

**CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
7 SEPTEMBER 2020**

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2019-20

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

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 the attached report.

Summary

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 also highlights areas for further development.

The statutory requirements for individual services to safeguard and promote the welfare of children are set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children, A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (July 2018). 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

It is recommended that:-

- (a) Members note the content of this annual report

Suzanne Joyner

Director of Children and Adults Services

Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers

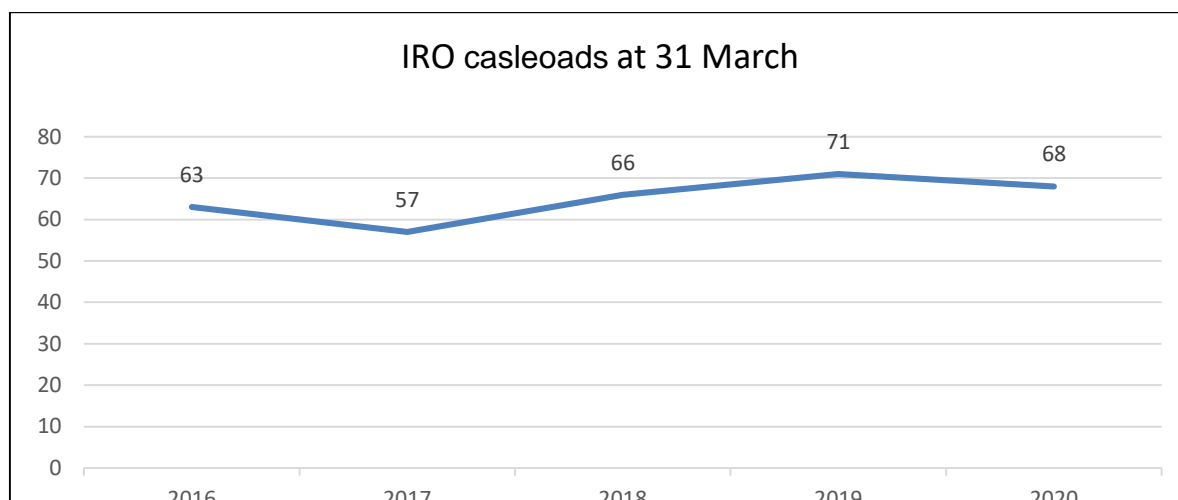
1. The Independent Reviewing Officers are committed to achieving the best outcomes for all children and young people in Darlington, particularly the most vulnerable; including, children who are looked after and those subject to Child Protection Plans.
2. The Service has an independent role to ensure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

Staffing Levels and Caseloads

5. 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.
6. During 2019-20 the IRO team has been stable and all substantive posts remain permanent appointments. At 31 March 2020 there were 5.2 IRO posts plus an additional 0.4 agency post to undertake Annual Foster Carer Reviews.
7. The Independent Reviewing Officers are supported by a full time Business Support Team Leader and 5.0 permanent Business Support Officers (one post is term time only).
8. The Independent Reviewing Officer's handbook (2010) recommends that caseloads for IROs need to be between 50 and 70 LAC children.
9. 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."
10. Annual Foster Carer Reviews continue to be undertaken by a part-time agency Reviewing Officer to ensure independence and avoid any conflict of interest with in-house foster carers.

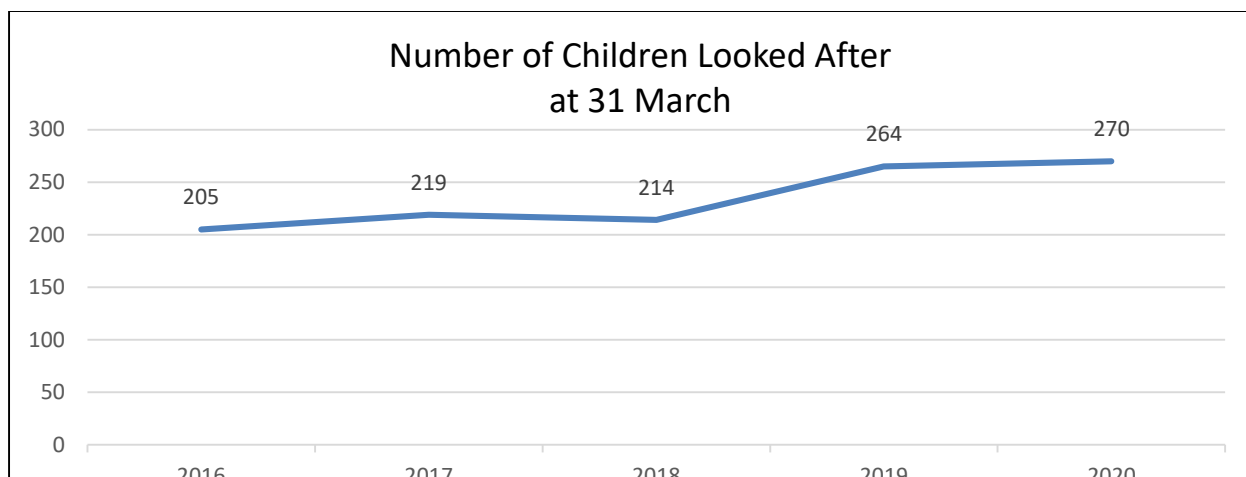
11. Over the last 12 months, the requirement around the size of caseloads for IROs in Darlington has fallen slightly from an average of 71 children to 68 children. This remains at the upper limit of the statutory guidance.



12. This figure does not include additional work undertaken by IROs:
- one IRO is a member of the Children's Placement Service Panel (14 Panels held annually)
 - another provides Multi-agency Child Protection training sessions (12 sessions in year).
13. When caseloads are manageable it allows IROs to have sufficient time to provide a quality service to each Looked After Child including meeting with the child before the review to ensure that their views are clearly understood, consulting with social workers following significant changes, monitoring drift and where appropriate, ensuring that a challenge is made.
14. In addition to LAC Reviews and Child Protection Conferences, IROs have undertaken monthly case file audits and the chairing of, Secure Reviews and Disruption Meetings.
15. There is a statutory requirement in the IRO Handbook to ensure sufficient administrative support to Independent Reviewing Officers in relation to Looked After Reviews. Current responsibilities include the administering and producing a record of Child Protection Conferences as well as the administrative function in relation to Looked After Children. Regular meetings are held with the Business Support Team leader to agree how the team can best support the Children's Safeguarding Unit.

Looked After Children

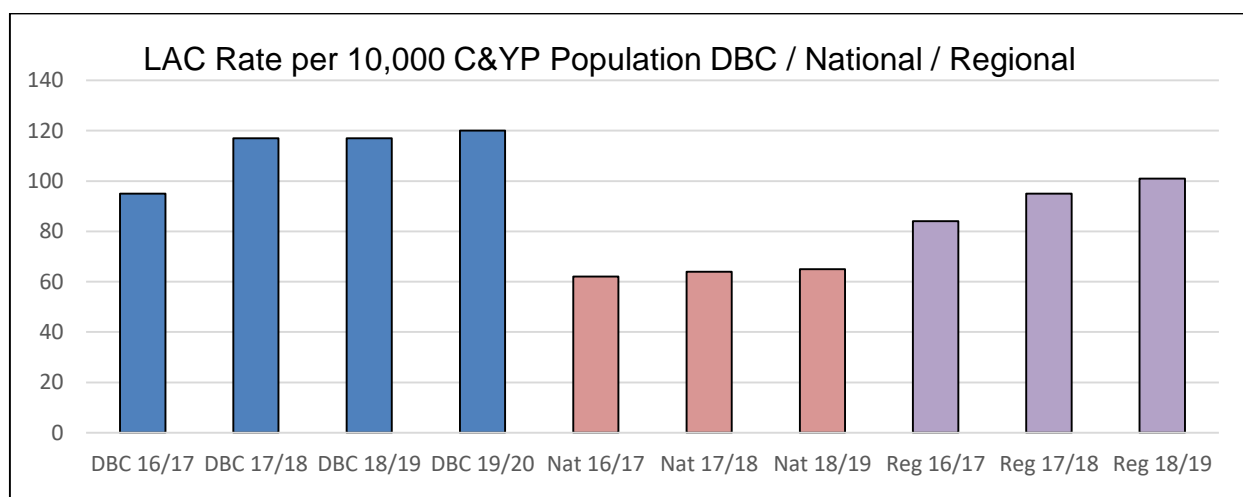
16. At the end of March 2020 there were 270 Children Looked After in Darlington, a similar position to the previous year (264) which had experienced a significant increase. This follows the relatively stable position that has been in place since 2016.
17. The chart below shows the monthly number of Looked After Children (LAC) over the last 56 years.



18. The rate in Darlington has remained high; it plateaued with only small increases though 2016 to 2018. There was a significant increase in numbers during the summer of 2018 followed by a relatively stable period over the last 12 months.

Looked After Children rate per 10,000

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



20. At the end of March 2020, 270 children were looked after by Darlington a rate of 120.1 per 10,000, a slight increase from the rate of 117.20 per 10,000 for 2018/19.
21. Analysis shows that Darlington continues to have a significantly higher rate of Looked After Children than both the Regional and Statistical neighbours' average. It should be noted the most recent published data is as of 31 March 2019 and there has been a national increase in Children Looked After over the year. The comparator figures for 31 March 2019 will be published in the autumn.

LAC Demographics

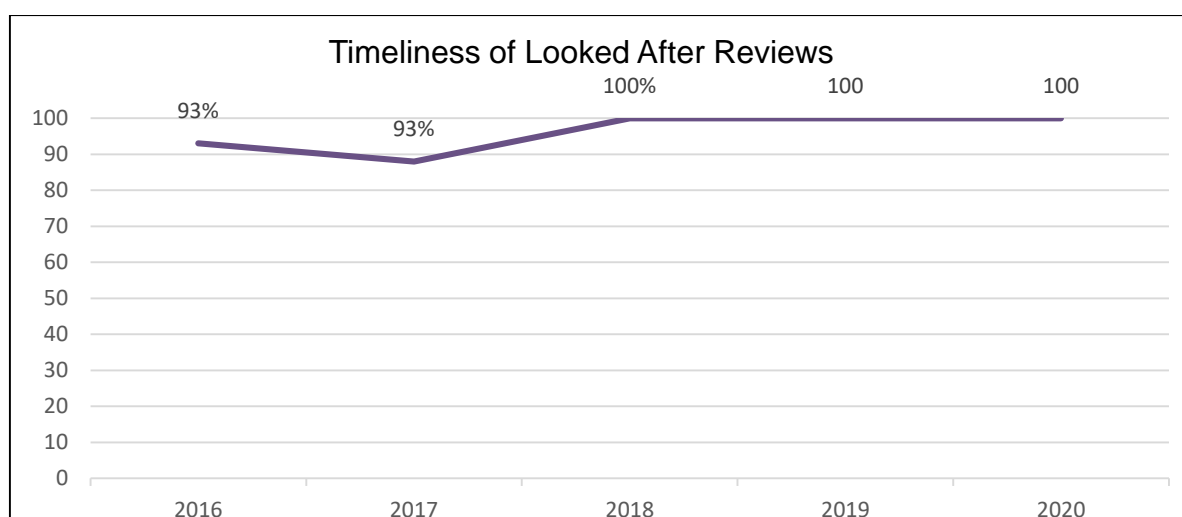
Age Looked After Children (as of 31 st March)	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	
Under 1	8%	8%	5%	8%	15	6%
1-4	18%	16%	15%	16%	51	19%
5-9	21%	26%	26%	26%	71	26%
10-15	34%	33%	35%	39%	100	37%
16-17	20%	17%	18%	12%	33	12%
Total	205	219	214	264	270	

22. The age profile of Darlington's Looked After population has remained stable over the last 4 years. The majority of Looked After Children in Darlington are aged between 10 and 15 years which is similar to the distribution nationally.

Ethnicity of Looked After Children (as of 31 st March)	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	
White	94%	90%	92%	91%	244	90%
Mixed	4%	6%	4%	5%	12	4%
Asian or Asian British	1%	3%	3%	3%	9	3%
Black or Black British	1%	1%	1%	1%	5	2%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0%	0	0%
Total	205	219	214	264	270	

23. The ethnic population of Looked After Children in Darlington has remained stable over the previous 4 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



24. The above chart shows that during 2019-20 performance in relation to the percentage of LAC cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales was 100%, maintaining the improvements made in recent 4 years.

LAC Participation and contact with IRO

25. Participation applies to children or young people (subject to age and understanding; Care Planning, Placement and Case Review, DCSF March 2010).
26. 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
27. Children's participation in their Looked After Review looks at those children over the age of 4 years who participate in their statutory review through attending or other form of contribution (via advocate, written submission etc.). At the end of this reporting year, 787 individual Looked After Reviews were held, an 11% increase on the 712 held the previous year (but a 37% increase in activity over the last two years).

Aged Under 4	C&YP Participation in Reviews (over the age of 4 years)	
	Participated	Did not Participate
196	563 (96%)	22 (4%)

28. The aim will be to increase the proportion of children and young people over the age of 4 that attend their review meeting, and to reduce the number of meetings where there is no views expressed.
29. 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 4 or over and make arrangements to meet them prior to their LAC review. All contact details are provided at the time of allocation.
30. The IRO Handbook recommends the IRO meets 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.
31. 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.

Permanence Planning and Adoption

32. 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.in 2018/19 all children had their permanency plan discussed at their 4 month review.

33. 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.

Dispute Resolution Process

34. 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 auctioned 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.
35. There is good evidence of the 'IRO footprint' being evidenced on children's records. The letter form Ofsted following the Focused Visit in February 2019 stated:
- Independent reviewing officers (IROs) have become more effective since the last inspection (February / March 2018). They appropriately challenge Social Workers and Team Managers to help progress plans and reduce delay for children.
36. Evidence of IRO involvement in cases is checked via Learning Audits, dip sampling and through regular case supervision.

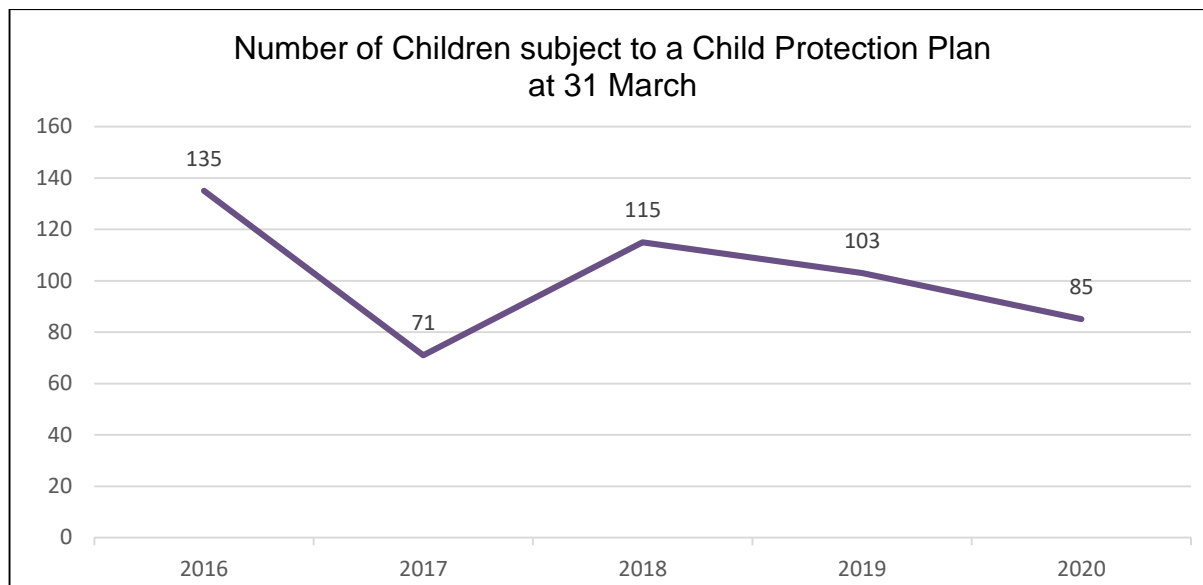
Foster Carer Reviews

37. 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. The additional part-time agency IRO has been retained. Ofsted during their re-inspection of Services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers; commented that it was good practice to have someone other than an IRO undertaking this role due to possible conflicts of interest.
38. Any significant changes to circumstances, or concerns raised at the Annual Review, are referred to the Children's Placement Service Panel. All required

Child Protection Activity

39. 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 5 years.



40. The total number of children with a Child Protection Plan on 31st March 2020 was 85; a rate of 37.8 per 10,000 children under the age of 18yrs. This is a decrease from the figure position at the end of March 2019, when the figure stood at 103 (a rate of 45.7 per 10,000).

Rate per 10,000 of Children Subject to Child Protection Plans at 31 st March	2018 / 19			2019/20
	Darlington	North East	England	Darlington
National stats table (D1)	45.7	63.1	43.7	37.8

41. The rate of children who were the subject of a Child Protection Plan as of 31 March 2020 remains below North East and inline England averages of 31st March 2019. Published benchmark data for 2019/20 will be available later in the year.

Child Protection Demographics

42. At the end 2019/20, of the 85 children subject to a Child Protection Plan. Nationally the most recent published data for March 2019. In the tables below please note that the percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Age of Children subject to a Child Protection Plan / (as of 31 st March)	DBC 2019	National 2019	DBC 2020

Unborn	2%	8%	5%
Under 5	47%	16%	24%
5 -10	34%	26%	35%
11-15	17%	33%	29%
16 +	1%	17%	7%
Total	103		85

Category of Child Protection Plan / (as of 31 st March)	DBC 2019	National 2019	DBC 2020
Neglect	68%	48%	38%
Physical	4%	7%	8%
Sexual	5%	4%	8%
Emotional	23%	38%	45%
Multiple	0	3%	0
Total	103		85

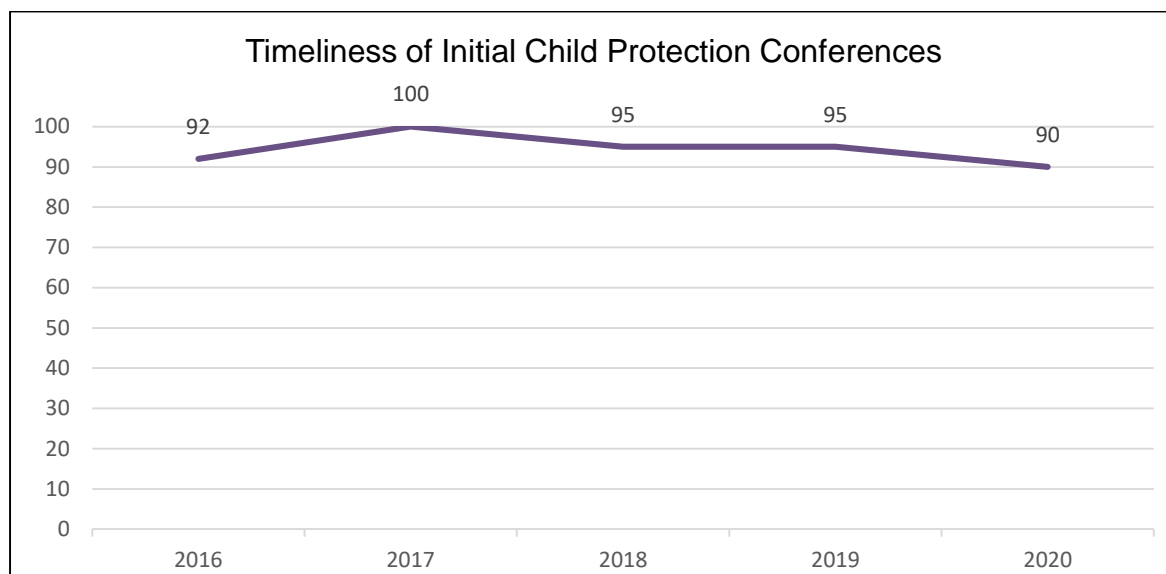
43. The proportion of Children subject to Child Protection Plan where the risk is Physical Abuse or Sexual Abuse remains broadly in line with the national position. Locally the interpretation of the impact of emotional harm in cases of neglect may inflate the percentage of cases categorised as being at risk from Emotional Abuse. Although multiple-categories should not be used this is still utilised in some local authority areas and therefore appears in the national statistics.
44. On the 31st March 2019 there were 103 children subject to Child Protection Plans; over the 12 months to 31st March 2020 this had decreased to 85 children. 173 Children had Plans removed and 155 new Plans were made.

CP Plan Activity	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Becoming subject to a CP Plan	171	102	138	180	155
Ceasing to be the subject of a CP	122	166	94	192	173
Increase / decrease	+49	- 64	+44	-12	-18

45. The table above shows overall activity in relation to Child Protection Plans (numbers becoming subject to or ceasing). The situation in the last two years has been relatively stable when compared to the larger fluctuations seen in previous years.
46. Over the year, 97 Initial Child Protection Conferences and 16 Transfer Conferences [a combined total of 203 children] and 171 Child Protection Review Conferences were held [342 children].
47. The corresponding figures for the previous year were 114 Initial Child Protection Conferences and 19 Transfer Conferences [combined total of 220 children] In addition to this there were 191 Child Protection Review Conferences [375 children]. This was a slight decrease in activity when compared to the previous year.
48. In the year, the proportion of children subject to ICPCs who were not made subject to a Child Protection Plan was 16.6% similar level to the previous year [14.3%].
49. In Darlington at the end of March, there was one child open to Life-stages who was subject to a Child Protection Plan (i.e. Children with Disabilities). A very slight increase on the position

over the previous two years when there was no child with a disability subject to a Child Protection Plan at the year end. This information is not currently part of the nationally published data so no comparison is available.

Timeliness of ICPCs

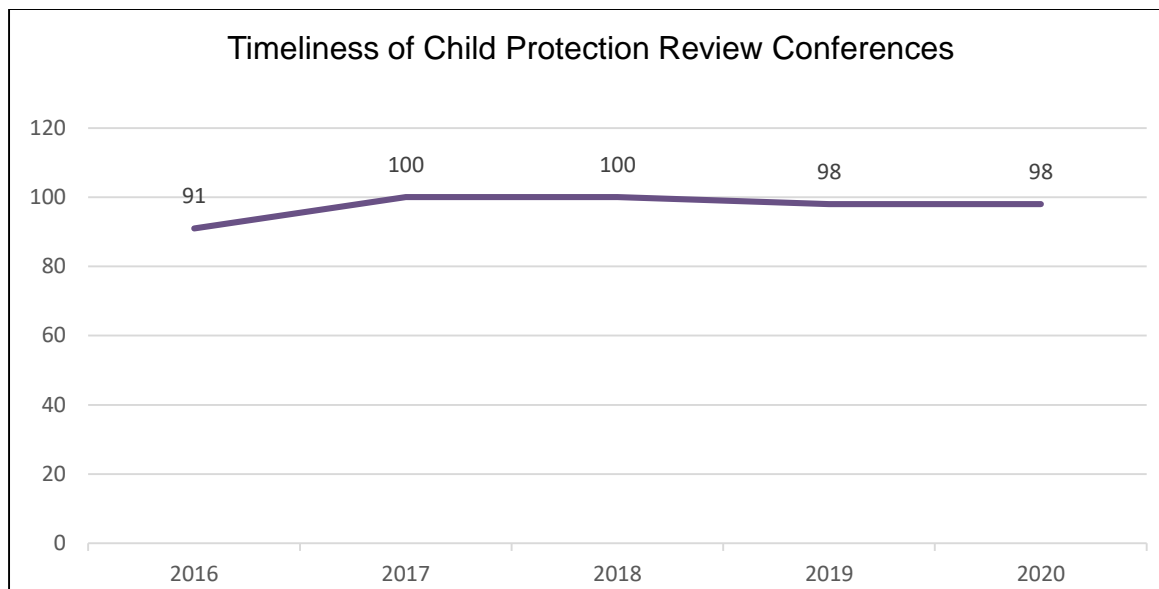


50. The chart above tracks the ICPCs held within the year and records the percentage that are held within 15 working days of the Section 47 enquiry.
51. For the year to 31st March 2020, 153 (90%) of children were subject to an ICPC (excludes transfer conferences) that was held within the prescribed 15 working days of the Section 47 Enquiry. Although performance has dropped over the year it remains higher than statistical benchmarks; regional [82%], statistical neighbours [82%] and national benchmark of [79%]. Eighteen children from five families had meetings delayed for the following reasons:
- delay in key information being available for conference,
 - availability of a key professional,
 - availability of interpreter to attend, and
 - a father being abroad on the date that the meeting was due to be held.

In each case an interim plan was in place to ensure that the children were safeguarded.

Timeliness of CPRCs

52. 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.



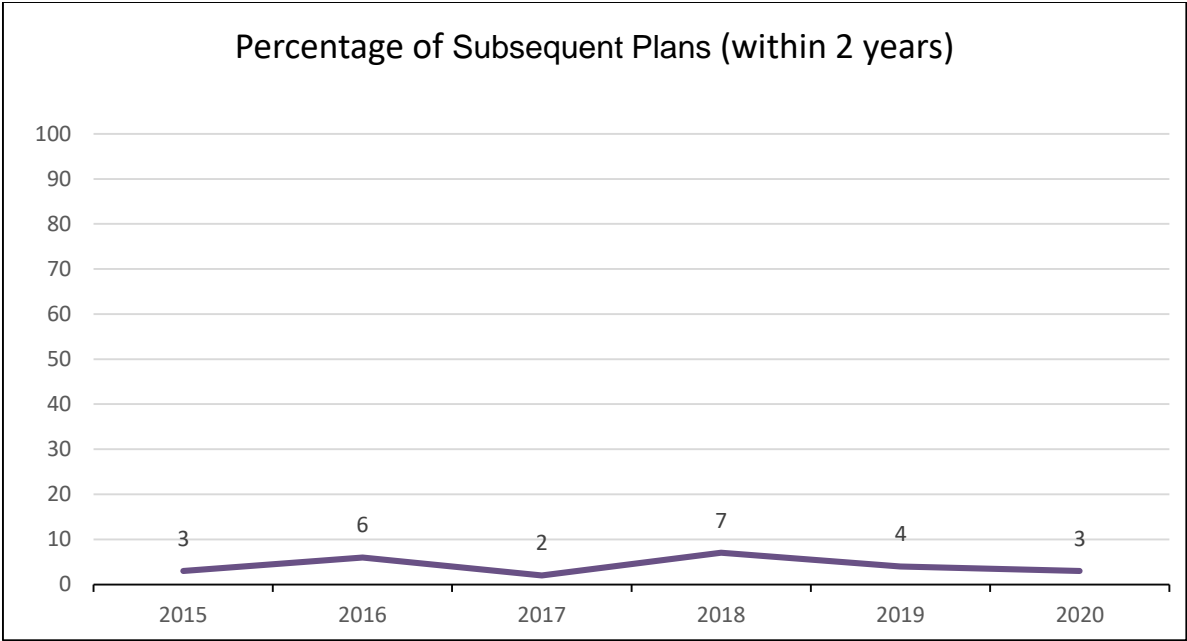
53. The above chart tracks the percentage of Child Protection cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales in the year. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a higher percentage, ideally 100%. In recent years this has been an area of good performance.
54. For the year to 31st March 2020, 98% of children had their Child Protection Review Conferences within timescales [98%], the same as last year. Again performance in this area remains higher than regional [93%], national [92%] and statistical neighbours [94%].

Child Protection Review Conferences within timescales	2018/2019			2019/20
	Darlington	North East	England	Darlington
	98%	93%	92%	98%

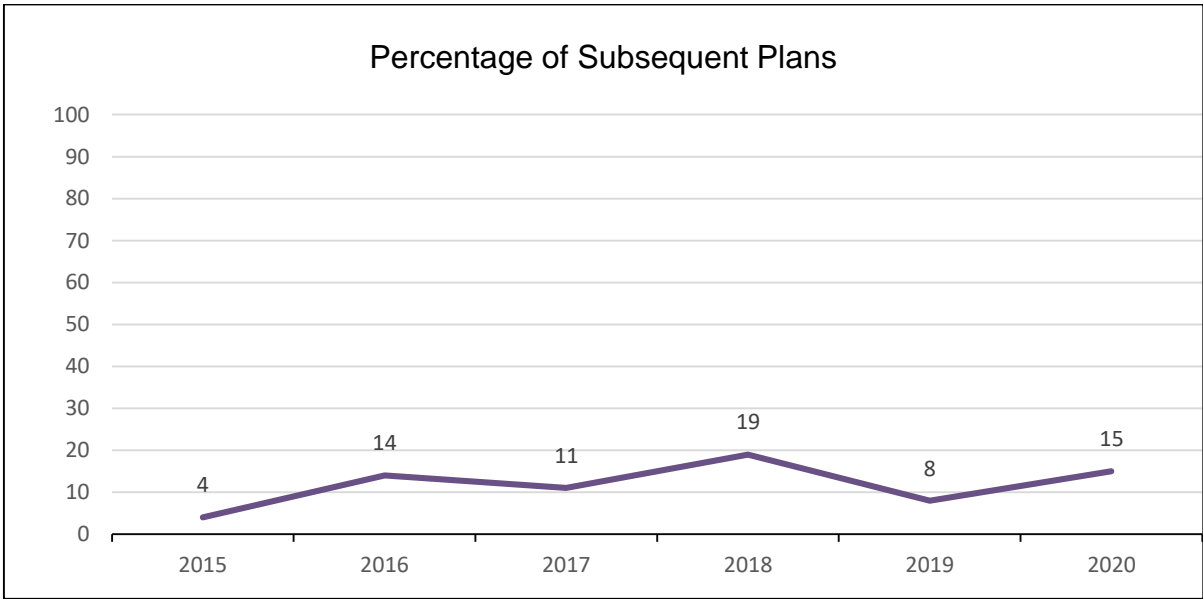
55. Published benchmark data for 2019/20 will be available later in the year.

Second or Subsequent Plans

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

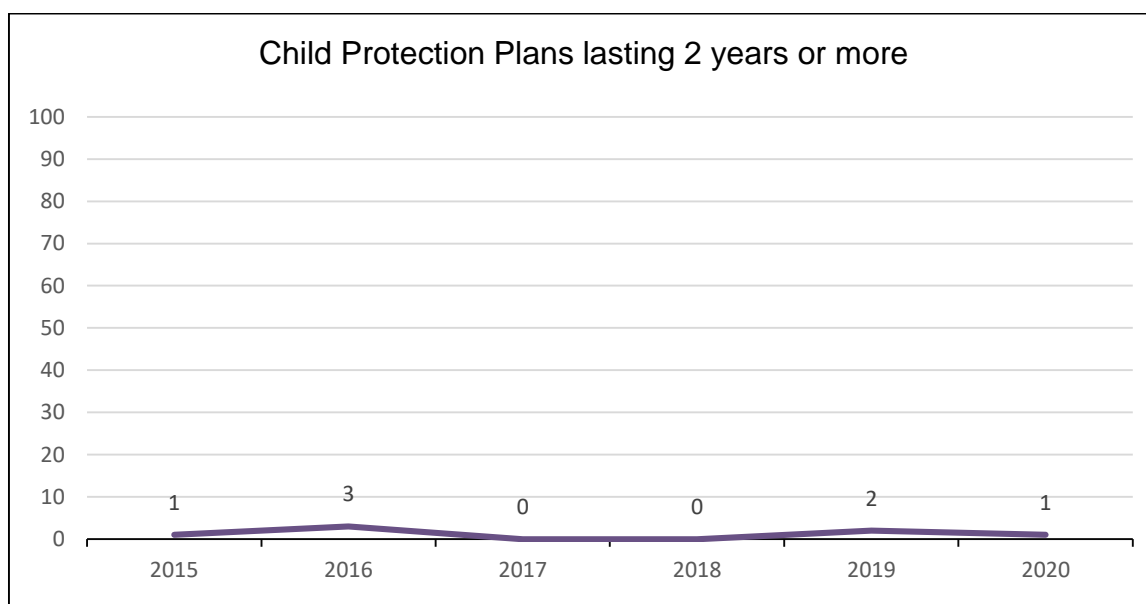


57. This indicator is a proxy for the level and quality of service a child receives. Its purpose is to monitor whether Children's Social Care Services devise and implement a Child Protection Plan which leads to lasting improvement in a child's safety and overall well-being. Good performance for this 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.



58. National benchmarked data is based on a second or subsequent plan being agreed at any time after a previous plan. Our rate for 2019-20 had was 14.7%, although this was an increase it remains better than both the England average of 20.8% and the regional average which is 21.8% (most recent published data).

Child Protection Plans lasting 2 years or more



59. The above chart tracks the number of children who had been the subject of a Child Protection Plan continuously for two years or longer against the number of children ceasing to be the subject of a Child Protection Plan during the year, expressed as percentage.
60. 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 Child Protection Plans for longer. Good performance is therefore typified by a lower percentage.
61. 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.

62. 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 0.6% during the year to 31st March 2020.
63. The percentage of Child Plans ceasing where the plan had lasted more than 2 years in Darlington is currently below both the North East average [2.2%] and England [3.3%] averages at 31st March 2019. Published benchmark data for 2019/2009 will be available later in the year.

Family attendance at Conference

64. In the year, out of 97 invitations, parents attended 89 Initial Child Protection Conferences, a total of 92%, in-line with the rate in recent years.
65. In the year, out of 171 invitations, family members attended 152 Child Protection Review Conferences, a total of 89%, again in-line with the rate in recent years. Generally the rate for Child Protection Reviews tends to be lower by a few percentage points.

Year	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Percentage of ICPCs attended by parent	97%	94%	95%	94%	92%
Percentage of CPRCs attended by parent	94%	91%	91%	91%	89%

66. Over the year to 31st March 2020, no family members with parental responsibility were excluded from attending child protection conferences.
67. A draft Child Protection Plan is produced at the end of the Initial Child Protection Conference enabling professionals and family members to leave the meeting with a copy. The plan is therefore available at the first Core Group that is held within 10 working days of the Initial Child Protection Conference.
68. 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. If the young person is not in attendance the IRO should ensure that there is an agreed action for the Core Group regarding how the advocacy role will be communicated to the child or young person.

Management

Quality Assurance

69. 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.
70. 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
 - Direct Observation

Workload Allocation

71. 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. The team has been permanently staffed over the period covered by this report, with no staff changes requiring temporary cover. This is positive position when compared to previous years.
72. Allocations are monitored regularly and form part of the discussion in monthly supervision sessions.

Supervision and Annual Appraisal

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

- Caseloads
- Performance issues (team / individual)
- Relevant case discussions
- IRO Disputes
- Training (attended / needs identified)
- Involvement of young people (visits by IRO / attendance at conference / LAC Reviews)

74. Annual Personal Development Reviews are undertaken in line with corporate arrangements.

Team Meetings

75. Scheduled Team Meetings are held a minimum of a 12 times in year and are augmented with development sessions (normally two in year). Team meetings 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 have included the Administration staff who support the IROs.

76. This year IRO development sessions have focused on a restorative approach that is part of the Leeds Strengthening Families Programme.

Audit

77. Since the Ofsted re-inspection (February and March 2018), IROs have been integral to the Learning Audits programme. In 2019/20 all IROs have completed audits in line with the monthly quality assurance cycle. This process includes the case-holder in the audit process.

Training and Development

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

79. Bespoke Disruption Meeting Training for IROs was provided sub-regionally in May 2019, all IROs participated in the Regional IRO Conference in October 2019 and they also benefited from the Darlington Staff Conference in January 2020.

80. In the year, two team members have completed the National Assessment Accreditation System (NAAS) for Social Workers and all IROs are registered with Social Work England.

81. IROs continue to provide multi-agency child protection training in partnership with the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Trainer

82. Outside of this IROs complete training in line with corporate requirements.

Observations

83. The Children's Safeguarding Unit is open to external scrutiny. During 2019/20 this has included observations on behalf of Darlington Safeguarding Partnership. A programme number of observations were completed by subgroup members from July 2019 – October 2019.

84. To ensure that quality of practice each year a programme of direct observations of IROs of Looked After Reviews and Conference Chairs of Child Protection Conferences is undertaken by the IRO line manager.

Next steps for 2020/21

85. The following are scheduled for action in 2020/21

- a) To develop a relational approach to the conduct of Child Protection Conferences in line with The Leeds Strengthening Families approach.
- b) To extend the learning from the relational practice developed around Child Protection Conferences to the statutory Child Looked After Review process. This will include improve performance in relation to how children and young people participate in their looked after reviews.
- c) In aligning our approach (as above) to develop consistency and a “team offer” regarding the service provided by the Children’s Safeguarding Unit.
- d) Ensuring the IRO footprint his continues to be a focus for IROs. This needs to be evident in recording and IRO disputes.

Martin Graham
Head of Service QA & PI
20 July 2020