

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY
27 FEBRUARY 2023**

CHILDREN'S SAFEGUARDING UNIT

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22

CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE CHAIR ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22

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 Look After, and
 - (b) Children who are the subject of Child Protection Conferences and / or multi-agency Child Protection Plans.

Summary

2. The report provides an overview of performance, activity, and areas for development.
3. Part 1 is the Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2021/22. 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).
4. Part 2 is the Child Protection Conference Chair Annual Report 2021/22. 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.
5. For the period April 2021 – March 2022, due to the ongoing Covid-19 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 most of the contact with children, young people, and their families.

Recommendation

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

Chris Bell
Assistant Director Children's Services

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

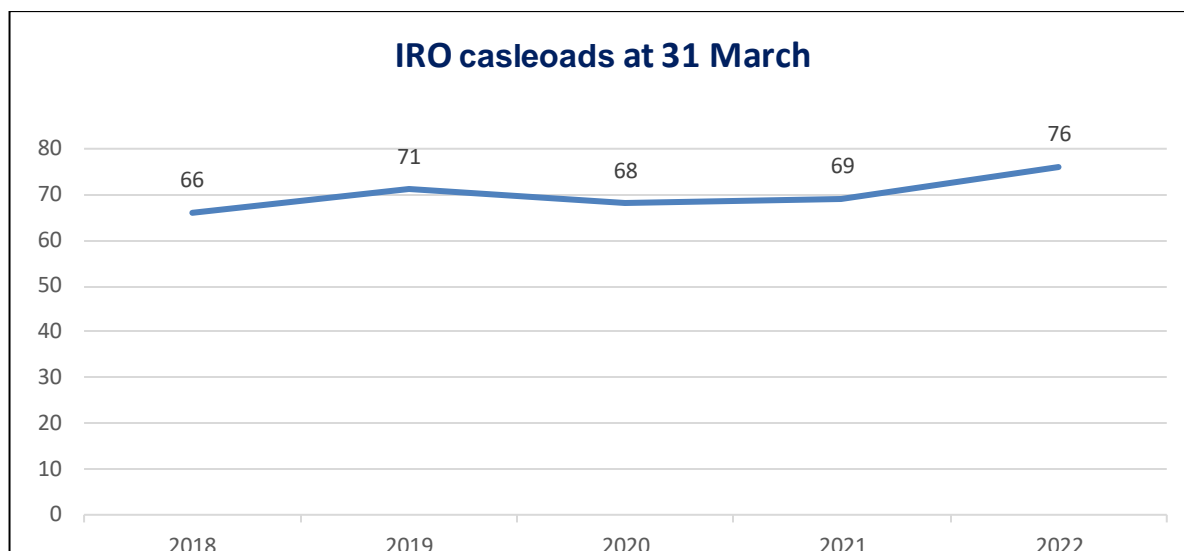
Section 17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for Crime and Disorder.
Health and Wellbeing	This report has no direct implications to the Health and Well Being of residents of Darlington.
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	There are no issues which this report needs to address.
Diversity	There are no issues relating to diversity which this report needs to address.
Wards Affected	The impact of the report on any individual Ward is considered to be minimal.
Groups Affected	The impact of the report on any individual Group is considered to be minimal.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
Council Plan	The changes set out in this report contribute to the Council Plan in particular by maximising the potential of our young people and supporting the most vulnerable in the borough.
Efficiency	This report does not identify specific efficiency savings.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report will assist in advising on matters that impact on Looked After Children.

MAIN REPORT

7. The Independent Reviewing Officers are committed to achieving the best outcomes for children and young people in Darlington who are looked after and those subject to Child Protection Plans.
8. 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
9. In Darlington, Independent Reviewing Officers undertake a range of non-statutory functions including, providing advice and guidance, child protection training and are members of formal panels.

Staffing Levels and Caseloads

10. 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.
11. During 2021-22 the team has been carrying a 0.6 (FTE) vacancy. The remainder of the substantive posts are permanent appointments. At 31 March 2022 there were 4.6 (FTE) Independent Reviewing Officer in post, the 0.6 (FTE) vacancy and an additional 0.4 (FTE) contracted post to undertake Annual Foster Carer Reviews.
12. The statutory guidance in the IRO Handbook (2010) recommends that caseloads for Independent Reviewing Officer need to be between 50 and 70 LAC children.
13. Annual Foster Carer Reviews continue to be undertaken by a part-time contracted Reviewing Officer to ensure independence and avoid any conflict of interest.
14. Over the last 12 months, the size of caseloads for Independent Reviewing Officers in Darlington has risen from an average of 69 children to 76 children. This is currently higher than the level set in the statutory guidance.



15. This figure does not include the additional tasks undertaken by Independent Reviewing Officers.
16. When caseloads are manageable it allows Independent Reviewing Officers to have sufficient time to provide a quality service to each Child Looked After 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.
17. 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 Children Looked After. Regular meetings are held with the Business Support Team leader to agree how the team can best support the Independent Reviewing Officers / Child Protection Conference Chairs.

Management and Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance

18. 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.
19. The quality and effectiveness of the Children's Safeguarding Unit is ensured through:
 - (a) Workload Allocation
 - (b) Supervision and annual Personal Development Review (PDR)
 - (c) Team Meetings
 - (d) Audit / Direct Observations of practice
 - (e) Training and Development
 - (f) Annual registration and accreditation through Social Work England

Workload Allocation

20. All Children Looked After and / or children subject to Child Protection Plans are allocated a designated Independent Reviewing Officer with the intention that where possible the allocation will remain consistent, until the child is no longer Looked After or subject to a Child Protection Plan.
21. The team have had a part-time vacancy since June 2020. The position was advertised three times unsuccessfully. Higher salaries are offered in the region, so it has been difficult to attract suitable candidates. Over the year 2021-22 agency cover and staff working additional hours have been necessary to cover the vacancy.
22. Allocations are monitored regularly and form part of the discussion in monthly supervision sessions.

Training and Development

23. Individual training requirements for Independent Reviewing Officers are identified through supervision and annual appraisals.
24. This year the Independent Reviewing Officer development session (April 2021) was on how we can utilise the restorative approach that is part of the Leeds Strengthening Families Programme.
25. Bespoke Independent Reviewing Officer Training was commissioned regionally and delivered by Edge Hill University. The majority of Independent Reviewing Officers completed this in March 2022.
26. Outside of this Independent Reviewing Officers complete training in line with corporate requirements (i.e., mandatory Academy 10 Training modules).

Registration and accreditation

27. As the National Assessment Accreditation System (NAAS) for Social Workers was put 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. The NAAS has now been discontinued.
28. All Independent Reviewing Officers are registered with Social Work England and have completed the required annual Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and evidenced this as part of their continued registration as Social Work practitioners.

Next steps for 2022/23

29. The following are scheduled for action in 2022/23:
 - (a) To develop a hybrid model for Child Protection Conferences that allow for agency representatives to contribute virtually while allowing Social Workers and families to attend the meeting with the Child protection Conference Chair.

- (b) To increase the number of children who attend their actual Child Looked After Review as opposed to sending their views to the meeting.
- (c) To increase the uptake of advocacy services for children & young people who are the subject of Child Protection Conferences.
- (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.

Intentionally

Blank

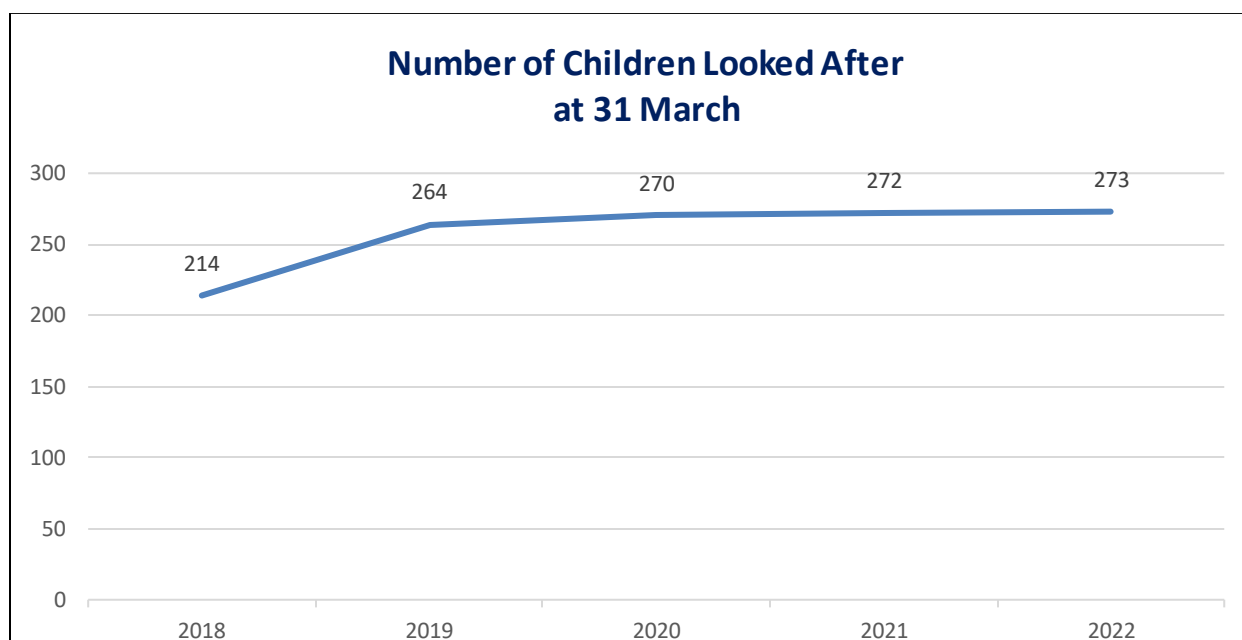
Page

Part 1: INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22

1. 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

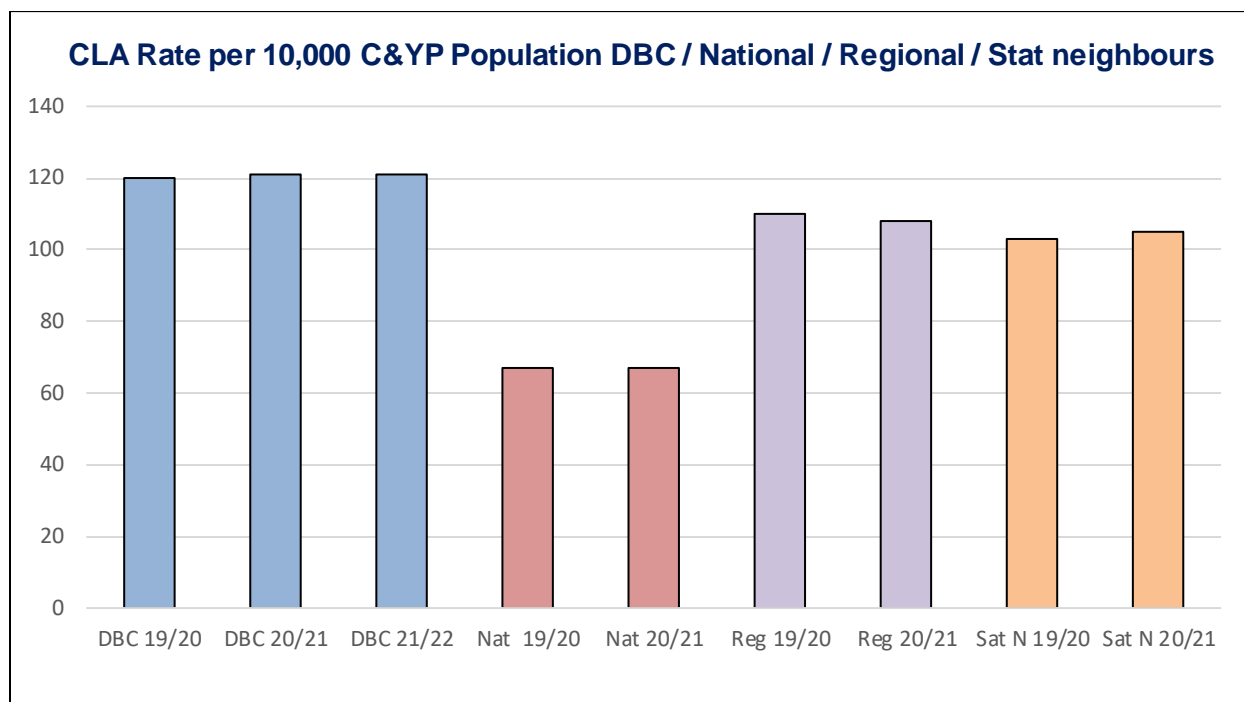
2. At the end of March 2022 there were 273 Children Looked After in Darlington, a similar position to the previous year (272).
3. The chart below shows the end of year number of Children Looked After over the last 5 years.



4. The rate of Looked After Children in Darlington has remained high; there was a significant increase during 2018, since then, the position is not necessarily as stable as it appears; the number went above 300 during the period August - November 2020, however this reduced and stabilised in 2021-22.

Children Looked After rate per 10,000

5. 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.



6. At the end of March 2022, 273 children were looked after by Darlington a rate of 121 per 10,000 which is the same rate as 2020/21.
7. Darlington continues to have a significantly higher rate of Children Looked After than the national average but is more in line with Regional and Statistical Neighbours. It should be noted the most recent published data is as of 31 March 2021 and there has been a national increase in Children Looked After over the year. The comparator figures for 31 March 2022 will be published in the autumn.

Child Looked After Demographics

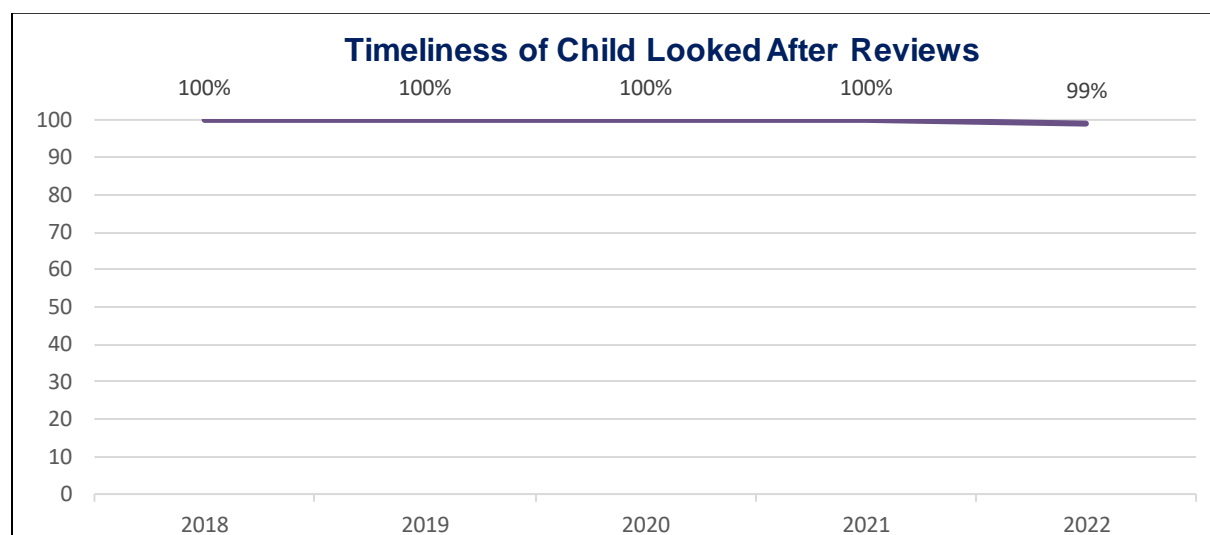
Age of Children Looked After (as of 31 March)	2018	2019	2020		2021		2022	
Under 1	5%	8%	15	6%	11	4%	25	9%
1-4	15%	16%	51	19%	56	21%	53	19%
5-9	26%	26%	71	26%	68	25%	63	23%
10-15	35%	39%	100	37%	100	37%	100	37%
16-17	18%	12%	33	12%	37	14%	32	12%
Total	214	264	270		272		273	

8. The age profile of Darlington's Looked After population has remained stable over the last 4 years. The largest proportion 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)	2018	2019	2020		2021		2022	
White	92%	91%	244	90%	250	92%	249	91%
Mixed	4%	5%	12	4%	10	4%	14	5%
Asian or Asian British	3%	3%	9	3%	7	3%	6	2%
Black or Black British	1%	1%	5	2%	4	2%	1	<1%
Other	0%	0%	0	0%	1	<1%	3	1%
Total	214	264	270		272		273	

9. 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, when compared to the national position.

Looked After Reviews and Timescales



10. 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 99%, almost matching the performance of recent years.

Children’s participation and contact with Independent Reviewing Officer

11. 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.
12. 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, 747 individual Looked After Reviews were held, which is lower than last year at 784.

C&YP Participation in Reviews (over the age of 4 years)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Participated	88%	90%	96%	94%	93%

13. 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.
14. When a child becomes looked After, their Independent Reviewing Officer will contact them, if aged 4 or over, and arrange to meet them prior to their Child Looked After Review. During the Covid period, most of these contacts were virtual.
15. The IRO Handbook recommends the Independent Reviewing Officer meets with the child / young person within their placement, prior to their meeting or as part of the review process. Despite the increase in Independent Reviewing Officer caseloads over the last year, this contact with young people between reviews has been maintained.
16. 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

17. 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 2020/21, all children had their permanency plan discussed at their 4-month review.
18. Additional Children Looked After Reviews are required when the decision is taken that 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

19. 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 it is appropriate to follow up on recommendations that have not been actioned 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.

20. There continues to be good evidence of the 'IRO footprint' in children's records. They appropriately challenge Social Workers and Team Managers to help progress plans and reduce delay for children. Evidence of Independent Reviewing Officer involvement in cases is checked via audits, dip sampling and through regular case supervision.

Foster Carer Reviews

21. Local Authorities are required by Regulation 29 (The Fostering Services Regulations 2001) to review the approval of foster carers at least once a year. The additional part-time contracted Reviewing Officer has been retained. Ofsted during their re-inspection commented that it was good practice to have someone other than an Independent Reviewing Officer undertaking this role due to possible conflicts of interest.
22. All Darlington Borough Foster Carers and Connected Carers should receive an annual review.
23. In the year (2021-22); 86% of Annual Foster Carer Reviews were completed. Where annual reviews were not completed in the year this was due to either the Carer or Social Worker availability due to Covid or where the Social Worker had changed. All outstanding reviews have now been completed.
24. All recommendations made were for Foster Carer re-approval, no recommendations were in relation to de-registration. If 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)	2020/21	201/22
Number of Foster Carers	51	55
Number of Connected Carers	19	20
Total number of carers	70	75
Percentage completed in year	95%	86%

Secure Reviews

25. In the year, one young person was subject to a Secure Accommodation Order that required a Secure Accommodation Review.

Observations of Independent Reviewing Officer

26. 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 line manager. This is statutory requirement.
27. Findings:
- (a) There is evidence that mid-term reviews are taking place and that there is meaningful contact with young people prior to their Child Looked After Review meeting.

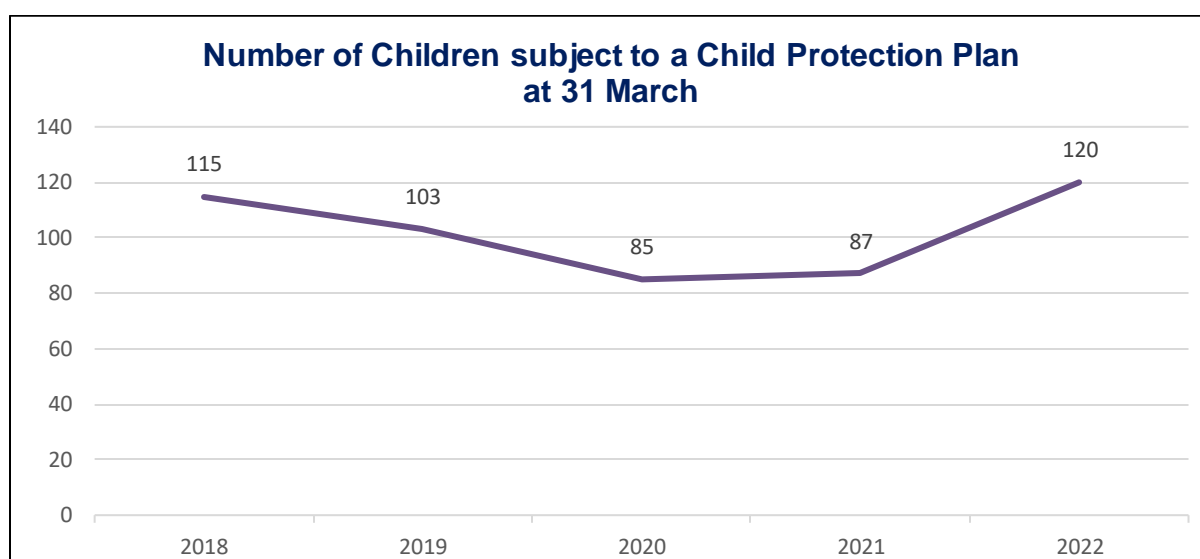
- (b) During the Covid period, Independent Reviewing Officers have on occasions arranged to meet young people outside to discuss their placement and upcoming reviews.
- (c) During the Covid period, Independent Reviewing Officers have used technology to ensure that they maintained a relationship with young people.
- (d) Independent Reviewing Officers chairing Child Looked After Reviews have a good understanding of the child's circumstances and the plan for the child.
- (e) 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.
- (f) Where age appropriate the young people involved attend and contribute well to their review meetings. When they do attend, they feel able to contribute and to raise their own issues.

Part 2: CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2021-22

1. 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).
2. 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

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



4. The total number of children with a Child Protection Plan on 31 March 2022 was 120; a rate of 53.3 per 10,000 children under the age of 18 years. This is higher than the figure position at the end of March 2021, when the figure stood at 87 (a rate of 38.8 per 10,000).
5. Although this is higher than last year, it remains below our statistical neighbours (55.8) and north-east regional local authorities (67.2), but higher than the National average of 31 March 2021. In the year nationally the rate has reduced (42.8 to 41.4). Published benchmark data for 2021/2 will be available later in the year.

Child Protection by Category

6. At the end March 2022, 120 children were subject to a Child Protection Plan. Nationally the most recent published data is for March 2021. In the tables below please note that the percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Of the 120 children:

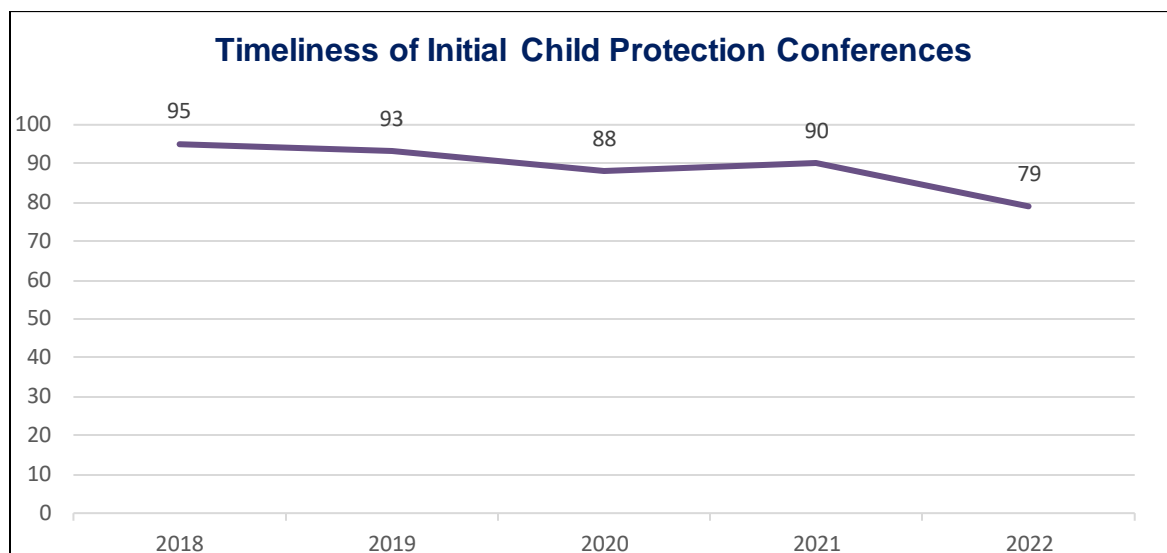
Category of Abuse	DBC 2021	National 2021	DBC 2022
Neglect	36%	47%	47%
Physical	26%	6%	21%
Sexual	1%	4%	9%
Emotional	37%	40%	23%
Multiple		2%	
Total	87		120

7. 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. Due to the size of the population in the borough, 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.
8. On the 31 March 2021 there were 87 children subject to Child Protection Plans; over the 12 months to 31 March 2022 this had increased to 120 children. 121 Children had Plans removed and 154 new Plans were made.

CP Plan Activity	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
New CP Plan	138	180	155	117	154
CP Plan ceased	94	192	173	115	121
Change	+44	-12	-18	+2	+33

9. The table above shows overall activity in relation to Child Protection Plans (numbers becoming subject to or ceasing).
10. Over the year, 89 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 178 children]. In addition, 146 Child Protection Review Conferences were held [for 263 children].
11. The corresponding figures for the previous year were 78 Initial Child Protection Conferences [133 children] or and 124 Child Protection Review Conferences [250 children].
12. In the year, the proportion of children subject to Initial Child Protection Conferences who were not made subject to a Child Protection Plan was 13.5%, this is between the figures for the previous two years; [11.9% & 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, it is important that children and families are not subjected to this process unnecessarily.
13. In Darlington at the end of March there were three children with a disability who were subject to a Child Protection Plan, a small increase from the previous year. This information is not currently part of the nationally published data, so no comparison is available.

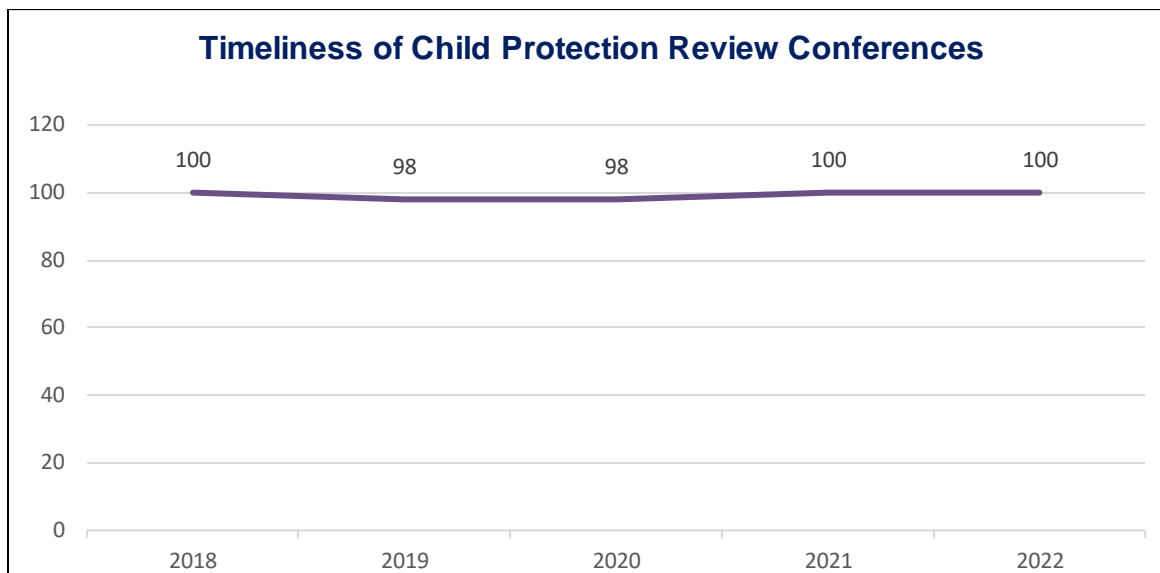
Timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences



14. 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.
15. For the year to 31 March 2022, 138 (79%) of children were subject to an Initial Child Protection Conference (this excludes transfer conferences) held within 15 working days of the Strategy Meeting. Although performance this year has dropped it remains in line with the region [80%] and is better than the national benchmark [71%].
16. Thirty-five children from fifteen families had meetings delayed for the following reasons:
 - (a) Delay in the conference being requested
 - (b) ICPC booked, cancelled then rearranged; new date was out of timescale.
17. In each case an interim plan was in place to ensure that the children were safeguarded.

Timeliness of Child Protection Review Conferences

18. The Working Together 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.



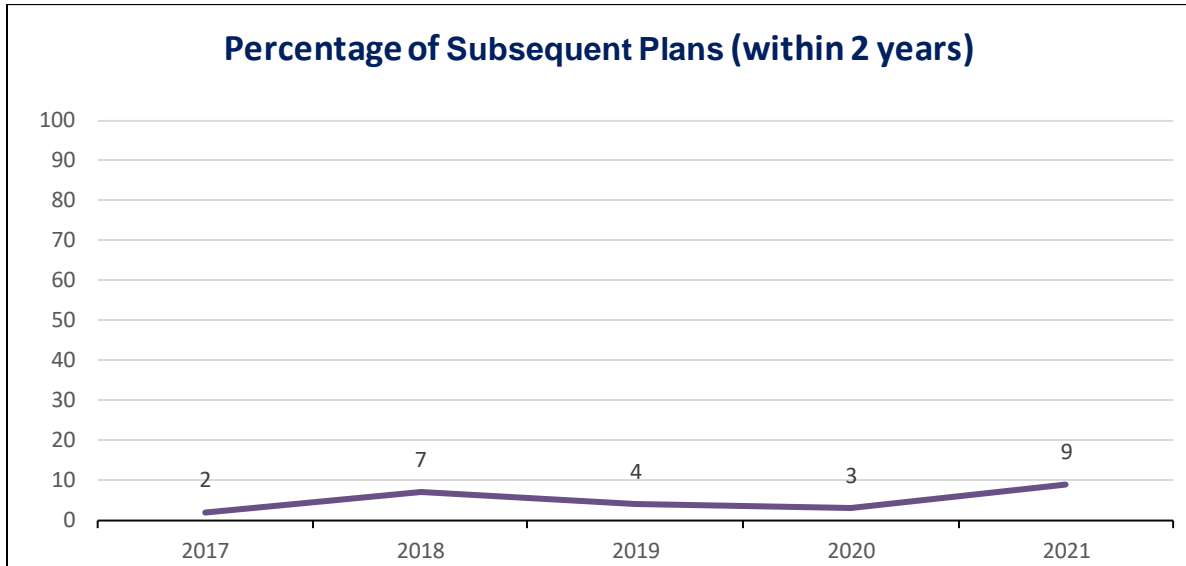
19. The above chart tracks the percentage of Child Protection cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales in the year. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a higher percentage, ideally 100%. In recent years this has been an area of excellent performance.
20. For the year to 31 March 2022, 100% of children had their Child Protection Review Conferences within timescales. Again, performance in this area remains higher than Regional [91%], National [93%] and statistical neighbours [92%] (most recent published data).

Child Protection Review Conferences within timescales	2020/2021			2020/22
	Darlington	North-East	England	Darlington
	100%	91%	93%	100%

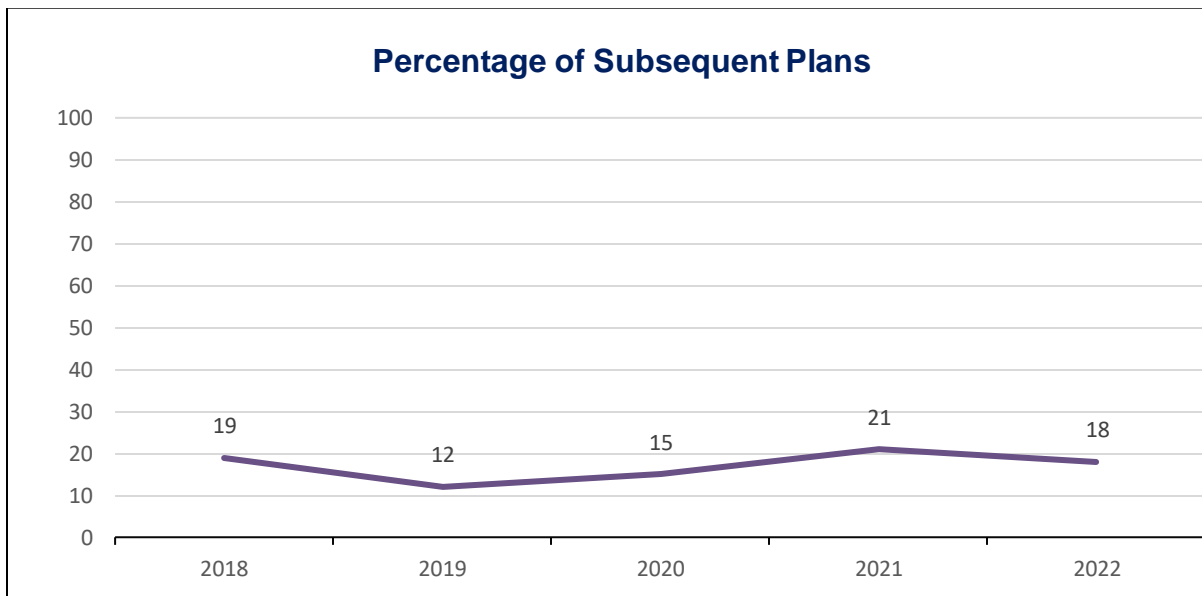
21. Published benchmark data for 2021/22 will be available later in the year.

Second or Subsequent Plans

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

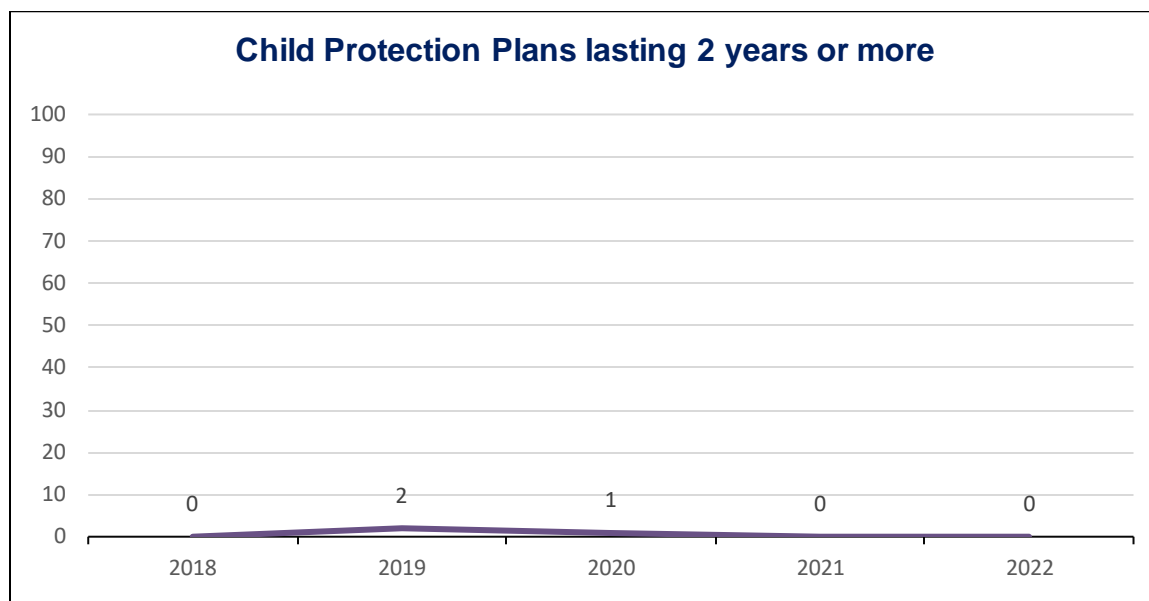


23. This indicator is a proxy for the level and quality of service a child receives. Its purpose is to monitor whether Children's Social Care Services devise and implement a Child Protection Plan which leads to lasting improvement in a child's safety and overall well-being. Good performance for this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



24. National benchmarked data is based on a second or subsequent plan being agreed at any time after a previous plan. Our rate for 2021-22 was 18%, a slight decrease over the year and it remains roughly in line with the National average of 22%, regional average 21% and statistical neighbours 23% (most recent published data).

Child Protection Plans lasting 2 years or more



25. 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.
26. This indicator reflects the underlying principle that professionals should be working towards specified outcomes which, if implemented effectively, should lead to most children not needing to be the subject of a Child Protection Plan for longer than two years. It is however recognised that some children will need Child Protection Plans for longer. Good performance is therefore typified by a lower percentage.
27. 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 2022.
28. 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 [1%] and national [2%] and statistical neighbours average [4%] at 31 March 2021. Published benchmark data for 2021/2022 will be available later in the year.

Family attendance at Conference

29. In the year parental involvement was 94% for Initial Child Protection Conferences and of 92% for Child Protection Review Conferences. Generally, the rate for Child Protection Reviews tends to be lower by a few percentage points. This is in-line with the rate in recent years.

Year	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
ICPCs attended by parent	95%	94%	92%	92%	94%
CPRCs attended by parent	91%	91%	89%	95%	92%

30. Over the year to 31 March 2022, no family members with parental responsibility were excluded from attending child protection conferences.
31. 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.
32. 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.