

**CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
25 OCTOBER 2021**

CHILDREN'S SAFEGUARDING UNIT

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2020-21

CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE CHAIR ANNUAL REPORT 2020-21

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The Annual Independent Reviewing Officer report is produced by the Children's Safeguarding Unit (CSU). The report includes an overview of the work by of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service. In Darlington the service provides independent reviewing and functions in relation to both:
 - (a) Children who are Looked After, and
 - (b) Children who are the subject of Child Protection Conferences and / or multi-agency Child Protection Plans.
2. The report provides an overview of performance, activity, and areas for development.
3. The report provides an overview of the service followed by two sections that can be separated:
 - (a) Part 1 is the Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2020/21. The production of this report is a requirement under the statutory guidance. This covers the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer which is a defined role that relates to Children Looked After. This statutory function is set out in the IRO Handbook (2010), and links to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance (2011).
 - (b) Part 2 is the Child Protection Conference Chair Annual Report 2020/21. This covers the role of the conference chair in relation to children who are in need of safeguarding. The statutory requirements are set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children (July 2018), which 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.

COVID-19

4. For the whole of the period April 2020 – March 2021 the work undertaken by the Children’s Safeguarding Unit has been under Covid-19 arrangements. The Government’s *Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for children’s social care service*, states that meetings should; “go ahead, using video conferencing or conference calling solutions where appropriate.”
5. In line with this guidance, all formal meetings, which in previous years would have been face to face, have been conducted using virtual platforms. This applies to all Child Protection Conferences, Child Looked After Review, and the majority of contact with children, young people and their families.

Recommendation

It is recommended that Members note the content of this annual report.

James Stroyan
Group Director of People

S17 Crime and Disorder	No direct impact
Health and Wellbeing	The service actively promotes health and wellbeing of Children & Young People
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	No direct impact
Diversity	The service actively supports the diversity agenda
Wards Affected	The service offers provision across all of Darlington
Groups Affected	Children & Young people subject to Child Protection Conferences Children & Young people who are Looked After
Budget and Policy Framework	The service is managed within current budgets
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
Council Plan	The service contributes to the priorities in the Council Plan; Providing care and support when needed / Working with partners
Efficiency	Scrutiny of performance is integral to optimising outcomes
Impact on Children Looked After Children and Care Leavers	The first part of the report has a focus on Children Looked After

Role of Independent Reviewing Officers

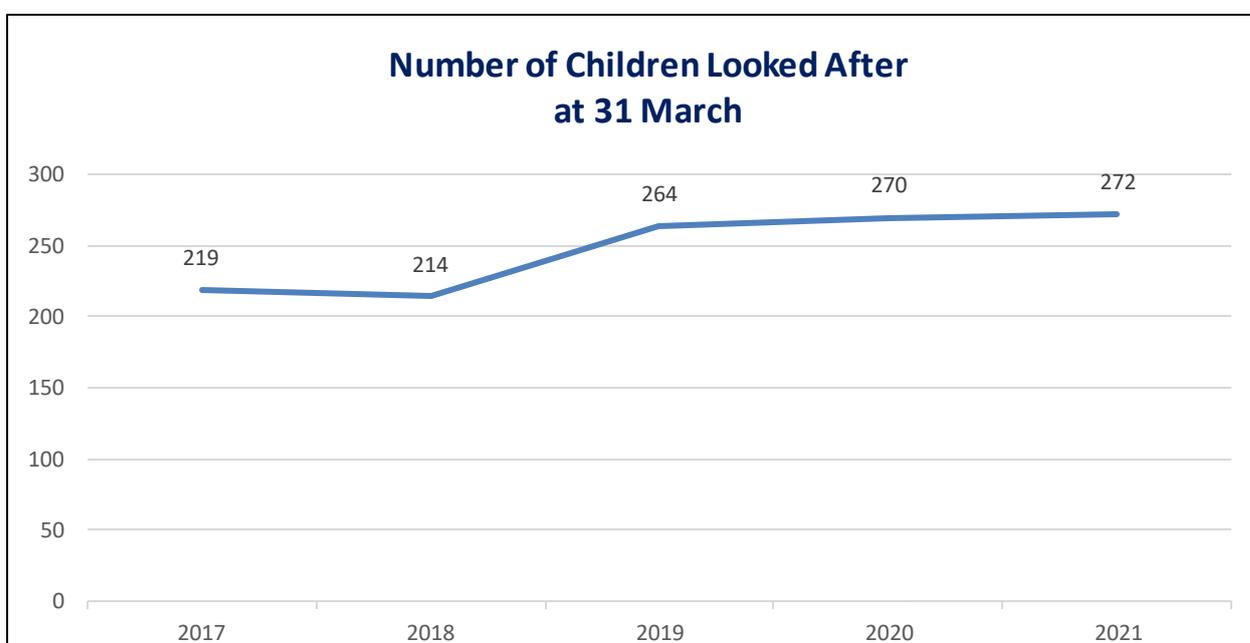
6. The Independent Reviewing Officers are committed to achieving the best outcomes for all children and young people in Darlington, particularly the most vulnerable; including, children who are looked after and those subject to Child Protection Plans.
7. The service is responsible for the following statutory functions:
 - (a) Initial Child Protection Conferences;
 - (b) Child Protection Review Conferences;
 - (c) Child Looked After Reviews;
 - (d) Annual Foster Carer Reviews;
 - (e) Adoption Reviews;
 - (f) Disruption Meetings;
 - (g) Reviews of children placed in Secure Accommodation.
8. In Darlington, Independent Reviewing Officers 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 a range of audits and other quality assurance activities.
9. Responsibility for the operational management, performance and development of the Service lies with the Service Manager for Quality Assurance and Independent Review, who reports to the Head of Practice, Children and Adult Services.

Part 1: INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2020-21

10. The Independent Review Officer (IRO) has a statutory responsibility / role in relation to Children Looked After. This is set out within the statutory framework of the IRO Handbook (2010) which is linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance (2011). The responsibility of the Independent Reviewing Officer 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 Independent Reviewing Officer has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Children Looked After (CLA) and for challenging drift and delay.

Children Looked After

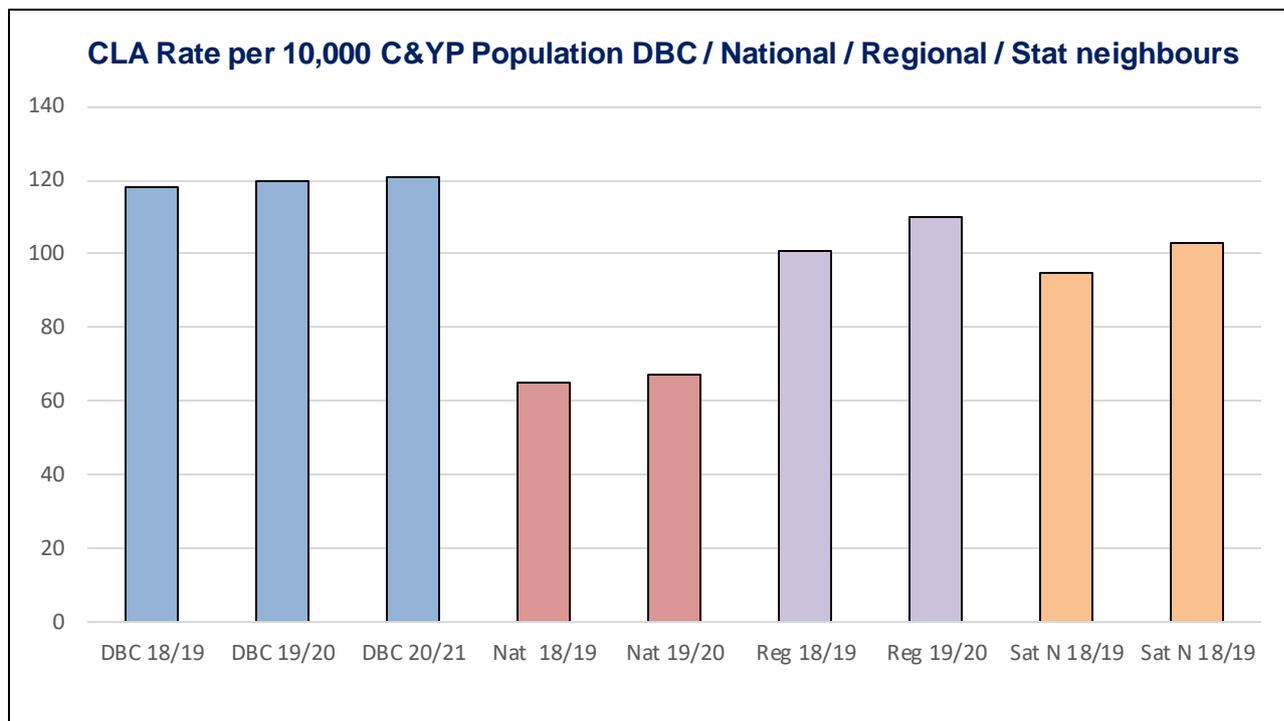
11. At the end of March 2021 there were 272 Children Looked After in Darlington, a similar position to the previous year (270).
12. The chart below shows the monthly number of Children Looked After over the last 5 years.



13. 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. Although the end of year figures for the last two years is similar, the position is not necessarily as stable as it appears; there were 304 Children Looked After in August 2020, and this figure remained at a similar level until November. Due to Covid there were delays in the Courts ability to consider applications to discharge Care Orders which inflated the numbers of Children Looked After for a significant part of the year.

Children Looked After rate per 10,000

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



15. At the end of March 2021, 272 children were looked after by Darlington a rate of 121 per 10,000, a slight increase from the rate of 120 per 10,000 for 2019/20.
16. Analysis shows that Darlington continues to have a significantly higher rate of Children Looked After than both the Regional and Statistical Neighbours' average. It should be noted the most recent published data is as of 31 March 2020 and there has been a national increase in Children Looked After over the year. The comparator figures for 31 March 2021 will be published in the autumn.

Child Looked After Demographics

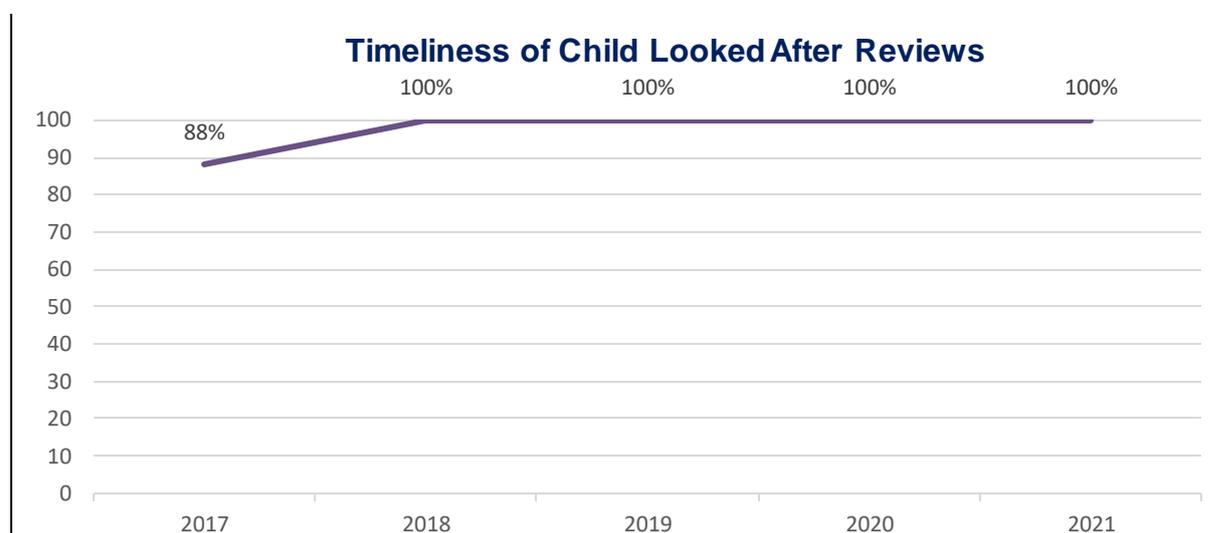
Age of Children Looked After (as of 31 March)	2017	2018	2019	2020		2021	
Under 1	8%	5%	8%	15	6%	11	4%
1-4	16%	15%	16%	51	19%	56	21%
5-9	26%	26%	26%	71	26%	68	25%
10-15	33%	35%	39%	100	37%	100	37%
16-17	17%	18%	12%	33	12%	37	14%
Total	219	214	264	270		272	

17. The age profile of Darlington's Looked After population has remained stable over the last 4 years. The majority of Children Looked After in Darlington continue to be between 10 and 15 years old which matches to the distribution nationally.

Ethnicity of Children Looked After (as of 31 March)	2017	2018	2019	2020		2021	
White	90%	92%	91%	244	90%	250	92%
Mixed	6%	4%	5%	12	4%	10	4%
Asian or Asian British	3%	3%	3%	9	3%	7	3%
Black or Black British	1%	1%	1%	5	2%	4	2%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0	0%	1	<1%
Total	219	214	264	270		272	

18. The ethnic population of Children Looked After in Darlington has remained stable over the previous 4 years. This is predictable due to the continued, comparative, lack of ethnic diversity within the Darlington population as a whole when compared to the national position.

Looked After Reviews and Timescales



19. The above chart shows that during 2020-21 performance in relation to the percentage of Children’s reviews which were completed within statutory timescales was 100%, maintaining the performance of recent years.

Children’s participation and contact with Independent Reviewing Officer

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

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

- (a) attending their Review and speaking on their own behalf,
- (b) attending their review but having another person speak for them,

(c) not attending the review but providing their views in a written form or through another facilitative medium, and /or

(d) not attending the review but briefing an advocate to represent their views.

22. 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, 784 individual Looked After Reviews were held, almost the same as last year at 787. [Note last year has seen a 37% increase in activity over the previous year].

C&YP Participation in Reviews (over the age of 4 years)	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Participated		88%	90%	96%	94%

23. 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 are no views expressed.

24. Independent Reviewing Officers 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 contact them if they have any concerns. Once a new admission to care is allocated, the Independent Reviewing Officer will contact the child, if aged 4 or over and make arrangements to meet them prior to their Child Looked After Review. All contact details are provided at the time of allocation.

25. The IRO Handbook recommends the Independent Reviewing Officer meets with the child / young person within their placement, prior to the Looked After Review meeting or as part of the process. Despite the increase in Independent Reviewing Officer caseloads over the last year, this contact with young people between reviews has been maintained. Independent Reviewing Officers 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.

26. Independent Reviewing Officers currently record on the Liquid Logic case management system when they visit, have a Microsoft Teams, telephone, text conversation, or other form communication, with a child or young person.

Permanence Planning and Adoption

27. At the second Child Looked After Review scheduled within 4 months of a child or young person becoming looked after, the Permanence Plan should be agreed. The Independent Reviewing Officer will then actively monitor the care planning process to minimize any drift or delay. In 2019/20 all children had their permanency plan discussed at their 4-month review.

28. Additional Children Looked After 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. 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

29. One of the key functions of the Independent Reviewing Officer is to resolve problems arising out of the Care Planning process. The Dispute Resolution process reinforces the authority of the Independent Reviewing Officer and their accountability for decisions made at reviews. Independent Reviewing Officers 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. Independent Reviewing Officers 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.
30. There is good evidence of the 'IRO footprint' being evidenced on children's records. The letter from Ofsted following the Focused Visit in February 2019 stated:
 - (a) 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.
31. Evidence of Independent Reviewing Officer involvement in cases is checked via Learning Audits, dip sampling and through regular case supervision.

Foster Carer Reviews

32. 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 Independent Reviewing Service is responsible for undertaking the annual reviews. The additional part-time contracted Reviewing Officer 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 Independent Reviewing Officer undertaking this role due to possible conflicts of interest.
33. All Darlington Borough Foster Carers and Connected Carers should receive an annual review.
34. In the year (2019-20); 95% of Annual Foster Carer Reviews were completed. Where annual reviews were not completed this was due to either the Carer or Social Worker recovery / availability due to Covid 19. All outstanding reviews were subsequently completed.
35. For all of the Annual Reviews completed recommendations were for carer re-approval. No recommendations were made in relation to de-registration. If any there had been any

significant changes to circumstances, or concerns raised at the Annual Review, these would be referred to the Children's Placement Service Panel.

Annual Foster Carer Reviews (as of 31 March)	
Number of Foster Carers	51
Number of Connected Carers	19
Total number of carers	70
Percentage completed in year	95%

Secure Reviews

36. In the year, no children were placed in Secure Accommodation that required a Secure Accommodation Review.

Observations of Independent Reviewing Officer conducting Looked After Reviews

37. To ensure that quality of practice each year a programme of direct observations of Independent Reviewing Officers of Looked After Reviews is undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officer line manager.
38. Findings:
- (a) There is good evidence that mid-term reviews are taking place and that there is contact with young people prior to the Child Looked After Review meeting;
 - (b) Independent Reviewing Officers chairing Child Looked After Reviews have a good understanding of the child's circumstances and what their plan is;
 - (c) Independent Reviewing Officers have a good understanding of children's placements and issues;
 - (d) Independent Reviewing Officer recording of what has been discussed with the child / Young person prior to the Child's Looked After Review was not always evident in a case note on the electronic record;
 - (e) Independent Reviewing Officers are considering children's specific needs;
 - (f) Young people attending reviews feel able to contribute to their meetings and to raise their own issues;
 - (g) Where age appropriate the young people involved attend and contribute well to their review meetings.

Registration and accreditation

39. As the National Assessment Accreditation System (NAAS) for Social Workers has been on hold due to Covid, none of the Independent Reviewing Officers have completed the accreditation this year. Two team members completed the NAAS prior to the pandemic.
40. All Independent Reviewing Officers are registered with Social Work England and have completed the required annual CPD and evidenced this as part of their registration.

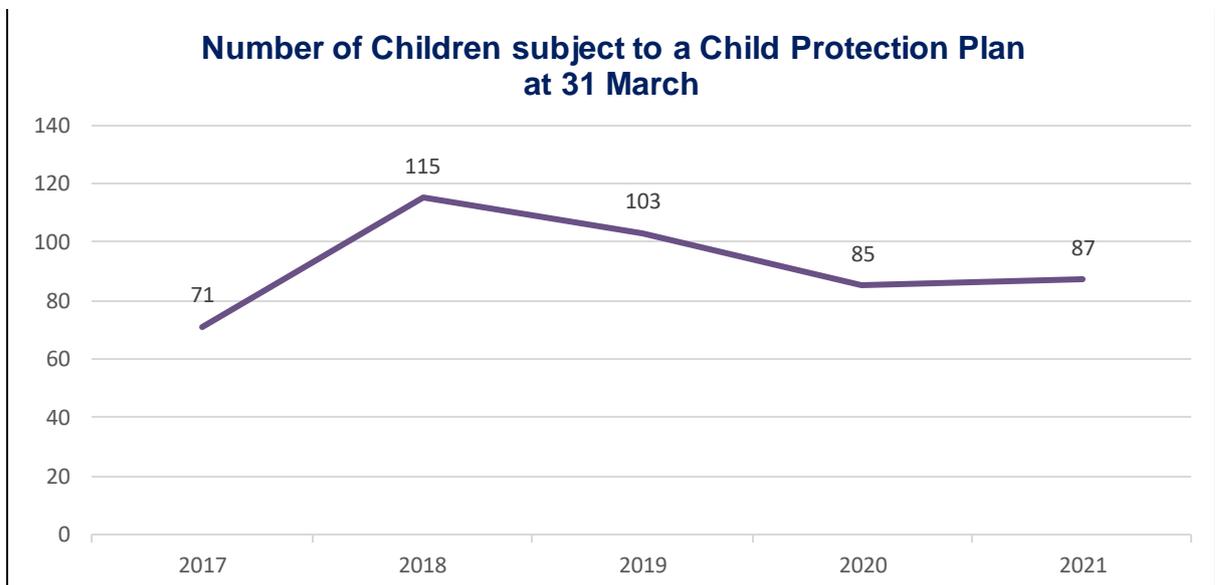
Part 2

CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE CHAIR’S ANNUAL REPORT 2020-21

41. 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).
42. 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. In Darlington this function is undertaken by Independent Reviewing Officers.

Number of Children subject to Child Protection Plans

43. The chart below shows the number of Children subject to Child Protection Plans (CPP) over the last 5 years.



44. The total number of children with a Child Protection Plan on 31 March 2021 was 87; a rate of 38.8 per 10,000 children under the age of 18yrs. This is very similar to the figure position at the end of March 2020, when the figure stood at 85 (a rate of 37.8 per 10,000).

Rate per 10,000 of Children Subject to Child	2019 / 20				2020/21
	Darlington	Regional	Stat Neighbours	England	Darlington

Protection Plans at 31 st March					
National stats table (D1)	38	70	58	43	39

45. The rate of children who were the subject of a Child Protection Plan as of 31 March 2021 remains below the Regional, and in-line with the National averages of 31st March 2020. In the year nationally the rate has reduced (43.7 to 42.8) and regionally the rate has increased 63.1 to 70.0). Published benchmark data for 2020/21 will be available later in the year.

Child Protection Demographics

46. At the end March 2020, 87 children subject to a Child Protection Plan. Nationally the most recent published data for March 2020. In the tables below please note that the percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Of the 87 children:

Age of Children subject to a Child Protection Plan / (as of 31 March)	DBC 2020	National 2020	DBC 2021
Unborn	5%	2%	8%
Under 5	24%	34%	41%
5 -9	26%	29%	23%
10-15	39%	31%	22%
16 +	7%	5%	6%
Total	85		87

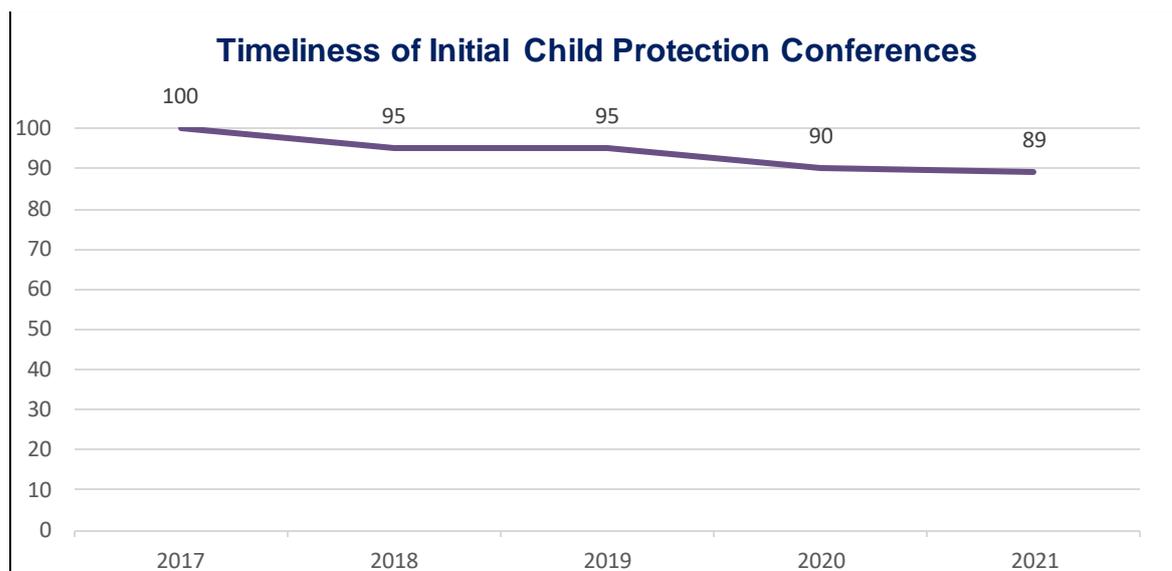
Category of Child Protection Plan / (as of 31 March)	DBC 2019	National 2020	DBC 2021
Neglect	38%	50%	36%
Physical	8%	6%	26%
Sexual	8%	4%	1%
Emotional	45%	38%	37%
Multiple		2%	
Total	85		87

47. The proportion of Children subject to Child Protection Plan where the risk is Neglect or Emotional Abuse remains broadly in line with the national position in that they remain the highest categories. Locally percentages relating to categories can be impacted by one or two families either becoming, to or ceasing to be subject to a child Protection Plan.
48. On 31 March 2020 there were 85 children subject to Child Protection Plans; over the 12 months to 31 March 2021 this had increased to 87 children. 115 Children had Plans removed and 117 new Plans were made.

CP Plan Activity	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Becoming subject to a CP Plan	102	138	180	155	117
Ceasing to be the subject of a CP	166	94	192	173	115
Increase / decrease	- 64	+44	-12	-18	+2

49. The table above shows overall activity in relation to Child Protection Plans (numbers becoming subject to or ceasing). The situation in the last three years has been relatively stable when compared to the larger fluctuations seen in previous years.
50. Over the year, 78 Initial Child Protection Conferences or Transfer Conferences (where a child who is subject to a protection plan in another local authority moves to Darlington) were held [combined total of 133 children]. In addition 124 Child Protection Review Conferences were held [for 250 children].
51. The corresponding figures for the previous year were 100 Initial Child Protection Conferences and 171 Child Protection Review Conferences [342 children].
52. In the year, the proportion of children subject to Initial Child Protection Conferences who were not made subject to a Child Protection Plan was 11.9%, a lower rate than the previous year [16.6%]. Although it is appropriate for some children to be considered at an Initial Child Protection Conference where no Child Protection Plan is made, the reduction in the number of children being considered at conference, where no plan was made, is an improved position.
53. 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. Child with Disabilities). The same position as last year. It should be noted that for the two years prior to this there were no children 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 Initial Child Protection Conferences



54. The chart above tracks the Initial Child Protection Conferences held within the year and records the percentage that are held within 15 working days of the multi-agency Strategy Meeting that agreed the section 47 enquiry.

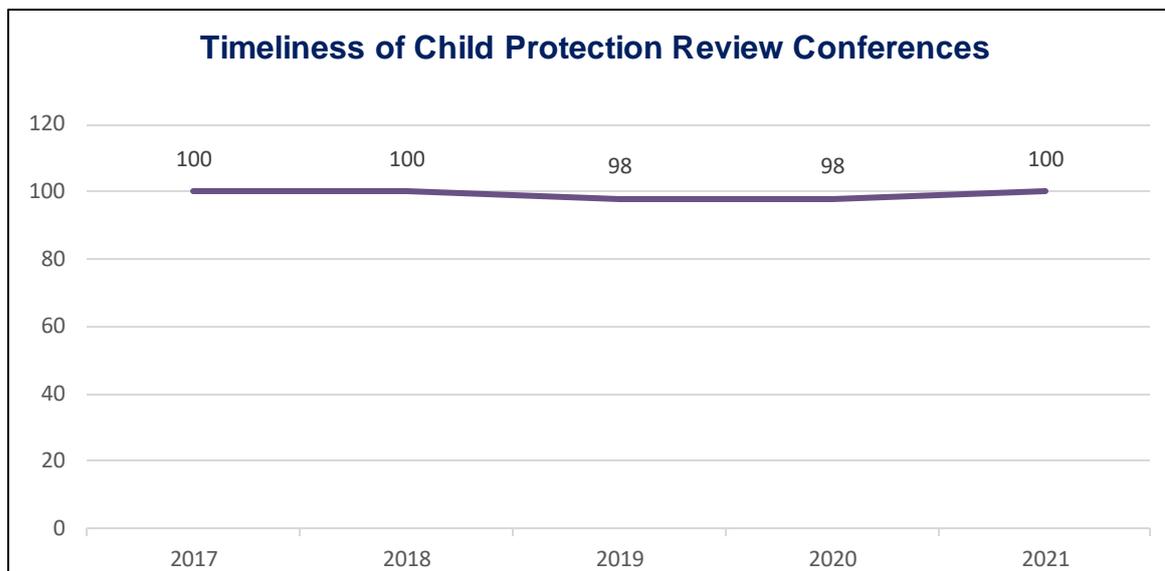
55. For the year to 31 March 2021, 119 (89%) of children were subject to an Initial Child Protection Conference (this excludes transfer conferences from other Local Authority areas) that was held within the prescribed 15 working days of the Strategy Meeting. Performance is similar to last year and remains higher than statistical benchmarks; regional [82%], statistical neighbours [82%] and national benchmark of [78%]. Eighteen children from five families had meetings delayed for the following reasons:

- (a) Delay conference being requested;
- (b) Key information not being available for conference (includes Social Worker reports).

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

Timeliness of Child Protection Review Conferences

57. 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.



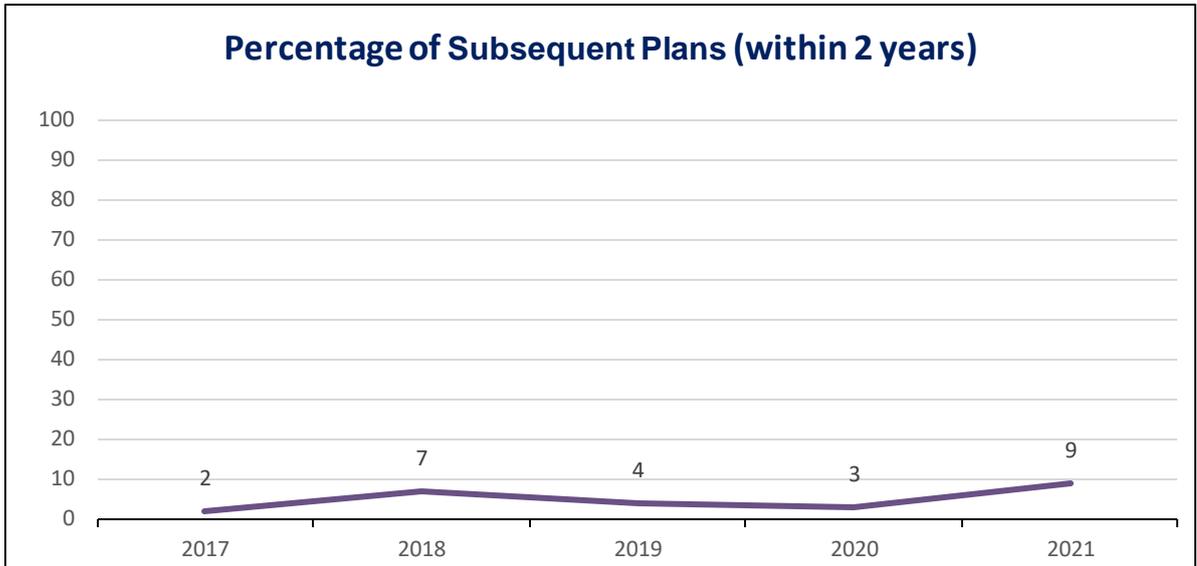
58. The above chart tracks the percentage of Child Protection cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales in the year. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a higher percentage, ideally 100%. In recent years this has been an area of excellent performance.
59. For the year to 31 March 2021, 100% of children had their Child Protection Review Conferences within timescales an improvement on last year. Again performance in this area remains higher than Regional [93%], National [92%] and statistical neighbours [91%].

Child Protection Review Conferences within timescales	2019/2020			2020/21
	Darlington	North East	England	Darlington
	98%	93%	92%	100%

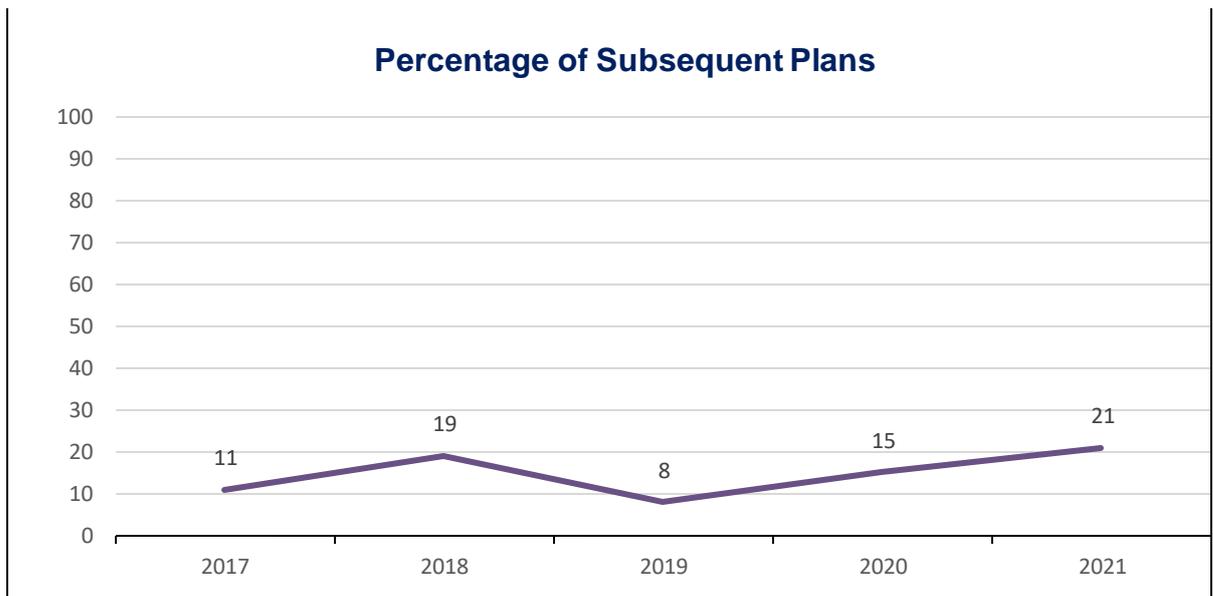
60. Published benchmark data for 2020/21 will be available later in the year.

Second or Subsequent Plans

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

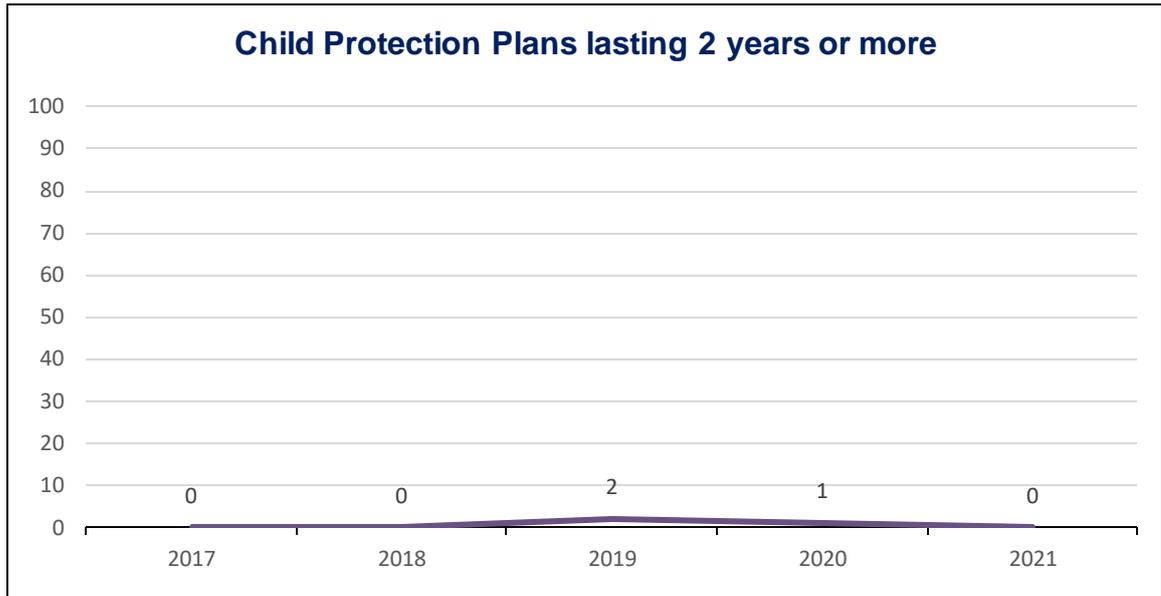


62. This indicator is a proxy for the level and quality of service a child receives. Its purpose is to monitor whether Children's Social Care Services devise and implement a Child Protection Plan which leads to lasting improvement in a child's safety and overall well-being. Good performance for this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



63. National benchmarked data is based on a second or subsequent plan being agreed at any time after a previous plan. Our rate for 20210-21 was 21%, although this was an increase it remains in line with the National average of 22%, regional average 22% and statistical neighbours 23% (most recent published data).

Child Protection Plans lasting 2 years or more



64. 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.
65. 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.
66. 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 31 March 2021.
67. The percentage of Child Protection Plans ceasing where the plan had lasted more than 2 years in Darlington [0%] is currently below the regional average [2%] and national [4%] and statistical neighbours average [2%] at 31 March 2020. Published benchmark data for 2020/2021 will be available later in the year.

Family attendance at Conference

68. In the year, out of 78 invitations, parents attended 72 Initial Child Protection Conferences, a total of 92%, again in-line with the rate in recent years.
69. In the year, out of 124 invitations, family members attended 118 Child Protection Review Conferences, a total of 95%, a slight improvement on last year [89%]. Generally, the rate for Child Protection Reviews tends to be lower by a few percentage points, however this year this has been reversed. This could be down to the use of Microsoft Teams to conduct meetings as the overall contribution from agencies has also increased.

Year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Percentage of ICPCs attended by parent	94%	95%	94%	92%	92%
Percentage of CPRCs attended by parent	91%	91%	91%	89%	95%

70. Over the year to 31 March 2021, no family members with parental responsibility were excluded from attending child protection conferences.
71. A draft Child Protection Plan is produced at the end of the Initial Child Protection Conference. The plan is therefore available to professionals and family members at the first Core Group which is held within 10 working days of the Initial Child Protection Conference.
72. 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 Independent Reviewing Officer 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.

Child Protection Conference Observations

73. The Children’s Safeguarding Unit is open to external scrutiny. During 2020/21 this has included observations of Child Protection Conferences by staff from Leeds City Council as part of the Strengthening Families Programme. Child Protection Conferences have also been observed by Qualitative Researchers from the *What Works for Children’s Social Care* as part of their evaluation of the Strengthening Families approach in Darlington.
74. Observations of Child Protection Conferences on behalf of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership have been put on hold. A new programme of observations is due to be scheduled in forthcoming months.

Next steps for 2021/22

75. The following are scheduled for action in 2021/22:
 - (a) To extend the relational approach to the conduct of Child Protection Conferences in line with The Leeds Strengthening Families programme;
 - (b) To use 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 Independent Reviewing Officer footprint continues to be a focus for Independent Reviewing Officers. This needs to be evident on the child's electronic record and through Independent Reviewing Officer disputes.

Martin Graham
Service Manager Quality Assurance & Independent Review
10 September 2021