

Commissioning Plans

2023 -2024



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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The following commissioning plans provide up to date information for providers and other interested stakeholders on our immediate commissioning intentions for 2023/24.
- 1.2 The plans recognise that our strategic commissioning intentions are set out in the Market Position Statement (MPS) however our intention is to produce commissioning plans that will be updated more frequently than the MPS in response to operational circumstances or other developments that were not included in the MPS such as unexpected additional funding like the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund.
- 1.3 The plans are ordered into sections listed below and feedback is welcome on the current structure and content.
 - Older person care homes
 - Visit based home care
 - Specialist accommodation services for people with autism, mental health conditions and learning disabilities
 - Day services
 - Direct payment/Personal assistants.

2. Older persons care homes

2.1 Current position

2.1.1 Background

2.1.2 This section is relevant to those homes registered for nursing and residential care for adults aged 65 years old and over.

2.1.3 Based on information submitted by older persons care home operators, occupancy levels as of December 2023 are around 92% and the council does not generally have any difficulties in making placements into older persons care homes with the exception of some situations where people have dementia with behaviours that challenge services.

2.1.4 Plans to support this part of the market are outlined below. The council is consulting with older persons care home operators on the contract arrangements from April 2024 as the current contract will expire in March 2024.

- 2.1.5 Discussions are also ongoing with providers about measures we intend to take in year through the use of the Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund, including the potential to bring forward wage increases from April 2024.

2.2 Long-term residential care

- 2.2.1 In general, the Council considers that there is sufficient capacity in older persons residential care homes and there are no plans to encourage the expansion of this sector as there is no evidence that this market needs to increase. The Council's [Local Plan \(Adopted 2022\)](#) includes the following statement:
- 2.2.2 The Council's latest assessments identify no immediate need for new care home accommodation, and that there is sufficient capacity through vacancies and permitted schemes to meet future needs. The Council's strategic approach to housing for older people is to enable more residents to live independently in their own homes and communities through providing support, the adaptation of existing dwellings and the building of new flexible homes.
- 2.2.3 The geographical spread of Northumberland can lead to issues in finding a care home place local to a person's family and community, but we do not generally have any difficulties in finding placements for people.
- 2.2.4 Over the past three years, because of workforce capacity issues in home care, the Council has needed to arrange short-term placements in residential care for some people awaiting a home care service, but despite this extra demand, we have not had a significant problem finding available vacancies at our standard rates without a top up, though some older people have been understandably reluctant to accept placements.
- 2.2.5 For the second year running, the Council is providing additional support through time-limited fee increases to offset the impact of high energy and food costs.

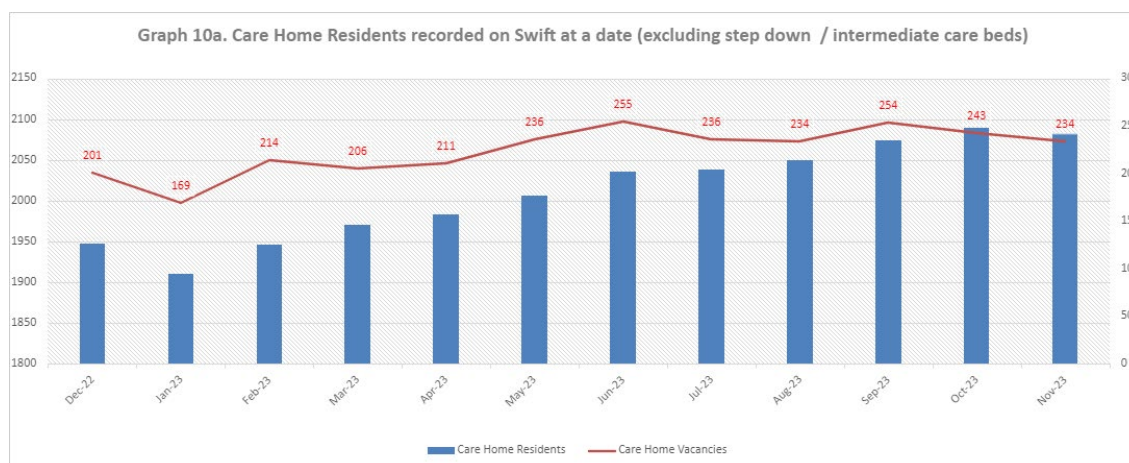
2.3 Long-term nursing care

- 2.3.1 Across Northumberland as a whole there appear to be sufficient numbers of nursing placements although the Council does have some concerns about the availability of nursing care in specific locations and particularly for people with advanced dementia and behaviour that can challenge services. Since January 2021 two homes have decided to de register from providing nursing care, and two others have stepped back from providing it operationally whilst remaining CQC registered to deliver it. Finding appropriate dementia nursing placements for people whose dementia is causing them to behave in ways which create risks for other residents, themselves or

staff can be challenging. The Council's commissioning response is outlined below.

2.4 The current market

2.4.1 General occupancy levels



2.4.2 The number of residents placed under the Council's contract in care homes has increased in Northumberland over the last 12 months which is accounted for in the difficulties in sourcing home care and the continued recovery since the covid pandemic.

2.4.3 The graph above also shows an increase in the numbers of people in care homes and also an increase in the number of vacancies which is counter intuitive, and officers are investigating the reasons for this which may include data errors on capacity tracker where the vacancy figures are taken from.

2.5 Demand for nursing care

2.5.1 Lack of demand to sustain nursing services has been one issue raised by local care home operators and we are in discussion with the ICB about this. Of the two care homes that deregistered from delivering nursing care in Northumberland, one explained that the reason for making this decision was the inability to attract sufficient numbers of people who qualified for Funded nursing Care and brought in the additional income paid for those placements to cover the costs of employing nurses.

2.5.2 Following a similar pattern to national and ICB-level statistics, the number of people assessed as eligible for funded nursing care (FNC) fell sharply at the onset of Covid, and has only partially recovered since, as shown below.

| Area | Q4 2019/20 (pre-Covid) | Q2 2020/21 (Covid low) | Q4 2022/23 (most recent) |
|----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Northumberland | 492 | 350 | 358 |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| North East & North Cumbria ICB area | 3,084 | 2038 | 2498 |
| England | 78,546 | 62,880 | 71,098 |

Source: NHSE - [CHC and FNC – Data File Q1 2017-18 to Q4 2022-23](#)

- 2.5.3 Note: these figures do not include people receiving nursing care funded through NHS CHC, or special NHS funding schemes during the pandemic. In Northumberland that number fluctuates but is similar now to the level before Covid, so it does not substantially alter the pattern shown in the table.
- 2.5.4 Published CHC statistics do not provide a comparable breakdown for other areas.
- 2.5.5 We are uncertain about the long-term demand for nursing care and would recommend that any providers considering investing in nursing homes in Northumberland discuss this with us beforehand.
- 2.5.6 There is no evidence that an overall increase in the number of general nursing placements is required although the need for specialist nursing provision for people with dementia is being monitored.
- 2.5.7 The Council, in conjunction with North East Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) is in discussions with the ICB at a local and regional level. Whilst the commissioning responsibility for nursing home places sits with the NHS, local authorities will try to help tackle this by working closely with the ICB. There are outline plans in place to manage these situations and these will be explored in more detail in the 2024/25 Commissioning Plans.

2.6 Winter pressure provision

- 2.6.1 Since 2020 the Council has been asked by the NHS to make special arrangements for winter pressures including intermediate care services and designated covid settings.
- 2.6.2 During the winter of 2022/23 winter, the Council made block bookings of nursing home beds for short-term placements after hospital discharge, in response to a view from some NHS stakeholders that this would facilitate rapid discharge therefore 12 general nursing beds and 4 dementia nursing beds were block booked.
- 2.6.3 Our assessment is that, in practice, the block booked beds had no clear advantage over the existing arrangements for short term discharge placements, in which a substantially larger number of care homes have agreed to accept placements after discharge from hospital at the council's standard contract rates.
- 2.6.4 Because of the geography of Northumberland, most people in need of care home accommodation have strong views about the location

of the home, and block-booked beds in a small number of locations were of limited value when other capacity was available nearer to where the person wished to be.

- 2.6.5 We expect to continue to require short term discharge placements during 2023/24.

2.7 Commissioning Intentions

2.7.1 Dementia

- 2.7.2 The council recognises that support to people with dementia can be more difficult when residents have behaviour that can be associated with that condition.

2.7.3 Specialist unit

- 2.7.4 The council worked with the ICB to commission a specialist unit for people with dementia whose behaviour could not be managed in a mainstream care home and who require a specific service including the environment and staffing requirements. The cost of the service required Cabinet approval before proceeding with the tender exercise and this was confirmed following the presentation of [this](#) report in April 2022.
- 2.7.5 The opportunity to tender for this service was offered to nursing homes in October 2022, however at that point there were no tenders submitted by Northumberland care homes. The service is therefore delivered by a specialist mental health provider from one of their homes in Gateshead. Whilst the Council would have preferred to have a resource in Northumberland that could support its residents, this service does have a requirement to devise care plans for individuals that focuses on trying to return them to a care home in Northumberland. The impact of this service is currently being evaluated before a decision is made about whether to continue to commission it.

2.7.6 Challenging Behaviour Premium

- 2.7.7 In addition to those residents that require the above facilities the council recognises that some individuals will require additional staffing levels and potentially a different environment because of the dementia but will not reach the level of need and behaviour that warrants the challenging behaviour unit. Since April 2020 the council has had a clause in the older persons care home contract to pay an additional “challenging behaviour premium” when certain conditions are met.
- 2.7.8 The premium was introduced after discussions with care home managers and specialist mental health experts and had been intended to make it easier to provide additional support without the

restrictions of 1:1 support which was considered to be overly restrictive and not consistent with the Mental Capacity Act. After analysis of placements attracting the premium and discussions with care home operators, the Council concluded that the premium required adjustment to broaden the scope of the circumstances in which it is paid and an increase in the amount.

- 2.7.9 From December 2023 the amount will increase from £100 per person to £250 per person per week and the categories of eligibility will be expanded to include people with dementia who require a single sex unit and people who are at risk of falls as a consequence of their dementia. This initiative was approved by cabinet in Cabinet in September 2023 following this [report](#).

2.7.10 Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund (MSIF)

- 2.7.11 The MSIF has been awarded to two separate payments which were announced in April and July 2023. Planning to spend the first allocation was approved by the Council's cabinet on 9 May 2023 in this report. As referenced above this has been used to increase fees in response to what are considered short term inflationary pressures which have particularly impacted on food and energy costs. £770k of the MSIF was used to pay for a temporary increase in fees for older persons care homes in Northumberland, and to cover the costs of increased fees for the councils out of area placements.
- 2.7.12 It is also proposed that the second tranche will be used to bring forward the increase in wage increases that staff will expect to benefit from in April 2024. Providers will also be given the opportunity to propose additional initiatives that will have the effect of supporting the workforce. One example put forward by a provider was to enhance the training and development offer their care home currently has in place for staff.

3. Visit-based home care

3.1 Current Situation

3.1.1 Background

- 3.1.2 Capacity issues in home care have been a concern to us since summer 2021, with around 200 people at any one time waiting for home care which cannot immediately be sourced. Since April 2023 there have been some signs of a possible improvement, but it would be premature to assume that no further action is needed. As of December 2023, there are less than 60 people for whom the Council are trying to source home care but the reduction in the numbers of people still seeking a care package does not appear to be the result

of improvements in the workforce difficulties experienced by our home care providers.

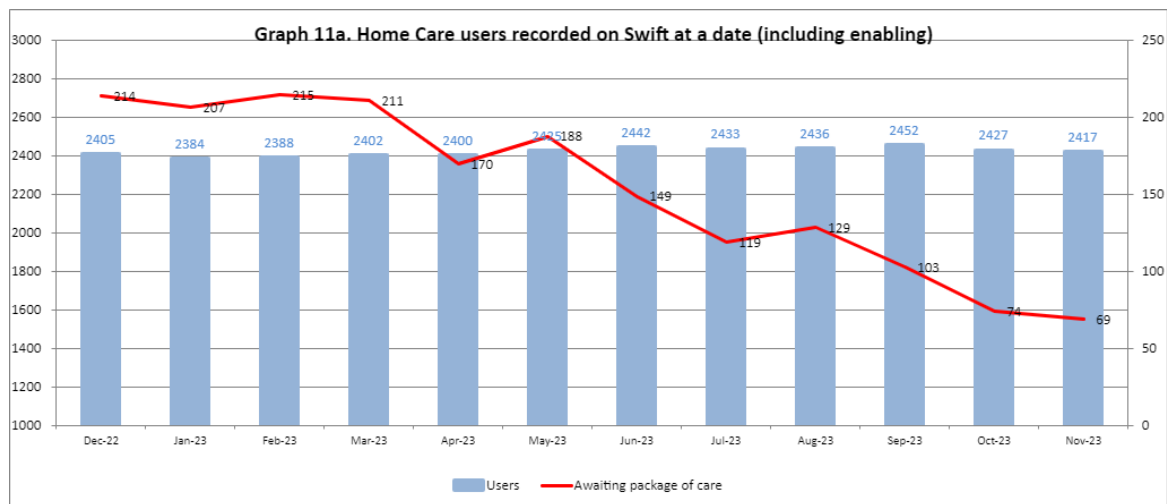
3.2 The current market

- 3.2.1 There have been some changes in our home care provider market which are consistent with the experiences of our neighbouring local authorities. During the last decade the number of organisations providing mainstream home care services in the county has significantly increased. Previously, “preferred” providers in each area of the county had been able to meet most needs, but the number of smaller providers has grown and there are now almost 60 home care providers signed up to the council’s contract, a number which looks like it will continue to increase.
- 3.2.2 Our contractual arrangements were changed in 2019 to reflect the trend in the growth of small providers, which may have had some benefits for user choice but has also created a more fragmented sector and made it more difficult to maintain close relationships with all providers.
- 3.2.3 Whilst it could be seen as a positive position to see increased choice for service users the number of providers on our contract does cause some logistical difficulties for the council when it comes to contract and quality management. Some providers have told us that the increasing number of providers is also leading to some volatility in the workforce as staff regularly moving between providers impacting on their human resource functions. Where there has been instability in the market and providers have ceased operating it has been smaller providers who have generally been most affected by this and where they have left the home care market it has been required to manage the transfer of packages to other providers in challenging circumstances.
- 3.2.4 We have seen several providers begin operating in Northumberland who are sourcing staff through overseas recruitment, and we are monitoring the impact of this. Earlier on this year there was some evidence that these providers were successful in picking up new packages, although they also required intensive support from council officers in order to properly understand the geography of Northumberland and how it impacts on the delivery of home care.
- 3.2.5 The council has taken a number of steps to try to improve capacity issues in the home care workforce in response to data that appeared to demonstrate a worrying reduction in the size of this workforce. At the start of April 2021, the number of care workers reported by the home care services based in Northumberland which accept referrals from the Council was 1553. By 1 October, the reported number had fallen to 1393 and by 31 March 2022 the figure was 1377. Most of this fall took place after Covid “Freedom Day” in July 2021 but it is concerning that the trend has continued despite additional support

and incentives being in place to assist with recruitment and retention throughout the period from November 2021. The comparable figure at 31 March 2023 is 1317, though comparisons may be slightly distorted by the arrival of some new home care providers whose registered bases are outside Northumberland and not included in the figures.

3.3 Home care supply and demand

3.3.1 The graph below shows the number of service users accessing home care in Northumberland which has been at a stable level over the last 12 months. The number of people awaiting home care packages shows that demand for home care is higher than the council has been able to deliver because the workforce is not available.



3.3.2 Analysis of data from the brokerage service in November suggests a more positive picture is emerging in home care. The percentage of referrals which no provider could pick up is (just) below 10%, for the first time since April 2021 and before “Freedom Day”. This does seem to support the evidence of the falling number on the waiting list in suggesting that the crisis may be subsiding. In the South East (Ashington, Bedlington, Blyth, Cramlington) referrals that the Council can’t source a service for are starting to look like occasional special issues rather than a pattern however this is not all about increased capacity.

3.3.3 One pattern which seems to be becoming apparent is that the number of requests for services has reduced. In every month since April, the number has been lower than in the same months last year – the average number of brokerage requests in the first six months of this financial year has been 344 per month, compared to 379 last year. The number of packages being picked up off the outstanding list is also much lower than last year. It appears that the main drivers for the fall in the list are a mix of a reduced number of additions to the list and weeding of cases where people no longer need the

package but this this needs further analysis to confirm which will take place over the coming months.

- 3.3.4 There *does* seem to be some real increase in capacity as the total number of weekly hours of home care provided through the mainstream contract has increased from 28,378 at 1 April 2023 to 29,434 at the start of October. The Council will continue to monitor this.

3.4 Commissioning Intentions

3.4.1 Workforce initiatives

- 3.4.2 In response to operational difficulties resulting from workforce shortages the Council's Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee (H&WOSC) have asked for updates on the steps that have been taken and the contingency plans that are in place to resolve the situation. Two reports went to H&WOSC in July 2023 (available [here](#)) and provide a useful summary of the steps the Council has undertaken so far to support providers in trying to attract a sufficiently large workforce including building links with job centres, social media campaigns and job fairs.

3.4.3 Market Sustainability and Improvement Fund (MSIF)

- 3.4.4 Whilst these initiatives have some success it has not been on a sufficient scale to attract significant numbers of people to work in social care and particularly home care services.
- 3.4.5 The MSIF has brought significant additional funding to the adult social care budget and because of the ongoing difficulties in the home care market the Council's cabinet approved proposals in [this](#) report to target a significant proportion of this fund into measures targeted at improving the workforce situation where they were most acute, visit based home care services.
- 3.4.6 Of the fund available £1.5m was allocated to support an immediate increase in the minimum sum paid to home care workers, to a level of £12.00 per hour, to be introduced from 1 July 2023, establishing a differential above the "Real Living Wage" rate available to care workers in all services in Northumberland whose providers have signed up to the Council's Wage Support Scheme. A further £500K was allocated to fund the introduction of a "Northumberland Home Care Worker Guarantee" to be implemented in December 2023, which aims to improve the terms and conditions of home care workers and address some of the reputational factors which were considered to be impacting on the low numbers of people choosing to be working in the sector. Steps were also taken to increase the mileage rate paid to home care staff.

3.4.7 Contract arrangements

- 3.4.8 The increase in the number of providers on the Councils contract arrangement has caused some operational difficulties particularly with the Council's aspirations for undertake quality monitoring of all providers, and also contributed to the large movement of staff between providers. The Council has therefore taken the decision to suspend new entrants to the market in Northumberland whilst it evaluates the existing contract arrangements. It is expected that this suspension will be in place until at least the summer of 2024.

4. Specialist services

4.1 Background

- 4.1.1 The Council refers to specialist services for those that support people with learning disabilities, mental health conditions and people with autism. This section will deal with the accommodation-based services offered through supported living and residential care. The Council has had a longstanding commitment and preference to develop supported living services in line with the policy objectives of Valuing People and Transforming Care.

5. Supported living

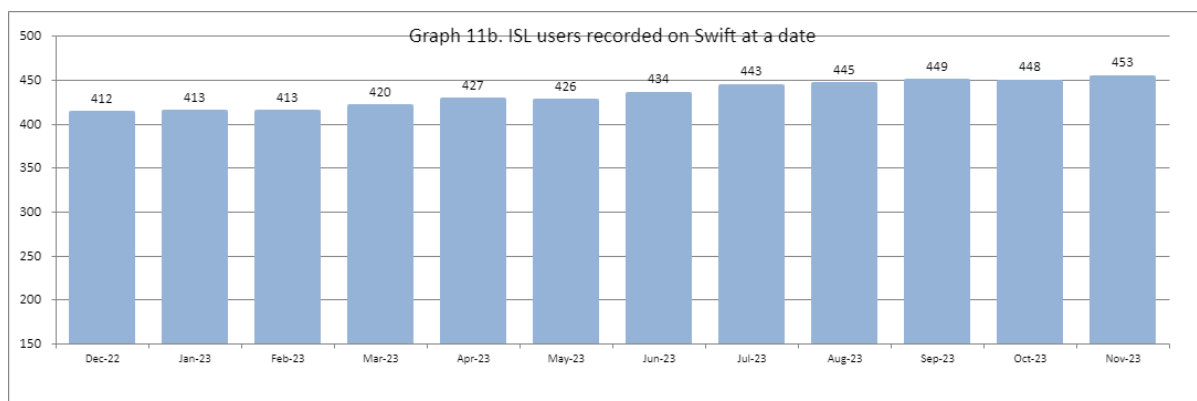
5.1 The current market

- 5.1.1 There are 22 providers currently on the Council's dynamic purchasing system that support service users across three levels of complexity. The arrangements are currently operating well although there is always room for development and commissioners would consider support to people with the most complex needs is an area for development. This would include people with autism, complex learning disabilities, and personality disorders which tend to be the areas of support that are most likely to be commissioned out of area. Providers interested in these services are also encouraged to look at the council's strategy for Extra Care and Independent Supported Living which is available [here](#).

5.2 Demand

- 5.2.1 The chart below shows a positive increase in the number of people in supported living services which includes people new to services and some people who have moved from residential care and into supported living arrangements. It is expected that demand for

supported living arrangements will continue increase with people transitioning from children's services and people currently supported by older carers.



5.3 Commissioning Intentions

- 5.3.1 We had a number of planned accommodation developments to deliver supported living services that were delayed due to the pandemic that are now back on course. Services are commissioned via the dynamic purchasing system which continues to be fit for purpose and there is generally a number of providers interested at each call off.
- 5.3.2 We would be interested in speaking to care and housing providers about any opportunities for developing new supported living services that they become aware of. Our preference is that new supported living services offer self-contained accommodation to prevent compatibility issues leading to voids. This is one issue that officers will work with support providers to try to address as both financial and staff resources could be freed up by tackling voids.
- 5.3.3 Providers with an interest in supporting our most complex service users are invited to approach the council to discuss their business plans and aspirations.

5.4 Specialist residential care

- 5.4.1 This is not a part of the care sector that has been a particular area of focus for the Council in terms of development and in line with national policy objectives more people are now in supported living arrangements.
- 5.4.2 Where people have moved into specialist residential services it is generally because a more regulated service has been assessed as the best fit for the person's needs. It is anticipated there will always be demand for specialist residential services however the model aspired to is changing to enable people to live in self-contained residential accommodation to best meet needs. The Council is interested in discussing with specialist residential care providers the

options to remodel their services to offer self-contained accommodation and meet the needs of people with particularly complex needs. The Council does not anticipate that there will be new specialist residential services built except for respite facilities.

6. Day services

6.1 Background

- 6.1.1 Day services offer social interaction and activities to support independent living for adults and are available for people with a range of needs including people with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, autism, mental health conditions and for older people. Day services are offered in a centre-based environment and through enabling where service users are supported to access mainstream facilities in the community.

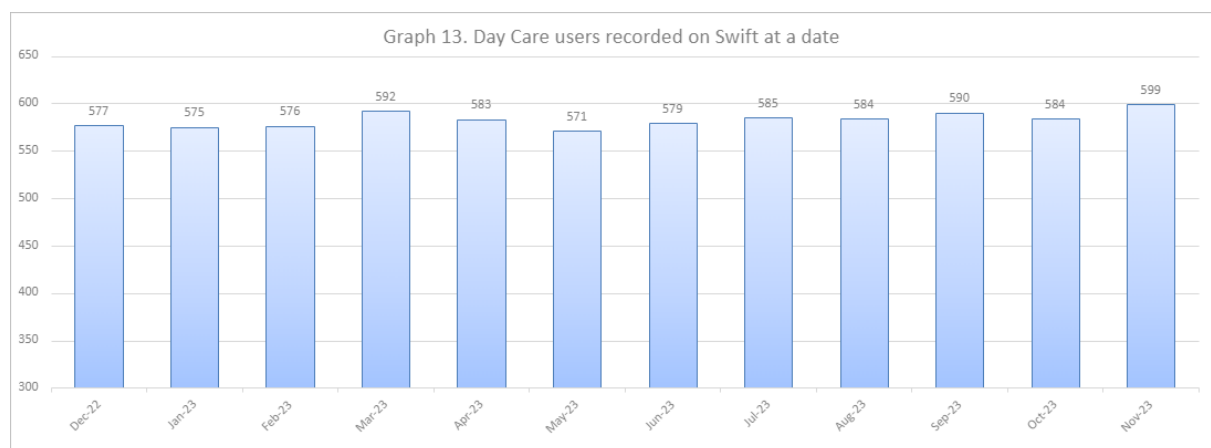
6.2 The current market

- 6.2.1 Northumberland County Council contracts with 32 organisations that offer commissioned day services, and in addition there are also many community groups and organisations within the County that offer activities outside of the Council's contract arrangements.
- 6.2.2 The day service arrangements are currently operating well although we are aware that there are opportunities for development particularly for people with autism, and people with complex learning disabilities and behaviours that may challenge existing services.
- 6.2.3 The following have been identified as potential areas for development we would be interested in talking to providers that have an interest in offering additional services that increases availability in these areas.
- Age-appropriate services for people with autism
 - Services for younger adults across all adult care user groups
 - Opportunities for people to develop and sustain a social life outside of services. This includes low level support services to support people with housing, health, and employment.
 - Providers to work in partnership with other training and educational organisations to maximise individual's opportunities and to develop skill-based services.
 - People to be supported to be part of their local communities.
 - Flexible approaches that offer evening and weekend support.

- Northumberland based services to support people with highly complex physical and medical conditions, that provide engaging, meaningful, and outcome-based activities.
- Activity based services for people with learning disabilities and/or mental health conditions.
- Support with independent travel training for people to learn, develop and maintain skills to increase independence.
- Older persons day services that offer a bathing service.
- Services that embrace technology with an ability to deliver virtual day services across Northumberland.

6.3 Demand

6.3.1 The graph below shows the number of people currently using days services in Northumberland with a relatively small increase across the last 12 months.



6.4 Commissioning Intentions

- 6.4.1 Social care teams are working closely with the Community Hubs to ensure that as many day service users as possible have access to community activities and groups in their own localities.
- 6.4.2 The Council encourages providers to work in partnership to develop day services to optimise choice and outcomes for Northumberland residents and to modernise the range of services available. Examples include services that are modelled on Forest and Beach Schools and the Council is interested in working with providers interested in offering this.

7. Direct Payments

7.1 Background

- 7.1.1 People who have assessed care needs and meet the funding thresholds have the opportunity to have a direct payment which they can use to design a personal care package that meets their individual needs. All service users eligible for support will have a plan detailing how this will be arranged and the costs of this support. Most people who are eligible for support should be offered the chance to receive a direct payment which allows them to arrange and pay for their care and support themselves, giving them greater control choice and flexibility.

7.2 The current market

- 7.2.1 As at January 2024 there are almost 600 adults accessing Direct Payments to arrange their services that are funded by adult social care. This can be further broken down to 271 (46%) Adults employing their own personal assistant, 306 (52.1%) Adults using their Direct Payment to arrange a service via a provider and 11 (1.9%) arranged by a Self-Employed Worker (Micro Provider).
- 7.2.2 There are currently 114 adults accessing Direct Payments via Health Care Funding to arrange their services. This can be further broken down to 72 (63.2%) Adults employing their own personal assistants 39 (34.2%) Adults using their Direct Payment to arrange a service via a provider and 3 (2.6%) arranged by a Self-Employed Worker (Micro Provider).
- 7.2.3 Direct Payments are traditionally used to arrange services in the following areas:
- Complex Home Care Plans
 - Home Care Support
 - Independent supported living
 - Enabling
- 7.2.4 The Council has trialled the use of an HR platform for the last 12 months which has been used to advertise current Personal Assistant (PA) vacancies and act as Personal Assistant register.
- 7.2.5 With the investment of time this platform is showing some encouraging signs of a positive return of new Personal Assistants signing up and successfully securing work. However, the Council needs to continue looking at other opportunities to raise the awareness of working with Direct Payment recipients and direct

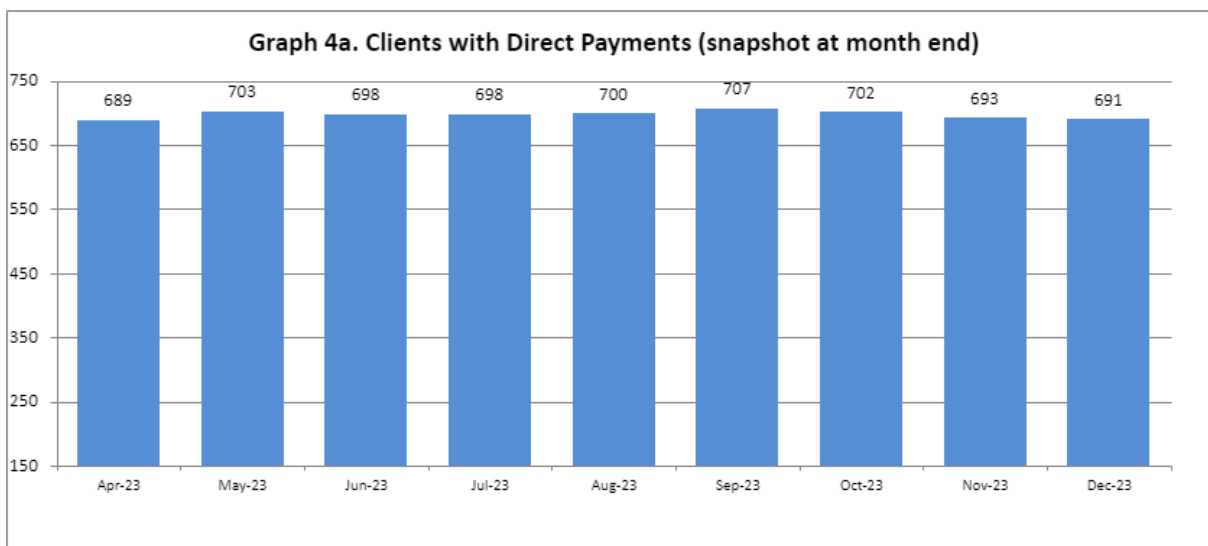
potential Personal Assistants to this platform. The Council will continue to use this platform as a recruitment tool.

7.2.6 The Council is undertaking the following activities to encourage the uptake of and increase the availability of Direct payments:

- Regular engagement with all Social Care and Health Care Staff who are involved in arranging care packages and identifying ways of meeting people's needs to promote the use of Direct payments.
- Collaborative work between Direct Payments and Social Care teams to problem solve individual cases.
- Attendance at recruitment events throughout Northumberland and signpost potential Personal Assistants to the recruitment platform.
- Work with Partners such as Employability Specialists and DWP to match vacancies available with potential employees.
- Work with our colleagues in Northumberland Communities Together to support introductions to groups in Northumberland who would have a shared interest in promoting vacancies to their attendees.
- Update and Develop Direct Payment Web Page on Northumberland County Council Website.

7.3 Demand and supply

7.3.1 Demand for direct payments is currently higher than the existing pool of workers can meet. The Direct Payment Team are currently working with 48 new adult service users wishing to recruit personal assistants to deliver their Care and Support Plan. There are 27 existing Direct Payment recipients also advertising for additional Personal Assistants.



- 7.3.2 Further work will be undertaken to break down this data further to show the split between Direct Payment recipients who purchase a service through and agency and those that use the payment to employ a worker or to pay someone they already know (such as a family member they don't reside with) to support them.
- 7.3.3 The Council is aware of the impact of its contracting arrangements and the impact on the number of Direct Payment recipients in Northumberland. Home Care contract arrangements were changed in 2019 and one of the consequences of this was to reduce the number of Direct Payment recipients in Northumberland by transferring people who were using a Direct Payment because it was the only route open to them to use a provider onto the Council's contract arrangements if that was their preference.

7.4 Commissioning Intentions

- 7.4.1 The Council are looking closely at the value of growing the number of micro providers to increase the availability of Personal Assistants. Early discussions are to be held in January 2024 with Somerset County Council who have successfully implemented this offer via Direct Payments. The Council is particularly keen to increase the pool of Personal Assistants and micro enterprises available in Northumberland and also to encourage social care professionals to explore the range of support options available to people through friends, family and the communities that they live in.