

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
8 JANUARY 2024**

**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23
CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE CHAIR ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The Annual Independent Reviewing Officer report is produced by the Service Manager of the Children's Safeguarding Unit. The report includes an overview of the work undertaken by Independent Reviewing Officers, who, in Darlington, provide independent reviewing and associated functions in relation to both:
 - (a) Children who are Looked After.
 - (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.
 - (a) Part 1 is the Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2022/23. 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 2022/23. 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.
3. For the period April 2022– March 2023, due to the roll out of the Agile Working programme and post-Covid working arrangements across agencies, formal meetings, which in previous years would have been face to face, have in the main been conducted using virtual platforms. This applies to Child Protection Conferences and Child Looked After Reviews.

Recommendation

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

Chris Bell

Assistant Director of Children's Services

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report

Author: Martin Graham - Service Manager Independent Review & Safeguarding Partnership

S17 Crime and Disorder	N/A
Health and Wellbeing	Supports improved outcomes for children and young people
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	No implications arising from this report
Diversity	No implications arising from this report
Wards Affected	All wards are affected
Groups Affected	Young people 0-25 with Special Educational Needs
Budget and Policy Framework	Children and Young People
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
Council Plan	Supports efficient use of resources and service improvement
Efficiency	Supports efficient use of resources and service improvement
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report relates to Looked After Children

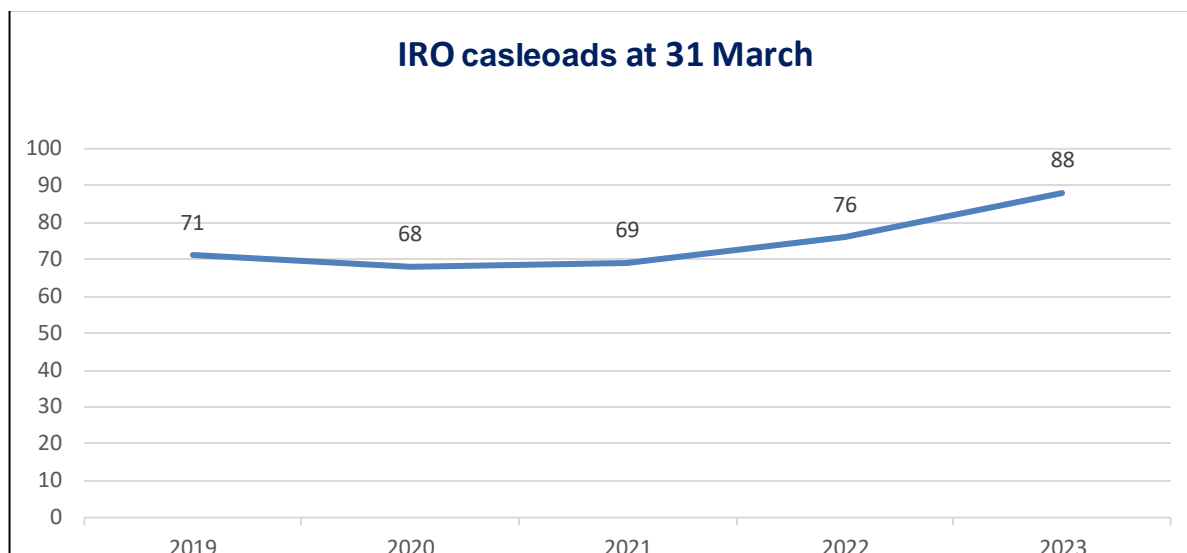
MAIN REPORT

Role of independent Reviewing Officers

5. 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.
6. 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.
7. 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

8. 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 Children's Front Door and Early Intervention.
9. During 2022-23 a 1.0 (FTE) vacancy was covered by an agency appointment, the remainder of the posts are permanent appointments; at 31 March 2023 there were 5.0 (FTE) Independent Reviewing Officers in post. In addition, there was a 0.4 (FTE) agency post to undertake Annual Foster Carer Reviews.
10. The statutory guidance in the IRO Handbook (2010) recommends that caseloads for Independent Reviewing Officer need to be between 50 and 70 LAC children.
11. Annual Foster Carer Reviews continued to be undertaken by a part-time contracted Reviewing Officer (to the end of December 2022) and subsequently by an agency IRO, to ensure independence and avoid any conflict of interest.
12. Over the last 12 months, the size of caseloads for Independent Reviewing Officers in Darlington has risen from an average of 76 children to 88 children. This therefore remains higher than the level set in the statutory guidance.



13. This figure does not include the additional tasks undertaken by Independent Reviewing Officers.
14. 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.
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 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.

Quality Assurance

16. 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.
17. 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

- 18. 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 no longer subject to a Child Protection Plan.
- 19. Allocations are monitored regularly and form part of the discussion in monthly supervision sessions.

Training and Development

- 20. Individual training requirements for Independent Reviewing Officers are identified through supervision and annual appraisals.
- 21. This year the Independent Reviewing Officers have participated in Relational Practice sessions developing how we use the restorative approach that is part of the Strengthening Families Programme.
- 22. Outside of this Independent Reviewing Officers complete training in line with corporate requirements (i.e., mandatory Academy 10 Training modules).

Registration and accreditation

- 23. 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 2023/24

- 24. The following are scheduled for action in 2022/23.

- (a) As Independent Reviewing Officers:

- (i) To work in partnership with Social Workers, Foster Carers and Residential staff to increase the number of children who attend their Child Looked After Review as opposed to sending their views to the meeting.
- (ii) Ensuring the Independent Reviewing Officer footprint continues to be an area of focus. This needs to be evident on the child's record:

- 1. Case notes (IRO midway Review / IRO notes).
- 2. IRO contact with child forms.
- 3. Independent Reviewing Officer disputes (in line with statutory guidance).

- (b) As Child Protection Chairs:

- (i) To secure suitable accommodation that will facilitate a hybrid model for Child Protection Conferences that allows for agency representatives to contribute virtually while allowing Social Workers and families to attend the meeting in person with the Child Protection Conference Chair.
- (ii) To work in partnership with Social Workers, Advanced Practitioners and Team Managers to encourage the uptake of advocacy services for children & young people who are the subject of Child Protection Conferences.

Comparator Data

- 25. Please note that in the following reports the most recent published national, regional, and statistical neighbours' data is as of 31 March 2022.
- 26. The new comparator figures for 31 March 2023 will be published in the autumn.

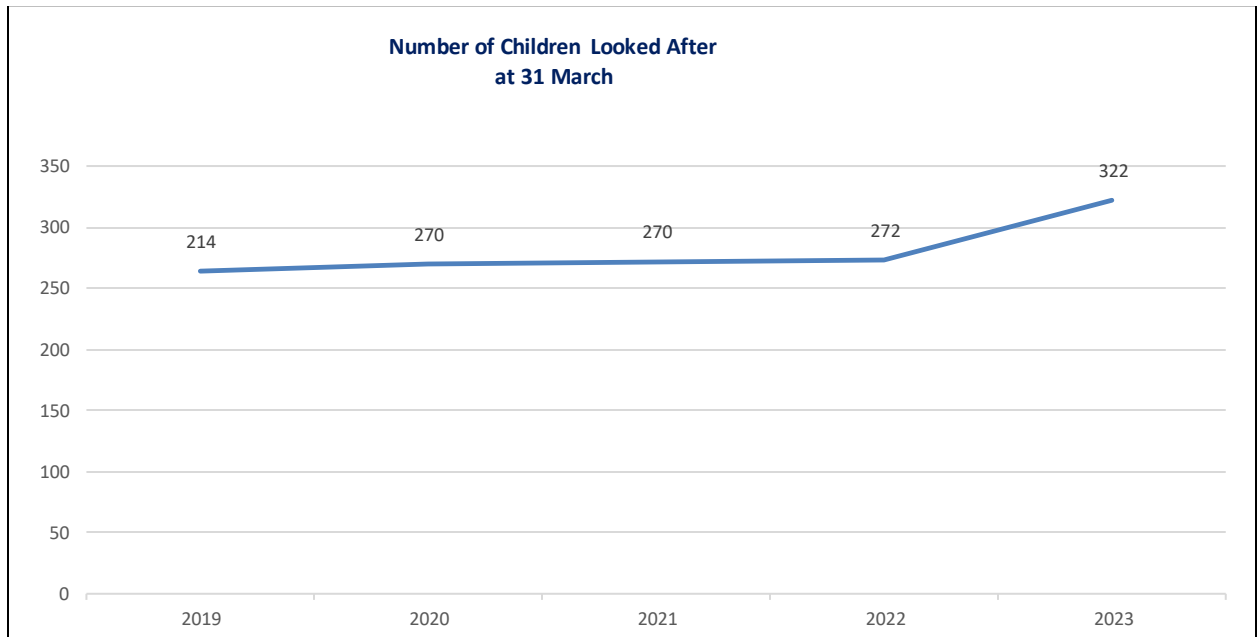
Part 1: INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23

Statutory Framework

27. The Independent Review Officer (IRO) has a statutory responsibility 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

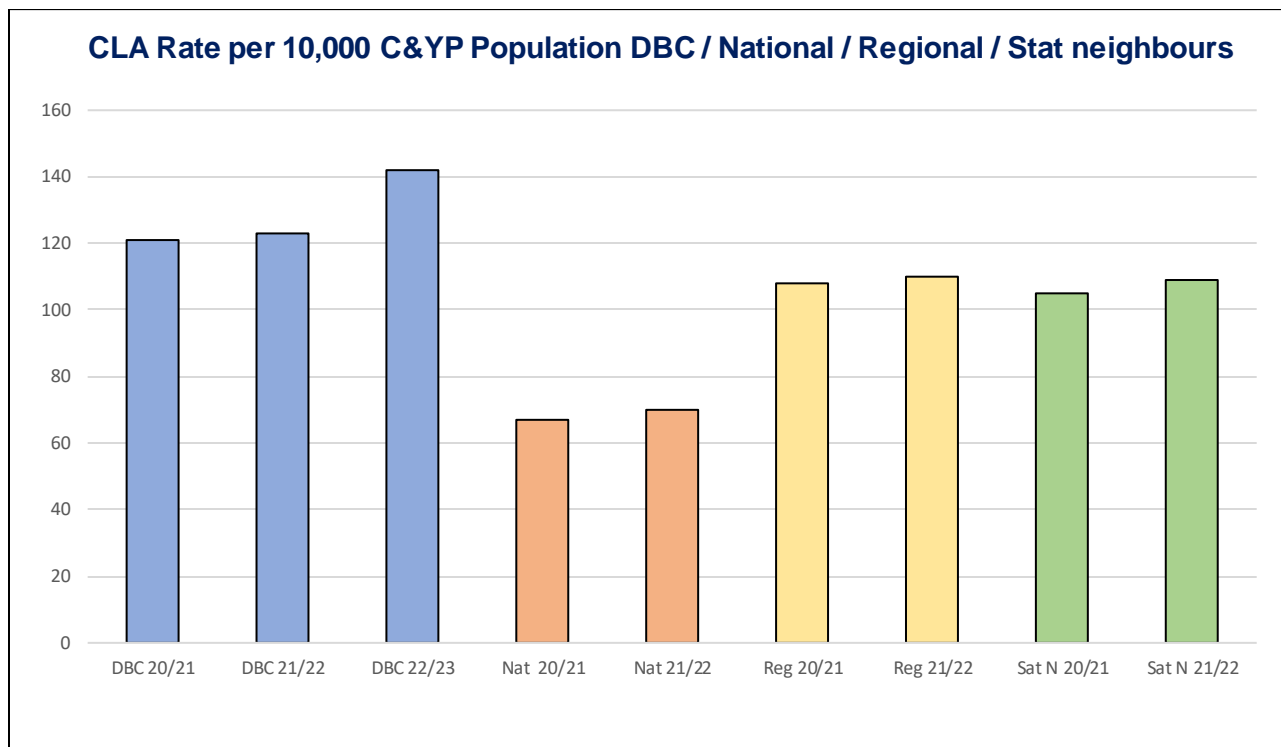
28. At the end of March 2023 there were 322 Children Looked After in Darlington, an increase from the previous year (273). The chart below shows the end of year number of Children Looked After over the last 5 years.



29. 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. Over the year 2022-23 the number of Children Looked After steadily increased.

Rate per 10,000

30. 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.



31. At the end of March 2023, 322 children were looked after by Darlington a rate of 142 per 10,000, which is an increase since 2021-22.
32. Darlington continues to have a significantly higher rate of Children Looked After than the National, Regional, and Statistical Neighbours averages. It should be noted the most recent published data is as of 31 March 2022 and there has again been a national increase in Children Looked After over the year.

Child Looked After Demographics

Age (at 31 March)	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
Under 1	8%	15	6%	11	4%	25	9%	11	3%	
1-4	16%	51	19%	56	21%	53	19%	60	19%	
5-9	26%	71	26%	68	25%	63	23%	77	24%	
10-15	39%	100	37%	100	37%	100	37%	127	39%	
16-17	12%	33	12%	37	14%	32	12%	47	15%	
Total	264	270	272	273	322					

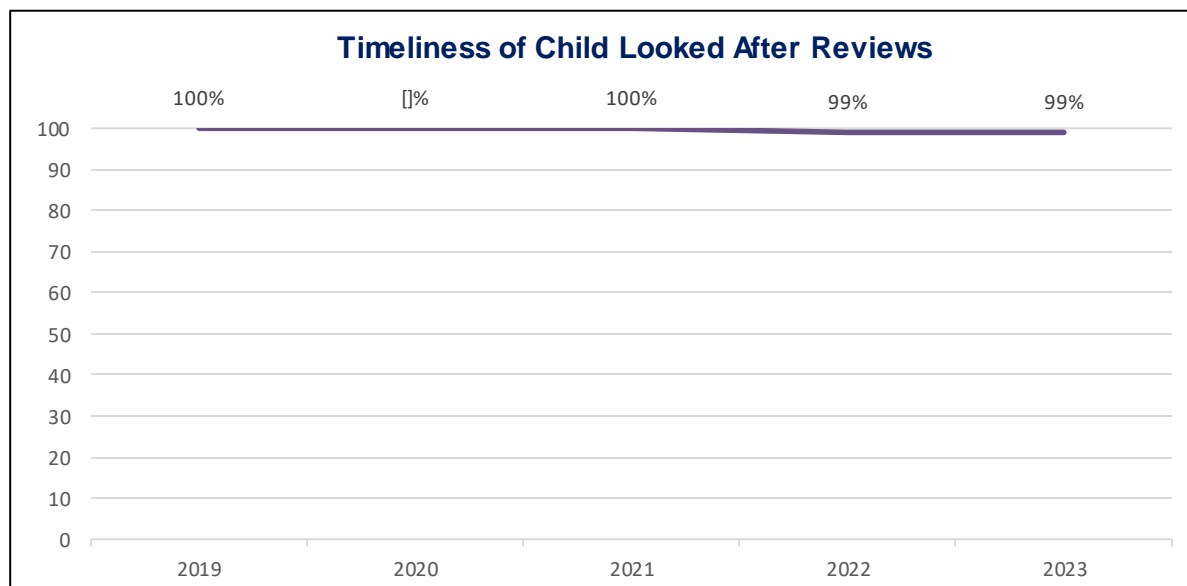
33. The age profile of Darlington's Looked After population has remained stable over the last 4 years. The largest proportion of Children Looked After in Darlington continue to be between 10 and 15 years old which matches to the distribution nationally.

Ethnicity (at 31 March)	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
White	91%	244	90%	250	92%	249	91%	274	85%	
Mixed	5%	12	4%	10	4%	14	5%	24	7%	
Asian or Asian British	3%	9	3%	7	3%	6	2%	6	2%	
Black or Black British	1%	5	2%	4	2%	1	<1%	5	2%	
Other	0%	0	0%	1	<1%	3	1%	13	4%	

Total	264	270	272	273	322
-------	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

34. The ethnic population of Children Looked After in Darlington has remained stable over the last 5 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 Review Timescales



35. The above chart shows that during 2022-23 performance in relation to the percentage of Children’s reviews which were completed within statutory timescales was 99%, matching the performance of recent years.

Children’s Participation

36. 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.
- (d) Not attending the Review but briefing an advocate to represent their views.

37. 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, 883 individual Looked After Reviews were held, which is significantly higher than last year at 747.

C&YP Participation in Reviews (over the age of 4 years)	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
---	---------	---------	---------	---------	---------

Participated	90%	96%	94%	93%	91%

38. 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.
39. 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. Since Covid and the roll out of agile working, these have been a mixture of virtual and face to face contacts.
40. 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.
41. Independent Reviewing Officers record on the Liquid Logic case management system when they visit, have a virtual meeting via Microsoft Teams, telephone, text conversation, or other form communication, with a child or young person.

Permanence Planning and Adoption

42. 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.
43. 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

44. 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 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.
45. 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.

Annual Foster Carer Reviews

46. 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 continued in post until the end of December 2022. The role has subsequently been undertaken by an agency IRO. Ofsted, during their previous 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. A one-year post to cover this function, has been agreed and recruitment to this post is taking place at the time of writing this report. Once recruited to, the twelve months that follow will allow time for a business case to be put forward.
47. All Darlington Borough Foster Carers and Connected Carers should receive an annual review.
48. In the year (2022-23); 84% of Annual Foster Carer Reviews were completed. Where annual reviews were not completed in the year this was due to Foster Carers being on hold due to personal circumstances or awaiting completion of checks. There are a small number of new carers, approved in the year, who are not yet due their annual Review.
49. In the year, 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	2021/22	2022/23
Number of Foster Carers	51	55	45
Number of Connected Carers	19	20	16
Total number of carers	70	75	61
Percentage completed in year	95%	86%	84%

Secure Reviews

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

Ofsted Inspection

51. The Inspection of Darlington local authority children's services was undertaken in October 2022. The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers, was judged as "Outstanding" by Ofsted.
52. In the report, the Lead Inspector states:
- (a) Child focused care plans are reviewed by a consistent Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).
 - (b) When required, IROs challenge professionals effectively on behalf of children to ensure they receive the right support.
 - (c) Children are actively encouraged to access advocacy services.
 - (d) Time is taken to support children to attend their review meetings.
 - (e) This ensures that they have some say in their care and support, wherever possible.

Quality Assurance

53. To ensure that quality of practice each year a programme of audits and observations of Independent Reviewing Officer practice is undertaken by the line manager. This is a statutory requirement.
54. In addition to the Ofsted findings this has identified:
- (a) 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) 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 entered in case notes but is evident in the record of the Looked After Review meeting.
 - (c) When children / young people attend their review meetings, they feel able to contribute and to raise their own issues.
55. For associated actions from either Ofsted or quality assurance activities, please refer to paragraph 20.

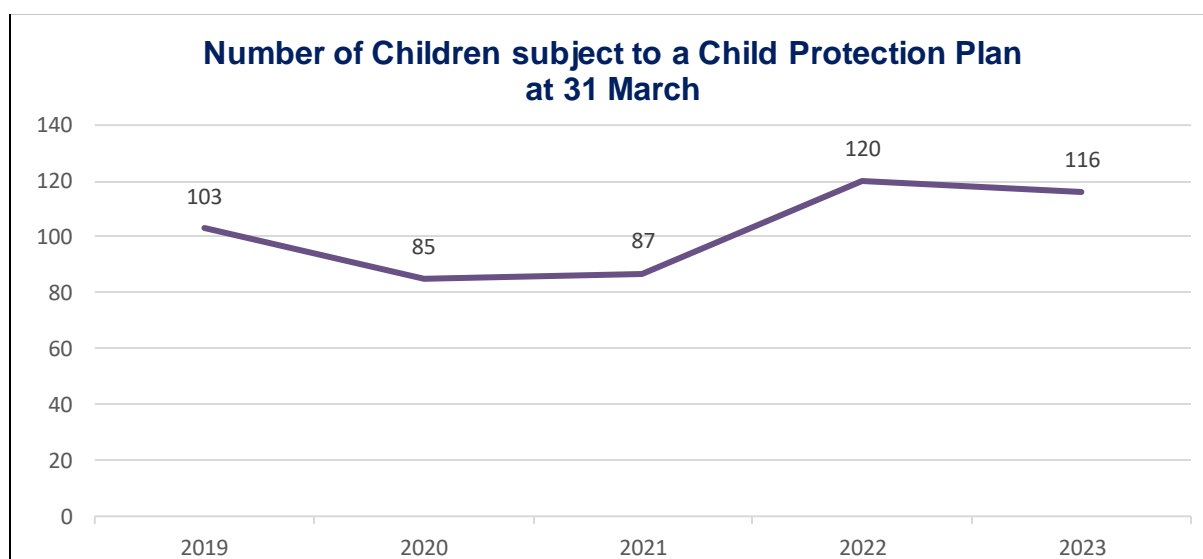
Part 2: CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23

Statutory Framework

56. 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).
57. 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

58. The total number of children with a Child Protection Plan on 31 March 2023 was 116; a rate of 51.3 per 10,000 children under the age of 18 years. This is similar to the position at the end of March 2022, when the figure stood at 120 (a rate of 53.3 per 10,000). The chart below shows the number of Children subject to Child Protection Plans over 5 years.



59. This rate remains below statistical neighbours (55.8) and north-east region (62.6), but higher than the National average at 31 March 2022. During the previous year nationally, the rate increased (41.4 to 42.1).

Child Protection by Category

60. At the end March 2023, 116 children were subject to a Child Protection Plan. In the tables, please note that percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. In line with national guidance, Darlington does not use multiple categories, but as this continues to be used by some authorities, it reported on nationally.

Category of Abuse	DBC 2022	National 2022	DBC 2023
Neglect	47%	48%	47%
Physical	21%	38%	36%
Sexual	9%	7%	16 %
Emotional	23%	4%	1%
Multiple		3%	
Total	120		116

61. The proportion of children subject to Child Protection Plan where the risk is Neglect or Physical Abuse remains in line with the national position. Due to the relatively small size of the population in the borough, local 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.

Child Protection Activity

62. On 31 March 2022 there were 120 children subject to Child Protection Plans; over the 12 months to 31 March 2023 this has been relatively stable and is now 116 children. 135 Children had Plans removed and 131 new Plans were made.

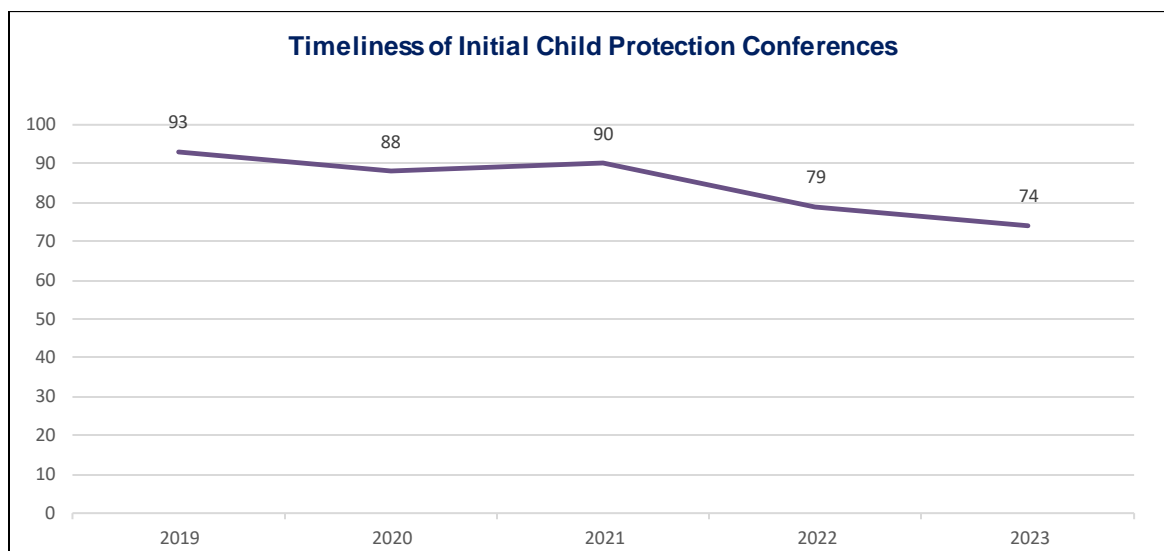
Activity					
Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
New CP Plan	180	155	117	154	131
CP Plan ceased	192	173	115	121	135
Change	-12	-18	+2	+33	-4

63. Over the year, 85 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 161 children]. In addition, 156 Child Protection Review Conferences were held [where 210 individual children were discussed].

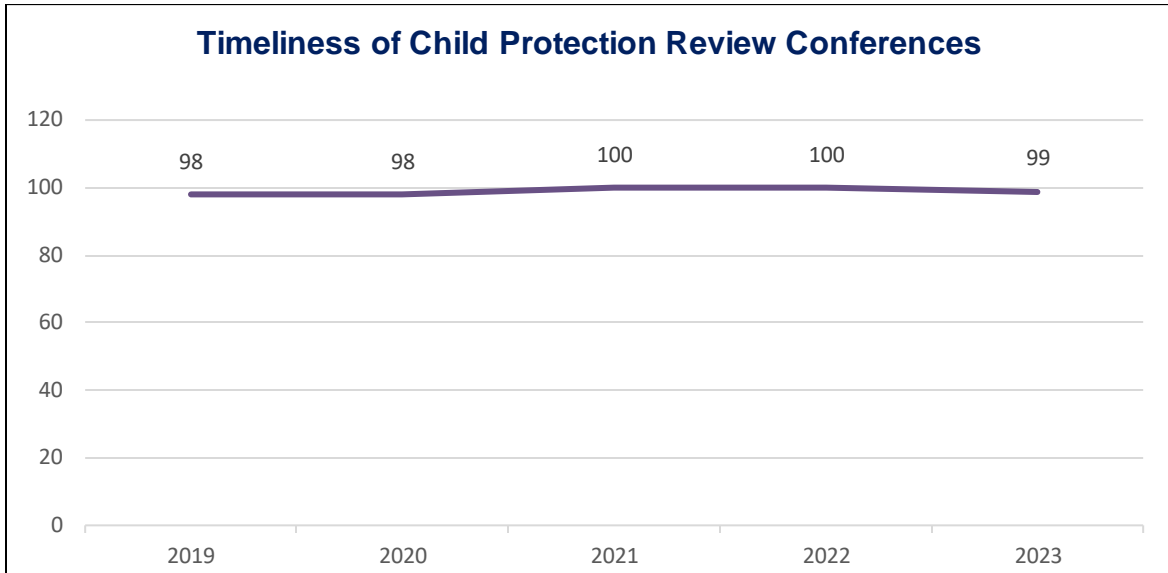
64. The corresponding figures for the previous year were 89 Initial Child Protection Conferences [178 children] and 146 Child Protection Review Conferences [263 children]

65. In the year, the proportion of children subject to Initial Child Protection Conferences who were not made subject to a Child Protection Plan was 18.6% this is above the figures for the previous two years; [16.6% & 13.5%]. 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.

66. In Darlington at the end of March there were 2 children with a disability who were subject to a Child Protection Plan, the figure was 3 the previous year. This information is not currently part of the nationally published data, so no comparison is available.



67. 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.
68. For the year to 31 March 2023, 116 (74%) of children were subject to an Initial Child Protection Conference (this excludes transfer conferences) held within 15 working days of the Strategy Meeting. Performance this year has dropped and is now below the latest regional [81%], but still better than the latest national benchmark [71%] figures.
69. Forty children from 19 families had their Initial Child Protection Conference delayed for the following reasons:
 - (a) Delay in the conference being requested by Social Work Team (84% / 16 out of the 19 meetings)
 - (b) Other reasons for delay were to allow for attendance of family members and negotiation with another local authority as to who was responsible.
70. In each case an interim plan was in place to ensure that the children were safeguarded. Last year the figures were 35 children from 15 families.
71. 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.

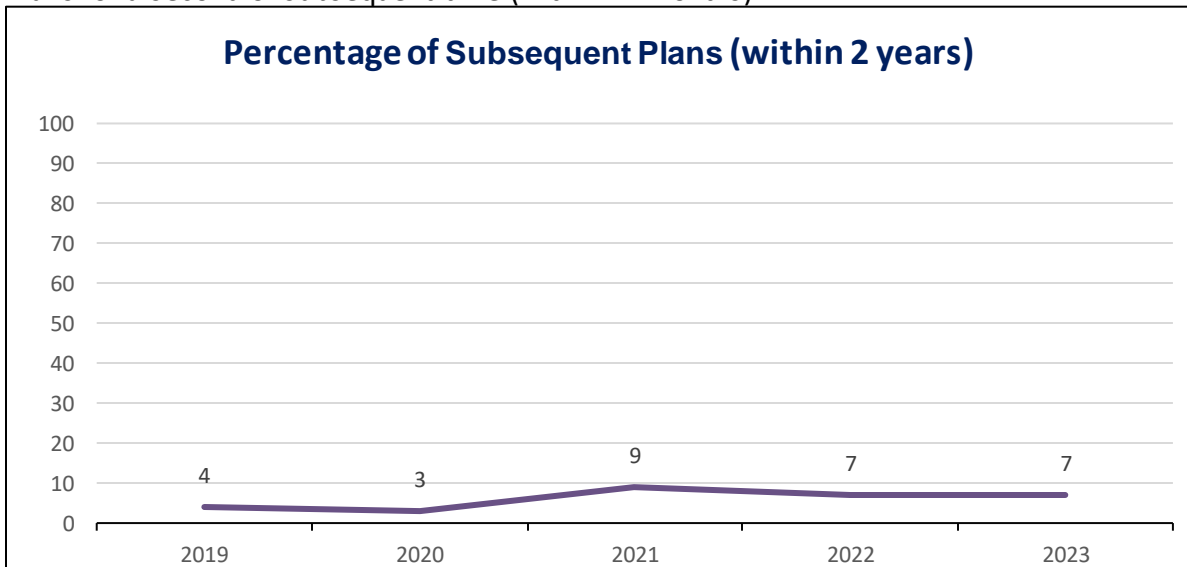


- 72. The above chart tracks the percentage of Child Protection cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales in the year. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a higher percentage, ideally 100%. In recent years this has been an area of excellent performance.
- 73. For the year to 31 March 2023, 99% of children had their Child Protection Review Conferences within timescales. One meeting was rearranged to ensure that key agencies were able to attend. Again, performance in this area remains higher than Regional [90%], National [89%] figures (most recent published data).

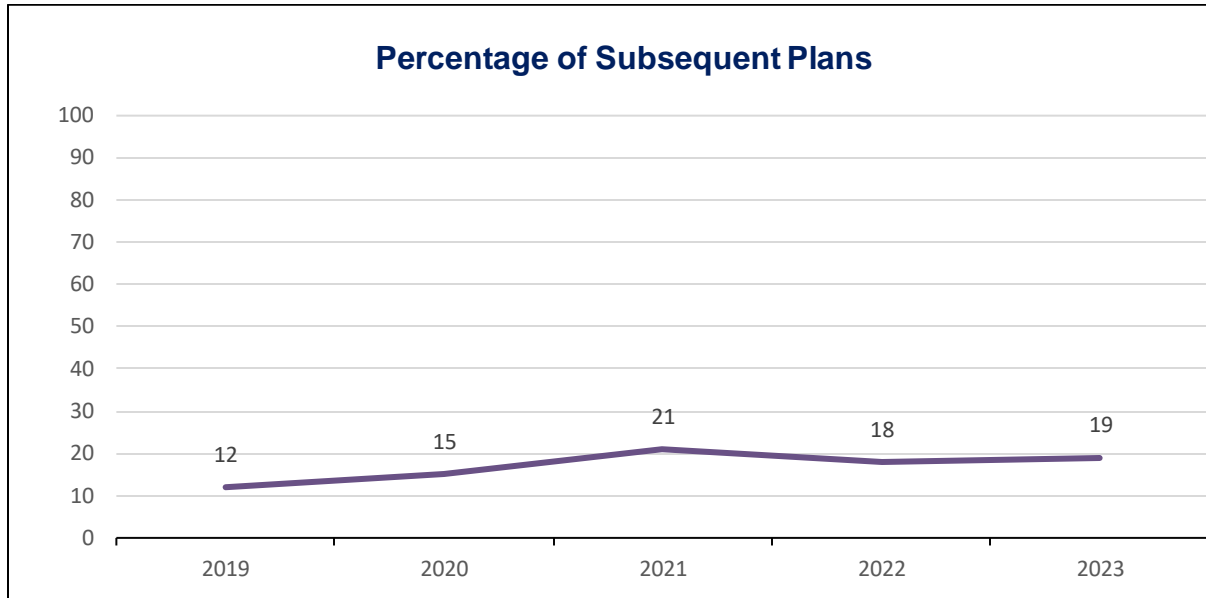
Child Protection Review Conferences within timescales	2021/2022			2022/23
	Darlington	North-East	England	Darlington
	100%	90%	89%	99%

Second or Subsequent Plans

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

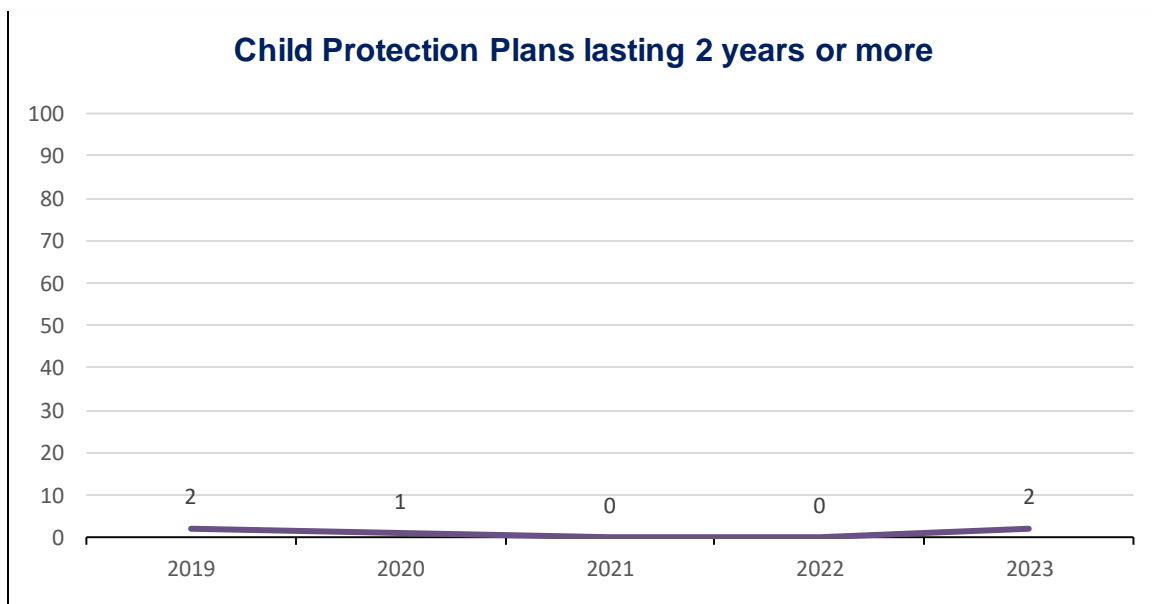


75. This indicator is a proxy for the level and quality of service a child receives. Its purpose is to monitor whether Children's Social Care Services devise and implement a Child Protection Plan which leads to lasting improvement in a child's safety and overall well-being. Good performance for this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



76. National benchmarked data is based on a second or subsequent plan being agreed at any time after a previous plan. Our rate for 2022-23 was 19%, a slight increase over the year and is slightly better than the National average of 23%, regional average 21% (most recent published data).

Length of Child Protection Plan



77. 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.

- 78. 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.
- 79. 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 2% during the year to 31 March 2023.
- 80. The percentage of Child Protection Plans ceasing where the plan had lasted more than 2 years in Darlington [2%] is similar to the regional average [1.5%] and national [2.5%] at 31 March 2022.

Family attendance at Conference

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

Year	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
ICPCs attended by parent	94%	92%	92%	94%	94%
CPRCs attended by parent	91%	89%	95%	92%	92%

- 82. Over the year to 31 March 2022, no family members with parental responsibility were excluded from attending child protection conferences.
- 83. 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.
- 84. 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 at the Child Protection Conference, 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. The team had a session looking at advocacy with the NYAS manager in May 2023.

Ofsted Inspection

85. The Inspection of Darlington local authority children's services was undertaken in October 2022. The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, was judged as "Good" by Ofsted.
86. In the report, the Lead Inspector states:
- (a) Children benefit from well-reviewed multi-agency plans that are specific to their needs.
 - (b) Initial Child Protection Conferences are timely and are well attended by partner agencies.
 - (c) Families are meaningfully engaged through the relational practice model, and their views inform the decision-making where appropriate.
 - (d) Independent advocacy services are not consistently offered to all children who are subject to child protection processes.
87. For actions arising please refer to paragraph 24.