline preceding the pandemic.

The pandemic – and change in government last year – also delayed the long-awaited reforms package in children's social care, and when it did arrive, we were pleased with its rhetoric

on prevention but less so on the funding made available for any step-change.

In short, it has not been smooth sailing in delivering children's services over the past few years. But the last decade has shown that local government responds well to adversity, and I'm pleased this County Spotlight shows how we have adapted and transformed services over the last decade.

Across the four themes of this document – prevention, crisis care, transformation, and workforce – there are several examples of how councils are putting young people and their families at the heart of care and how we have achieved more with less.

Of course, we remain ambitious to do more: providing more substantial preventive and wrap-around services for families on the cusp of crisis and keeping young people in with their family where it is safe to do so. CCN's 2021 report with Newton showed the art of the possible, and we will be advocating for a future government to adequately fund the ambitious we have in children's services.

Cllr Keith Glazier
CCN Children's Services
Spokesperson



It is only just over a year since the country lifted all Covid-19 restrictions for the final time. Yet it now sometimes feels as though the pandemic is some strange distant memory of long ago rather than the very recent event which has been a key driver of so many of the policy challenges we face today; from inflation and rising cost of living to the workforce recruitment challenges facing countless sectors.

Although the key focus during the acute phase of Covid-19 was, understandably, on the NHS and associated issues in adult social care, councils quickly understood that perhaps one of the longest lasting impacts on their services would be felt in children's social care.

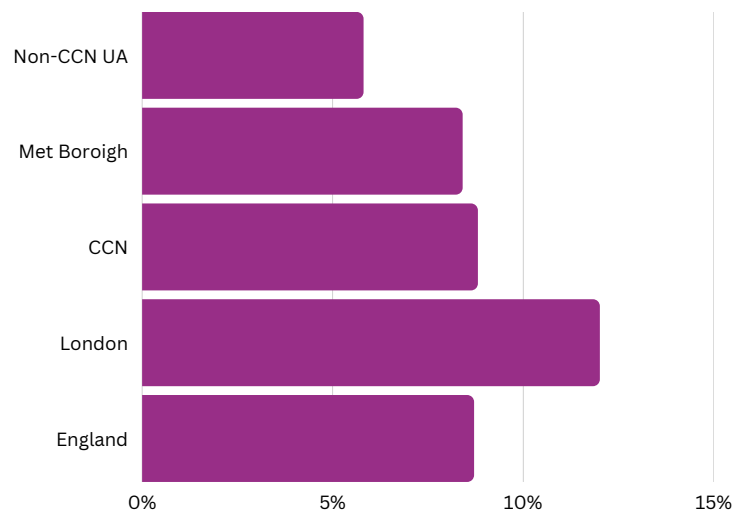
Even in those earliest months of the pandemic sweeping the country the County Councils Network's (CCN) member councils recognised the necessity of a national lockdown to halt the spread of the virus but did also highlight the effects of lockdown on the country's children – from the young infants stuck at home in situations of domestic abuse; through to the vulnerable teenagers at greater risk of criminal or sexual exploitation; and the devastating consequences for children's development and mental health of the inability to socialise or connect with others physically.

Sadly the evidence gathered for this report shows only too clearly the immense challenges faced by councils since. Despite an initial drop in referrals

during April, May and June 2020 during the first lockdown numbers soon bounced back up and remained high.¹

Between 2020-21 and 2021-22, there was a surge in over 20,000 extra referrals in county areas. This represented an 8.8% increase in county areas which was slightly above the national average increase of 8.7%. The effects of the pandemic reversed a trend which was seeing referrals begin to come down with a decrease of 1,400 year-on-year registered between 2018-19 and 2019-20 just before the pandemic struck.

Figure 1: Percentage change in referrals from 2020-21 to 2021-22 by tier type



With the increase in the number of referrals, those requiring support by local authorities has also risen. The number of children 'in need' of support by CCN member councils during the year increased 6% in 2021/22, some 16,030, and higher than the national average (4.9%), compared to an increase of 0.4% in the period just before the pandemic.

[1] CCN: [Over 600 young people day referred to children's services after lockdown](#), November 2020

The number of children in local authority care in year within county areas also increased by 1,079 young people over the same post-pandemic period: a 10.1% year-on-year rise. This is in contrast the months directly before the pandemic, when there was a decrease of 140 children requiring local authority care in 2019-20. Nationally, the number of children in council care is at a record high of 82,170 as of March 2022 – up from 66,180 in 2012.

These trends have, naturally, placed extensive pressure on county authority budgets. Analysis by CCN for this publication shows that 30 out of 36 (83%) of CCN member councils overspent on their children’s services budget in 2021-22 to meet this rising demand. This constituted a combined £316.7m total contributing to a combined national overspend across all councils of nearly £1bn.

Figure 3: Total children's services overspends by tier type, 2021-22

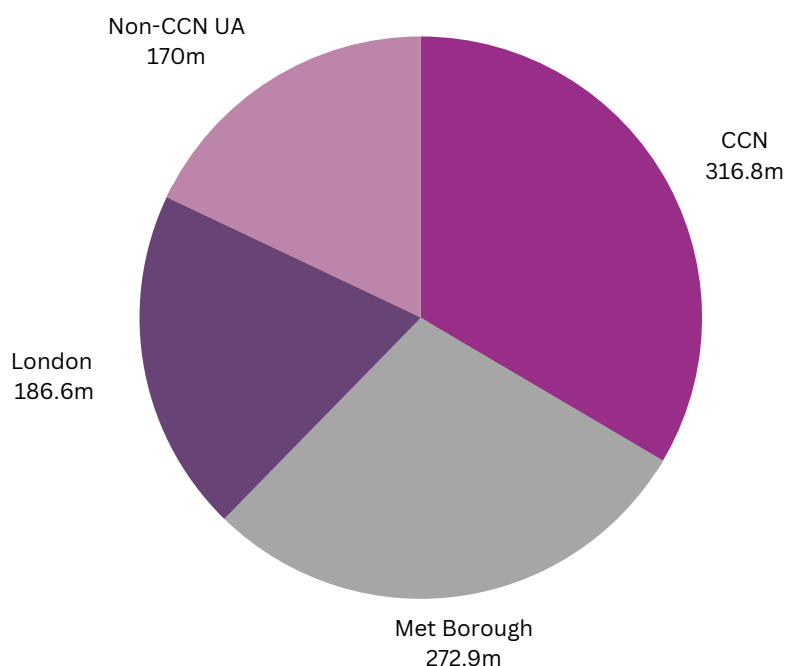
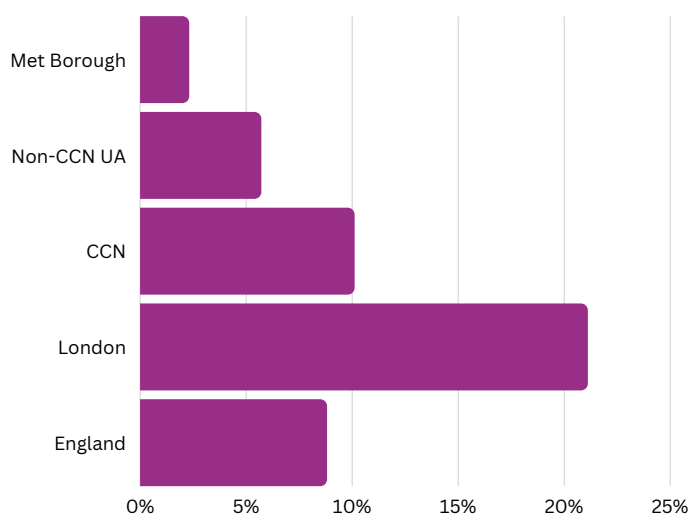


Figure 2: Percentage change in Looked-After Children from 2020-21 to 2021-22 by tier type



There is also very little that councils can do to avoid these overspends. Councils do their utmost to protect young people from harm, and child safeguarding and care procedures comprise of statutory measures which councils must fulfil.

The CCN previously showed that the proportion of children’s services spending devoted to these statutory services had already risen from just under 40% of total budgets to over 50% between 2012/3 and 2019/20. The rapid increase in numbers post-pandemic suggests that this proportion is now well on the way to 60%, even before the impact of recent inflation over the past eighteen months is taken into account.²

These trends, coupled with inflation adding an estimated £666m to children’s services budget in the two-year period from 2022-23 and 2023-24³ are continuing to place immense pressure on councils’ ability to maintain

[2] CCN and Newton - [The Future of Social Care: Emerging Findings](#).(pg17)

[3] CCN and LG Futures: [Counting the Costs of Inflation](#) (pg 13)

spending on non-statutory early help and preventive services.

As CCN's report with Newton, *The Future of Children's Social Care*, showed, reductions in these budgets are counterproductive. It is these very interventions which are needed to stem the flow of demand on expensive care proceedings by offering more suitable, cost-effective opportunities to support families at an earlier stage, such as within family hubs, before problems become entrenched and children get put at risk.

This should be of particular concern to the government, whose Children's Social Care Reform Implementation Plan, unveiled in March, is contingent on an expansion of early help services. This plan was widely welcomed by the sector – including CCN – as having identified many of the key elements of the system needing reform with comprehensive solutions. Many of the recommendations mirrored those contained in CCN's report with Newton, that showed long-term investment⁴ in preventative and edge of care services could reduce the number of children in care by 31,000 young people.

However, the money pledged to support the plan – £200m – falls far short of the £2.5bn recommended by Josh McAlister's Independent Review. With these latest figures emphasising that the pressure on existing services is growing rapidly the government must reconsider how much it needs to invest in services to compensate for the impact of the

pandemic to ensure that the admirable ambitions of its reform plans remain on course to be met later in the decade.

Investment is also needed to ensure that local authorities can continue to recruit and retain the skilled workforce required to look after the rising numbers of children in care. Despite the best efforts of local authorities, the number of foster carers has fallen dramatically year-on-year. The number of applications received by councils across England totalled 3,665 in 2021-22, down from 5,095 in 2020-21: a 28% decrease. In county areas, the number of applications to councils fell from 2,750 to 1,885 over the same time: a 31% decrease.

Nevertheless despite the pressures on the system, this report shows how county authorities are innovating to meet the challenge.

Even before the pandemic CCN member councils were at the forefront of high-quality children's services with a high number of Ofsted 'Outstanding'-rated councils. Since Ofsted began a sizeable number of CCN councils have significantly improved meaning even more 'Outstanding' and 'Good' authorities are now within membership. The innovation demonstrated by the case studies set out here show why this is the case.

[4] CCN and Newton - [The Future of Children's Social Care](#) (pg 7)

CCN Partner View



Earlier this year the government set out its eagerly anticipated children's social care reform agenda 'Stable Homes, Built on Love'. This strategy and its preceding review recognised that the system requires fundamental change to allow local areas to better meet the needs of children and young people in their care.

As local authorities begin to engage with this agenda, the scale of the challenges involved in meeting the needs of children and young people in the care system have intensified.

Many are experiencing increases in the number of children entering care versus fewer children leaving, increases in complexity of need for specific cohorts, and significant rises in provider costs. As a result most local authorities are experiencing overspends on children's services budgets, and for some this is posing significant challenges to financial sustainability.

We are currently working with a number of county councils in direct response to these challenges (including Somerset, Cornwall, West and North Northamptonshire and East Sussex). All of our work in this area is focused on finding and delivering ways of improving outcomes and life chances for children

and young people which can also reduce cost (e.g. different approaches to early intervention, finding the right homes for children, and supporting reunification with families).

At the heart of this work is 'Valuing Care' – a collaborative programme across a number of local authorities which captures and connects intelligence needs, costs and outcomes to drive improvement and transformation.

Over the coming months we will be working with CCN and a group of local authorities to assemble and analyse data on needs, demography, care provision and costs for over 5,000 children and young people. Our experience locally is that a better understanding of the needs of the care population and costs of care can unlock opportunities to improve outcomes and reduce cost. This work will allow us to explore this intelligence and opportunity at a greater scale – watch this space for a report later this year.

Dominic Luscombe
Delivery Director:
Children's Social Care Lead
IMPOWER

Theme 1: Preventing families from reaching crisis

Prevention has long be considered the best form of cure within children's services, but for local authorities the twin forces of rising demand and declining resource has meant that increasingly they have had to focus on those in crisis. From 2015 to 2020, CCN members reduced their spend on prevention by over £170m, on top of further reductions in the preceding five years.

The network has long argued there needs to be a change of emphasis, and the government's reforms package, unveiled in March, aims to stop families from reaching crisis point, including rebranding children's centres family hubs and joining up more services within them.

Several counties have been selected as trailblazers for these new hubs, where they will fast-track the reform of these services locally and support other councils.

Elsewhere in the CCN membership, despite challenges highlighted above, there is ample evidence that county local authorities have used their local expertise to transform preventative services so they can do more even with scarce resource.

This includes working with the voluntary and charity sector as well as employment partners to stem the issues that could tip families into crisis, as well as an increased focus on young people's mental health.

Other CCN members already have a very strong network of neighbourhood or children's centres, which are designed to support families and young people from birth to adolescence to prevent problems from being built up and snowballing later in life.



Staffordshire County Council

Supporting over 1,000 families with early help

Staffordshire County Council's approach to early help focuses on prevention and has been held up as a beacon of good practice.

Over the last 12 months, the council has commissioned voluntary sector providers and local charities to provide targeted family help and outreach, which has supported over 1,010 families to achieve successful and sustained outcomes.

The council has been given 'earned autonomy' status, which is for those authorities demonstrating a mature partnership approach to their early help delivery. Each district in Staffordshire has a dedicated Effective Practice Development Officer helping to deliver training, advice and guidance, ensuring professionals are empowered to deliver effective early help, and that families receive support from the people working with them, in the way the family need it. The council and DWP also jointly fund Supporting Families Employment Advisors, who are co-located with children's services teams to help families access financial and employment advice.

Northumberland Council

Trailblazing the evolution of children's centres

Northumberland Council is one of a handful of local authorities selected as a 'trailblazer' to fast track the delivery of new Family Hubs and support other councils.

Children's centres across England are being relaunched as Family Hubs and will be given extra investment to expand their services. As part of this, the government's Early Years Advisor Dame Andrea Leadsom MP toured the county's hubs, praising their effectiveness.

Family Hubs are a one-stop-shop for family support - from parents-to-be right through the teenage years 25. Midwives, registrars, health visitors, early years and mental health professionals, youth specialists and a host of other services - including relationship and parenting programmes, and financial advice are all available onsite. Other CCN members selected as trailblazers are Cornwall Council, Durham County Council, East Sussex County Council and Kent County Council.

[Read more here](#)

Cornwall Council

Supporting thousands of children with mental health

A £10.8m project to help young people manage their emotional health and wellbeing – and stop them heading into crisis – has supported almost 90,000 individuals across Cornwall.

The project, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and run by Cornwall Council's Together for Families service, was set up to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10 to 16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. As part of the programme, which was designed with young peoples' input, over 4,000 children and teenagers received targeted support, over 300 educational settings received a wellbeing toolkit, and over 7,000 professionals received mental health training.

The council said that everything learnt from this project will shape the future emotional health provision for young people in Cornwall.

[Read more here](#)

Lancashire County Council

Providing early years support through to adolescence

The Lancashire Children, Family, and Wellbeing Service has 56 neighbourhood centres across Lancashire, bringing together a range of early help and family services in one location.

The service hosts groups and sessions for families and children from pre-pregnancy through to adolescence. On offer are drop-in sessions, midwife and well-baby clinics, breast feeding support groups and child development checks.

As well as those services above, the centres have a preventative aim: to stop issues from snowballing later in life so also available are groups for new parents, support courses for low confidence children, learning and development, and support for those who have witnessed or experienced domestic violence as well as bespoke help for young people with learning difficulties.

[Read more here](#)

Theme 2:

Managing demand in tough times

Since the country opened up after the third national lockdown during the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic, CCN member councils have been grappling with a surge in demand for children's services, including significant increases in referrals, children in need, and looked-after children.

Indeed, over much of the last decade there have been increases in demand for both 'front door' and crisis services within children's social care, for many and complex reasons.

Whilst this has resulted in overspends for many councils, this has also meant that CCN members are adept in rising to these challenges and are flexible in responding to spikes in demand.

Many are taking direct action in their care markets and are investing in extra capacity by building more children's accommodation to address rising numbers. This will not only help suffice demand, but more importantly, allow a child in care to stay local instead of being housed further afield.

Others are creating multi-disciplinary teams which incorporate new methods of counselling and support, and mixing these with substance misuse experts, life coaches and domestic violence to provide 'edge of care' wrap around services to young people and their families.

The goal of this approach is a greater emphasis on reuniting young people with their families where it is safe to do so - and therefore driving down numbers of children in care - as well as helping teenagers in supported living transition to independent life.



Hertfordshire County Council

Reuniting children in care with their families

A three-year pilot scheme which focuses on reuniting children in care with their family, where it is safe to do so, is underway in Hertfordshire.

Hertfordshire's County Council's Family Safeguarding Model has been highlighted as an example of best practice by the government, centring around a multi-disciplinary team who are highly trained in motivational interviewing, which is a counselling approach that creates confidence in parents to change their behaviours that cause harm to their children. The pilot scheme involves parental mental health, substance misuse, domestic abuse specialists and life coaches all working together in one team, with the goal of supporting children in care to return home.

The council is investing £5.4m in this programme due to an increase in the number of children in care between 2018-21, and increasing placements costs. It is estimated that over the three years of the extended programme greater numbers of children will be able to safely return to their families.

[Read more here](#)



Wiltshire Council

Improving capacity so children in care stay local

Wiltshire Council is taking an innovative approach to helping young people in care stay local by creating three new children's homes in the area.

The new homes will help to provide places for up to 12 children and young people, helping them to stay in Wiltshire, and near to local schools, friends and support networks.

For two of the homes, Wiltshire Council will fund 50% of the cost of purchasing and adapting, with 50% match funding secured from the Department for Education's £19.5m grant programme to buy or refurbish children's residential homes to meet growing demand. The homes will be operated by a private or charitable care provider. These homes will be for young people in care who are unable to be placed with a foster carer for various reasons, and will help them stay in Wiltshire rather than accommodation outside of the county.

[Read more here](#)



Essex County Council

Helping young people transition into independent living

Essex County Council's housing related support services for over 16s aims to enable young people to transition into independent living.

Each year these services support up to 270 young people in supported living, helping them to transition out of care and into independent living. This includes a Divisionally Based Intervention Team (DBIT) which has been providing a drop-in service since August 2021 in two supported accommodation sites.

DBIT practitioners attend each week and provide group and individual conversations with young people. They use a 'solution focused' approach, whereby the tone is more conversational and casts young people as the experts in their own lives, to try help them make the changes they want in their lives. Based on feedback, those sessions have helped young people improve their confidence and aspirations.

[Listen to the case study here](#)

Lincolnshire County Council

Building accommodation to address capacity challenges

Lincolnshire has seen a rising number of young people coming into local authority care, so the county council has begun work on two new children's homes this year.

The £2m project, jointly funded by Lincolnshire County Council and the Department for Education, will see two new homes built in Louth and Lincoln to help address demand. The county council is looking to create extra places in the county for ten young people aged between 12 and 18, with the proposed buildings to appear as safe and as homely as possible.

Once complete, it will mean fewer children will need to be housed outside of the county and will be supported accommodation – including staff, a dining room, kitchen, and lounge. It will also be fully accessible for those with disabilities.

[Read more here](#)

Theme 3:

Local solutions to workforce challenges

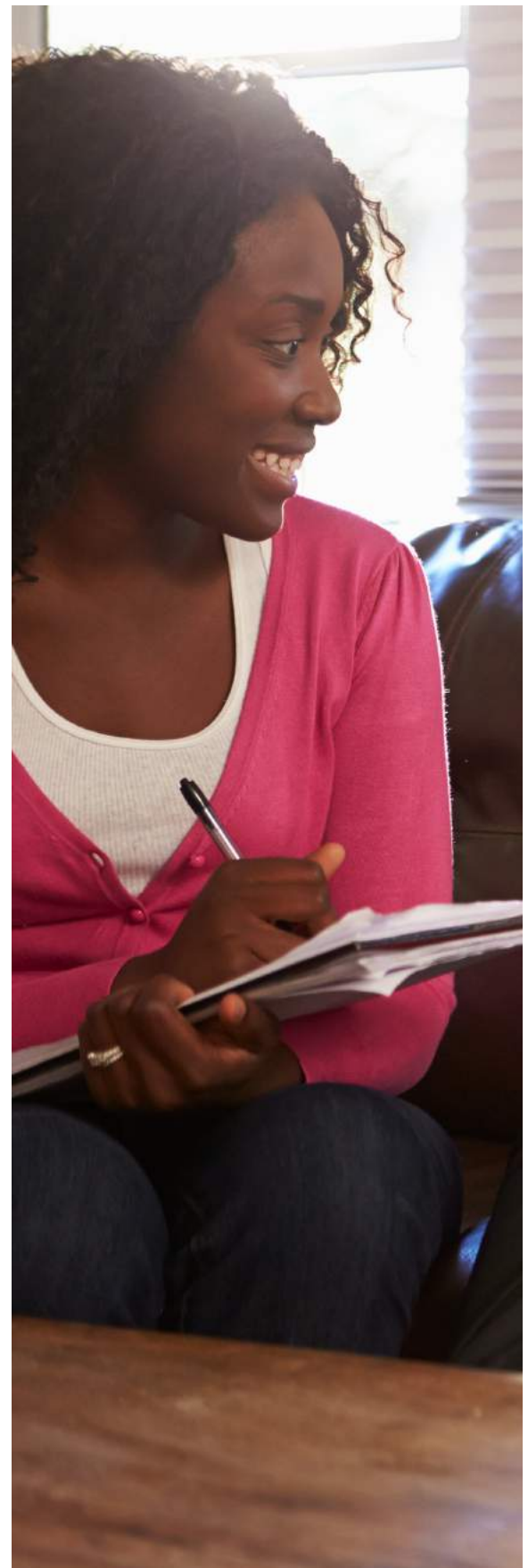
Like in adult social care, there has long been recruitment challenges in children's services. A survey from the Association of Directors of Children's Services last year found 19% of social worker posts were unfilled last July.

Whilst nationally-set pay and conditions is a prime factor in improving this, it is in councils' gift to make working in children's services attractive to prospective candidates too. Many are embracing greater digitisation of services so social workers spend less time on administration and other tasks.

But this section shows, CCN members are going further than this and have set up training academies to support social workers in progressing their careers; trying to address some of the core retention and recruitment issues. Others are embracing technology to improve the practice of foster carers and social workers, and in turn, the care received by young people.

Attracting foster carers remains a significant challenge across the country and could get worse during the present cost-of-living crisis.

But CCN members know how to communicate with their residents and what works locally, and the recruitment campaigns outlined in this section have all yielded substantial results and significant increases in interest.



Gloucestershire County Council

Inventive social worker academy to address retention

Facing recruitment and retention challenges, Gloucestershire County Council launched its Social Work Academy in 2019 to welcome aspiring social workers to the profession and to support the continuing professional development and progression of existing staff.

The academy works with universities and students on placements, alongside other routes into the profession, and has created a successful 'Assessed and Supported Year in Employment' programme to develop individuals and providing progression opportunities to social workers.

Newly-qualified social workers are placed in teams according to need and make-up across the county, and have access to training and insights from experts. The council has a track record in showing progression of staff from student placements to leadership, and Ofsted's recent inspection in 2022 highlighted how staff turnover had 'greatly reduced'.

[Read more here](#)

Northamptonshire Children's Trust

Innovatively using virtual reality to improve care

Virtual reality (VR) has been used by Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) to place foster carers directly in the position of a child, to help them understand young people's behaviour and improve their empathy.

The VR technology supplied by Antser, uses immersive films to put foster carers in a child in care's position; helping them to gain a better understanding of their world. It won 'Best Public Sector Project' at the National Technology Awards this year.

Every respondent who was trained in VR said it made them think differently and consider alternative ways to respond and make decisions in their approach. In one case, NCT was able to use VR to help a carer develop their understanding and change their behaviour, resulting in better care of the child who was requiring a more therapeutic approach to their needs.

[Read more here](#)

Hampshire County Council

Campaigning to attract 150 new fostering households

Hampshire County Council's 2021 'You Can Foster' campaign to attract more foster carers resulted in a spike of enquiries and a prestigious award.

'You Can Foster' received a gold award in last year's PRide awards, with the campaign telling the story of a child discovering their foster family over the winter period. This in-house campaign resulted in a 300% increase in enquiries in what is usually a quiet time. The council is redoubling its efforts to find 150 new fostering households in Hampshire by the end of 2023 with its new #OpenYourDoor campaign.

The County Council is also currently looking for foster carers for children seeking asylum, with a new campaign designed to raise awareness. It includes an [emotive video](#) which challenges local people to imagine the plight of a child seeking asylum and the difference they can make to that child's life as a foster carer.

[Read more here](#)



Devon County Council

Campaign puts children in hot seat

A fostering recruitment campaign earlier this year by Devon County Council took its cue from a popular TV series, putting young people in the hot seat.

The county council's 'You're Hired!' concept came from keyword research which showed that 'pay' and 'allowance' search terms were driving high volumes of traffic to their Fostering Devon website. The council wanted to switch the focus away from remuneration, and instead to highlight the benefits of fostering as a different kind of career.

Their recruitment campaign used the context of a job interview, inspired by The Apprentice, using two young people in foster care 'interviewing' would-be foster carers. By putting young people with foster experience in the video, and explaining how fostering has changed their lives, the council generated a 900% increase in website traffic, showcasing the support that Fostering Devon offers to its foster carers.

[Learn about fostering in Devon here](#)

Theme 4: Transforming and improving care

As outlined in this report, local authorities have had to deal with both rising demand at a time when resource has declined over the past decade. As such, many have undertaken ambitious transformation strategies, refocussing and prioritising services to ensure the most vulnerable are protected during challenging financial times.

Yet some of the biggest catalysts for reform have been borne out of adversity. Clearly, it is a difficult time for all parties – young people, families, officers, leadership and politicians – when a council receives a negative Ofsted judgement.

Yet as this section outlines, many have used this negative experience to drive through change, both in terms of services but also in culture. As some of the CCN members profiled show, they have used such judgements as a period of reflection and redoubled their efforts to get things right for young people and their families second time round.

In some instances, too, those councils have benefitted from peer support from neighbouring or high performing authorities, showing the collaborative spirit of the sector.

In all four examples in this section, the council has managed to transform its services – with each having a different story based on local need and challenge – and all are now on a much more positive trajectory. Most importantly, this means that services work better for young people and their families, and those that need support are able to receive effective and timely help.



East Riding of Yorkshire Council

From 'Inadequate' to 'Good' in three years

Children's services in East Riding have been rated 'Good' by Ofsted, three years after being told by inspectors they were inadequate.

The inspectors visited East Riding of Yorkshire Council earlier this year and found that there had been "significant and sustained changes in all the practice and leadership areas identified for improvement" in the previous inspection which took place in December 2019.

They also lauded the council's senior leadership team within children's services, as well as a culture of staff feeling valued, and "timely and effective response to concerns at the front door", which was an issue highlighted in the 2019 inspection. The council said its 2019 inspection gave it cause for reflection and that it did not look for quick fixes but in collaboration with its partners, wanted to achieve systemic cultural change through a new model of practice.

[Read more here](#)

Norfolk County Council

Inspectors praise journey from 'Inadequate' to 'Good'

Norfolk County Council's children's services have been judged 'Good' by Ofsted with inspectors praising the authority's improvement journey.

Ofsted's November 2022 inspection found that there had been 'significant improvements' from the council since it was judged 'Inadequate' in 2013, recognising stable and determined leadership, investment in services, and 'compassionate, warm and committed workers and carers.'

The council paid tribute to the work of its staff in children's services as Ofsted highlighted adoption services as a strength, as well as planning and decision-making for babies needing early protection. Inspectors added that independent reviewing officers are 'strong advocates for children'. They also highlighted the work of the Targeted Youth Support Service in diverting children away from criminal exploitation, and the skilful work of the social workers taking calls where there were concerns about children.

[Read more here](#)

A banner image for Warwickshire County Council featuring a blue sky with white clouds, a stone bridge with arches, and green trees in the foreground.

Warwickshire County Council

Services rated 'Good' in all areas after transformation

Warwickshire County Council's investment into early help services and its workforce helped the authority be judged 'Good' in all areas by Ofsted.

Inspectors in 2022 found that children and families in Warwickshire benefit from consistently good quality services at an early stage, with children's views integral to decision-making. This was an improvement on 2017's 'Requires Improvement' judgement, underpinned by investment into prevention, a focus on workforce improvement and the establishment of Warwickshire Family Values, which seeks to support children to remain with their families where it is safe to do so.

In addition, a 'focused visit' by inspectors, where they explore one element of a council's children's services, took place in March 2023. They found that in spite of challenging finances, 'almost all care-experienced young people receive support and services that meet their needs effectively'.

[Read more here](#)

A banner image for West Sussex County Council featuring a field of yellow buttercup flowers in the foreground and a stone bridge with arches in the background under a blue sky.

West Sussex County Council

County's 'relentless approach to improving practice'

West Sussex County Council has been praised for its 'relentless approach to improving practice' in children's services and the significant progress made over the last four years.

Ofsted inspected the council in March this year and gave an overall rating of 'Requires Improvement', with 'Good' judgements for children in care and leadership and management.

The last inspection in 2019 judged all areas as 'Inadequate', but in this inspection Ofsted found that most children in care make good progress, their voices are heard, and early help support is making a positive difference to families' lives. The council has made significant investment in its children's services since 2019 to address corporate and political weaknesses and have a plan in place to continue their improvement journey.

[Read more here](#)

Spotlight on fostering

Jacquie's story: Staffordshire

“

You are making a difference in a child's life because of what you are doing. Some of these children would have never sat around a dinner table before or used a knife or fork.

For Jacquie Forrester, from Leek in Staffordshire, it was two events that happened by chance that led her to become a foster carer, supported by her husband Stuart. The first was significant – she was offered redundancy at the financial services company she worked for and the second was less significant but no less life-changing: a TV advert.

She said: “After taking redundancy I was in the garden thinking ‘what do I enjoy doing?’ I love looking after my granddaughter and I thought I'd like to look after children. A while after I saw an advert on TV about children in a war-torn country and thought I'd like foster those kind of young people. I naively though fostering was just for refugee children rather than local ones!”

But after being inspired to register her interest in fostering, Jacquie has not looked back and has since fostered four young people over eight years, ranging from teenagers to a new-born child.

She admits it has not always been easy, with her first placement a ‘baptism of fire’ but having supported and worked with that young child over several years, the care she received from Jacquie and her husband helped turn round her life.

Jacquie added: *“At first, we were living in a lot of stress, she didn't go to school and she was nocturnal – in short a handful.*



“But with our care and guidance we've helped her onto the straight and narrow. She is now a mother herself and doing well and says that she does not know what she would do without us.”

Jacquie has since become a hub carer as part of Staffordshire County Council's Mockingbird Hub model, which first originated in America. Hub carers help out other foster carers across in the area, whether it be transporting their children to school, helping with doctors' appointments, organising sleepovers for children in foster care and events and support for carers. She helps out with eight other families in the area.

Jacquie also adds that the support she has received from the county council, from social workers to management has been ‘outstanding’ and for anyone considering fostering ‘help is always at hand with from all the social services.’

Asked if she had any advice for anyone considering fostering, Jacquie said: *“Fostering is extremely rewarding... and you will make a difference in a child's life.”*

Spotlight on fostering

Gareth's story: Warwickshire

“

As a foster carer it's a privilege to offer a place where my foster child can call home, they now know where they're going, they know they're here with me and that I'll support them with everything they need.

Gareth in Warwickshire was inspired to become a foster carer from his previous career working in a fostering residential home. There, he realised how unsettling it can be for children to go from home to home and eventually move into a residential care home: he wanted to play his part and be able to offer young people a permanent home.

Since becoming a foster carer, Gareth said that he has been able to offer his foster child opportunities to try new things, as well as stability and a place to call home.

He said: *“The child in my care had previously been out of education for three years, since coming to stay with me they've been more settled and are now happily attending full time education. As a foster carer it's a privilege to offer a place where my foster child can call home, they now know where they're going, they know they're here with me and that I'll support them with everything they need”.*

“One thing I really enjoy is offering opportunities to my foster child to try new things. We recently went on holiday and tried jet skiing, it was something they'd never experienced before, and it was great to share that with them”.



As a solo carer, Gareth said the support offered by the county council has been vital in supporting both him and his foster child. The council offers bespoke training based on the child's needs, and he has completed training on therapeutic approaches to care and he has access to a psychologist.

He continued: *“I get dedicated support from Warwickshire including a social worker, a social worker for the child and a family support worker. The team come out every two weeks to check in and see us. The most important thing is that we're all there working together to ensure the child's needs are met”.*

Gareth is one of over 150 foster carers in Warwickshire, and he recommends that more people come forward and register to become a fosterer:

He added: *“Just do it, it's the best thing you can ever do and I'd never go back from it.”*



THE VOICE OF COUNTIES

Founded in 1997, the County Councils Network is a network of 23 county councils and 13 unitary authorities that serve county areas.

The network is a cross party organisation, expressing the views of member councils to the Local Government Association and to the government.

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COUNTY SPOTLIGHT