
INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2016-17

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The Independent Review Officer (IRO) service is set within the statutory framework of the IRO Handbook (2010), linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO changed from the management of the Review process to a wider overview of the child's case including regular monitoring and follow-up between Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Looked After Children (LAC) and for challenging drift and delay. Further details of the role of the IRO are set out in Appendix A.

Ofsted's review of the effectiveness of IROs, Independent Reviewing Officers; taking up the challenge? (June 2013), reported on the progress of IRO services in 10 Local Authorities in taking up on their enhanced responsibilities. This has been followed by the National Children's Bureau's report, The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England (March 2014). The reports highlighted a range of challenges and recommendations for best practice within IRO services: in particular

- Improvements on the quality of IRO challenge,
- Statutory review recommendations and representation of children's views, senior management/corporate parenting oversight of the IRO service and
- Relationships with CAFCASS.

Over the last year, the IRO service within Darlington has made a number of improvements in line with the above recommendations as detailed in the main body of this report.

Summary

2. The Annual IRO report is produced by the Children's Safeguarding Unit (CSU) and provides an overview of the work by the IRO Service in relation to Looked After Children, including the Dispute Resolution Process as required by the statutory guidance. The report also provides an overview of the performance of the unit in a range of responsibilities, activities and functions, including Child Protection, training and advice to professionals. The report identifies good practice as well as highlighting areas for further development.

3. The statutory requirements for individual services to safeguard and promote the welfare of children are set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children 2015. A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (March 2015). Working Together stipulates that the chair of a Child Protection Conference needs to be accountable to the Director of Children's Services, and should be a professional, independent of operational and/or line management responsibilities for the case.

Recommendation

4. It is recommended that :-

- (a) Scrutiny members note the content of this annual report

Suzanne Joyner
Director of Children and Adults Services

Background Papers

Martin Graham : Extension 6703

S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for this group
Health and Well Being	This report has no implications for this group
Carbon Impact	This report does not have a carbon impact
Diversity	This report has no implications for this group
Wards Affected	This report has no implications for this group
Groups Affected	Children who become looked after and those subject to child protection plans are affected by the content of this report
Budget and Policy Framework	There are no budget or policy issues from this report
Key Decision	This report does not warrant a key decision
Urgent Decision	This report does not warrant a key decision
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	This report does not affect One Darlington
Efficiency	There are no efficiencies contained within this report

Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers

5. The Independent Reviewing Officers are committed to achieving the best outcomes for all children and young people in Darlington, particularly the most vulnerable; including, children who are looked after and those subject to Child Protection Plans.
6. The Service has an independent role to ensure that all children, whatever their religious or cultural background, receive the same care and safeguards with regard to abuse and neglect.
7. The service is responsible for the following statutory functions:
 - Initial Child Protection Conferences
 - Child Protection Review Conferences
 - Looked After Children Reviews
 - Annual Foster Carer Reviews
 - Adoption Reviews:
 - Disruption Meetings
 - Reviews of children placed in Secure Accommodation
8. IROs undertake a range of non-statutory functions including, providing advice and guidance to professionals, facilitating single and multi-agency child protection training and case file audits.

Staffing Levels and Caseloads

9. Responsibility for the operational management, performance and development of the Service lies with the Head of Service for Quality Assurance and Practice Improvement, who reports directly to the Assistant Director, Children's Services.
10. During 2016-17 the IRO team experienced a number of staffing changes. The previous Head of Service left the authority in December 2016 and was succeeded temporarily by an interim Manager to 31 March 2017. The Head of Service post is now a permanent appointment.
11. There have been changes in relation to Independent Reviewing Officers with staff leaving and agency appointments made initially to cover vacant posts. The service has, over the year had a full complement of staff made up of a mixture of temporary and agency posts. At 31 March 2017 there were 5.4 IRO posts, 60% were permanent and 40% agency staff.
12. The Independent Reviewing Officers are supported by a full time Business Support Team Leader and 5.0 Business Support Officers (one term time only), 60% were established posts and 40% agency staff.

13. The Independent Reviewing Officer's handbook (31 March 2010) recommends that case loads for IROs need to be between 50 and 70 LAC children. Ofsted's; *Independent Reviewing Officers: taking up the challenge?* (June 2013), which looked at 10 local authorities reported IRO average caseloads ranging from 50-112 (with some individual caseloads as high as 120). The average caseload was found to be slightly above 80 cases. More recently a national benchmarking survey (December 2013) placed the average caseload for an IRO between 50 and 95, with the proviso that the size of caseload alone does not indicate the overall workload for each individual IRO as individual roles and responsibilities vary within authorities.
14. The National Children's Bureau; *The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England* (March 2014) reported that:

"Being employed by the local authority usually meant carrying out other duties not specified in the IRO guidance. Having to chair child protection conferences as well as looked after children's reviews was mostly, but not universally, seen as a benefit in providing continuity for children subject to a child protection plan who then become looked after. However, other duties, such as conducting Regulation 33 visits or foster carer reviews, were not always seen as appropriate for IROs. There were concerns that these activities could lead to a conflict of interest and compromise IROs' independence."
15. The IROs in Darlington do not undertake Regulation 44 Visits (function previously covered by Regulation 33 Visits). This service is provided by NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service).
16. Annual Foster Carer Reviews are currently being undertaken solely by a part-time agency reviewing officer to ensure independence and avoid any conflict of interest with in-house foster carers.
17. Over the last 12 months, the requirement around the size of caseloads for IROs in Darlington has been in line with the range set out in statutory guidance. At 31 March 2017 their average caseload was 57 children. To set this in context; in December 2015 the average IRO caseload in Darlington was 99 children.
18. Manageable caseloads have allowed IROs to have sufficient time to provide a quality service to each LAC including monitoring drift, consulting with social workers following significant changes and meeting with the child before the review to ensure that their views are clearly understood.
19. In addition to LAC Reviews and Child Protection Conferences, IROs also undertake monthly case file audits and the chairing of, Secure Reviews and Disruption Meetings.
20. There is a statutory requirement in the IRO Handbook to ensure 'sufficient' administrative support to Independent Reviewing Officers in relation to Looked After Reviews. The current responsibilities include the administering and minuting of Child Protection Conferences as well as the administrative function in relation to

Looked After Children. Regular meetings are held with Business Support to look at how they can best support the Children's Safeguarding Unit.

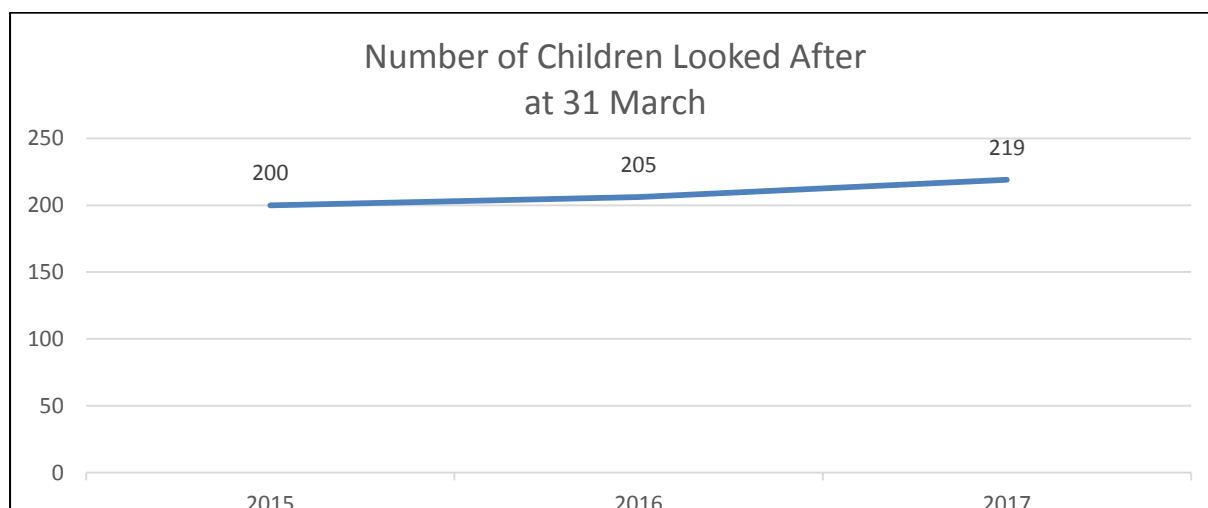
21. In October 2016, children's services introduced a new integrated Children's system, Liquid Logic and the IROs and Business Support have worked to ensure a smooth transition from the previous to the new system.

Looked After Children Review Activity

Number of Looked After Children

22. At the end of March 2017 there were 219 Children Looked After in Darlington, a slightly higher position to the previous year (205). This follows the trend over the last few years, with the total increasing from 200 in March 2015 to the current level.

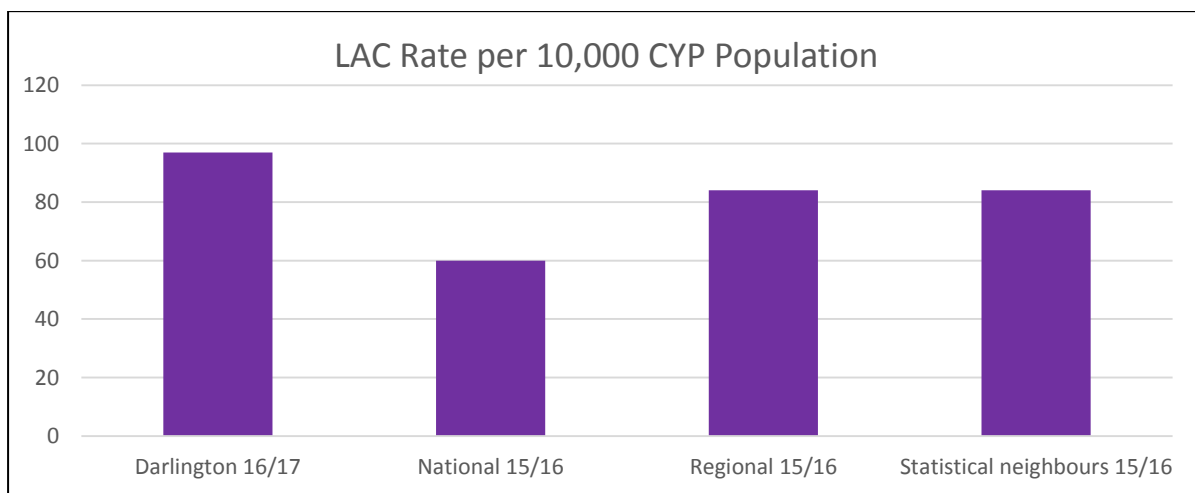
23. The chart below shows the monthly number of Looked After Children (LAC) over the last 3 years.



24. While comparatively high, the rate of LAC in Darlington has plateaued with relatively small increases in 2015/16 and 2016/17.

Looked After Children rate per 10,000

25. The table below is expressed as the rate per 10,000, which allows benchmarking with other councils (National and comparator groups of North East authorities and statistical neighbours).



26. At the end of 2016/17, 219 children were looked after by Darlington a rate of 96.8 per 10,000, an increase from the outturn figure for 2015/16 of 90.6 per 10,000.
27. Analysis shows that Darlington has continued to have a significantly higher rate of Looked After Children than the national average and are consistently higher than the regional average. This can partly be attributed to an increase in the number of children becoming Looked After (an increase of 39% between 2016 and 2017) due to legislative changes where children became subject to Interim Care Orders, prior to their move into a placement under a Special Guardianship Order or a Child Arrangement Order.

LAC Demographics

Looked After Children (as of 31 st March)	2015		2016		2017	
Under 1	13	7%	16	8%	17	8%
1-4	37	19%	36	18%	36	16%
5-9	38	19%	44	21%	56	26%
10-15	76	38%	69	34%	72	33%
16-17	36	18%	40	20%	38	17%
Total	200		205		219	

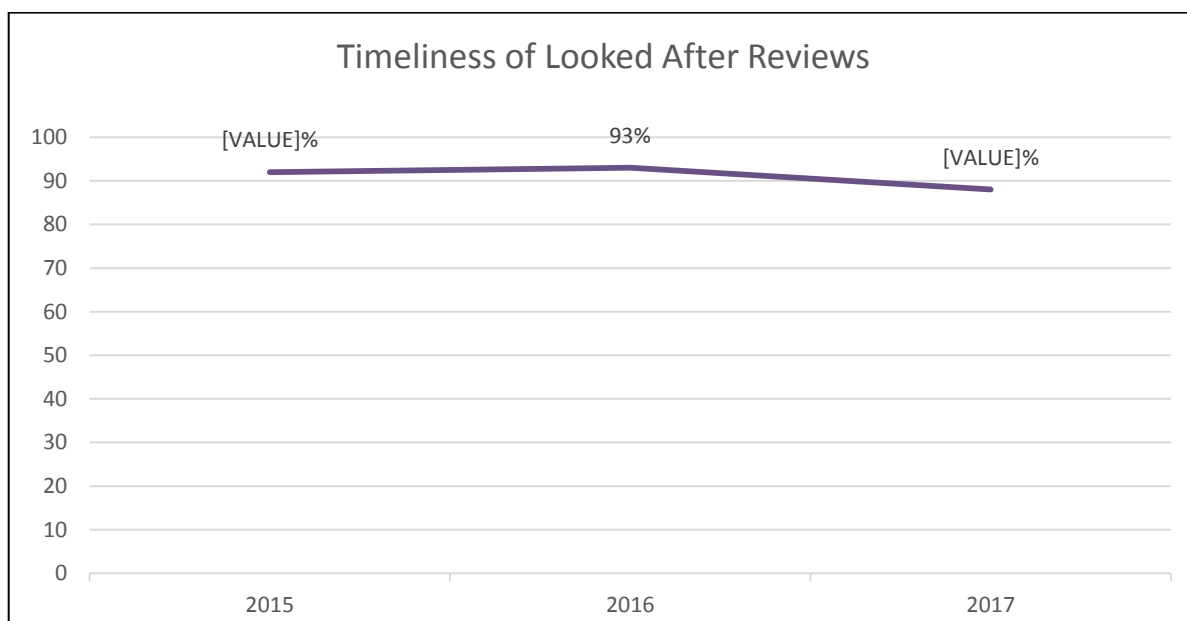
28. The age profile of Darlington's Looked After population has remained fairly stable over the previous 3 years. The majority of Looked After Children in Darlington are aged between 10 and 15 years. This is similar to the distribution nationally.

Ethnicity of Looked After Children as of 31 st March	2015		2016		2017	
White	187	94%	192	94%	197	90%
Mixed	9	5%	8	4%	13	6%
Asian or Asian British	3	2%	3	1%	7	3%
Black or Black British	1	1%	2	1%	2	1%
Other Ethnic groups	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	200		205		219	

29. The ethnic population of Looked After Children in Darlington has remained relatively stable over the previous 3 years. Although this does not match the national distribution, this is

predictable due to the comparative lack of ethnic diversity within the Darlington population as a whole.

Looked After Reviews and Timescales



30. The above chart shows that during 2016-17 performance in relation to the percentage of LAC cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales. For the year to 31st March 88% (provisional figure) of Looked After Children were reviewed within timescales, a slight decline from the previous 2 years performance. Rationale for reviews not meeting the required timescales was family / carer not being available, the Social worker or the IRO not being available, through legitimate reasons such as a need to attend court or illness.

LAC Participation and contact with IRO

31. Participation applies to children or young people (subject to age and understanding; Care Planning, Placement and Case Review, DCSF March 2010).

32. Participation is based on one of the following methods of participation:

- attending their Review and speaking on their own behalf;
- attending their review but having another person speak for them;
- not attending the review but providing their views in a written form or through another facilitative medium; and /or
- not attending the review but briefing an advocate to represent their views

33. IROs play a key role in actively seeking the views for children who do not wish to attend their reviews and to see what would assist in getting them there. Independent Reviewing Officers ensure that young people are able to make contact with them if they have any concerns. Once a new admission to care is allocated,

the IRO will contact the child, if aged 8 or over and make arrangements to meet them prior to their key LAC review. All contact details are provided at this point.

34. Ensuring that Looked After Children are able to participate as fully as possible in Care Planning and Looked After Children Reviews is a key priority. Whilst a small number of children regularly chair their own LAC reviews, participation in LAC reviews is an area for further development in 2017/18.
35. The IRO Handbook recommends the IRO meet with the child/young person within their placement, prior to the Looked After Review meeting or as part of the process. With the reduction in IRO caseloads over the last year this contact with young people between reviews has continued to improve. IROs continue to offer the option of attending earlier than the review time to meet with the child or young person on the day of the scheduled review if they have not been able to visit them prior or in circumstances where the placement is at a significant distance from Darlington.
36. The service is looking at ways to be more creative by utilising alternative methods of contact for those young people who have declined a visit or live out of borough. In 2017/18 the IROs are to be provided with new Smart phones and tablets that will allow them to text / FaceTime / Skype etc., however some options are dependent on the compatible equipment being available for both the IRO and the young person.
37. The expectation with regards to IRO visiting and maintaining contact are set out in the IRO Standards for Looked After Children and their families as well as a pledge specifically aimed at our looked after children. IROs currently record on the Liquid Logic case management system when they visit, have a telephone conversation, or other form communication, with a child or young person.

Adoption and Permanence Planning

38. Additional Looked After Children Reviews are required when a child is to be adopted. When a child becomes the subject of a Placement Order an Adoption Review is required within 3 months of the Order being made. For children moving into an adoption placement additional reviews are held within 28 days and at 3 months regardless of when the last looked after review was held. It is therefore possible for individual children to have up to four Looked After Reviews within a twelve month period.
39. At the second LAC Review scheduled within 4 months of a child or young person becoming looked after, the Permanence Plan should be agreed. The IRO will then actively monitor the care planning process to minimize any drift or delay. Recent analysis of 4 monthly reviews has shown that all but one child during Q1 had their permanency plan discussed during their 4 monthly review. Going forward, performance will be measured and a benchmark established to ensure that all children who are Looked After in Darlington will have a permanency plan at their 4 monthly review.

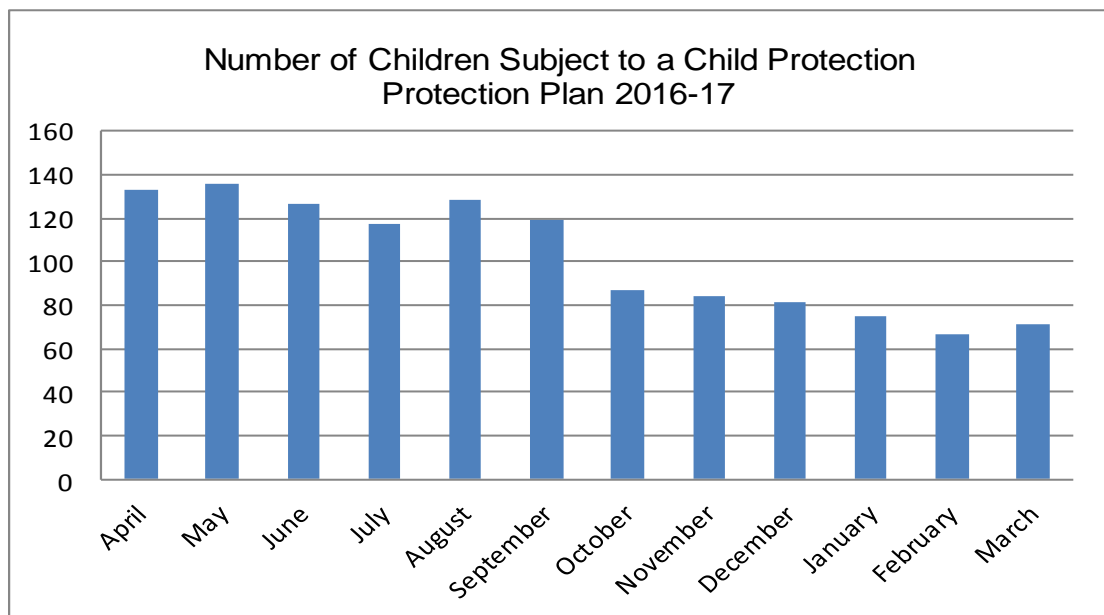
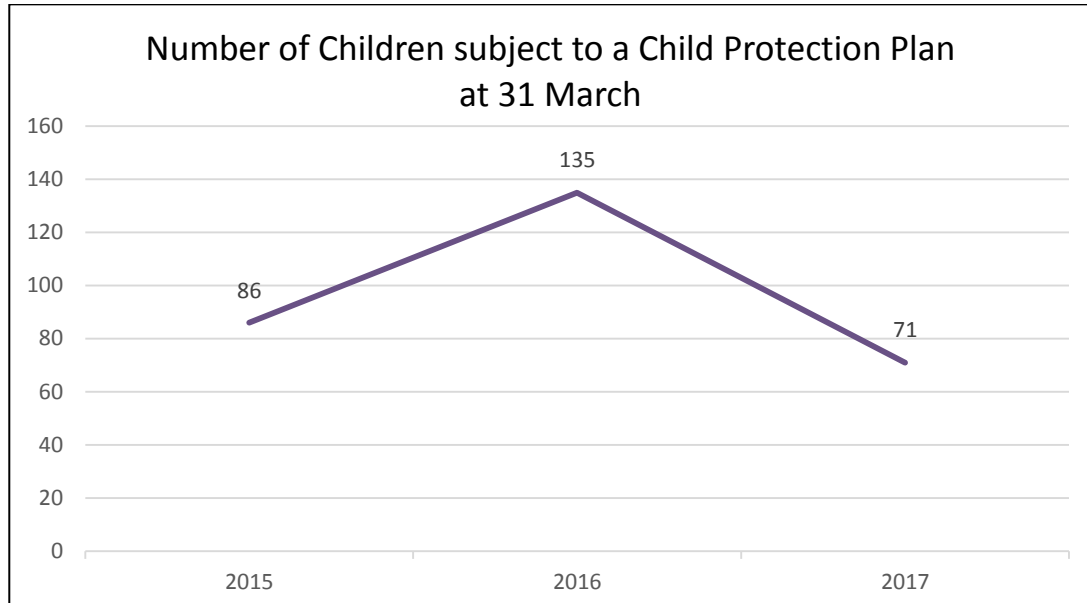
Foster Carer Reviews

40. Local Authorities are required by Regulation 29 (The Fostering Services Regulations 2001) to review the approval of foster carers at least once a year and the Reviewing & Development Service is responsible for undertaking the annual reviews. An additional part-time agency IRO has been engaged to undertake these reviews and is working to a schedule to have all required annual reviews undertaken by the end of October 2017.
41. Any significant changes to circumstances, or concerns raised at the Annual Review, are referred to the Fostering Panel.

Child Protection Activity

42. Number of Children subject to Child Protection Plans

The chart below shows the number of Children subject to Child Protection Plans (CPP) over the last 3 years.



43. The total number of children with a Child Protection Plan on 31st March 2017 was 71; a rate of 31 per 10,000 children under the age of 18yrs. This is a 47% decrease from the previous year, when the figure stood at 135 (a rate of 60 per 10,000).

Rate per 10,000 of Children Subject to Child Protection plans at 31st March	2015/ 16			Darlington 2016/17
	Darlington	North East	England	
	57.9	59.6	43.1	31

44. The rate of children who were the subject of a Child Protection Plan as of 31 March 2017 is below North East and England averages of 31st March 2016. Published benchmark data for 2016/17 will be available later in the year.

Number at 31st March	2014	2015	2016	2017
Darlington	140	86	135	71

45. A deeper analysis of children subject to a Child Protection Plan is due to be carried out in QTR 1 2017

Child Protection Demographics

43. At the end 2016/17, of the 71 children subject to a CPP:

- 7% Unborn, 39% aged under 5 years, 37% aged 5-10 years, 17% aged 11-15 years and 0% aged 16 years+
- 63% had category Neglect, 30% Emotional Abuse, 7% had a category of Physical Abuse, 0% Sexual Abuse.

Note: percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

44. On the 31st March 2016 there were 135 children subject to Child Protection Plans; over the 12 months to 31st March 2017 this had decreased to 71 children. 166 Children were removed from the list and there were 102 new Plans made.

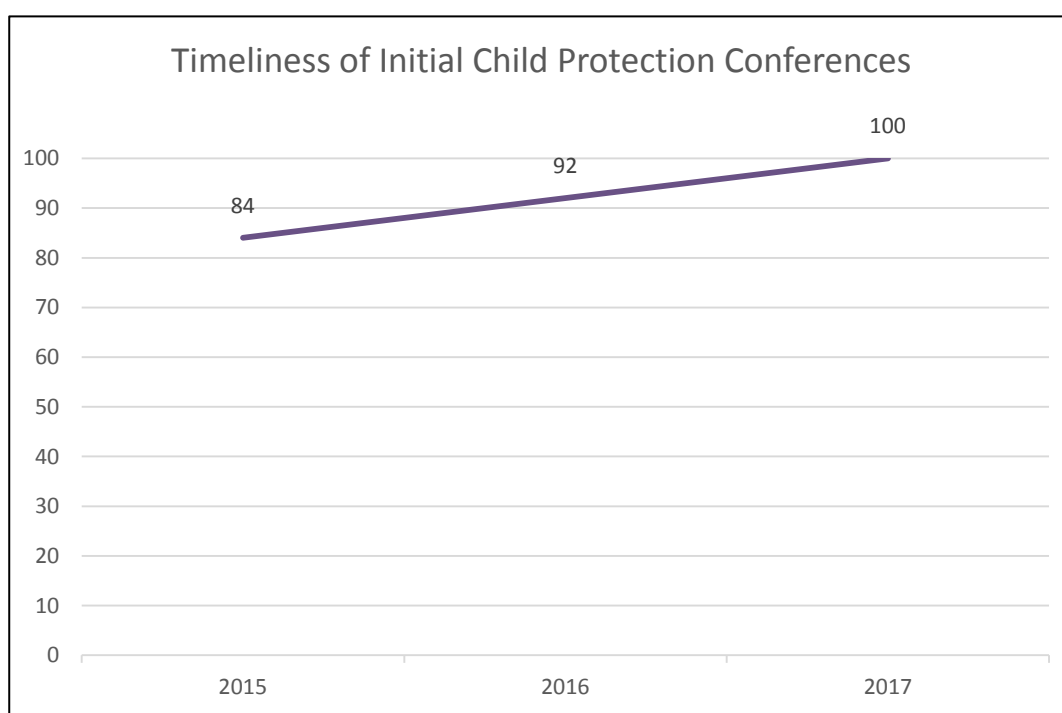
CP Plan Activity	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Becoming subject to a CP Plan	124	171	102
Ceasing to be the subject of a CP Plan	179	122	166
Increase / decrease	-54	+49	-64

45. The table above shows overall activity in relation to CPPs (numbers becoming subject to or ceasing).
46. 166 children had their CPP discontinued in the year 2016/17, an increase from 122 the previous year. This has been a factor in the number of CP Plans dropping steadily over the year.
47. Over the year, 72 Initial Child Protection Conferences and 194 Child Protection

Review Conferences were held. The figures for the previous year were 104 Initial and the table above shows overall Child Protection Conference activity over the last 3 years. In the last year the number of children who were the subject of an ICPC decreased by 43%, from 200 to 114, whilst the number of children subject to a Child Protection Review Conference increased.

48. In the year, the proportion of children subject to ICPCs who were not made subject to a Child Protection Plan was 8.4%; a shift from the relatively high rate of 14.9% in 2015/16.
49. Currently in Darlington there are three areas of under representation in relation to Child Protection Plans that warrant further exploration in 2017/18:
 - There are no children at present open to Life-stages who are subject to a Child protection Plan (i.e. Children with Disabilities)
 - The proportion of Children subject to Child Protection Plan where the risk is Physical Abuse is low
 - The proportion of Children subject to Child Protection Plan where the risk is Sexual Abuse is low. This is in line with National Statistics but is monitored on a regular basis by the CSU.

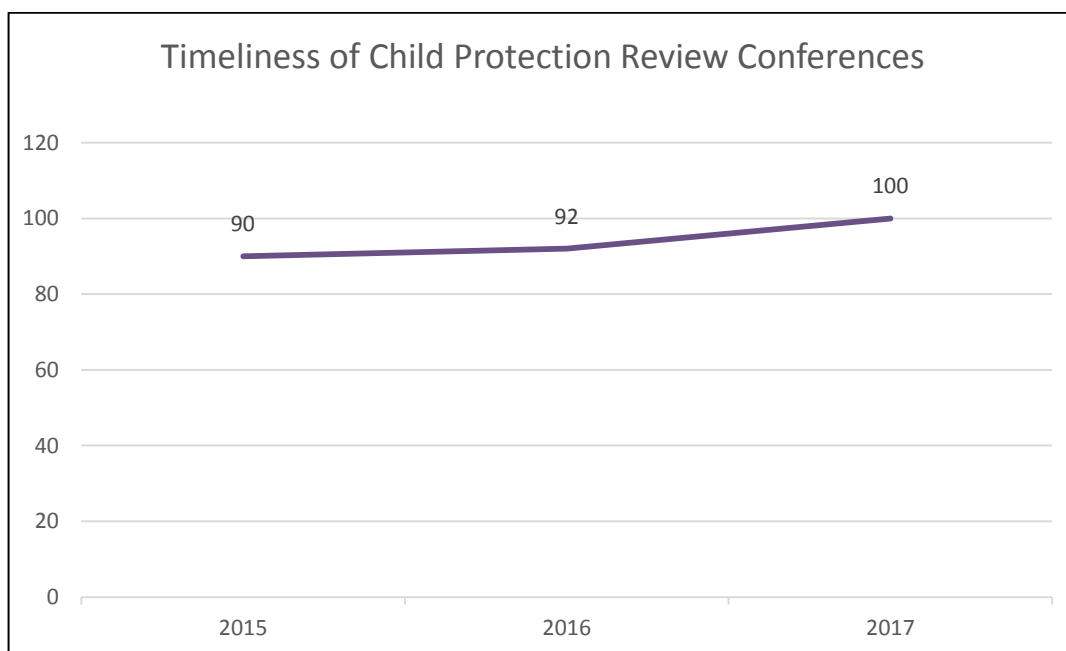
Timeliness of ICPCs



50. The chart above tracks the ICPCs held within the year and records the percentage held within 15 working days of the Section 47 enquiry.
51. For the year to 31st March 2017, 144 (100%) of children were subject to an ICPC that was held within the prescribed 15 working days of the Section 47 Enquiry; a significant improvement on the 2015/16 position of 92%. This has been as a result

of a change to the process where Social Work Managers now consider at 3 days following the Strategy / S47 decision, whether the case is likely to proceed to ICPC, and provisionally book a conference, thus avoiding delay.

Timeliness of CPRCs



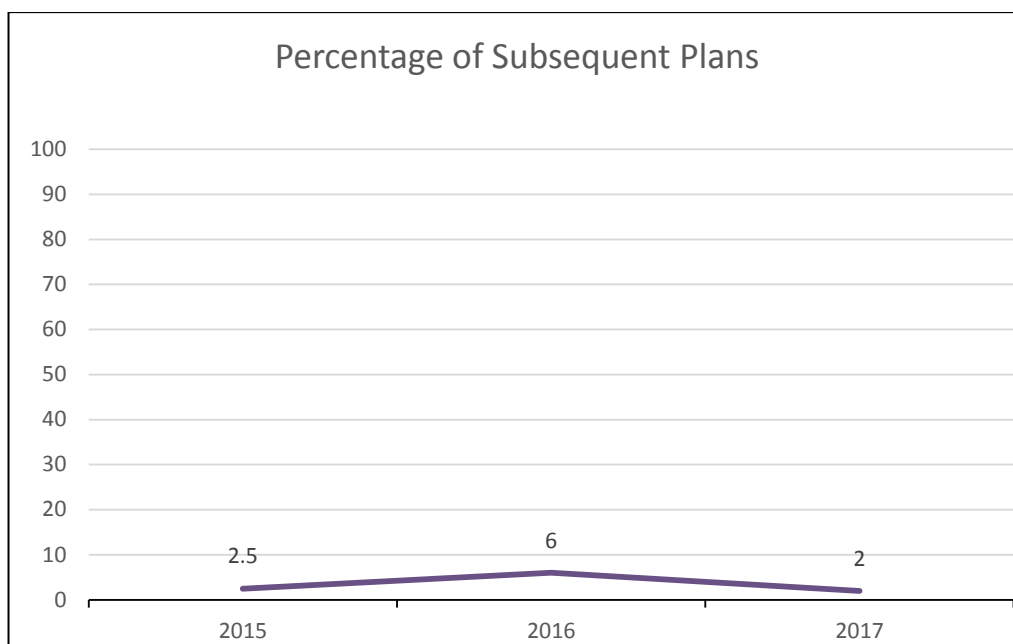
52. The above chart tracks the percentage of Child Protection cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales in the year. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a higher percentage, ideally 100%. In recent years this has been an area of good performance.
53. For the year to 31st March 2017, all 72 (100%) of Child Protection Review Conferences were held within timescales.
54. Performance is monitored on a monthly basis. The corresponding position at the end of 2015/16 was 89%.
55. The Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance requires that the first review should be within 3 months of the initial child protection conference and thereafter at intervals of no more than 6 months.

Child Protection Review Conferences within timescales	2015/			Darlington 2016/17
	Darlington	North	England	
	89%	92%	94%	100%

56. The timeliness of Child Protection Review Conferences in Darlington has improved in the last year and is currently above both the North East and England averages of 31st March 2016. Published benchmark data for 2016/17 will be available later in the year.

Second or Subsequent Plans

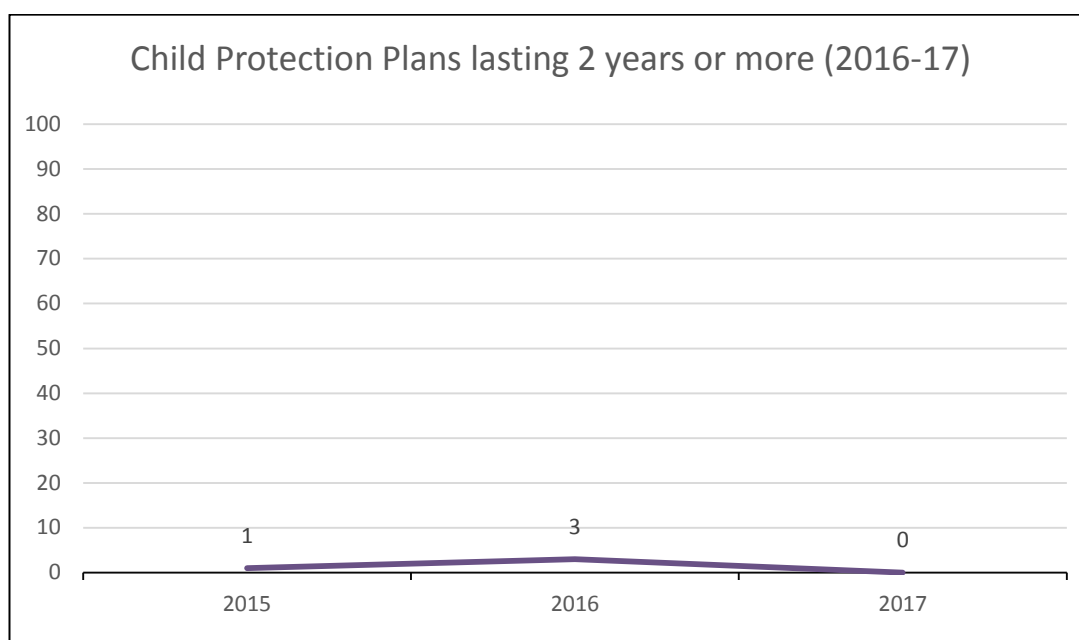
57. The chart below shows the percentage of children becoming the subject of Child Protection Plans for a second or subsequent time (within 24 months).



58. This indicator is a proxy for the level and quality of service a child receives. Its purpose is to monitor whether Children's Social Care Services devise and implement a Child Protection Plan which leads to lasting improvement in a child's safety and overall well-being. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a lower figure. However, it is acknowledged that a second or subsequent child protection plan will sometimes be necessary to deal with adverse changes to the child's circumstances.

59. National benchmarked data is based on a second or subsequent plan being agreed at any time after a previous plan. Our rate for 2016-17 was 2%, well below both the England average of 18% and regional average of 14% from the previous year.

Child Protection Plans lasting 2 years or more



60. The above chart tracks the number of children who had been the subject of a CPP continuously for two years or longer against the number of children ceasing to be the subject of a CPP during the year, expressed as percentage.

61. This indicator reflects the underlying principle that professionals should be working towards specified outcomes which, if implemented effectively, should lead to the majority of children not needing to be the subject of a Child Protection Plan within a two year period, however it is recognised that some children will need CPPs for longer. Good performance is therefore typified by a lower percentage.

62. The period of time that children are subject to a Child Protection Plan is monitored by the Children's Safeguarding Unit Manager with particular attention given to tracking cases where they are:

- Approaching their first Child Protection Review Conference, and
- 15 months after a Child Protection Plan is put in place.

This system has ensured that cases are reviewed in a timely manner, and that there is an appropriate level of scrutiny on the plans made for children and young people.

63. The percentage of children ceasing to be the subject of a Child Protection Plan who had been the subject of a Child Protection Plan continuously for two years or longer was 0%, during the year to 31st March 2017.

64. The percentage of Child Plans ceasing where the plan had lasted more than 2 years in Darlington is currently below the North East average (4.6%) and similar to the England (4%) average at 31st March 2016. Published benchmark data for

2016/17 will be available later in the year.

Family attendance at Conference

65. In the year, out of 71 invitations, family members attended 67 Initial Child Protection Conferences, a total of 94%, slightly lower than last year's rate of 97%. There are various reasons why families do not attend, such as holidays or personal circumstances.
66. In the year, out of 185 invitations, family members attended 168 Child Protection Review Conferences, a total of 91%, again slightly lower than last year's rate of 94%.

Year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Percentage of ICPCs attended by parents / family	95%	97%	94%
Percentage of CPRCs attended by parent / family	91%	94%	91%

67. Over the year to 31st March 2017, no family members with parental responsibility were excluded from attending child protection conferences.
68. Since April 2016 a draft Child Protection Plan is distributed at the end of the Initial Child Protection Conference enabling professionals to leave the meeting with a copy of the plan.
69. Since July 2016, all Social Work child protection reports are emailed to professionals 48 hours prior to the conference taking place, which means that reports are being received 72 hours prior to conference. By sending out reports two days before the meeting this has improved the situation for all conference attendees, including parents.

Participation in Conference

70. The Unit is committed to promoting independent advocacy for children and young people. The Council has a contract with the National Youth Advocacy Service which provides an independent and confidential service, however the uptake of this service could be improved upon. The IROs chairing Child Protection Conferences have a responsibility for ensuring that children and young people are aware of the National Youth Advocacy Service and how to access it. If the young person is not in attendance there needs to be a clear action regarding how the advocacy role will be communicated to the child or young person.

Quality Assurance

71. In September 2015 Ofsted raised the following concerns about the effectiveness of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) as well as systems and processes around Child Protection Case Conferences:

- Ensure that independent reviewing officers (IRO) demonstrate rigour when overseeing both the quality and progress of plans, and the frequency of social work visits to children who are the subject of child protection plans
- When IROs challenge poor practice, make sure this is clearly recorded and monitored to ensure improvements are made and where necessary, a lack of progress can be formally escalated to senior leaders
- Ensure when children are looked after that decisions about their need for permanence are timely with robust oversight, including by IROs

72. In order to ensure that the effectiveness of the Unit and ability to provide a key Quality Assurance function, it is essential that the Independent Review Team have the relevant skills, knowledge and understanding.

73. The quality and effectiveness of the Children's Safeguarding Unit is ensured through:

- Workload Allocation
- Supervision and Personal Development Review (PDR)
- Team Meetings
- Audit
- Training and Development
- Observation

Workload Allocation

74. All Looked After Children and / or children subject to Child Protection Plans are allocated a designated IRO with the intention that where possible the allocated IRO will remain consistent, until the child is no-longer Looked After or subject to a Child Protection Plan.

75. Allocations are monitored regularly and form part of the discussion in monthly supervision sessions.

Supervision and Annual Appraisal

76. Monthly supervision is undertaken with Independent Reviewing Officers that includes:

- Caseloads
- Performance issues (team / individual)

- Case management discussions
- Learning identified
- Team Meeting (matters arising / issues for future meetings)
- Training (attended / identified)
- Involvement of young people (visits by IRO / attendance at conference / LAC Reviews)

77. Personal Development Reviews are undertaken in line with corporate arrangements.

Team Meetings

78. Team meetings are held on a minimum of a monthly basis and cover a range of practice issues, updates on local, regional and national developments, sharing of good practice, and learning from reviews and inspections. Additional meetings are held with IROs when necessary. Some sessions focus on the work of the IROs, while others involve the wider team and include the Administration staff who support the IROs.

Audit

79. The monthly audit cycle undertaken as part of the new Performance Framework will provide feedback on the work of IROs in relation to both Looked After Children and those subject to Child Protection Plans. In addition, in 2017/18 a bespoke tool will be developed to Quality Assure the work undertaken by IROs.

80. The Children's Safeguarding Unit has reviewed the Child Protection post-conference outcome sheet to include a comment on the quality of the social work report (judgement will be made using the criteria Outstanding / Good / Requires Improvement / Inadequate). This information is to be collected to provide monitoring performance reports for managers.

Training and Development

81. Individual training requirements for IROs are identified through supervision and annual appraisals.

82. Team training requirements can be identified through local developments (i.e. the implementation of the Signs of Safety methodology, National Reports, LSCB, Case Reviews, Ofsted, Regional Independent Reviewing Officers Managers group, Research, learning from Complaints / Dispute Resolution process etc.

83. All of the current IROs have either completed, or are scheduled to attend Signs of Safety training provided by an external provider so that full implementation of the methodology can be in place in the autumn of 2017.

84. As Signs of Safety is rolled out it is likely that further Child Protection Conference

Specific training will be required for the IROs who chair these meetings so that the role of the IRO is clearly defined.

Observation

85. An Annual cycle of direct observations of Looked After Reviews by the IRO line manager.
86. In addition to the above the IRO Unit is open to external scrutiny that has included:
 - LSCB Programme of observations
 - Ofsted Monitoring visits
87. As part of their monitoring function, IROs have a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority's function as a corporate parent and identify any areas of poor practice. This includes identifying patterns of concern emerging not just around individual children but also more generally in relation to the collective experience of looked after children and the services they receive. Equally important, the IROs recognise and report on good practice.
88. All Looked After Children and children subject to Child Protection Plans are allocated a designated IRO with the aim that whenever possible this will remain consistent throughout the period of involvement. Recent changes to staff have impacted on this however, this should improve in 2017/18 as the aim is to reduce the number of agency staff and have all IRO posts as permanent appointments.

Dispute Resolution Process

89. One of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the Care Planning process. The Dispute Resolution process reinforces the authority of the IRO and their accountability for decisions made at reviews. IROs will refer to the process when they feel that is appropriate to follow up on recommendations that have not been actioned or where the implementation of a Care Plan is delayed. IROs will in the first instance use informal negotiation to resolve issues, and only where this is not successful will a formal challenge be made by instigating the Dispute Resolution Process.
90. A revised IRO Dispute Resolution Process was launched in April 2016, bringing greater clarity to the process of challenge by IROs. A monitoring system is in place enabling progress and impact to be tracked and monitored by the Head of Service. IRO challenge is reported regularly at Senior Management Team Meetings.
91. The 'IRO footprint' is now regularly evidenced on children's records. Work is continuing to ensure that all staff understand and respond to disputes and challenges raised and that IROs are consistent in terms of the expectations in relation to issues they raise. The majority of the challenges in 2017/18 were dealt with at Social Worker / Team Manager level.

Next steps for 2017/18

- Improve contact with young people, including those who live outside the Borough, between reviews
- Increase participation and attendance of young people and their families in child protection conferences
- Increase permanent appointments and reduce the need for agency staff cover
- Enhance business processes to ensure timely circulation of minutes following review meetings
- Move from manual to electronic systems for the recording of all IRO activity
- Contribute to exploration in areas of underrepresentation on child protection plans such as children with a disability and those at risk of physical and sexual abuse
- Improve take up of Advocacy service for children and young people.