

Headlines from phase nine of the ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research

Phase nine of the ADCS Safeguarding Pressures research brings the evidence base up to date from April 2007 – the end of March 2024.

This latest report draws on quantitative data from 124 LAs, qualitative survey returns from 86 LAs plus interviews with over 34 senior leaders of children's services.

Headline messages

Across the key domains of safeguarding and child protection activity, there has been some levelling off of demand over the last two years but some increases too (it's important to note that this picture can vary significantly from one local authority area to another).

However, the trend across most domains of safeguarding activity, from initial contacts, referrals and children in need to child protection plans and care entrants, remains broadly on an upwards trajectory over the duration of this research from 2007 – date:

- **Initial contacts** stood at just over 3 million in the year ending 31 March 2024, up 8% since 2021/22 (Safeguarding Pressures Phase 8) and 122% since 2007/8 (Phase 1 of this research)
- **Early help assessments** increased 8% on Phase 8 of this research and are up 124% since Phase 4 of this research (2013/14) when this data began being collected
- **Referrals** were up 1% on Phase 8 of this research, and have risen 20% since 2007/8
- The numbers of **Children in Need** are down 6% since 2021/22 and down 27% since 2007/8
- **Child protection plans** were down 3% on 202/22 but up 83% since 2007/8
- The number of **children in care** as at 31 March 2024 was up 2% on 2021/22 and up 28% since 2007/8, when this research first began.

This latest phase of the research, covering the period 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2024, shows some changes in safeguarding activity which have not previously been seen, or not seen to this extent. These include:

1. The **lasting impact of Covid-19** on children and young people's lives and on their outcomes is increasingly visible in growing levels of mental health need among children plus their parents and carers, via heightened inequalities, deteriorating behaviour in schools resulting in rising exclusions as well as social and developmental delays in younger children. Families are less resilient and have more entrenched and overlapping needs and challenges as the pandemic aggravated or accelerated needs. Leaders of children's services are clear the impact of the pandemic on children and young people has been significantly underestimated and will endure for many years to come without more focus, attention and investment.
2. Multiple **housing concerns** were raised in terms of children and families being unable to access good quality housing, overcrowding, the growing use of temporary accommodation and the unaffordability of housing contributing to family distress and breakdown against the backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis. Children's services are now routinely supplementing rents under Section 17 duties of the *Children Act 1989* to sustain families and keep them together, this is unsustainable. Challenges linked to an increasingly transient population, often moving far and/or often due to high housing costs, were also raised by interviewees as a direct pressure on the safeguarding and child protection system.

3. A range of **health challenges** were flagged in the research, from the impact of delayed access to assessment or treatment plans for children and for parents and carers, particularly for alcohol and substance misuse as well as for mental health. For the first time, poor parental mental health has overtaken domestic abuse as the most common factor in children's social care assessments and three quarters of survey respondents reported an increase in safeguarding demand over the last two years due to children's mental health. The lack of focus on, and prioritisation of, children and young people in the reformed ICB structures was also frequently raised as a concern for leaders of children's services right across the country.

Other notable trends

Poverty was consistently raised as a safeguarding concern, with a new cohort of working families who are no longer managing to make ends meet in the cost-of-living crisis now being seen and worked with. The impacts of poverty on health, relationships, family functioning and the policy drivers from other government departments e.g. welfare and immigration, were also noted in surveys and interviews.

Securing the right **placements** at the right time for children in care was one of the top concerns for leaders of children's services, particularly meeting the needs of those with the most complex and multifaceted needs via placements costing tens of thousands of pounds per week.

While focused on safeguarding and child protection activity, another common challenge raised by respondents to the research was managing pressures in the **SEND system**, largely driven by an exponential growth in demand for assessments and support and chronic underfunding, echoing recent research and reports from Isos and the LGA as well as the National Audit Office.

While the headline numbers of children in care have been increasing annually, the research separates out the growing cohort of **unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children** who arrive in this country alone and enter care. These unplanned arrivals represented almost one in five entries into care in 2022/23. The number of UAS children in care was up 29% on the last phase of this research (2021/22) and up 370% since phase four of this research (2013/14) when these data began being collected.

The data shows a doubling of **early help assessments for child sexual exploitation, trafficking and gangs** over the two-year research period, from just over 9,000 in 2021/22 to 21,700 in 2023/24. Similarly, assessments with child criminal exploitation as a factor rose from 10,300 in 2021/22 to 17,700 in 2023/24. This is likely to better identification as well as understanding of these types of abuses as safeguarding concerns rather than crimes.

Two thirds of survey respondents reported a moderate or significant increase in safeguarding activity as a result of **children's online activity**, whether that was children creating or distributing explicit imagery, being groomed or sexually extorted to viewing violent pornography or radicalisation videos.