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Data, child protection and care: What's behind the declining numbers in Scotland?

3rd October 2024

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Declining number of children in care explained?

“Since 2020, the work to realise the conclusions of the Independent Care Review is shifting the focus of the ‘care system’ dedicated to supporting children and families towards prevention, with the number of children ‘in care’ reducing from c. 15,000 in 2020, to around 12,000 in 2024.”

The Promise Scotland

[Response to National Care Service \(Scotland\) Bill \(Stage 2\) call for evidence, 20th September 2024](#)



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Keeping the Promise: update on progress

Scottish Government, September 2024

Chart 2: Total number of looked after children

Total number of looked after children on 3rd July each year, 2016-2023

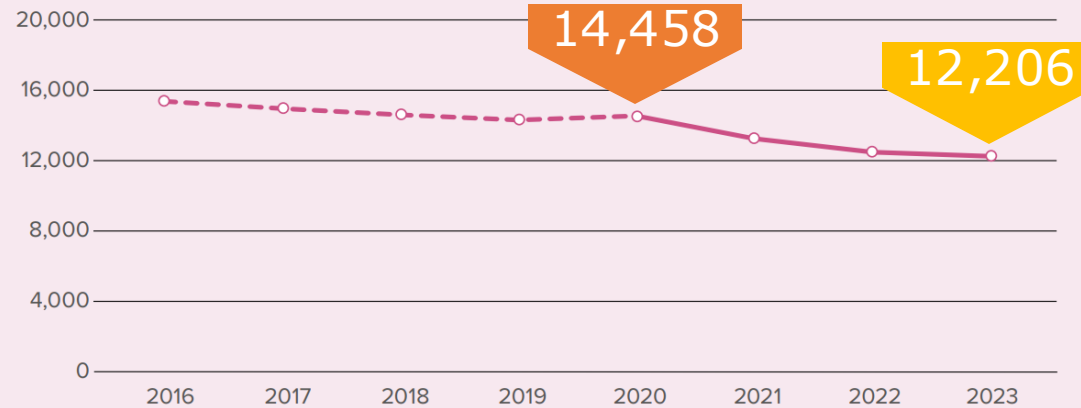


Figure 3: Rate of looked after children

Rate of looked after children per 1,000 children on 31st July each year



“We are seeing fewer of the very youngest children entering care each year”

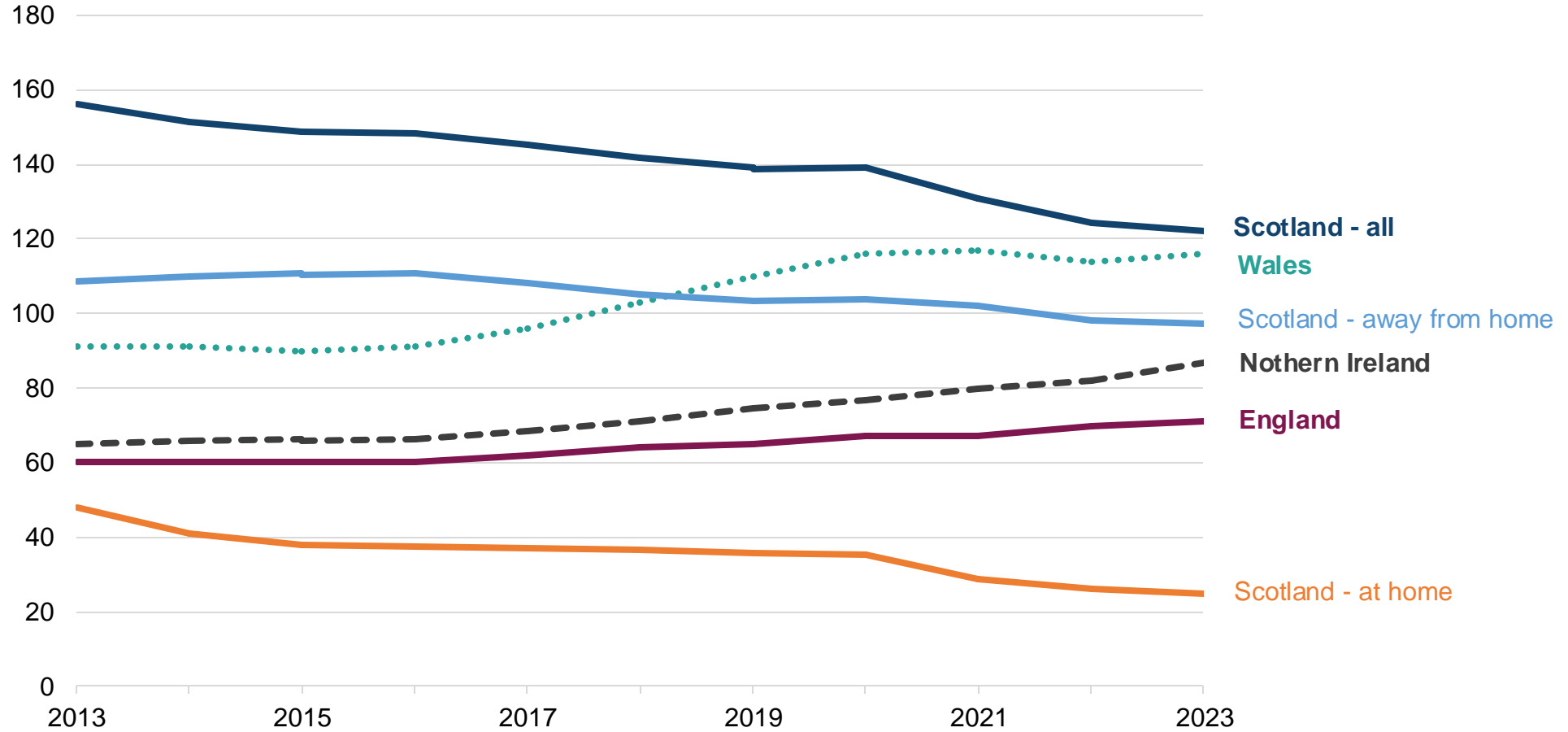
2013, 1,737
2020, 1,346
2023, 966

“This could be an indication that early years prevention work is generating positive change in preventing some of the youngest children from entering care.”

Children in care: Different trend to rest of the UK

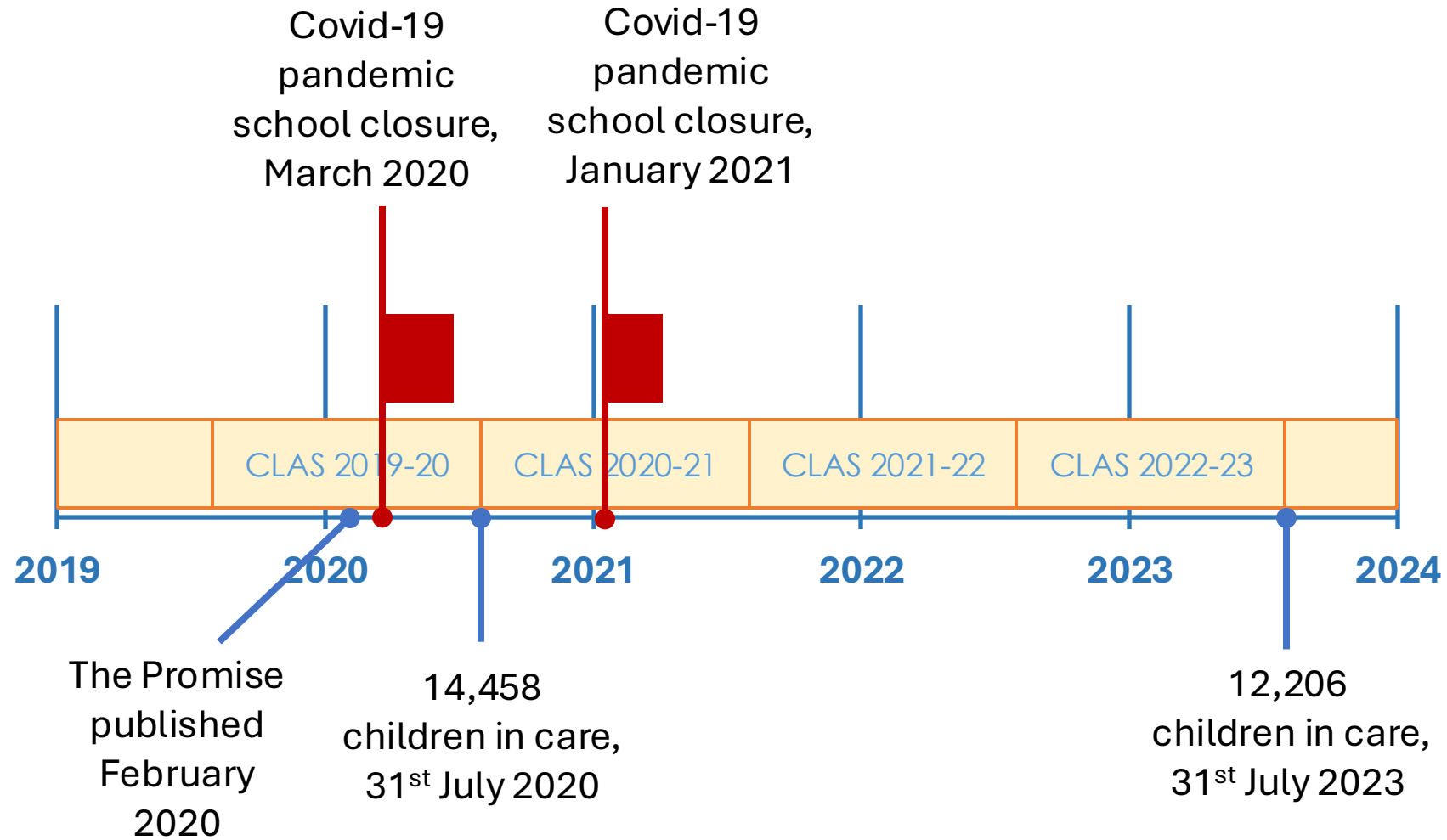
Rate per 10,000 children
(0-17 years)

Children in care, rate per 10,000 children (0-17yrs)

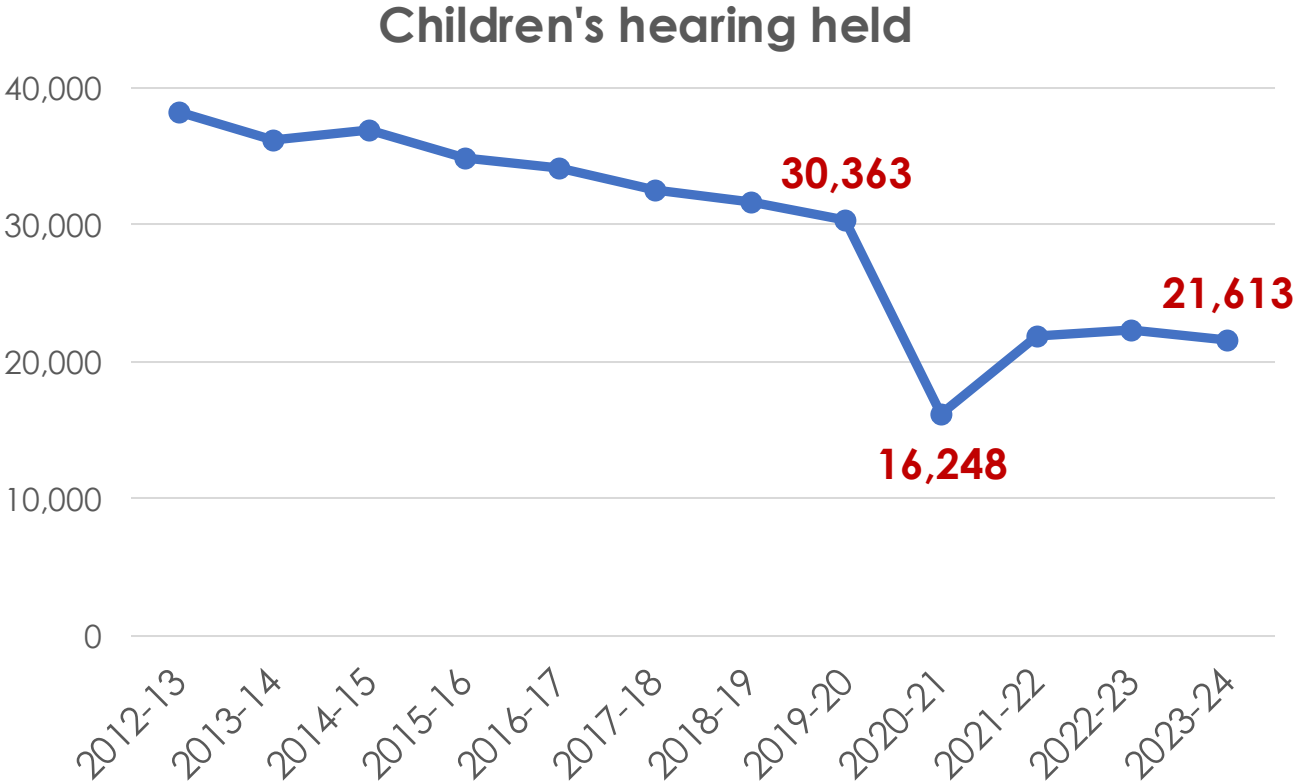


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2020 and 2021: Eventful years...

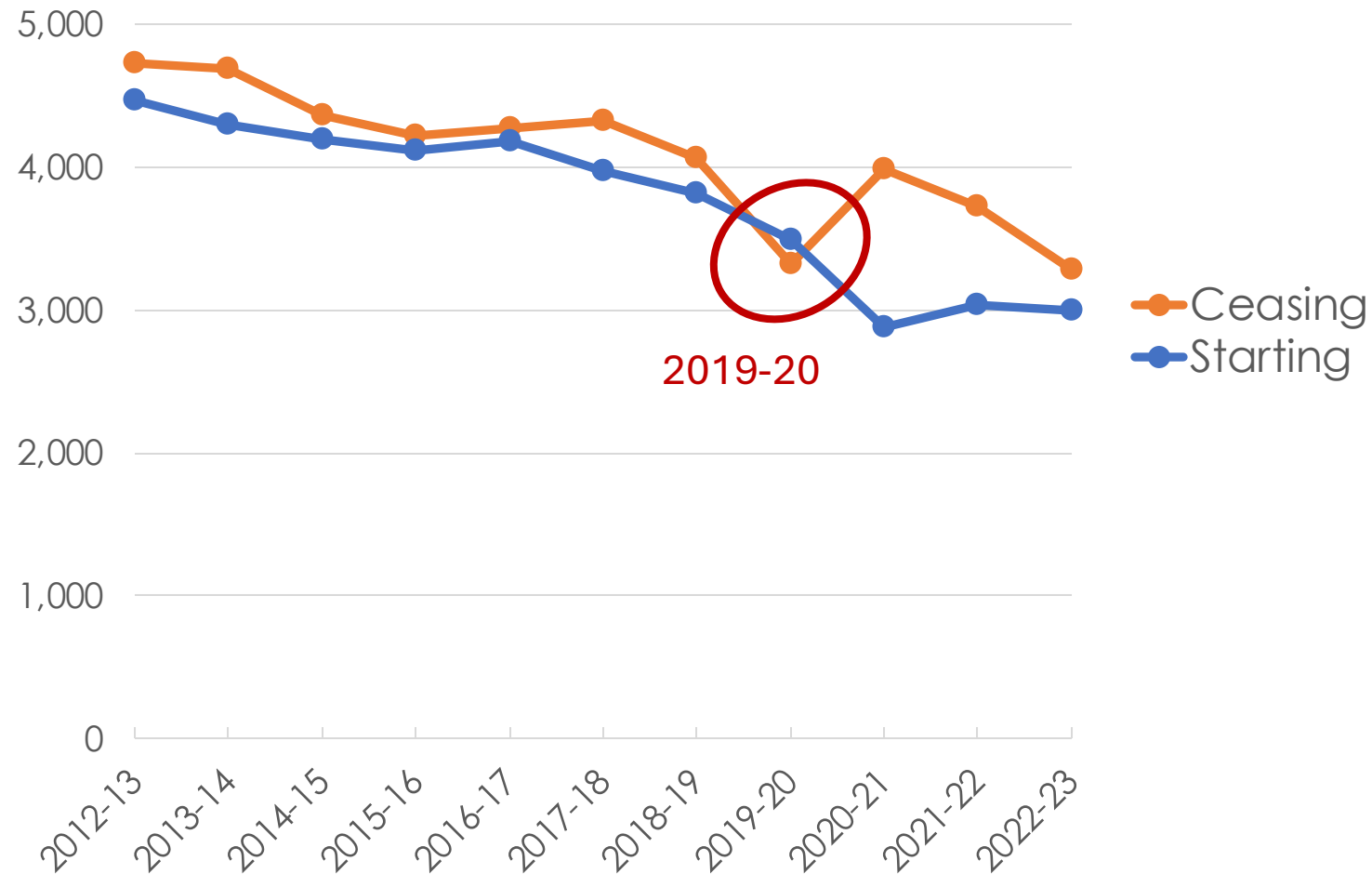


Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on Children's hearings

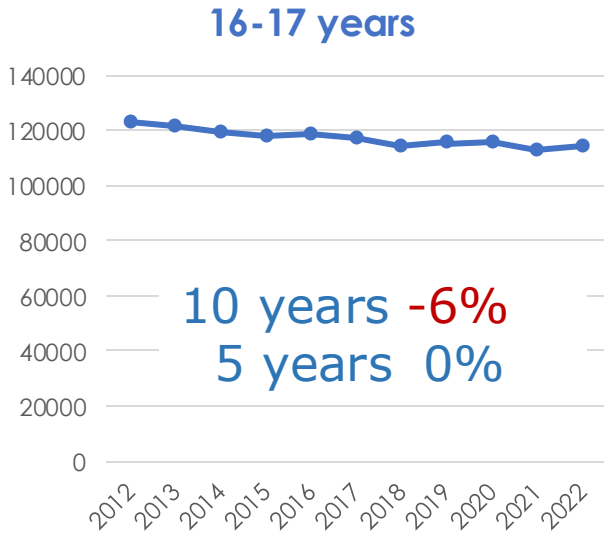
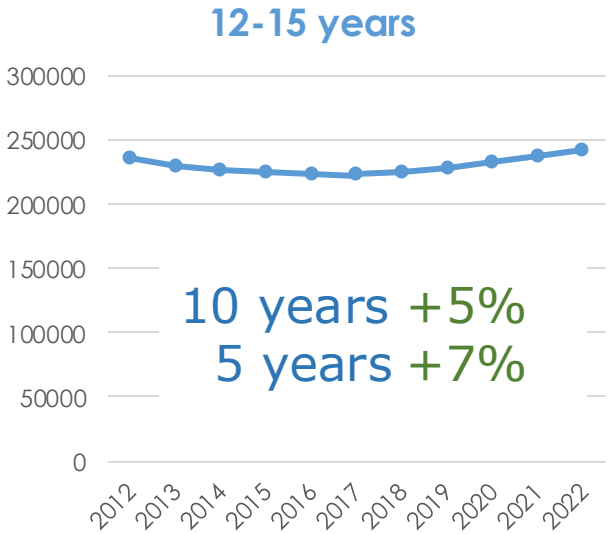
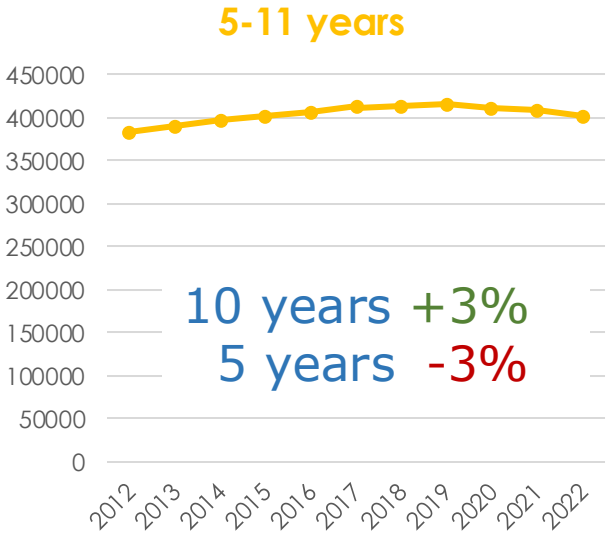
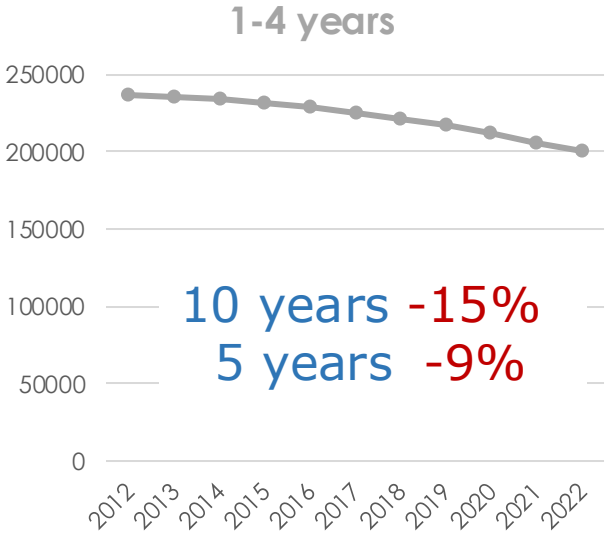
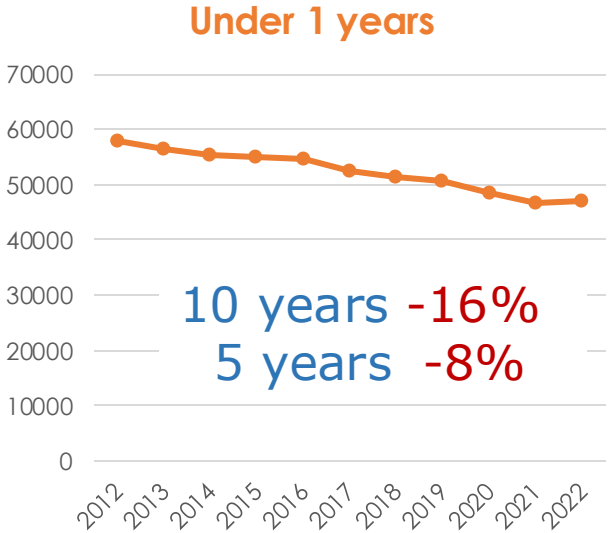
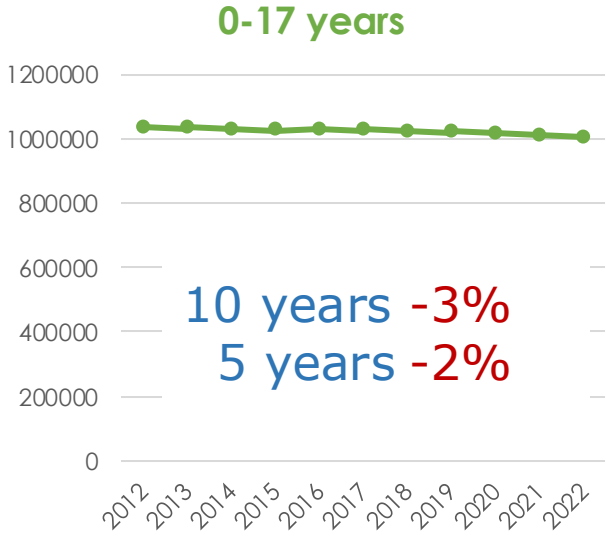


Children entering care and leaving care

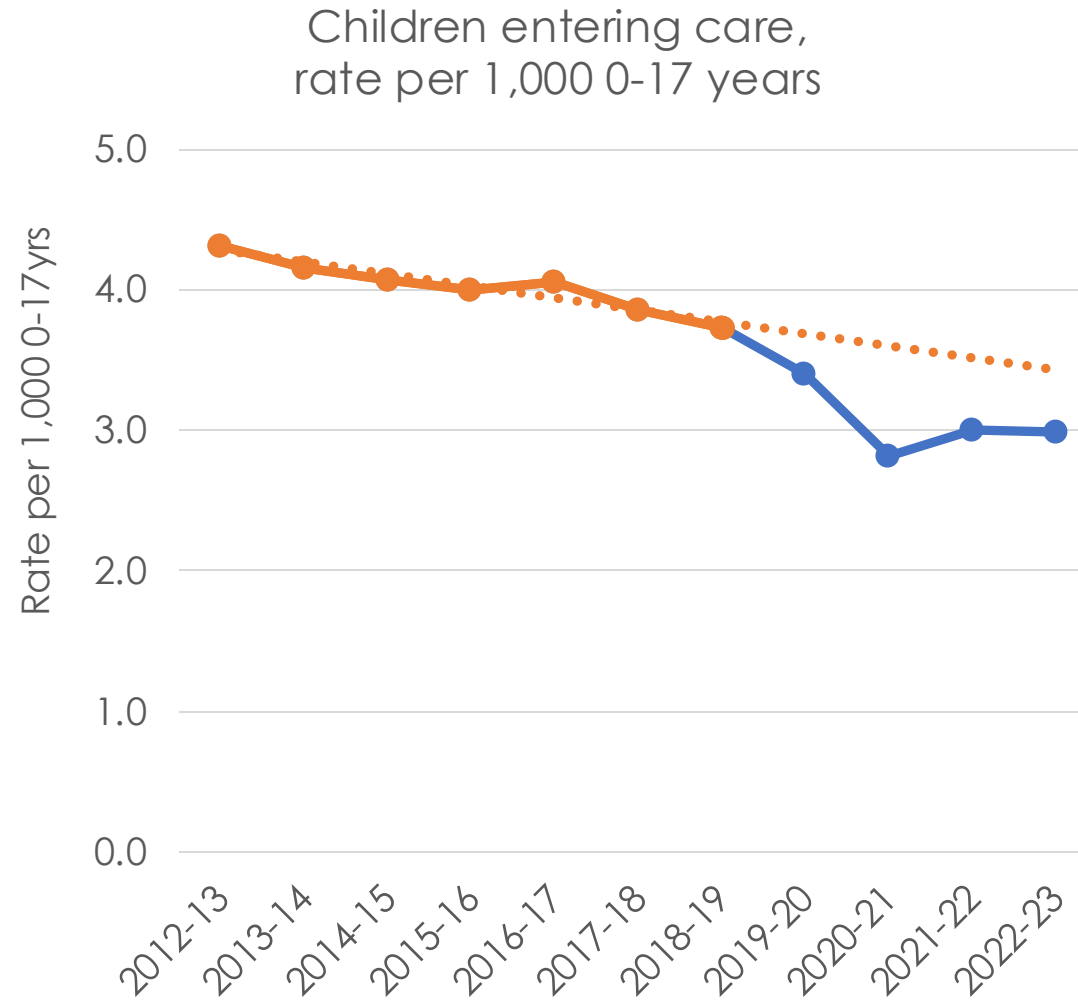
Children starting to be looked after and children ceasing to be looked after during the year



Demographic change: mid-year population estimates

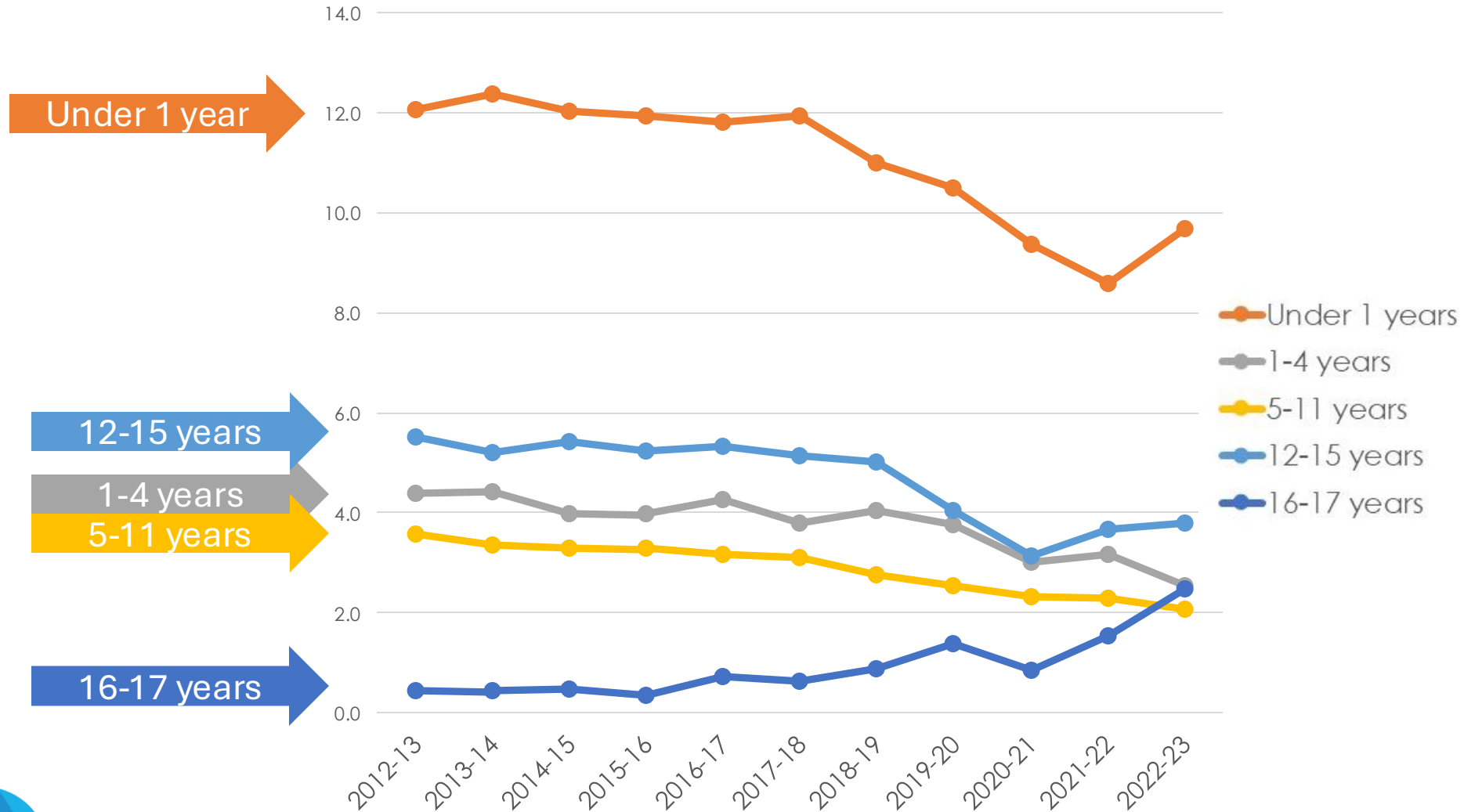


Fewer children entering care since the Covid-19 pandemic



Age of children entering care

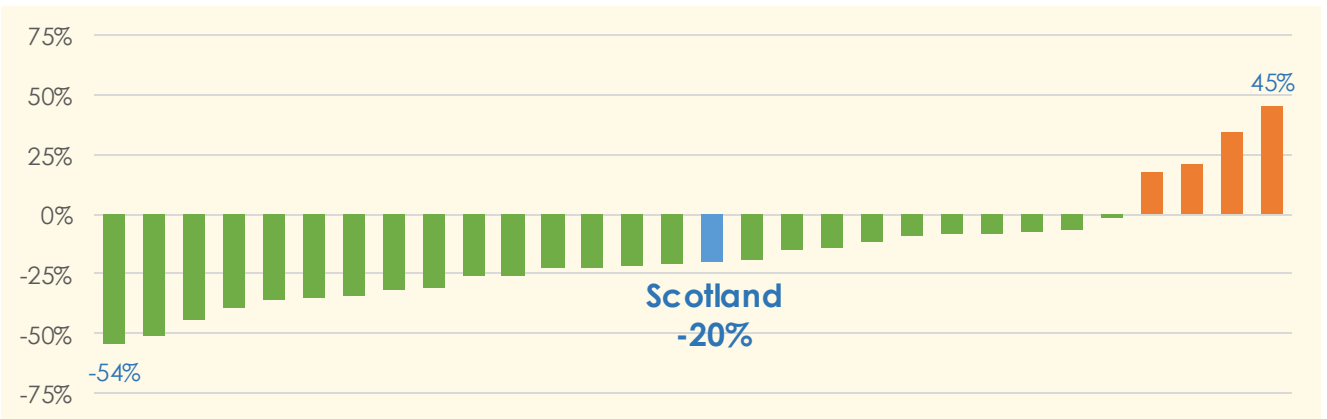
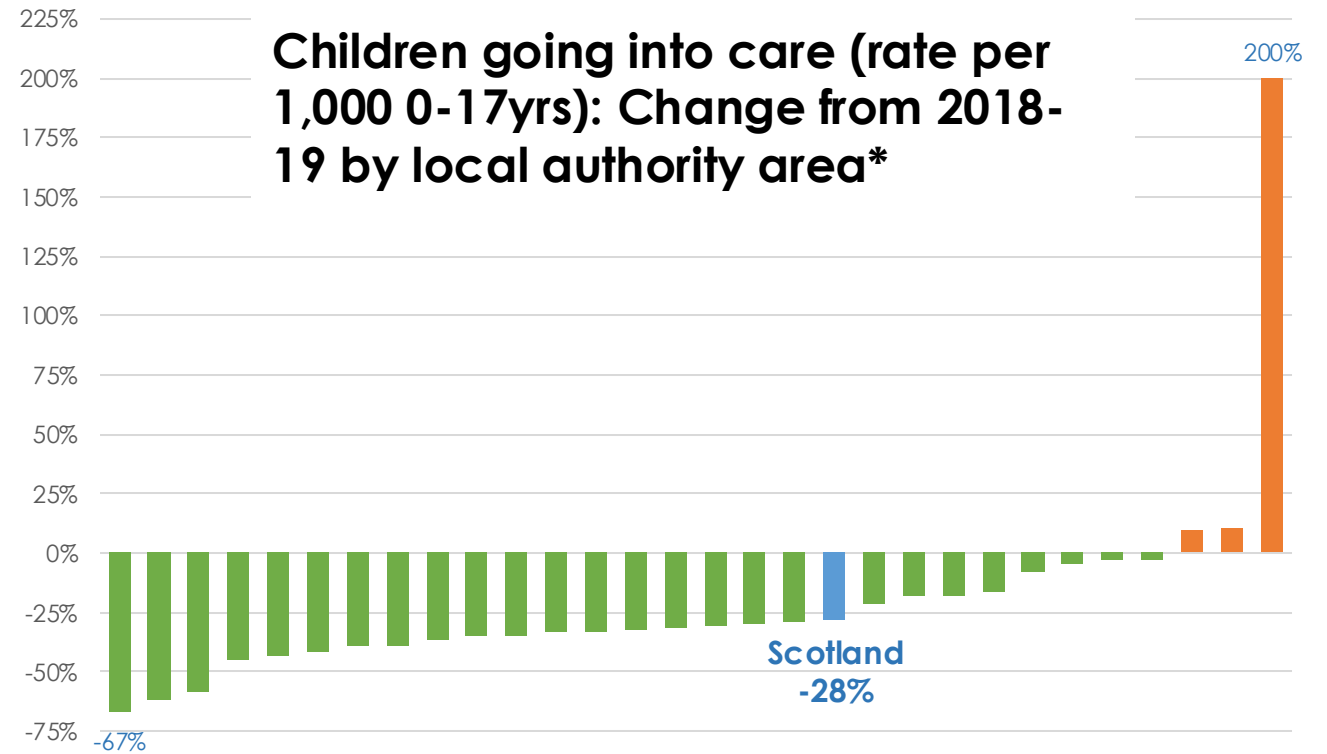
Entering care rate per 1,000 children by age bands



Variation across local authority areas?

2018-19
to
2020-21

2018-19
to
2022-23



*Island local authorities not shown because of effect of small numbers on percentages but included in Scotland calculation

What's going on?

Is there less need?

Are needs being met in a different way?

Is the response to The Promise helping to keep numbers lower?

Have thresholds changed?

Is the children's social care workforce crisis having an impact?

Are local authority budgetary constraints affecting decision making?

Was there too much state intervention in the lives of children and families before?

Have we been storing up trouble?

The SUNDAY POST

Increased anxiety, poverty, arrested development...

Experts warn catastrophic consequences of lockdown now emerging

15th September 2024


THE SCOTSMAN
SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER

“ghost children” who fell off radar in the wake of the coronavirus crisis.

16th September 2024



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Child protection

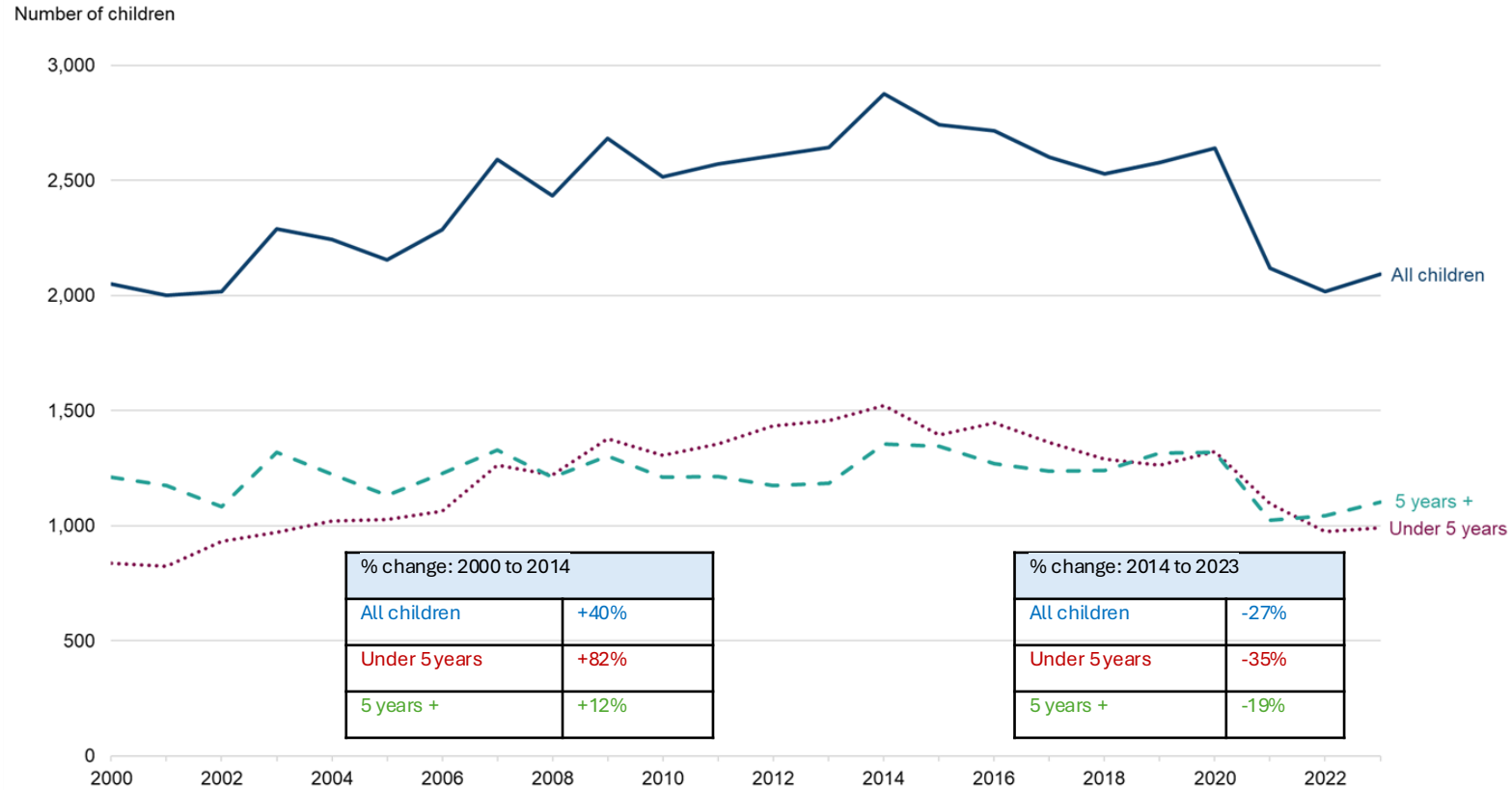
www.celcis.org

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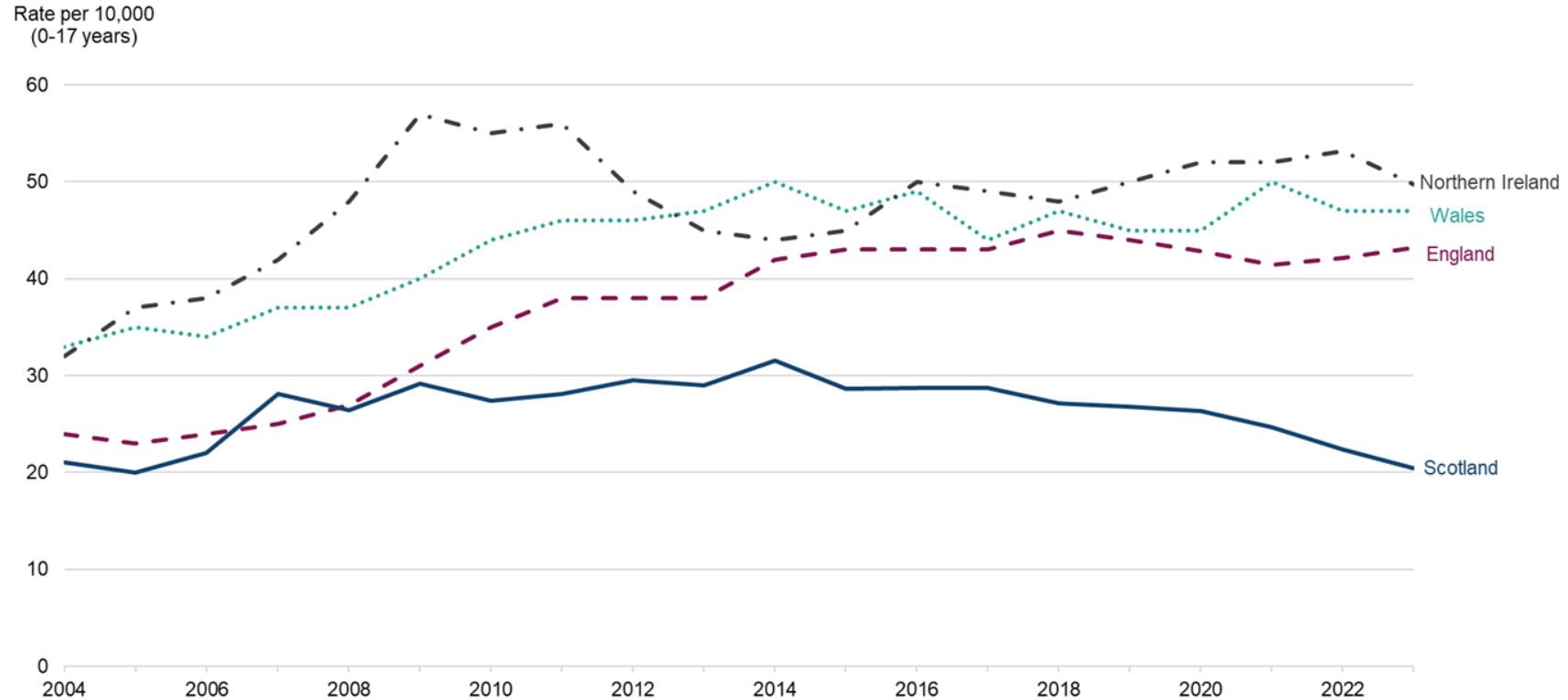
Number of children on the Child Protection register





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Rate of child protection registrations by UK nation





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What explains the decrease in Scotland?

- Is the reduction seen since 2014 the (cumulative) impact of GIRFEC, UNCRC, National Guidance for Child Protection, and The Promise?
- Focusing on the reduction in number of under 5s, is this the impact of the Universal Health Visiting Pathway, expansion of early learning and childcare hours, and demographic change?
- More recently, drop in 2020-21 due to COVID-19 pandemic but no sign of return to pre-pandemic levels



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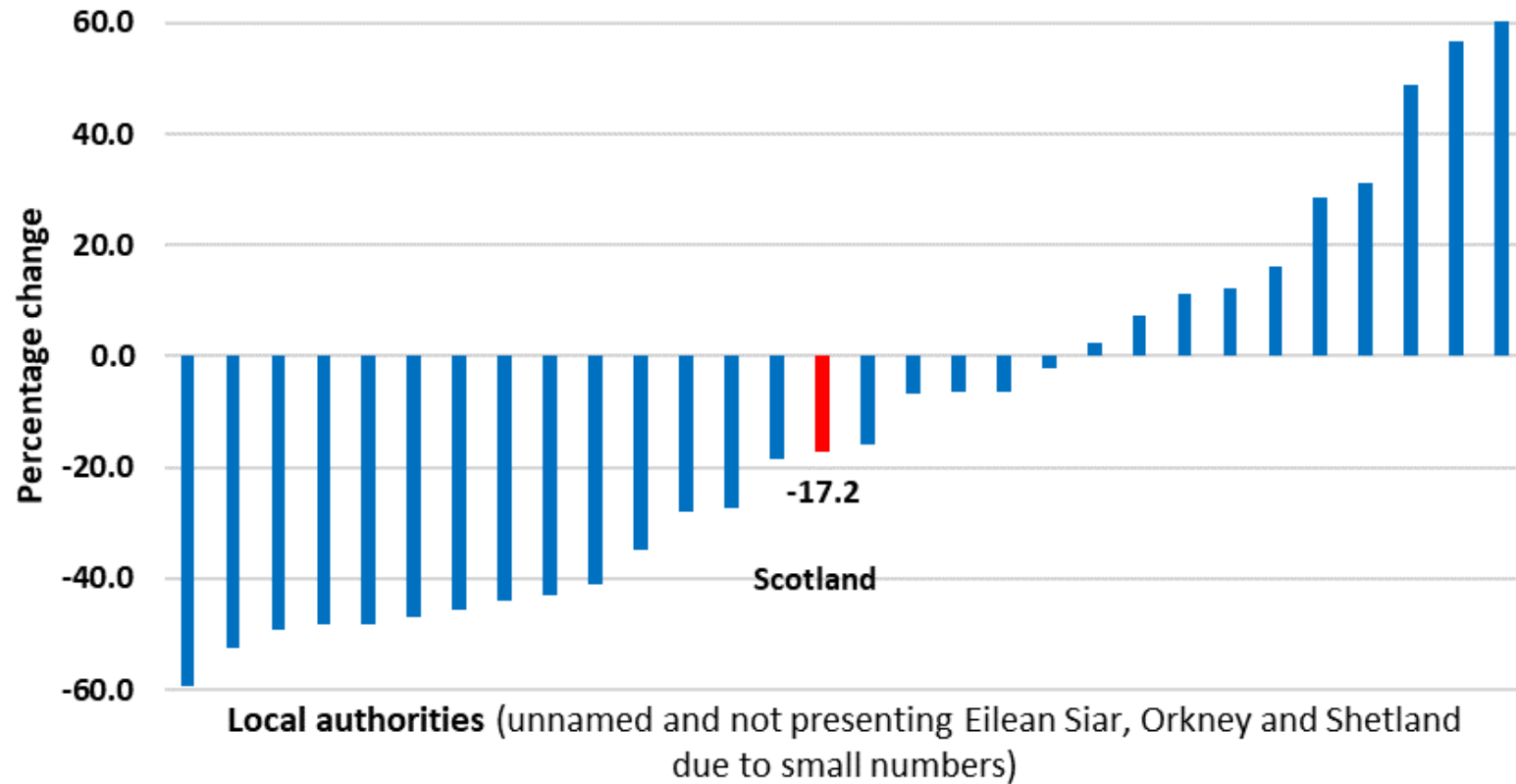
What explains the decrease in Scotland?

- Should we anticipate an increase? Recent three-year trend is at odds with wider context:
 - Increasing pressures experienced by children and families, such as COVID-19 pandemic, cost of living and housing difficulties, and increasing numbers of children with additional support needs
 - Stretched children's services workforce
 - Other UK nations not seeing a decrease
- However, caution needed in arriving at national conclusions when there are local variations across Scotland



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Percentage change in number of children registered: 2018-2023





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Some points to note

- National statistics largely reliant on child protection registration data:
 - Registration dependent on children being at risk of significant harm or abuse. Poverty, housing and/or parental mental health difficulties should not directly correspond to registration
 - Registration data is not providing evidence of growing concerns, such as child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation and online harm
- Looking forward, collection of Inter-agency Referral Discussion data should provide more rounded picture