



**COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR
CHIEF SOCIAL WORK OFFICER
REPORT 2023 - 2024**

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Introduction

This is the annual Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO) report for the Outer Hebrides for the period from 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024.

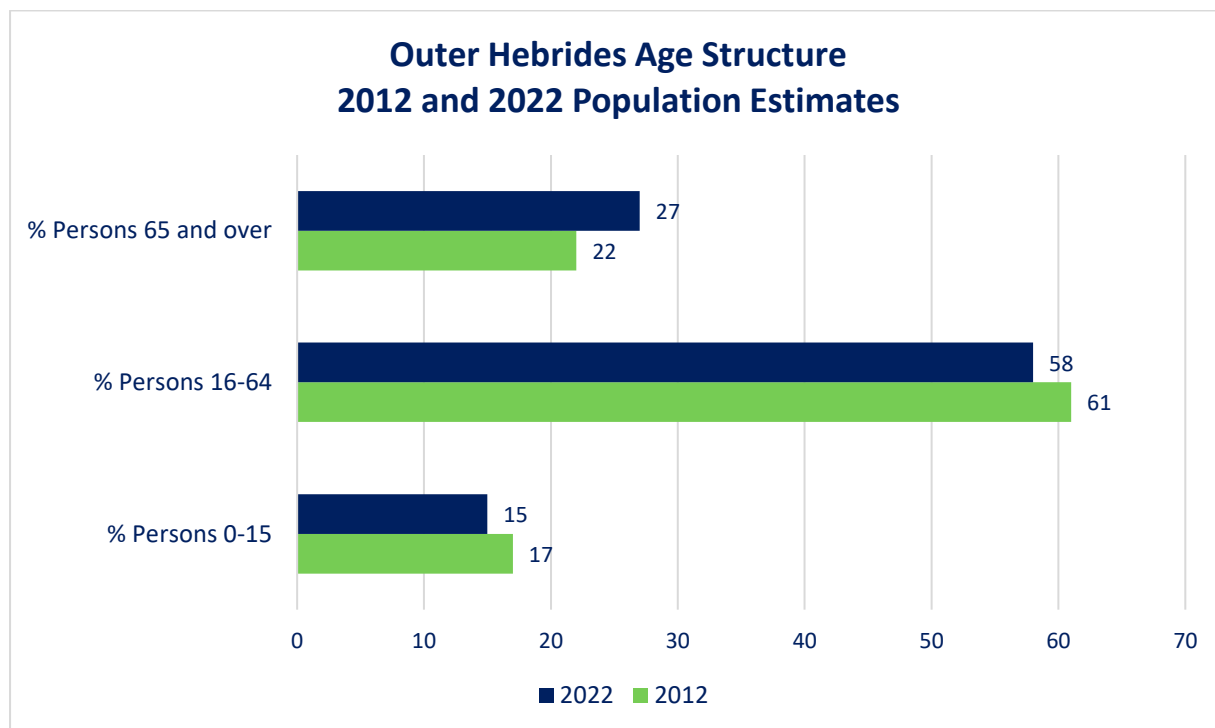
The Outer Hebrides is made up of the main islands of Lewis and Harris, North and South Uist, Benbecula and Barra. The island chain, which lies off the Northwest coast of Scotland, is some 210 km from Lewis in the north to Barra in the south.

The current population of the Outer Hebrides was estimated to be 26,120 as at 30 June 2022. This was a 0.3% decrease, due to negative change of -64 (56 births and 120 deaths) while net migration was positive at +80. However, there has been a 5.5% decrease (-1,500) persons from the 2011 Census to the 2022 Census. The population of the Outer Hebrides continues to experience negative natural change (more deaths than births).

The population is concentrated in Lewis (18,060 approx.), Harris (1,830 approx.), Uists and Benbecula (4,665 approx.) and Barra and Vatersay (1,300 approx.). The Stornoway settlement has a population of approximately 7,280. The remaining population is scattered over some 280 townships with the rural population continuing to have a high proportion of Gaelic speakers. The Gaelic language and culture are important factors in island life. They continue to remain embedded in communities throughout the island chain and are key considerations in the delivery of services.

The 2022 population estimates show that the Outer Hebrides has the highest percentage of those aged 65 and over at 27%, the lowest percentage of those aged 16-64 at 58% and the second lowest percentage of children aged 0-15 at 15%.

The chart shows the change in the age structure in the Outer Hebrides over the decade from mid 2012 (population 27,560) to mid 2022 (population 26,120), highlighting the growth in those aged 65 and over and the decrease in the percentage of children and those aged 16 to 64.



The 2018 population projections predict that over the ten-year period from 2018 to 2028 there will be changes in broad age groups as follows:

- 13% decline in the 0-15 year group.
- 6% decline in the working age population (the largest percentage decline in Scotland)
- 1% decrease in those of pensionable age (one of 6 areas with a decrease)
- 25% increase in the population of those aged over 75 years.

Whilst we welcome the fact that people are living longer lives, having a projected 25% increase in people aged over 75 in our community coupled with a projected 6% decline in the working age population does present us with major workforce challenges in the years ahead.

Considering there are existing workforce challenges in social care, arguably the situation could become critical in the years ahead in terms of service delivery. An example of this is our inability, due to challenges recruiting staff, to fully open our recently developed Housing with Extra Care provision. Making social care a more attractive career choice, better use of technology and the possibility of centralising more services and making them more efficient are possible solutions, as is the expansion of the Housing with Extra Care model of service delivery, workforce permitting.

Governance, Accountability and Statutory Functions

Children's Services Social Work sits within the Department of Education, Sport and Children's Services, reporting to Education, Sport and Children's Services Committee in the first instance.

Adult Services Social Work sits within the Health and Social Care Partnership and reports to the Integrated Joint Board and to the Social Work and Social Care Board.

Children's Services are well established within the Department of Education, Sport and Children's Services. Putting to one side the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill, there are no local plans surrounding any changes to the organisational structure. The current structure is fairly robust in terms of governance and accountability. There are no real complexities surrounding the governance and accountability. The challenge can be finding sufficient time. Normally, at Committee there is a very busy Education agenda leaving limited time to discuss critical social work issues in order to fully explore and analyse the myriad issues impacting on the risks inherent within delivering statutory social work services. As CSWO, I am represented at all key strategic meetings, both within the council and across the wider Children's Services partnership.

Adult Services are well established within the Health and Social Care Partnership. Putting to one side the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill, there are no local plans surrounding any changes to the organisational structure. The structures are well established and robust and not under any development. The CSWO attends Integrated Joint Board meetings and Integrated Corporate Management Team meetings, although as a result of competing demands, attendance is not as great as the CSWO like.

The main area of increasing pressure on the CSWO is having to respond to the multitude of national consultations and governance reporting currently underway. This is a real distraction and impediment to finding the time to developing local strategies and solutions to local problems. To mitigate against these challenges, the CSWO has to be selective as to what to participate in and what not to.

In terms of the CSWO being assured of the quality of social workers and of social work practice, he has monthly meetings with senior and middle managers across the Health and Social Care Partnership and for Children's Services, the aim is to have monthly meetings with managers across Children's Services. The CSWO also chairs the Child Protection Audit and Scrutiny Group, which offers up an opportunity to see for himself the quality of social work practice in some of the most complex and challenging of cases. Through being a member of the Adult Protection Committee and the Chief Officers Group for Public Protection, the CSWO can monitor the quality of social work practice across Adult Services.

At a more strategic level, continued remote working has also allowed more regular participation in national meetings and developments. It is far more efficient to participate in national events and meetings virtually, not having to spend hours travelling or as too often has been the case, waiting to travel. Increased participation has given the Outer Hebrides a louder and more sustained voice on the national scene. We have been able to influence in a way we have not enjoyed in the past. In addition to this, strategic engagement across the Highlands and Islands has increased, where the sharing of practice is a regular occurrence.

Recruitment continues to be difficult, particularly in social care although in Adult Services, there continues to be difficulties recruiting to social work posts, particularly senior and managerial positions, where our salaries are generally lower than salaries paid elsewhere in Scotland. This is not simply about a dearth of affordable housing or the expense of living in remote and island areas. It is about demographic changes and a national shortage of suitably qualified and experienced people. More than a year on since the 'Setting the Bar' report, there remains no national approach to addressing the need to train 'an army' of social workers, both to address the current recruitment challenges or to address the future recruitment crisis. Neither is there a nationally recognised framework for caseload and workload management tools, unlike some of social works partner who have more advance and prescriptive caseload and workload management tools. Taking up a new job in the Outer Hebrides means more than just changing job. It will require a house move and for some, a move of school for children. A positive development has been the recruitment of 2 trainee social workers.

As Chief Social Work Officer for the Outer Hebrides, I am also Head of Children's Services. This portfolio clearly includes direct responsibility for all social work services for Children and Families Services as well as all associated resources such as Fostering, Adoption and Kinship Care, Children's Houses, supported accommodation for vulnerable you people, the Extended Learning Resource and I have responsibility for the Emergency Social Work Out of Hours Service.

As CSWO I am a member of the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and am a member of the Integrated Joint Board (IJB), which has specific accountability for the delivery of adult social work and social care services ensuring that the statutory duties of the profession are delivered across adult's and justice services. Partnership working takes place with a wide range of multi-agency professionals including the Chief Officer, Chief Executive, Elected Members, health and social care managers and practitioners. There are regular meetings with the Chief Executive of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and the Chief Officer of the IJB.

I am a member of various key groups and committees within the organisation. Clear governance and reporting arrangements are in place. The CSWO provides professional advice and guidance on all social work matters and provides assurance that social work services are being delivered to the best standards and within the required statutory and policy guidelines. Regular performance reporting around risk management is also provided with the CSWO specifically reporting through the Chief Officers Group for Public Protection. The CSWO is a member of the Adult Protection and Child Protection Committees.

Over the period of this report a key issue for the IJB, Comhairle and NHS Western Isles continued to be consultation on and development of the National Care Service. The amount of time and effort that goes into participating in meetings and consultations relating to the National Care Service is considerable, which has impacted on capacity to devote to other areas of strategic development.

Service Quality and Performance

Children and Families and Child Protection

The Child Protection Services continues to await being inspected by the Care Inspectorate with the previous inspection being in 2016. This is not to say that quality improvement work has not been undertaken. It has, under the remit of the Audit and Self Evaluation Group. Admittedly, due to competing demands across the service, the extent of the audit activity during this reporting period has reduced. The audit activity that has occurred has evidenced the following areas of strength and areas for improvement:

Areas of strength

- The amount of contact between social workers and children and families is mostly as per expectations or exceeding expectations. This is remarkable given the service has fewer staff than in previous years due to efficiency savings;
- Clear evidence of relational based interventions with children and families
- Inter-agency attendance at IRD's is excellent;
- Parental attendance at Child Protection Planning Meetings is excellent
- Excellent adherence to Child Protection Investigation, Planning and Reviewing timescales;
- Outcomes for children in foster care are very good
- The local Promise Plan of supporting CEYP and children on the edge of care with their attainment and wider achievements is paying dividends.
- Positive service user feedback on the quality of respite provision, having taken the service back 'in-house' in 2022.
- A significant achievement has been the development of a supported accommodation facility for vulnerable 19 – 19 year olds, with the majority of those using the service thus far being care experienced.

Areas for improvement

- The quality of multi-agency chronologies continues to be variable although there is evidence of improvement. Social work chronologies of significant events are evident in all files although the quality is mixed with a number of chronologies being overly long due to them containing significant events, events that are no longer significant and routine events. Keeping chronologies relevant and updated is a challenge for social work staff given the amount of time and effort this takes versus time available for administrative tasks.
- There were examples where the most up to date assessments and plans had not been shared with partner agencies within agreed timescales and in a small number of cases, not shared at all. A procedural change has take place to prevent a reoccurrence of this happening.
- The outcome measurement tool, despite training been delivered, was not routinely used making evidencing the effectiveness of care plans difficult.
- There were examples at IRD's where consideration of referring to SCRA was not given.
- There was a particularly poor inspection report relating to the Fostering and Adoption Service. Whilst a finding from the inspection was that outcomes for children was generally very positive, there were gaps and some examples of non-adherence with polices and procedures. This was an out of character inspection report for the Fostering and Adoption Service as pre this inspection, almost all gradings for the service were good or very good for past 14 years. An improvement plan is now in place.

This reporting period has seen further improvements in our use of the National Minimum Dataset for Child Protection Committees, making better use of comparative data with Shetland, Orkney and national trends.

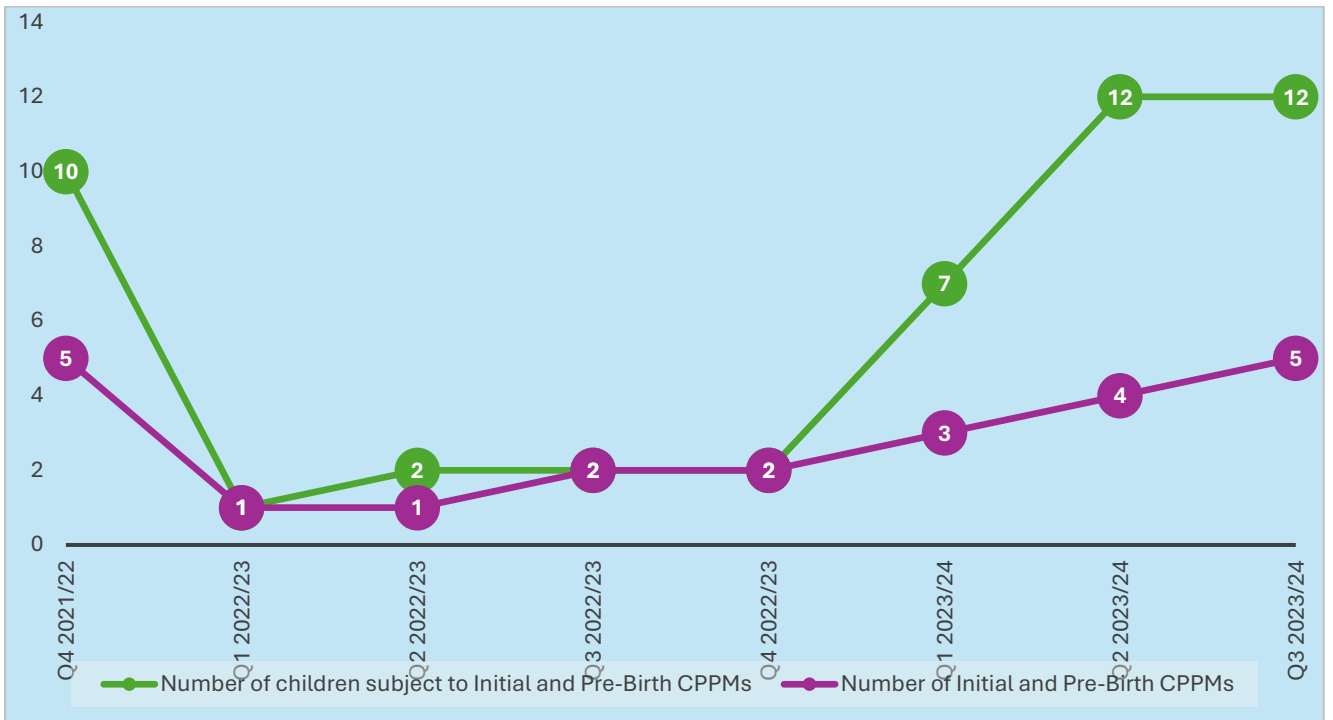
- There continues to be notable spikes within the figures, however we remain optimistic that by taking a view over future years of data available, we will better understand the data and what further actions and investments are required to achieve improvements.
- There continues to be significant challenges in terms of youth offending referrals to SCRA which is particularly evident when comparing our figures with Orkney, Shetland and Highland (all part of Police Scotland Northern Division). Our figures also compare poorly to that of the national average.
- The final quarterly figures in this reporting period are at their highest since quarter 4 in 2021/22 for the number of children subject to police child concern report; the number of children subject to Initial Referral Discussions and the number of Initial Referral Discussions commencing.
- Following a period of particularly low numbers of children receiving a joint investigative interview, the numbers are slowly increasing, returning to more expected position.
- The number of children on the Child Protection Register has increased, returning to the figures of quarter 4 in 2021/22.
- The data shows that only a small number of the cases involved in Child Protection processes are re-registered. In the last four years only two families have returned to the CP Register after de-registration. This indicates that the intervention offered reduces the risk of continuing harm that a child may experience.

Referral rate per 10,000 population over last 4 quarters (May 2023-Apr 2024)

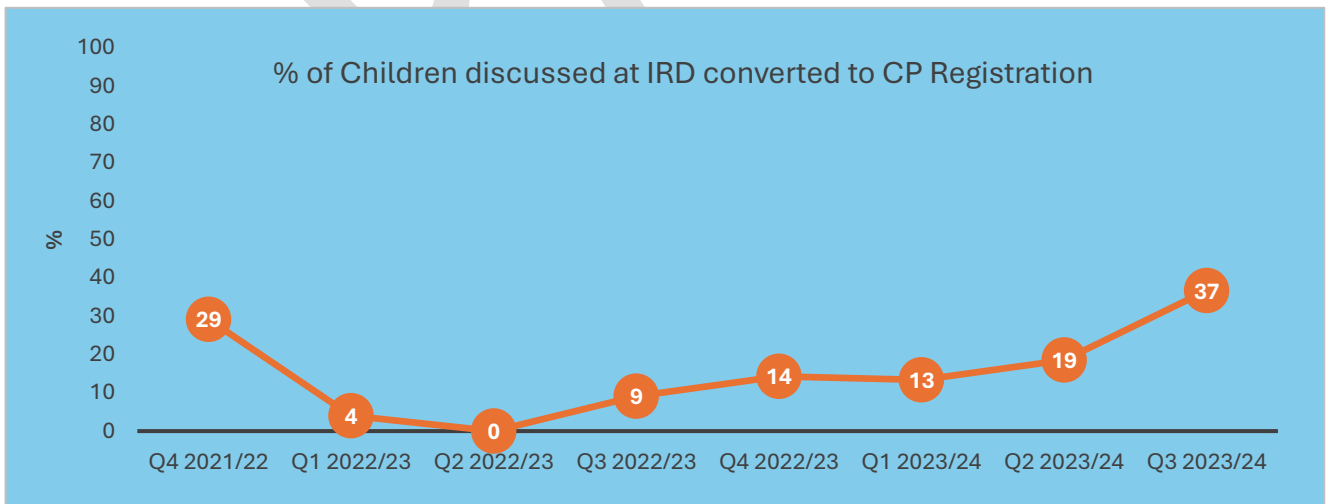
		Outer Hebrides	Shetland	Orkney	Highland	Scotland
Last 4 Quarters	Number of children subject to Police Scotland-recorded child protection concern reports	185	186	304	252	144
	Number of children subject to inter-agency referral discussions starting	225	157	375	245	219
	Number of inter-agency referral discussions starting	147	142	233	189	129

Whilst our rate of referrals remains higher than the national average, the rate continues to be similar to that of Shetland and lower than the rate in Orkney. The reality is, given the Outer Hebrides has a smaller social work staffing component than the other island authorities, the rate of referrals does have a major and detrimental impact on staff time as each referral requires professional time to assess the information and attend planning meetings such as IRDs. What needs further investigation is the rate of referrals that journey on to an IRD in the Outer Hebrides compared to that in Shetland, with Shetland having a significantly lower transfer rate.

Number of Children subject to Initial and Pre-Birth Child Protection Planning Meetings

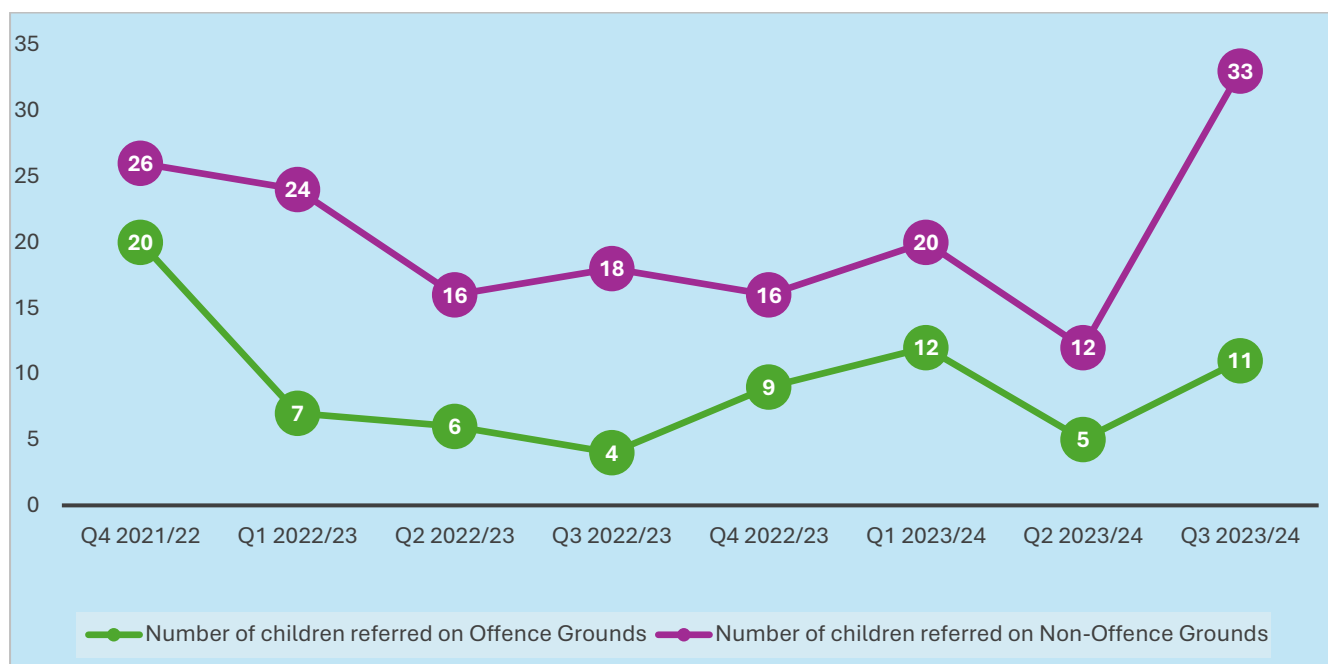


There has been an increasing trend over the last number of quarters in terms of children coming to CPPMs. It is likely due to the numbers of children being discussed at each CPPM being large, and previous quarters (2022/23) being single child families. The number of CPPMs hasn't increased significantly in line with the number of children, thus suggesting larger family groups, although a gradual increase is evident over the reporting period.



The increased conversion rate of children discussed at IRD being placed on the Child Protection Register will receive further analysis in terms of possible changes to thresholds and/or whether impacted upon by children and families not receiving support at an early enough stage, leading to interventions at a point of crisis.

Number of Children Referred to the Children's Reporter



Other than a particular spike in non-offence referrals in quarter 3, for both offence and non-offence referrals to SCRA, the figure remains fairly static. The relevance of this is that a reduced social work staffing compliment is having to service SCRA to the same extent.

A major event in this reporting period has been the appointment of a new Independent Chair of the Child Protection Committee and the Adult Protection Committee. Ross Drummond, previously Child Protection Lead Officer for Perth and Kinross has taken on this role. We are grateful to Tam Baillie for all his achievements during his tenure as Independent Chair. Ross, who has an abundance of experience of service quality and performance in the area of child protection has already made significant inroads into the delivery of our vision, where we are journeying with children and families to reach their full potential.

A significant area of work throughout this period is the development of the Outer Hebrides Bairns Hoose, which is being led by Social Work although ably supported by the wider Children's Services Partnership. Bairns' Hoose is a transformational, whole-system approach to delivering child protection, justice, and health support and services to child victims and witnesses of abuse and harm. The overall vision of a Bairns' Hoose in Scotland is that all children in Scotland who have been victims of or witnesses to abuse or violence, as well as children under the age of criminal responsibility whose behaviour has caused significant harm or abuse, will have access to trauma informed recovery, support and justice.

The original site for the Bairn's Hoose was deemed as unsuitable as the projected building costs of renovating the building far exceeded the available budget. An alternative site has been identified. It is within a central location and although co-location of all social work staff within the new site will not be possible, we will see the co-location of a small number of staff from across Social Work, Police Scotland, Health and the Third Sector.

As part of being a Bairns Hoose pathfinder, we have undertaken a comprehensive audit of all our child wellbeing and protection processes using a self-evaluation tool supplied by Health Improvement Scotland. The outcome of this exercise has been the formation of a Bairns Hoose Implementation Plan, with improvements contained within the plan being progressed by the Bairns Hoose Implementation Group. There is inevitable cross-over between this improvement plan and the Child Protection Improvement Plan, and the process of managing this in such a way that does not result in duplication of effort is critical given the limited staffing resource available for service improvement.

Linked to Bairns Hoose is our implementation of the Scottish Child Interview Model. We were the first of the 3 island authorities able to train staff in the model and then embed into our practice. There is one SCIM trained Social Worker on Lewis, covering Lewis and Harris and one on Uist, covering Uist and Barra.

The Outer Hebrides went live with SCIM on the 15th November and to date, 100% on joint investigative interviews since then have been completed using the SCIM model. Feedback from children, parents and carers has been very positive. The feedback from the two trained SCIM Social Workers has equally been positive although they do report that the process takes significantly more time, which can impact on other areas of their work. It has to be remembered that whilst we are fully supportive of the SCIM model, recognising the benefits of taking a more trauma informed and child centred approach to interview children, we also need to recognise the impact of the increased workload with no increase in workforce. A possible unintended consequence of this positive development, is that where improvement is made with crisis interventions i.e. child protection investigations, it could have a negative impact on for medium and longer term pieces of work i.e. achieving permanence for children, as there are only so many hours in the working day.

A revised Child Protection Committee Improvement Plan was being developed over the reporting period, with a number of specific sections within the plan, corresponding to various workstreams and sub-groups in existence:

- Child Protection Committee (CPC)
- Audit and Self Evaluation (Sub-Group of CPC)
- Child Exploitation (Sub-Group of CPC)
- Learning and Development (Sub-Group of CP)
- Violence against Women and Girls Partnership
- Bairns Hoose Implementation Group

Youth Justice

The reporting year has seen continued challenges with youth offending and anti-social behaviour, predominately in the town of Stornoway. Both locally and nationally, for this reporting period we have witnessed an increase in both the number of children being referred to SCRA on offence grounds and an increase in the number of offences. Work is underway to better understand the causal factor including seeking the support of the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice. Locally, the incidents have mainly involved young males many of whom are disengaged from education.

In response to this, the Youth Justice Group met monthly to review the effectiveness of strategies used and to monitor progress or otherwise with individual children's care plans. Our third sector partners are supporting statutory services with this group of young people.

A number of young people involved in anti-social behaviour/ offending behaviours would be categorised as being on the edge of care. What the young people are telling us is that there is a lack of places for them to 'hang out' in the evening or a Friday afternoon and hence, they walk the streets and at times end up behaving inappropriately. We know that there is an abundance of structured activities for many of our young people but, there are sub-groups of young people whose interests fall out-with mainstream activities. The reality is there are less youth club opportunities in Stornoway than in the past.

Recent initiatives, that have yet to establish themselves are the recruitment of a Youth Justice Practitioner to Children's Social Work and a dedicated Children's Services Support Worker for children on the edge of care (funded by The Promise). Unfortunately, the funding for the youth justice post expires in December 2024, with no new funding anticipated.

For the statutory service of Children's Social Work, responding to youth offending, by way of having to write assessments and provide task centered interventions takes up valuable time and resource. As a partnership, although relatively small in number, too many young people are progressing from low level, very occasional offending behaviours to higher level and more sustained behaviours. There is a need to review the partnerships preventative and early intervention approaches.

Care Experienced Children and Young People/The Promise

As part of our journey to keep the promise, we want to continue reducing the number of children and young people who are living away from their families and for those who do have to live away from their immediate family that they can live within their extended family/kinship network. And where they can't live within their extended family/kinship network, they live in a family type setting, such as foster or adoptive carers in their own community. We also want to reduce further our use of mainland placements, other than when strictly necessary i.e. secure care. Our approach to this is reflective of 'the fundamentals' of change that The Promise Scotland set out in its Plan 21-24:

- To do what matters to children and families
- To listen and embed what we have heard from children and families
- To tackle poverty and the forces that push families into it
- To respect children's rights, and
- To improve our language

Over the past 20 years, the average number of children on a Compulsory Supervision Order each year has been 39, with a high of 59 in 04/05 and a low of 26 in 2022/23. Having the lowest number of children on a CSO in 20 years offers some reassurance that we are making progress with Keeping the Promise. Our rates are lower than the national average but higher than Orkney and Shetland, which gives us something to aim for going forward but I feel that our rates are approaching what is realistically possible.

It is Important to note that social workers caseloads have not reduced any. What has changed is more emphasis on relationship based and trauma informed interventions, with greater success working voluntarily with children and families without the need for compulsion.

We have one Children’s House in the Western Isles, that being Hillcrest. Hillcrest has the capacity for 4 placements plus one additional placement for short-breaks. During the reporting period, as a result of efficiency savings having to be made, the Comhairle has reduced the funding to Action for Children, only 3 placements are now funded for, plus the short-break bed, and where social work have to utilise the 4th placement, savings have to be made elsewhere in the social work budget. The demand for placements has remained fairly consistent over recent years.

Residential (CEYP) 2020/21	1188 nights
Residential (CEYP) 2021/22	1126 nights
Residential (CEYP) 2022/23	1259 nights
Residential (CEYP) 2023/24	1043 nights

Children with Disabilities

The demand for short-breaks and outreach respite remains high. Families have to meet either substantial or critical need criteria to be able to access these services. There is 1 short-break bed in Hillcrest covering Lewis and Harris and 1 short-break bed in Balivanich covering Uist and Barra. Usage over the past year has been fairly consistent with previous years, although there was a more notable increase on Uist and Barra. The long term ambition of having a stand-alone residential and short-break facility for children with a disability has yet to be realised although during this reporting period, the plan has been rekindled and scoping exercises have taken place in terms of possible sites for building such a resource, and how viable such a resource would be in terms of cost, staffing plus care and educational outcomes.

Short-break nights 2020/21	192 Lewis and Harris plus 24 Uist and Barra
Short-break nights 2021/22	197 Lewis and Harris plus 35 Uist and Barra
Short-break nights 2022/23	183 Lewis and Harris plus 50 Uist and Barra
Short-break nights 2023/24	160 Lewis and Harris plus 26 Uist and Barra

Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Wellbeing

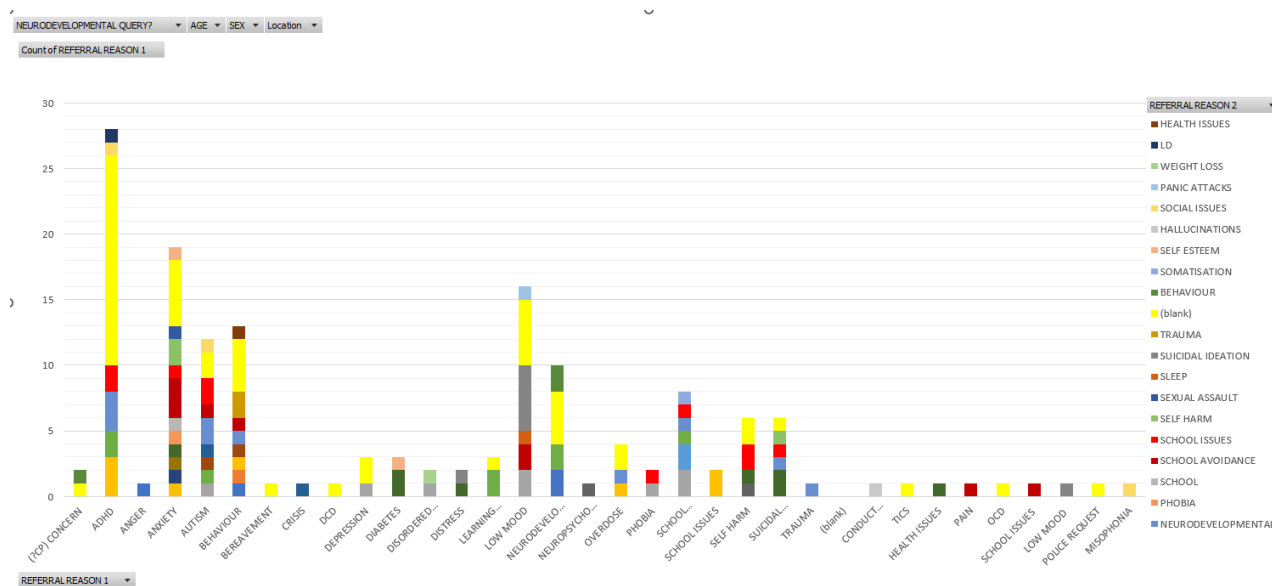
Over the past year we have continued to receive sustained volumes of referrals to Counselling and Family Mediation, ranging from a wide range of issues, including mental health, drug and alcohol, peer to peer relations and gender identity.

This trend includes ongoing utilization of counselling services within schools across the Outer Hebrides, as well as those provided in settings outside of school.

Currently, approximately 35-to-40 young people per week are accessing the school counselling service.

The primary driver of referrals continues to be anxiety, and in-school challenges, such as bullying, breakdowns of relationships or exam related stresses.”

During this reporting period there has been a reduction in referrals to both CAMHS (26.1% fewer) and Primary Care CAMHS (24.5% fewer). The proportion of neurodevelopmental queries to Primary Care CAMHS has remained consistent at 60.5% of referrals (2023 60.2%), while the proportion has increased from 35% to 56% of referrals to CAMHS. It appears that more of the requests received this year so far relate to support for existing diagnoses than in previous years, while requests for assessment have reduced proportionally with the reduction in other referrals. This year has also seen low mood, behaviour, and anxiety return to the top 4 reasons for referral. There was a proportional increase in presentations featuring suicidal ideation of 13% compared to the same time period last year, and a reduction in overdose by roughly 31%.



Adult Support and Protection

This reporting period seen a continued challenge surrounding the capacity of social work services to meet all statutory adult support and protection and case management tasks and requirements, not helped by the service experiencing difficulties with staff recruitment. One of the two Team Leader posts remains vacant – and there has been a reduction in Mental Health Officer’s (MHO) from 4 to 2 following the loss of two managers who were MHO’s. We have one social worker who has started the MHO training programme. We have had 2 maternity leave’s for social workers in the reporting year. The service has not managed to recruit to the temporary maternity cover.

Much of the improvement work in this reporting period has revolved around the Adult Support and Protection Improvement Plan which followed the Adult Support and Protection Inspection. The inspection took place between October 2022 and March 2023. The report identified key strengths; important weaknesses in terms of key processes and strategic leadership and identified the following high-level priority areas for improvement:

- The multi-agency procedures for adult support and protection did not cover all aspects of adult support and protection or fully detail the statutory duties and responsibilities of each agency.
- The delivery of key processes was ineffective. Investigation, risk assessment and risk management require significant improvement to effectively support and protect adults at risk of harm.

- Delivery and oversight of key processes relied too heavily on a small number of staff. Oversight and business continuity lacked resilience. This needed addressed by the health and social care partnership.
- Adults at risk of harm were ineffectively involved and engaged in operational and strategic adult support and protection.
- There was a lack of multi-agency reporting and governance by the Adult Protection Committee and Chief Officers' Group. Improvement in this area of practice would support more effective delivery of adult support and protection.
- All agencies/partners needed to improve their recording of adult support and protection work. This was particularly relevant for social work as the lead agency.
- A multi-agency audit was planned to support improvement work. This should put feedback from adults with lived experience, unpaid carers, and frontline practitioners at the centre. Findings from the social work audit should be implemented as a priority.

The Adult Protection Committee (APC) was tasked with developing an improvement plan to address the areas for improvement and over this reporting period the APC and partner services and agencies, have carried out a significant amount of adult support and protection quality assurance, self-evaluation and improvement work; supported by a local Multi-Agency Case File Reading Audit. It was an agreed task of the Quality Assurance subgroup of the Outer Hebrides Adult Protection Committee to undertake the file read.

Strengths

- There were good exemplars of well laid out referral forms and clear rationale for the decision-making process within the 3-point test.
- Good examples of recording comprehensive information.
- Risk was clearly evidenced in files and laid out in an easy to read manner. We also saw examples of where immediate risk of harm was mitigated and the adult placed in safety
- Clear rationale on the Duty to Inquire was evident within files which were read, and we could also see that the use of Investigatory Powers were applied on occasion at Inquiry stage appropriately
- There were good examples found of cases which were well organised and very well laid out.
- We could see good practice of partnership working whereby health colleagues were involved in the investigation as the second worker on occasion.
- Good conversations with informal carers and the individual were evident and their views were taken into account. There was evidence to support that independent advocacy was offered in most cases and a clear reason given for either accepting this or declining the offer
- Good practice of explaining the rights of the individual under adult support and protection was clear in several files which were read.
- There was evidence of very good partnership working when it came to case. There was good evidence to support that multiagency discussions took place on capacity, immediate risks, protection orders and the 3-point test, although the 3-point test on occasion remained unclear as no decision could be made. Decisions and actions required were identified and recorded clearly.

Areas for improvement

- Slippage was observed on some deadline dates, therefore, staff need to ensure why deadlines are not being met and that they are well recorded.
- A small number of instances where the readers felt that Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferencing (MARAC) could/should have been considered at referral stage relating to Domestic Violence concerns.
- Some confusion when it came to the use of investigatory powers at inquiry stage and clarity around this would be beneficial for staff in how to describe this use of powers. This will then make it clearer how it progresses to investigation.
- Auditors felt at times the process was disproportionate. In some cases which should have been closed off at inquiry, they proceeded further on than felt was necessary. Partner agencies felt that an Initial Referral Discussion (IRD) would be beneficial earlier in the process.
- There were some cases which proceeded to investigation which did not always have a clear rationale.
- There was some evidence of examples where the description of the information gathered within investigation appeared to have gaps of pertinent material. Staff should be encouraged to use professional curiosity and record the information well within case files.
- As we found in one example, if an individual does not meet a criteria within the three point test then a clear description must be given why.
- It would be beneficial if a list of all services the individual is receiving, both statutory and universal, were recorded within the risk protection plan.
- Detailed chronologies were found in some cases but not all.
- The adults' views were not always recorded with risk assessment and protection plans.
- Although there was good attendance noted at case conference, it would be beneficial if fire service agencies were involved earlier as appropriate when there are issues which are appropriate to them.

Adult Care at Home & Residential Care

The Goathill development and resident transition was completed in the summer of 2023. The new resource provides a significant improvement in environment and integrates residential care with supported accommodation, housing with extra care and specific services such as Alzheimer's Western Isles. Unfortunately, due to recruitment challenges the service was unable to fully open the Housing with Extra Care element of the Goathill Development, with only a small number of flats being occupied. For those that are occupied, the environment provides for an excellent living experience for the residents.

Adult Social Work continues to be fully engaged with the Coming Home agenda and is completing the requirements associated with the new Dynamic Support register. This work will build on the existing process and practice in place through the Exceptional Care Board. There are currently 22 adults living in off-island placements, which compares with 24 in 2022/24.

Adult Social Work commissions a range of services from twenty-three external providers in order to provide targeted, specific support to adults in the Western Isles. The work of these providers is directed by individual Service Level Agreements and the providers are required to report back both on activity and quality of delivery.

Service user involvement in the commissioning process is being promoted in order to ensure the commissioning is ethical, effective and focused on service user needs. Financial models used in these commissioning processes include grant funding, spot purchasing and use of Scotland Excel frameworks.

Integration Joint Boards continue to be confronted with a complex landscape of unprecedented pressures, challenges and uncertainties. According to Audit Scotland, across Scotland health inequalities continue to widen and with it an increased demand for social care and social work services. Needs are more complex and more needs are going unmet. This trend is evident in the Outer Hebrides, and we have not experienced any significant evidence of the shift in the balance of care from hospitals to the community. As committed as our social care and social work workforce are, they are under immense pressure, whatever the season although the winter season clearly compounds matters further, the reality is these are four seasons pressures. There continues to be challenges in recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce, although improving the terms and conditions of the Care at Home staff is showing tentative signs of improved recruitment and retention. The Outer Hebrides continues to rely on and are indebted to the many unpaid carers who are increasingly relied on as part of the safety net for vulnerable people in our community. What is not helping the strategic thinking and planning is the continued uncertainty surrounding the direction of the plans for a National Care Service. The financial outlook for the Integrated Joint Board continues to be precarious with indications of more challenging times ahead.

On a positive note is the growth in admission avoidance services, be it admission to a care home or a hospital, to support people in their own homes. This evidences a change in the system, resulting from a partnership approach by Health and Social Work and Social Care services, where there is a shared vision of 'home first', where safe to do so. In addition to this, we should emphasise the positive development in shifting the balance of care through urgent/unscheduled services alongside developments in community nursing. Also of note are new 3rd sector partnerships namely Improving Cancer Journey (Macmillan) and Distress Brief Intervention (Change Mental Health)

Criminal Justice

Annual New:	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Criminal Justice Social Work Report submitted	96	101	121
Community Payback Orders court reviews	7	17	25
Community Payback Order	34	47	48
Statutory Throughcare	8	10	8
Drug Treatment and Testing Order	0	0	0
Structured Deferred Sentence	15	27	26
Diversion from Prosecution	2	6	24
MAPPA (managed by JSW as at 31st March)	7	10	6

Within Justice Social Work services, the reporting period saw a significant increase in report writing activity, increasing by 20% year on year. It is pleasing to note the significant increase in Diversion from Prosecutions, increasing from 6 to 24 year on year.

A significant challenge for the Justice Social work service through the reporting period was that the core service continues to have a vacancy within the service which normally covers Uist and Barra, which could not be successfully recruited to, despite numerous attempts to do so. This has meant (and continues) that the social workers within the Lewis & Harris service have had to make arrangements to cover the statutory requirements within that area as well as furnish the Lochmaddy Sheriff Court with reports and supervision of orders for that area. This encompassed travel and logistical issues throughout the reporting year in terms of disrupted travel at times, though it should be recognised that the social work staff covering the area where the vacant post covered included routine overnight stays and significant travel regardless of weather and potential disruption.

In terms of Community Justice within the reporting period, the Justice Social Work services continues to have good partnership working within the Outer Hebrides Community Justice Partnership.

Finance and Resources

While Covid has been at the forefront in recent years, it is important to note that the Comhairle has continued to operate in a prolonged period of economic austerity and public sector funding constraints. Constraints that affect social work and social care as much as any other service. Indeed, arguably more so as when cuts are made to non-statutory services, pressure can gravitate towards statutory services i.e. closure of youth clubs can lead to increased levels of youth anti-social behaviour.

The budget in 2023/24 was £122.3 million, which includes the use of £3.5 million of reserves and savings assumptions of £1.7m. The extremely tight budget represents a significant challenge for the Comhairle which has very limited options when compared to other Councils for raising revenue.

The Comhairle has cut service budgets year on year to accommodate these reductions. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's Social Work budget for 2022/23 was £28.844m. The broad financial breakdown was £24.520m in Adult Care and Older People's Services, £0.477m in Criminal Justice Services and £4,198k in Children and Families Services.

Children's Services had an overall underspend of £294k, which reduced to £8k following the application of the specific carry forward of ring-fenced funding and the Action for Children budget shortfall. The shortfall on this residential contract was met from funding carried forward from the previous financial year. The figure above includes an overspend of £258k on Children's Mainland Placements. The Service did have to find an efficiency saving of 70k in this reporting year. The saving was made by not filling a social work post on Uist and Barra when a post became vacant. This leaves Uist and Barra with a single social worker for Children's Services, which offers no resilience i.e. cover during times of sickness absence or annual leave. These staffing risks have been captured in the Public Protection Risk Register, which is overseen by the Chief Officers Group. More concerning is the fact that Children's Services have been asked to deliver a further 5% efficiency saving for 2025/2026. This comes at a time where, as Chief Social Work Officer I am highlighting my concerns about safe staffing numbers and there is a need to grow the service as opposed to making further cuts to it.

There is limited evidence that recent Promise, Alcohol and Drug Partnership and WFWF early intervention initiatives are reducing the demand on social work services although we are seeing signs of improved outcomes in, for example attainment and school exclusion rates for care experienced pupils. Diversionary activities for young people involved in youth offending has also had a good uptake, although the dedicated youth justice post will come to an end during the next reporting period as the funding will expire. It will take time for the additional family support services funded via WFWF to take effect, but there is clear evidence that there are increasing outputs with families at an earlier stage in their family journey and this should help with identifying challenges early, preventing them reaching the threshold for statutory social work intervention.

In terms of Adult Social Work, at the end of the financial year the Comhairle services reporting to the Integration Joint Board (IJB) were over budget by £1.85m. Although there were significant under spends within some service areas for the reasons described below, these were not sufficient to fully meet the savings targets required when setting the 2023/24 balanced budget.

- The Home Care Service is underspent by £127k. This is mainly due to the level of vacancies within this service. This saving has already been partially offset by agency staffing costs, which were assigned to ensure continuity of care.
- Comhairle Residential Care is overspent by £835k. The new Goathill Campus is in its first year of operation; there are additional costs in this year due to the double running of the new and old facilities and staff being trained in the operation of the new facility. Funding was set aside in reserves to meet these costs, and this has been taken account of in the forecast. Additionally, the overspend includes a planned use of £375k of IJB Reserves set aside for the Goathill Campus capital costs.
- Adult Care and Support Services achieved savings related to staff vacancies in Bremner Court Housing with Extra Care. These have been set against the Department's central budget savings target.
- The Criminal Justice section is underspent by £95k mainly due to staffing vacancies and absences.
- Assessment and Care Services are underspent by £215k due to vacancies within the Community Care Team including new posts created from additional Scottish Government funding included within the 2023/24 budget.
- Independent Care Homes are underspent by £235k due to lower than budgeted costs for bed spaces.
- Commissioning and Partnership Services is underspent by £107k. This is largely due to vacancies in new posts created from further Scottish Government monies for improving care in the community (START team). Additional savings have been set against the Department's central budget savings target.
- The £1.85m Management and Administration over spend against the IJB Chief Officer reflects the budgeted use of IJB reserves and savings required to balance the 2023/24 budget. The known and achieved savings have been allocated against this service and the overspend reflects the final impact on IJB reserves from Comhairle services for the year.

To enable this level of service efficiency and recruitment controls to work, it is necessary to also manage change effectively. Change means that it becomes ever more important that employees and services work together to focus on priority areas and to avoid duplication of effort. While change is positive, it is important that the Comhairle continues to understand customer requirements and provides a dynamic learning environment for employees that enables them to develop the required skill.

To mitigate risk, Children's Services are in the early stages of planning for a local residential care facility for children with severe and complex needs, which would combine 52-week placements plus short-break care. This will help prevent high-cost mainland placements, although the real value saving extends beyond the financial, where children can live within their own community, close to family and friends.

To mitigate risk, Children's Services are looking developing a prevent and return policy, where resources will be directed towards, where safe to do so returning children from care placements back home, be they mainland placements or local placements. In terms of local placements, Children's Services intend to introduce a small number of professional, salaried foster carer to care for children who would otherwise be looked after in a residential establishment.

Challenges and improvements

The following areas of activity have gone well:

- Smooth transition from Dun Berisay and Dun Eisdan care homes to the new development at Goathill;
- The work undertaken by the Adult Protection Committee to drive forward the improvement programme;
- Adult Services successfully repatriated two services users who's placements were on mainland Scotland;
- Improved staff recruitment and retention in the Care at Home Service, resulting from improved terms and conditions;
- The transition of respite services from Action for Children to The Extended Learning Resource;
- The opening of the Supported Accommodation complex at Keith Street;
- The Trainee Social Work programme;
- The continued high use of kinship care placements where children have to be accommodated away from home;
- The creation of Room 19 at the Nicolson Institute, where care experienced pupils and pupils on the edge of care receive additional and tailored support;
- The introduction of an Independent Reviewing Officer;
- The work completed thus far in planning for an Outer Hebrides Bairns Hoose, which has included quality improvement work via the use of the START Tool;

The following are areas that have proved more challenging:

- Achieving the desired level of audit activity across the children's services partnership;
- Trying to avoid out of region placements for children, with 3 additional placements taking place over this reporting period;
- Recruitment of long term and permanent foster carers;
- There were a small number of adoptive placement breakdowns;

Areas of particular challenge:

- Our rates of anti-social and offending behaviour remains too high in Stornoway despite various efforts and initiatives;
- The volume of Child Protection and SCRA reports to be completed by social workers is extremely high, leaving little time for social workers to engage directly with children and families;
- Having to plan and deliver services on an ever decreasing budget. There is now zero resilience within social work services;
- The constant demands on senior and strategic officers to participate in national consultations, thematic reviews and inspection activity;
- Recruitment and retention of staff in Adult Social Work and Social Care.
- Continued high rates of adults/parents presenting with mental health and alcohol/substance misuse difficulties;

Workforce

As has been highlighted throughout this report, there continues to be workforce challenges although the extent of which varies across services.

The challenge in Children's Social Work, is not in keeping with most other areas of Scotland, who are experiencing recruitment and retention challenges. In the Outer Hebrides, that challenge is one of numbers, as in the budget Social Work has at its disposal. There are no vacant social work posts in Children's Services. Children's Social Work is understaffed when compared to the other two island authorities (see below) and from limited research undertaken, staffing is less favourable than more urban areas of Scotland, where staff are not having to travel the same distances to and between visits as in the Outer Hebrides. The volume of referrals coming to social work continues unabated.

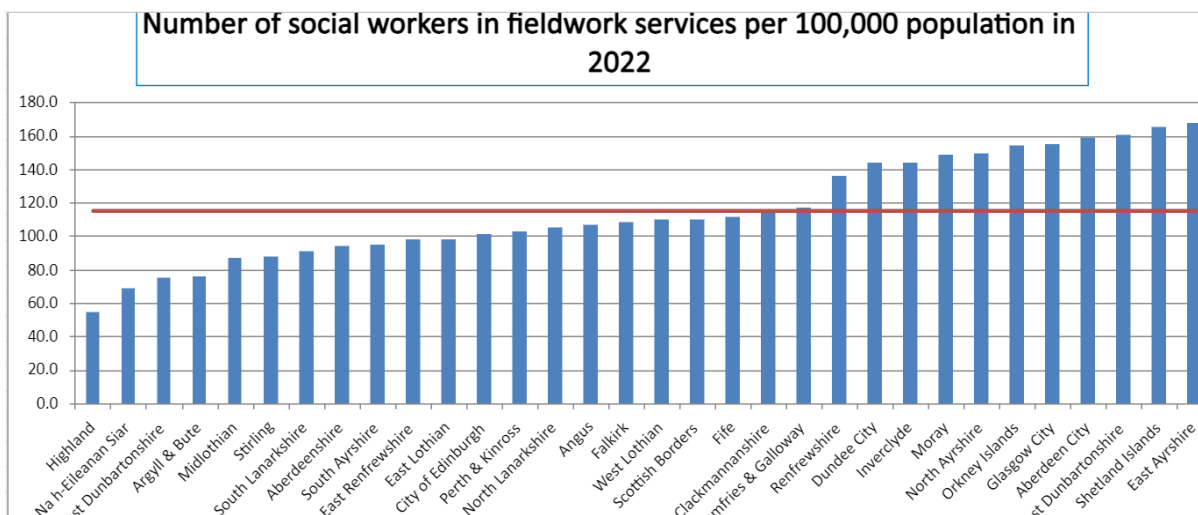
Children and Families Social Work

Region	Team Leaders	Senior Social Workers	Social Workers
Outer Hebrides	1	1	6.6
Shetland	2	1.6 fte	12
Orkney	2	1	9

Fostering/Adoption/Kinship Care

Region	Team Leaders	Senior Social Workers	Social Workers
Outer Hebrides	1	0	1
Shetland	0.68	0	3
Orkney	1	0	3

In terms of staffing resource for partner agencies involved in protecting children, all 3 island police forces have 5 child protection trained officers each, and in terms of Health Visiting, the Outer Hebrides has 10.2 whole time equivalent with Shetland having 7.4 whole time equivalent (no figure available for Orkney).



In terms of all Comhairle fieldwork social work posts and how they compare to other local authorities in Scotland, the Comhairle has the 2nd lowest figure. The number has actually fallen further since 2022 in terms of Comhairle fieldwork social workers due to efficiency savings.

In terms of Adult Services, the challenge is less budgetary and more about lack of suitable candidates for vacant post with a number of posts remaining vacant for most if not all of this reporting period. The Justice Service had a 5 month period where the Team Leader post was vacant but this post has now been filled.

Two social care assessors are currently undertaking social work training, funded through existing staffing resources, deriving from vacancies.

The service is currently reviewing the recruitment and retention data available to project the staff changes over the next 3 year period; working with HR services to collate all available information to inform options for consideration in relation to a restructure to mitigate the on-going risk in relation to recruitment for social work posts. This will include career pathway progression across grades including recognition for post graduate professional qualifications (MHO /Practice Educator), under graduate and post graduate social work awards.

The induction programme has been updated for social care mandatory training and SVQ qualifications to provide a more in-depth experience that consolidates the main requirements to avoid any potential drift in relation to achieving SVQ qualifications.

Training, learning and development

Training needs analysis is an ongoing process across all services.

Within Children’s Services, a key priority for this reporting period was training 2 social workers in the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM). We were the first of the three island authorities to successfully train staff in SCIM. It was a major time commitment. Thanks go out to the Scottish Government for agreeing to support the Service with additional funds to support with agency staffing when the two social workers were away on their training. Children’s Services also trained staff on Risk Assessment (based on the National Risk Framework) and Child Sexual Exploitation.

Priorities going forward for Children's Services are Care and Risk Management, GIRFEC (as we are in the process of reviewing referral pathways) and Family Group Conferencing. This is in addition to the rolling programme of Trauma and Child Protection training.

Within Adult Services, training priorities over the reporting period have been medication administration, tissue viability, and stress and distress. The service is engaging with partners to ensure that online and in person training is balanced, accessible and meets the needs of services.

Services from across Public Protection participated in Safe and Together Training.

Looking ahead

In terms of Adult Services, through the oversight of the Adult Protection Committee, the Service will continue with its improvement journey. One possible barrier to making swift progress will be whether or not the Adult Protection Lead Officer post, which is currently out to advert will be filled timeously or not.

In terms of Children's Services, a key area of work will be the review of the care estate, with the exploration of developing a 52 week residential placement and short break facility for children with severe and complex needs. There are two possible barriers to this. Firstly, there is no identified budget with there being many competing demands on the capital budget, although in this projects favour, it would be a facility that would over time recover costs in addition to preventing children from having to live so far from family and friends. Secondly, with such a small staff pool, it will be a significant pull on staffing resource to manage this project. The redesign of the fostering service is equally important but should require less financial outlay and will require less preparation as there are existing models across Scotland that could be adopted.

We also anticipate that there will be a joint inspection of services for children and young people in the next reporting year. The partnership does not have a large 'back-shop' making preparing and servicing an inspection of this magnitude very challenging, remembering that those with key roles in preparing and servicing the inspection will have key operational functions also.

The biggest overall challenge I envisage over the next year is that of staffing. This report has detailed exactly what these challenges are. Without financial investment in Children's Social Work the Service will continue to have extremely limited resilience, and the Service will continue to depend on staff retention and low sickness absence levels to be able to respond to the care and protection needs of children and young people. The Service has reached the point where without investment in for example a trainee program, then, just as in Adult Services, when posts do become vacant, it could be very challenging to fill posts.

The matter of the National Care Service will be a challenge both in terms of the continued uncertainty this is having on social work and social care services, and also in terms of the potential direction of travel.

In Adult Services, the continuous challenges in recruiting staff to vacant posts will undoubtedly be having an accumulative impact on the health and wellbeing of those staff within the service.

The plan is for there to be a day set aside for social workers across Children's and Adult Services, with a particular focus on the Out of Hours Service. The plan had been to hold this event during this reporting year but competing demands prevented this.

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