

North West ADCS Mid-Year Report 2022/23

October 2022

Introduction – NWADCS Chair



As we continue to navigate out of a global pandemic and evaluate the impact on children's lives, this mid-year report is set in the context of national political instability, rising costs, inflation, and significant policy changes for schools, social care children with SEND. It is little comfort these are national challenges facing local authority children services which are unprecedented and manifest symptomatically in our workforce, budget allocation and being able to secure the range and choice of placements for children who need our help, support and protection. In this context our four over-arching priorities remain relevant and current.

- **Children's Social Care –purposeful practice which promotes stability and permanence**
- **Education & Early Years –an inclusive education system which supports children to attend and achieve**
- **Special Educational Needs/Disability – multi-agency support improve the experiences of children with SEND**
- **Workforce - support a resilient Children's Services workforce**

In addition, as a region of many voices and where the issues of disadvantage and inequality can be acute we have a collective responsibility raise the awareness, offer solutions and collaborate . I therefore trust you will agree ably supported by a talented and committed team, you will find this report reflects our vision and commitment to both support each other, especially in difficult times and operate as a region that works for all children where:

- Innovation and improvement go hand-in-hand
- Practice, leadership and partnerships are strengths-based
- Relationships are at the heart of what we do, and how we do it.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a white background. The signature is stylized and appears to read 'Paul Marshall'.

Paul Marshall, Chair
North West Association of Directors of Children's Services

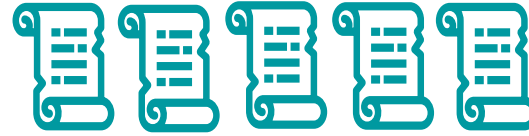
At a glance



13 LAs and **60** young people engaged in Rethinking Digital



36 participants from LAs and providers joined our fostering referrals session



5 responses to government and inspectorate consultations on:

- 2RI+ schools
- SEND Green Paper
- ECHP Annual Reviews
- Area SEND inspection
- Liberty Protection Safeguards

66% of placements made through regional purchasing systems



35 participants attended 'Better for Children' Market Stewardship event

63 representatives from across LAs and **40** provider organisations engaged via 16+ Provider Forum to look at outcomes for young people



£1.36m funding to support North West Innovation Programme



48 providers on Fostering FPS



140 providers on Residential FPS



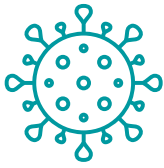
35 providers on SEND FPS



75 providers on SaILS DPS

32 people attended our Residential Provider event to discuss market challenges

Grant funding of **£121k** per annum settlement from Department for Education to support improvement and innovation in SEND.



Learning and recovering from the pandemic

Rethinking digital: A pause for reflection in digital practice in Children's Social Care

Working with our key delivery partner, Research in Practice 'choosing digital' was funded by DfE, via the *Building Back Better Fund*. Reaching out to the region to engage in the research phase of the project resulted in consultation with 13 LAs with practitioners and leaders to explore aspects of digital practice within social work, galvanising examples of good practice from these meetings.

Between March and July of 2022 we were also able to reach over 60 children young people, who provided their views and experiences of digital practice.

Reporting on progress to DfE-led update meetings, we're currently entering the final phase of the project as we finish the final report. Initial findings indicate

- **Digital is often seen as less valuable than in person** and other traditional approaches.
- the use of **digital within practice has a very narrow, compliance- based focus** associated with virtual meetings, and convenience, often within rigid boundaries.
- a complex dynamic between the lockdown experience, practitioner bias and **a lack of guidance locally,**
- **confusing positions from sector regulators, which has resulted in digital anxiety.**
- **Reactions to children and young people's digital use can be blunt, restrictive and overly risk averse.**

Further opportunities alongside Research in Practice may be considered following submission.



Supporting stability and outcomes

Collaboration at the heart of commissioning

LA knowledge and expertise continues to be invaluable through Purchasing System Governance groups, ensuring investment in development of our commissioning. We're especially grateful to Sarah Page (Cumbria), Marcus Robinson (Cheshire West and Chester), Sarah Tonge (Rochdale) and Geoff Catterall (Salford) for their input as chairs.

Over the next 12 months there are some significant changes required across the four purchasing systems due to differences in the market since the contracts were designed with the operating context; demand for placements; and design of services all notably changed.

Ready for regulation: Supported and Independent Living Services

More significant changes are required for the Supported and Independent Living Services (SAILS) Dynamic Purchasing System to bring the contract in line with market regulation in 2023. Initial consultation work is being carried out currently and a small working group are developing a draft set of paperwork by the end of the year. This review will also provide an opportunity to simplify some areas and address some areas of the contract that have caused issues operationally.

Transitioning from unregulated to a regulated SAILS market will be supported through the **North West SAILS Minimum Standards** programme. Minimum Standards checks completed for Round 2 providers and Round 3 & 4 planned before contract changes to accommodate regulation. A new annual checklist to ensure that standards are maintained throughout the length of the contract is also being rolled out.

"I think it's really important that all providers have gone through this process before regulation so we can spot any shortfalls and work with them to give them the best chance to succeed."

Preparing for adulthood

Work is being progressed through developing a toolkit of resources, guided by the Care Planning and Permanence Forum. Following informal consultation, four cornerstones of the toolkit have been established

- pathway planning,
- independent living skills and support,
- tenancy preparation and,
- support networks.

The resources will be a variety of formats of regional events, briefings, mapping of best practice, guidance refreshers to help identify local actions, possible content for the framework tender and practical tools.

The toolkit will be available to Local authorities, SAILS and housing providers and aims to bring partners together in supporting our young people's journey to adulthood.



Responding to the placement crisis

Summary of proposals

Local authorities are finding it increasingly difficult to find placements that children and young people need, not just for older children and those with complex needs but younger children and those who would usually have been able to benefit from a family placement.

This shortage of placements has resulted in an imbalance in relationships in the market with providers able to 'cherry pick' children and young people and local authorities being pushed into paying higher costs and for additional services to secure or maintain placements.

Diagnosing symptoms of this imbalance and linking to the underlying issues has been a key part of our work over the last six months. This has resulted in conversations with commissioning colleagues, providers and the National Association of Fostering Providers and Independent Children's Homes Association. With the acknowledgement that this is a national crisis and not one that is likely to be solved within the North West due to the impact of national pressures, proposals have been developed in collaboration with commissioning managers and include:

- Updating the uplift process for both indicative contract price and existing placements
- Provider engagement
- Work with local authority teams to look at referrals and understanding profit
- Guidance notes to establish NW position on key areas
- Benchmarking and collaboration with other regions

These aim to remove barriers to providers wanting to work in the North West and to encourage them to develop the services we need in the North West and work more effectively with host authorities.

Coming soon...

We are currently...

- **Developing regional templates** – to focus on outcomes and managing risk
- **Improving placement referrals** – planning 6 training events per year
- **Planning a fostering provider event** – looking at collaborative solutions





A return of regional education data benchmarking

Capitalising of the timely creation of NWADCS new Data Hub Manager role, work has been taking place on the first set of national assessments since 2019. Although researchers have attempted to quantify the impact of the pandemic on pupil attainment, national and regional datasets are providing us with the first large scale collection of data to examine changes in attainment and how the effects of COVID have impacted different groups of pupils and different areas.

While government have stated the main purpose of these statutory assessments will be to help understand more clearly the impact of the pandemic on pupils and schools - this varies between groups of pupils, schools and local authority areas. We can already recognise the uneven impact of the pandemic in our local authorities and the challenges with interpreting the 2021/22 data.

The data collection in itself has not been without challenges and the patience and understanding within the region is appreciated as these data are updated and shared incrementally and likely to be impacted by further reloading of data nationally.

Changes to provision of regional datasets by key partners (NCER and Angel Solutions) shortly before the usual release date necessitated the issuing of new data sharing agreements between all 23 Local Authorities, which NWADCS was able to orchestrate with signatories and collate at very short notice, in time for initial datasets to be shared in a timely manner.

Initial analysis suggests

- For Early Years, End of Key Stage Phonics, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, **attainment has decreased nationally, regionally and at Local Authority level compared to 2019.**
- Gender gap evidence churn with falls in attainment unevenly spread. In many areas, a **narrowing of the gender gap has been due to a slightly larger fall in attainment for girls than boys.**
- Disruption to learning during the COVID-19 **pandemic has had a greater impact on disadvantaged pupils** than on pupils not known to be disadvantaged, with the gap in attainment increasing to the highest level since 2012.



Improving the experiences of children with SEND

Sharing lived experience

- The NW SEND Leadership group has agreed to prioritise the development of children and young people's **advocacy and engagement** activity at a sub-regional level.
- The responds to both the creation of Integrated Care Boards and the likely introduction of local SEND Strategic Partnerships.
- Through ICB-level 'test and learn' projects we will invest in growing capacity, capability and learning around **young people sharing lived experience** so that their views inform delivery of services at all levels.

Prioritising sufficiency of SEND provision

In the coming year, work will be carried out to ensure that there is **equal focus on SEND sufficiency as there is on LAC sufficiency**. Several workstreams will feed into this work; the development of a specification for low incidence high needs placements, analysis of LA SEND sufficiency strategies and a focus on SEND placement data.

Whilst we now benefit from **35 providers on our SEND Flexible Purchasing System (FPS)**, there are some ongoing challenges to this piece of work including the embedding of Phase 1 not being fully complete across all authorities. A lack of engagement from SEND colleagues and the creating flexibility within the purchasing system to **encourage the creation of the bespoke blended offers for young people allowing us to meet the aspirations of young people** also offer scope for improvement.

Delivery of Phase 2 of the SEND Flexible Purchasing System is a priority for the next six months. At the point of implementation of the SEND FPS a last-minute decision was made to separate out 16+ providers from the initial phase due to some challenge from Natspec and Association of Colleges. Consequently, there is further work to develop the FPS to include these providers as Phase 2. We are aiming to have a specification and scope produced by the end of 2022 and ready for the March round to open. This will include further engagement with providers and local authorities to ensure that the initial feedback is still relevant and consider plans in relation to the SEND Green Paper.

Collecting data on existing SEND placements is core to our being able to understand the market better and share this intelligence with North West authorities. A request is sent to each authority at the end of the quarter alongside the LAC collection. Currently there has been a poor return rate for this information from local authorities and this is being followed up with individually.



Supporting a resilient Children's Services workforce

Reimagining workforce solutions

The region has taken the initiative to think differently about how Local Authorities can tackle this growing challenge. Under the attentive leadership of Simone White, DCS Wirral we worked with Capacity a third sector specialist on this 'reimagining' project. Between May and June 2022 Capacity, supported by NWADCS, delivered significant engagement across all 23 LAs in the North West to understand these pressures and look for imaginative, sustainable solutions for change.

Following the delivery of an insights report from the 'discovery' phase of the project, we were able to identify the following key findings for future work:

- Organisational culture: shared positive practice values articulated through a high-level cultural framework.
- Terms & conditions harmonisation: more collaborative, than competitive, approach for pay and benefits.
- Technological and back-office support: sharing learning and systems that respond to social worker's desire to be freed up from paperwork.
- Workforce development: a tangible offer that shares training and development resources and pathways.
- A not for profit agency/bank model could help to bring in more consistency of paycales across region

Practice & Principles - Recruitment, Retention and Development

To showcase and advocate the work, energy, and innovation in our local authorities, we have gathered collective knowledge into a Practice and Principles document to be disseminated across the region.

Extensive literature review and consultation in the region (including Assistant Directors, HR, Workforce Development and NW Employers) informs the evidence base.

Due for publication imminently, the resource will be accompanied by a 'true for us' exercise to enable LAs to evaluate their local position. This benchmarking aims to reduce variability, identify areas for improvement, and share good practice

Coming soon...



The discovery phase enabled our lead LA to unlock DfE funding for a feasibility study and options for a not-for-profit alternative to commercial agencies,

- **Test and learn**– NWADCS Wider Leadership will consider and agree a preferred not-for-profit model to test, and the right spatial levels for piloting.
- **True for Us** - this workforce benchmarking aims to reduce variability, identify areas for improvement, and share good practice



Embedding an effective Regional Innovation & Improvement Alliance

Better for Children – Sufficiency and market stewardship

The removal of most pandemic restrictions allowed us to tentatively reintroduce our programme of practice sharing 'Better for Children' seminars. Our first session followed publication of What Works for Children's Social Care Report: Are Local Authorities Achieving Effective Market Stewardship for Children's Social Care Services? Our **35** participants were able to:

- Hear directly from one of the co-authors about the findings from the report.
- Understand how Ofsted consider sufficiency during both regulatory and LA inspections
- To learn from the practice with keynote input on Manchester's commissioning 'behaviours and principles'

In addition to contributions from speakers, the session allowed an opportunity for colleagues to reflect and consider learning that can be applied locally.



One region, many voices

Firmly establishing the North West's contribution to shaping national conversations, our Policy and Improvement Officer has co-ordinated our 'many voices' approach to responding to consultations. Working across our regional networks and with NWADASS, the first part of the year has seen us respond to 5 government and inspectorate consultations on

- Supporting schools not making necessary improvements
Right support, right place, right time (SEND Green Paper)
- Reviews of Education, Health and Care Plans
- A new approach to SEND inspections
- Changes to the MCA Code of Practice and implementation of the LPS

Coming soon...

We are currently planning our next *Better for Children* seminars...

- **Pride in Practitioners** – recognising innovative frontline social care practice
- **Responding to extra-familial harms** – education as a protective factor





Meet the team



Bella Ryan, Contract and Quality Monitoring Officer

As the newest member of the team, I will be working with service providers to ensure they continue to meet requirements for regional purchasing system requirements and support workstreams linked to improving quality of provision for young people. I come from a planning and operational background having worked for British Gas for 12 years - entirely out of the world of Children's Services! I spent 6 years as a national lead Trade Union Officer, dealing with stakeholders of all levels and building real resilience when faced with tough challenges. I am proud to say I achieved a lot of firsts for the region, becoming first female on the Branch Committee and first female Branch President.

Outside of work I spend a lot of time with my family, my sister has severe learning difficulties and SEN, a lot of things are challenges for her, however we spend lots of weekends navigating new ways to make things easier for her, as she navigates college and becoming more independent. I am also an avid reader - I read somewhere that it only takes 1000 books to be classed as a library and I don't think I'm far off!

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Zelda Massey, Improvement Support Officer

For over 20 years, I worked as a civil servant in various roles across the Department for Education. My last role was at Government Office North West, where I provided policy support for the safeguarding agenda. After the closure of Government Office in 2011, I started my regional role working with the North West Sector Led Improvement Board to organise leadership programmes for aspiring directors in Children's Services. As our responsibilities as a team broadened, North West Sector Led Improvement Team became NWADCS. With this shift, my role changed - now, providing co-ordination and support to all regional improvement activity, including peer challenges and all sub groups meetings are all part of my responsibilities. I am the first point of contact for all communication to key partners and stakeholders. Outside of work, I am a passionate advocate for young people in disadvantaged areas. As a volunteer for the Salford Foundation and Salford Children's Holiday Camp, I help with fundraising so children in Salford can enjoy their leisure time pursuing activities they love and spend time by the Welsh seaside during the summer holidays.

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Leanne Boylan, Policy and Improvement Officer

I joined NWADCS in February 2022, as the Policy and Improvement Officer. Before which, I worked across a diverse range of Children's Social Care settings over the past 15 years. This has included working in the MASSH, as a Rapid Response CAF Coordinator, and Missing from Home Officer, and I also jointly led on an innovative programme called New Beginnings in Stockport.

My role within NWADCS includes leading regional responses to consultations and maintaining North West inter-authority procedures. I also support sector led improvement and innovation in areas of common interest for example workforce, Family Law, and digital practice.

I've recently completed my Masters' degree in Psychoanalytical Observational Studies with the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust. I've been able to bring some of that learning to my new role within NWADCS, as it applies not only to individuals but to groups and organisations.

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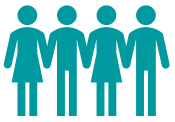


Sarah Halsall, Contracts and Markets Officer

My work background has consisted of customer service, data collection and reporting in the retail and sales sector. In 2019 I temporarily joined Bolton's childrens commissioning team as an administrator and realised how much I enjoyed the fast pace of referral searches, finding resolutions and helping the team. It made me want to change my career completely. Following maternity leave, I took the plunge and joined Placements North West as a Contract and Quality Monitoring Officer in July 2020. My role was to monitor unregulated providers to ensure they met the minimum standards as set in the North West. It was a great opportunity to meet providers and get further understanding of childrens social care.

In February 2022 I started my current role of Contract and Markets Officer taking more of a hands-on role in the other contracts we hold. As this is a regional role, it has given me the opportunity to suggest improvements and ways of working that can make a difference.

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Meet the team



Angela Brown, Quality and Outcomes Manager

My previous role was 14 years in local authority children's commissioning children's placements. Prior to this, I had a number of project and event management roles for national organisations including National Day Nurseries Association, Co-operatives UK and ADCS. I came into post in March 2022 and as a new role, spent consulting with partners across the region to scope the priority workstreams. With much to do in the sector around quality and outcomes the emphasis is the practical changes we can make to both practice and commissioning which over time will make a real and reported difference for our children and young people.

Outside of the day job I'm a passionate patient advocate having grown up with a long-term health condition. Having chaired a support group in partnership with my local hospital for several years, been a national charity trustee and patient research partner I find working in partnership with patients, universities, hospital trusts and private pharmaceutical companies rewarding.

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Julia Mather, Data Hub Manager

Following graduation, I carried out a variety of roles at North Tyneside Council including urban renewal, welfare reform and collaborative work with voluntary and community groups. Children's Social Care and Early Help quickly became my principal areas of work. I worked with leaders to provide performance data to help understand issues, identify areas of improvement, and develop solutions. In March 2022, I left my role in North Tyneside to join NWADCS in the newly created position of Data Hub Manager.

My role now is to manage the collation and analysis of Children's Services data and intelligence to support insight and evidence-based approaches across the region. Through developing strong working relationships with colleagues and stakeholders, my role is key in promoting the use of data to support high quality commissioning and delivery of services with the aim of underpinning improvement. Away from NWADCS, I continue with my role as a Subject Access Request officer in North Tyneside on an ad-hoc basis, collating and preparing sensitive historical information held within the LA. This often provides Care Leavers information to support them in piecing together their life story.

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Amy Lythgoe, Children's Sufficiency Programme Manager

Having worked in communications roles in housing for four years, including collaborative work on the Homes for Britain campaign, I joined Placements North West in 2016 to work on the You Can Foster and Adopt North West projects. In 2018 I took over project management of the Fostering Front Door, a regional service taking initial enquiries from prospective foster carers and then the role of Placements North West Manager in May 2020.

Whilst at Placements North West I managed the design and development of the NWADCS web portal; the development of the External Placements data collection; completed the delivery of Phase 1 of the SEND Purchasing System and put in place systems to improve the management of other regional commissioning. Outside of work I have an interest in the refugee and migrant sector and have managed Together Now, a small charity reuniting refugee families, for over 10 years. I am also vice chair of the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit board and volunteer at a local supported contact centre.

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Paul Bunker, Head of Children's Sector Led Improvement

A Civil Servant by background, my route to children's services via European Funds, emergency planning and ministerial briefing wasn't conventional but proved handy during the pandemic. I joined what was to become NWADCS in 2011. Initially focussed solely on children's social care, I shifted to a broader sector led improvement role in July 2018. Following our recent integration into a single regional service, I'm motivated to look ahead and support the region to respond together to the challenges and opportunities that the SEND Green Paper, Schools White Paper and Care Review present.

Building on our achievements in recent years, I remain keenly focused on working with our local authorities to establish the North West as a region known for evidence-based collaboration and innovation. Away from work, I'm something of a parkrun evangelist, acting as a Run Director at my local junior parkrun for 4-14 year olds, and close to launching a second junior parkrun in the borough. Having supported the local authority in several *Foster for Calderdale* events at parkrun, I'm working to strengthen those links through joint work to engage children in care to run, jog or walk at parkrun regularly and provide care experienced young people opportunities to gain experience of volunteering.

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