

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28 OCTOBER 2024**

**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24
CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE CHAIR ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This Annual report includes an overview of the work undertaken by Independent Reviewing Officers, who, in Darlington, provide independent reviewing and associated functions in relation to:
 - Children who are Looked After.
 - Children who are the subject of Supervision Orders.
 - 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 2023/24. 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 2023/24. 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 (December 2023), 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.

Recommendation

3. 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

Martin Graham: Extension 6703 - Service Manager Independent Review & Safeguarding Partnership

Council Plan	This report contributes to the Council Plan in particular by maximising the potential of our young people and supporting the most vulnerable in the borough.
S17 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.
Tackling Climate Change	There are no issues relating to diversity which this report needs to address.
Addressing inequalities	There are no issues relating to inequalities 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 recommend a change to the budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
Efficient and effective use of resources	This report has no impact on the Council's Efficiency Programme.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report will assist in advising on matters that impact on Looked After Children.

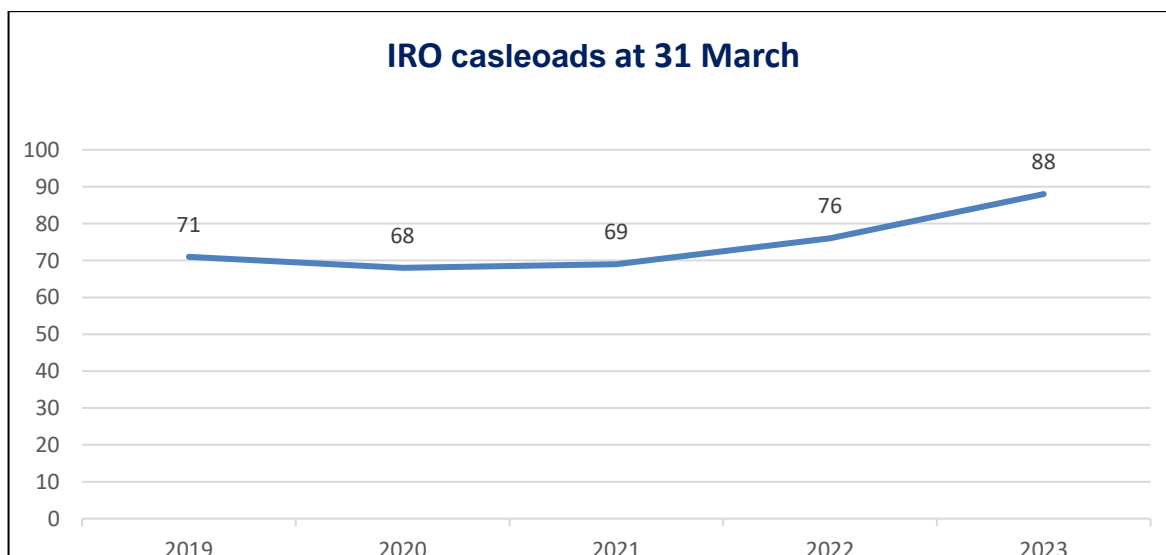
MAIN REPORT

Role of independent Reviewing Officers

4. The Independent Reviewing Officers are committed to achieving the best outcomes for children and young people in Darlington.
5. The Service is responsible for the following statutory functions:
 - Child Protection Conferences.
 - Child Looked After Reviews.
 - Annual Foster Carer Reviews.
 - Adoption Reviews.
 - Disruption Meetings.
 - Reviews of children placed in Secure Accommodation.
 - Supervision Order Reviews (new task this year).
6. 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.

Staffing Levels and caseloads

7. The Service Manager for Independent Review and Safeguarding Partnership is responsible for the operational management of the service.
8. The IRO team consist of 5.0 FTE Independent Reviewing Officers. This year the team have been supported by an additional 1.5 (FTE) agency posts due to an increase in workloads, a long-term absence, and subsequent vacancy, so there have been 5.5 (FTE) IROs in post. In addition, there is a 0.4 (FTE) post for Annual Foster Carer Reviews.
9. The statutory guidance in the IRO Handbook (2010) recommends that caseloads for Independent Reviewing Officer need to be between 50 and 70 children.
10. Annual Foster Carer Reviews were undertaken by an agency IRO at the start of the year, and since October, via a fixed term contract. This ensures independence and avoids any conflict of interest with the other IROs who review the children.
11. Over the last 12 months, the size of caseloads for Independent Reviewing Officers in Darlington has risen from an average of 76 to 88 children, however, there have been significant periods in the year where this was higher.
12. All Children Looked After and children subject to Child Protection Plans are allocated to an IRO with the intention that this will remain until the child is no longer requiring this service.



13. There is a statutory requirement in the IRO Handbook to ensure sufficient administrative support to Independent Reviewing Officers in relation to Looked After Reviews. Administrative support is provided in relation to Child Protection Conferences, Children Looked After, and Supervision Order Reviews. There is currently no administrative support in place for Annual Foster Carer Reviews.

Progress on targets set for 2023/24

Target	Progress	Comment
1 To increase the number of children who attend their Child Looked After Review as opposed to sending their views to the meeting.	Achieved	The rate for children attending their review (age 4 and above) was 42%, up from 37%
2 Ensuring the Independent Reviewing Officer footprint continues to be an area of focus. This needs to be evident on the child's record.	Achieved	IRO contacts and midway reviews by IROs are regularly undertaken and recorded by IROs for children who are Looked After.
3 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 a meeting in person with the Child Protection Conference Chair.	Not achieved	Update: In early June 2024, accommodation for the team was agreed by Chief Officers and required modifications are due to commence.
4 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.	Ongoing	This is a long-term project that remains a task for the team in their day-to-day function.(See paragraphs 57 - 58).

Next steps for 2024/25

14. The following are scheduled for action in 2024/25.

- To Review the structure of the team to ensure that the number of permanent posts are sufficient to fulfil statutory functions.
- To manage the transition from home-based to agile working when there is an identified central base for the team and meetings.
- As Child Protection Chairs, to develop a mid-way review programme similar to that for Children Looked After, for those who are the subject of Child Protection Plans.

Comparator Data

15. Please note that in the following reports, the most recent published national and regional data is as of 31 March 2023.

16. The new comparator figures for 31 March 2024 will be published in the autumn.

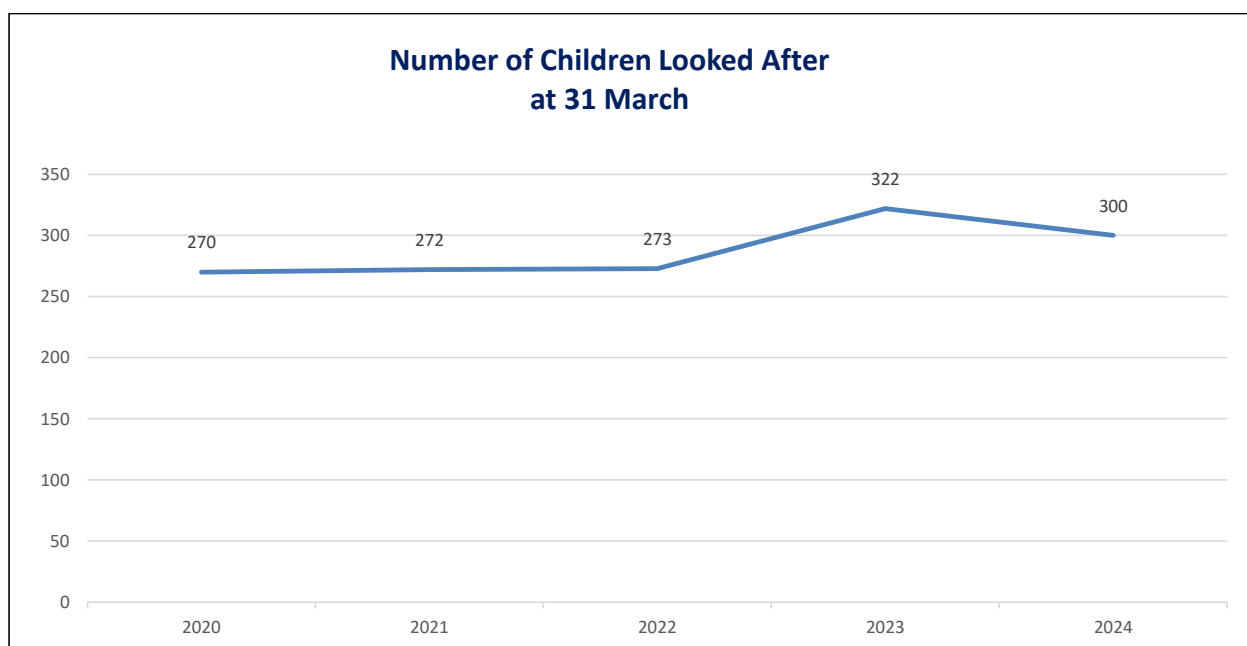
Part 1: INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

Statutory Framework

17. The Independent Reviewing 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 includes both the management of Child Looked After Reviews and an overview of the child's case including regular monitoring and follow-up between the 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

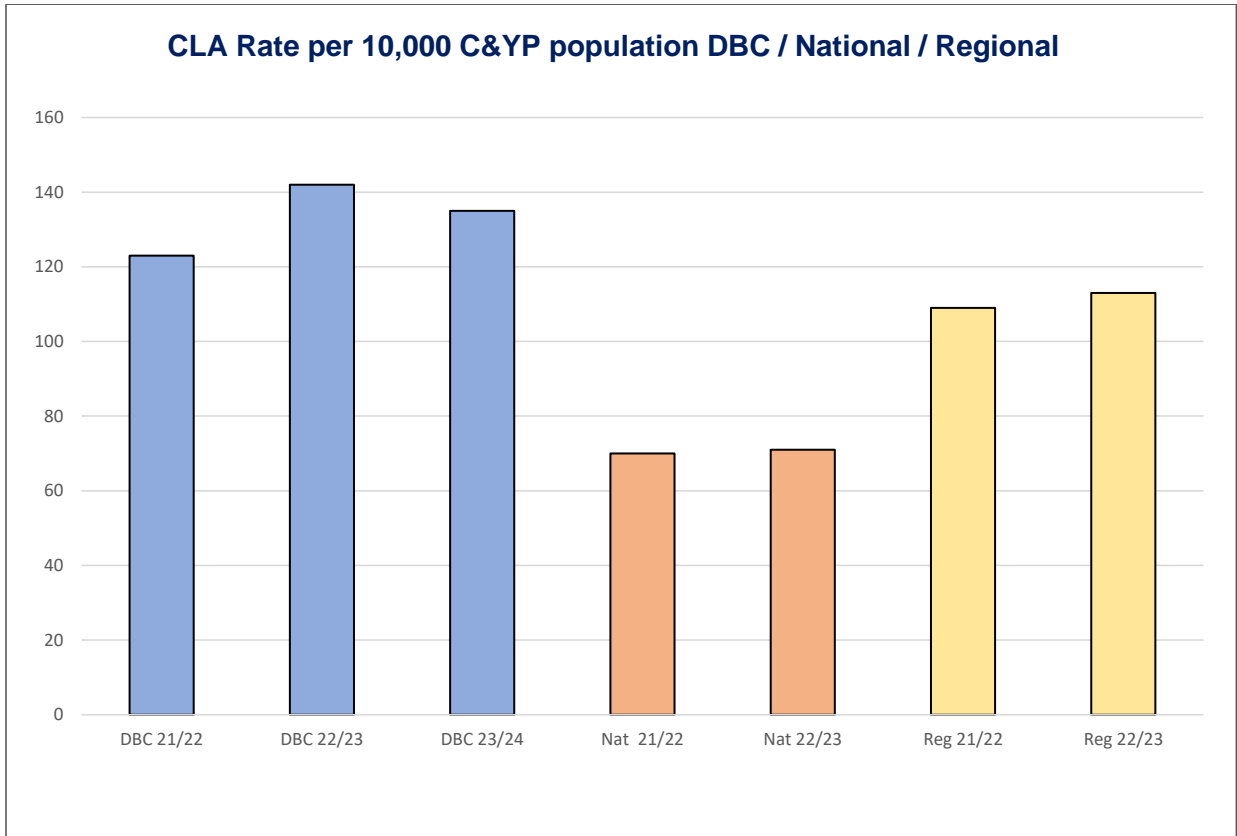
18. At end of March 2024, there were 300 Children Looked After in Darlington, a decrease from the previous year (322). The chart below shows the number of Children Looked After over the last five years.



19. 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 as there can be fluctuations in the year. For example, the number went above 300 for four months in 2020. In the first part of 2023-24 the figure continued to increase in line with the trend seen last year and peaked at 368 in mid-September. Since then, it has steadily reduced.

Rate per 10,000

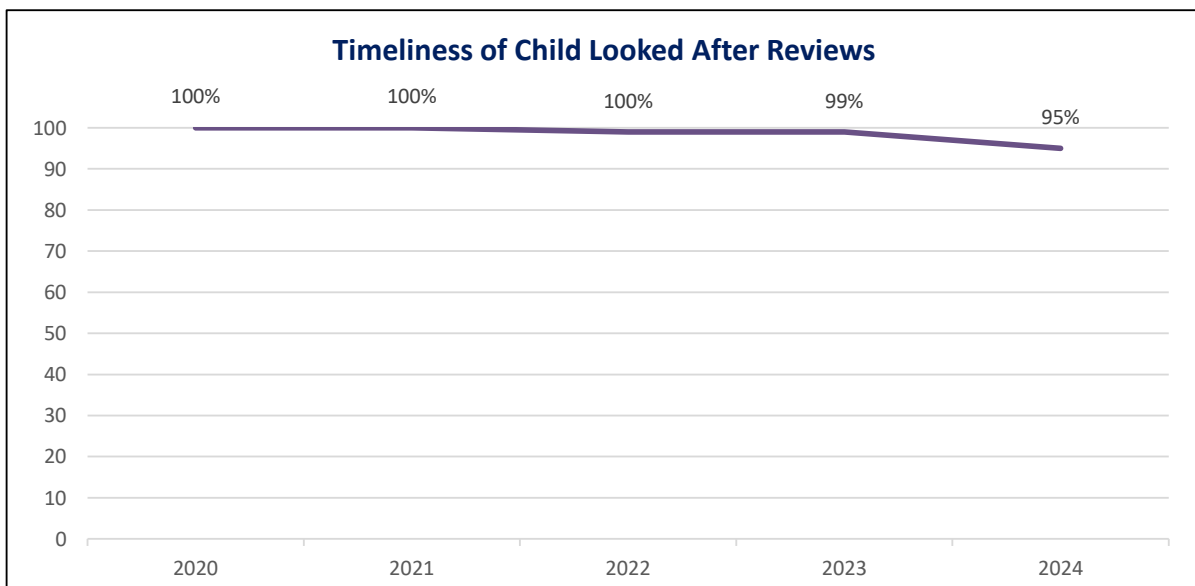
20. The table below is expressed as the rate per 10,000, which allows benchmarking with other councils (the most recent published data on National (England) and Regional (north-east) authorities).



21. At the end of March 2024, 300 children were looked after by Darlington a rate of 135 per 10,000, a decrease since 2022-23.

22. Although there has been a decrease in Darlington, we continue to have a significantly higher rate of Children Looked After than National and Regional averages. The most recent published data is as of 31 March 2023 and there was a national increase in Children Looked After over the year.

Looked After Review Timescales



23. The above chart shows that during 2023-24, performance in relation to the percentage of Children’s reviews completed within statutory timescales was 95%. The drop is linked to reallocations due to a long-term absence and increased workload.

Children’s Participation

24. Children and young people’s participation is based on one of the following methods:

- Attending their Review and speaking on their own behalf.
- Attending, but having another person speak for them.
- Not attending but providing their views in a written form or other medium.
- Not attending but briefing an advocate to represent their views.

25. 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 (i.e., via advocate or written submission). At the end of this reporting year, 842 individual Looked After Reviews were held, which is slightly lower than last year at 883.

C&YP Participation in Reviews (over the age of 4 years)	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Participated	96%	94%	93%	91%	94%

26. 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 increasingly, face to face contacts.

27. 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 an increase in Independent Reviewing Officer caseloads in the year, contact with young people between reviews has been maintained.

28. 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

29. At the second Child Looked After Review scheduled within four 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 2023/24, all children had their permanency plan discussed at their four-month review.

30. 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 three 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

31. 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.
32. 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 and through supervision.

Annual Foster Carer Reviews

33. Local Authorities are required by Regulation 29 (The Fostering Services Regulations 2001) to review the approval of foster carers at least once a year. Ofsted commented that it was good practice to have someone other than a children's Independent Reviewing Officer undertaking this role due to conflicts of interest. In early 2023 the role was temporarily covered by an agency post followed by a one-year contract that started in October. There was a gap between the two appointments. A business case will be put forward to retain the position.
34. All Darlington Borough Foster Carers and Connected Carers should receive an Annual Foster Carer Review. In the year (2023-24) 61 carers required an annual review and 49 (80%) of reviews were completed.
 - Two annual reviews were not completed in the year due to Foster Carers being on hold while work was undertaken.
 - The outstanding 10 reviews from the previous year were completed in the first quarter of 2024/25.
 - In addition, there were 11 new carers, approved in the year, who were not yet due their annual Review. These reviews are scheduled for 2024/25.

35. In the year, all recommendations made were for Foster Carer re-approval. Sometime the recommendation will be to change their terms of approval to reflect the foster carers circumstances, or increased level of confidence and skill. 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	2023/24
Foster Carers	51	55	45	45
Connected Carers	19	20	16	16
Total number of carers	70	75	61	61
Percentage completed in year	95%	86%	84%	80%

Secure Reviews

36. In the year, no young person was subject to a Secure Accommodation Order that required a Secure Accommodation Review.

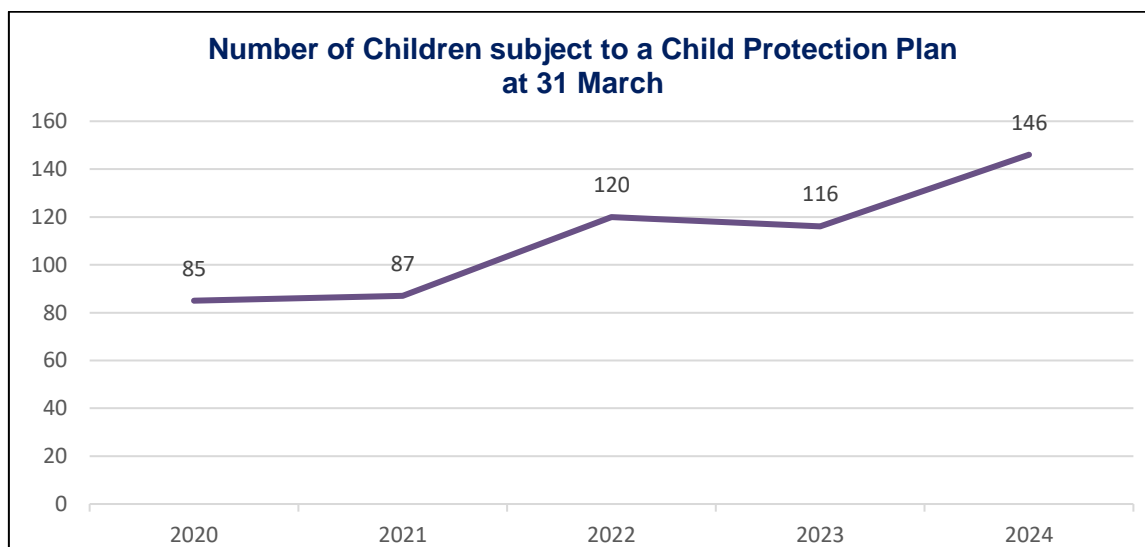
Part 2: CHILD PROTECTION CONFERENCE CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

Statutory Framework

37. 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 (December 2023).
38. 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 practitioner, 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

39. At the end March 2024, 146 children were subject to a Child Protection Plan, a rate of 65.6 per 10,000 children under the age of 18 years. This is a higher position than last year when the figure stood at 116 (a rate of 52.1 per 10,000). The table below shows the number of Children subject to Child Protection Plans over 5 years (at year end).



40. This rate is roughly in line with north-east region (64.8), but higher than the National average at 31 March 2023. During the previous year nationally, the rate increased (42.1 to 43.2).

Child Protection by Category

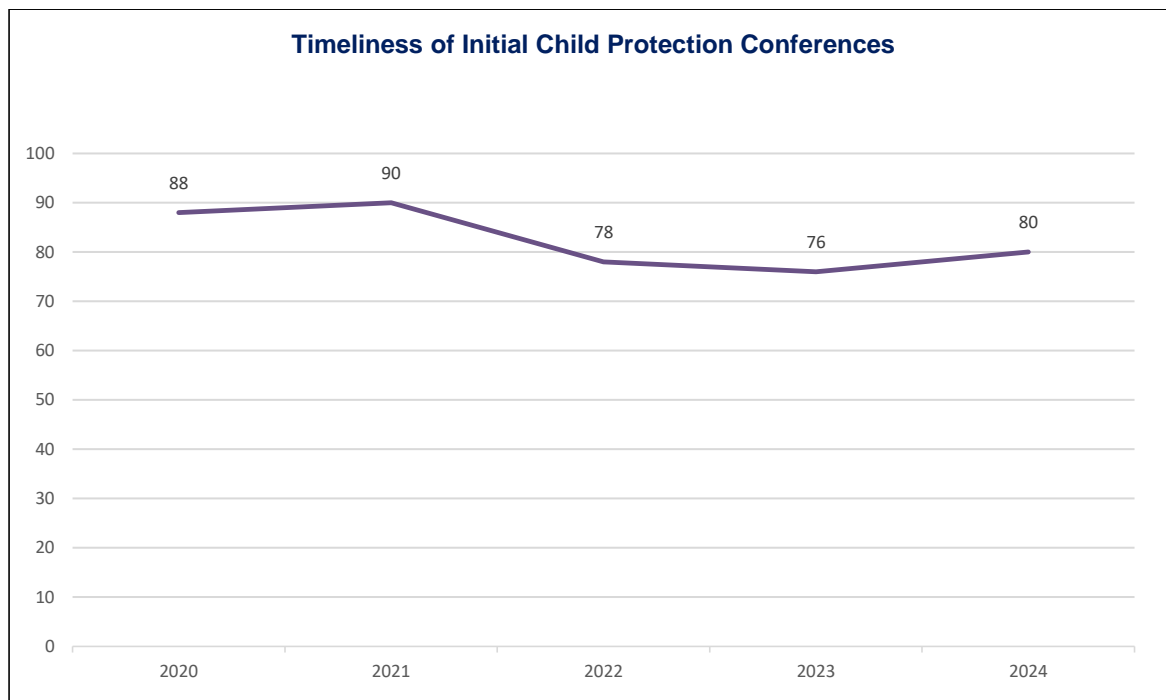
41. In the table, please note that percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. In line with national guidance, Darlington does not use multiple categories, but as this continues to be used by some authorities, it is still reported on nationally.

Category of Abuse	National 2023	DBC 2024
Neglect	49%	62%
Emotional	37%	32%
Physical	7%	7 %
Sexual	4%	0%
Multiple	2%	Not used

42. The highest proportion of children, where the risk is either Neglect or Emotional Abuse, is similar to the national position. The rate for Physical Abuse is in line with the national position. For more than half of the year the rate for sexual abuse ranged from 1-4%, but the end of year figure was 0%. 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, or ceasing, to be subject to a Child Protection Plan.

Child Protection Activity

43. Over the year, 119 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 229 children]. In addition, 174 Child Protection Review Conferences were held [where 364 children were discussed]. There can be more than one Child Protection Conference for a child in the year.
44. The corresponding figures for the previous year were 85 Initial Child Protection Conferences [178 children] and 156 Child Protection Review Conferences [210 children]. Over the year 166 Children had Child Protection Plans removed and 196 new Plans were made.
45. In the year, the proportion of children subject to Initial Child Protection Conferences who were not made subject to a Child Protection Plan was 14.4%, roughly in line with the figures for the previous two years; [13.5% & 18.6%,]. 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.
46. In Darlington this year, there were five children with a disability who were subject to a Child Protection Plan, the figure was 2 the previous year. This information is not currently part of the nationally published data, so no comparison is available.



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

48. For the year to 31 March 2024, 171 (80%) 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 improved and is roughly in line with the most recent regional [81%] and national [78%], benchmark figures.

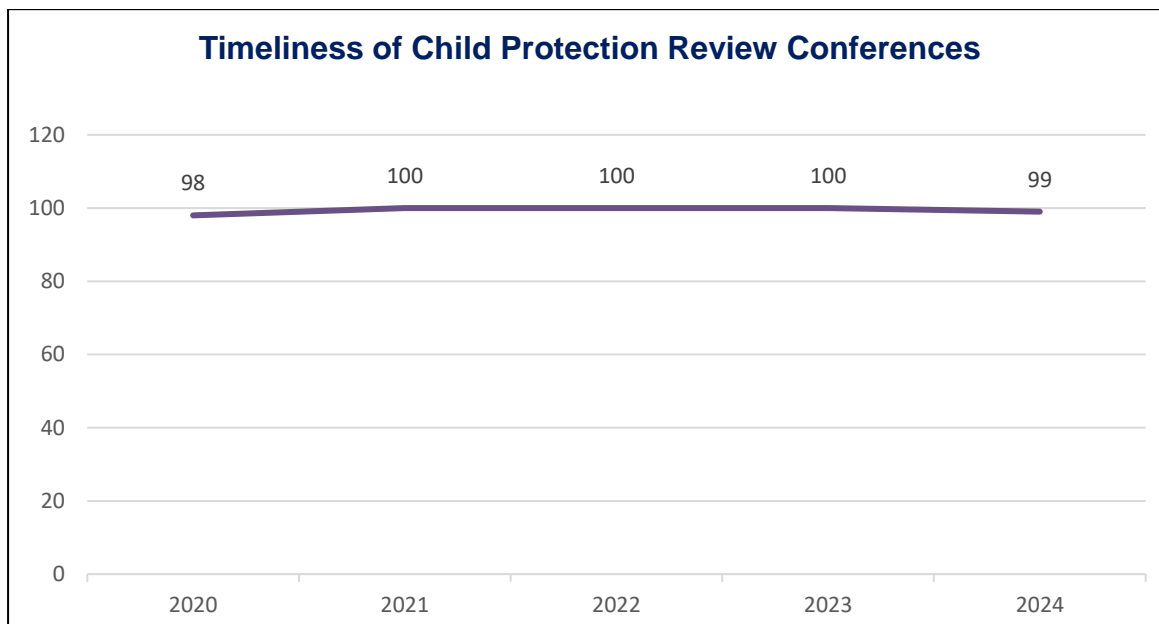
49. 20 Initial Child Protection Conference were delayed for the following reasons:

- a) Delay in the conference being requested by Social Work Team (95%)
- b) Delayed allowing for attendance of family members (5%)

It should be noted that seven of the children involved were unborn babies.

50. In each case an interim plan was in place to ensure that the children were safeguarded. Last year this was similar, with 19 Initial Child Protection Conferences being held outside the required 15 days.

51. The Working Together guidance requires that the first review should be within three months of the Initial Child Protection Conference, and thereafter at intervals of no more than six months.



52. The above chart tracks the percentage of Child Protection cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a higher percentage, ideally 100%.

53. For the year to 31 March 2024, 99% of children had their Child Protection Review Conference within timescales. One meeting was rearranged to ensure that key agencies were able to attend. Again, performance in this area remains higher than Regional [87%] and National [88%] figures (most recent published data).

Family attendance at Conference

54. Family involvement in the conference process tends to be consistent.

Year	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
ICPCs / parent	92%	92%	94%	93%	93%
CPRCs / parent	89%	95%	91%	91%	92%

55. Over the year, no parents were excluded from attending child protection conferences.

56. A draft Child Protection Plan is produced following each Initial Child Protection Conference and is available to professionals and family members for the first Core Group which is held within 10 working days of the conference.

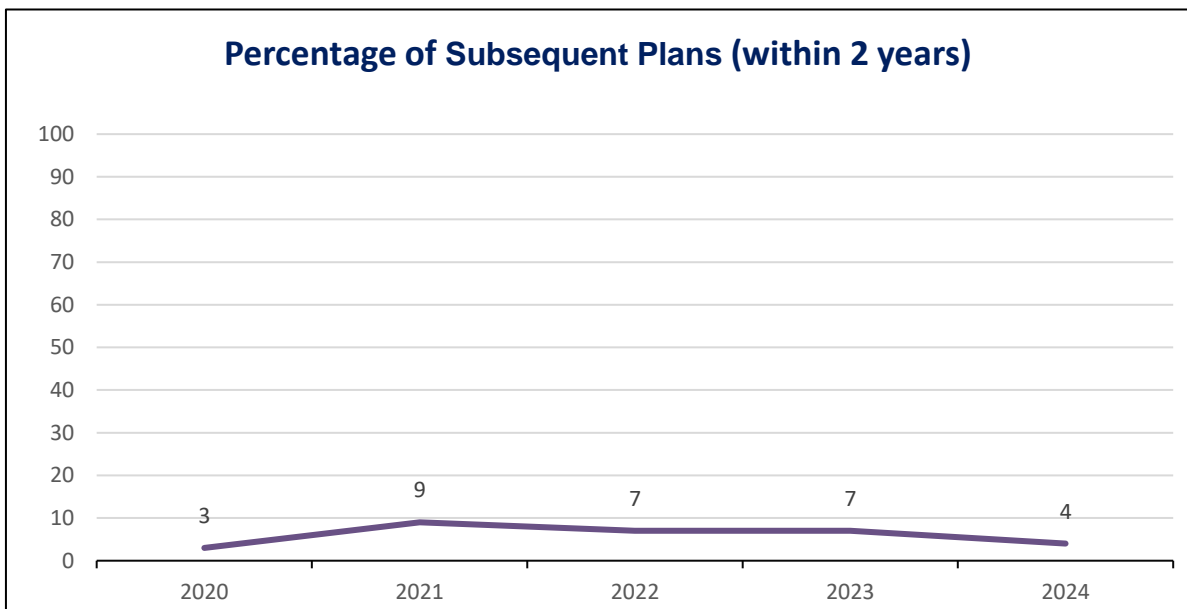
57. The Unit is committed to promoting independent advocacy for children and young people. The Council has a contract with the National Youth Advocacy Service which provides an independent and confidential service.

Children’s Views at CP Conference				
Year	Consultation Document	NYAS	In person	Total
2022/23	8	18	7	33
2023/24	8	16	13	37

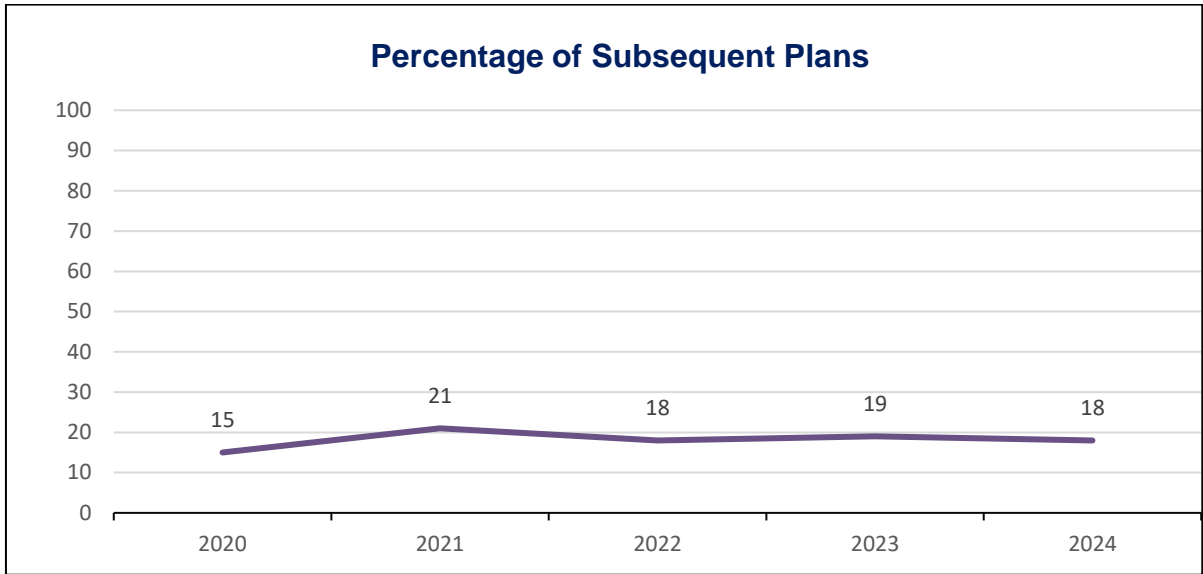
58. If the young person is not in attendance at the Child Protection Conference, the Independent Reviewing Officer should ensure that there is an agreed action for the Core Group regarding how the advocacy role will be communicated to the child or young person.

Second or Subsequent Plans

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

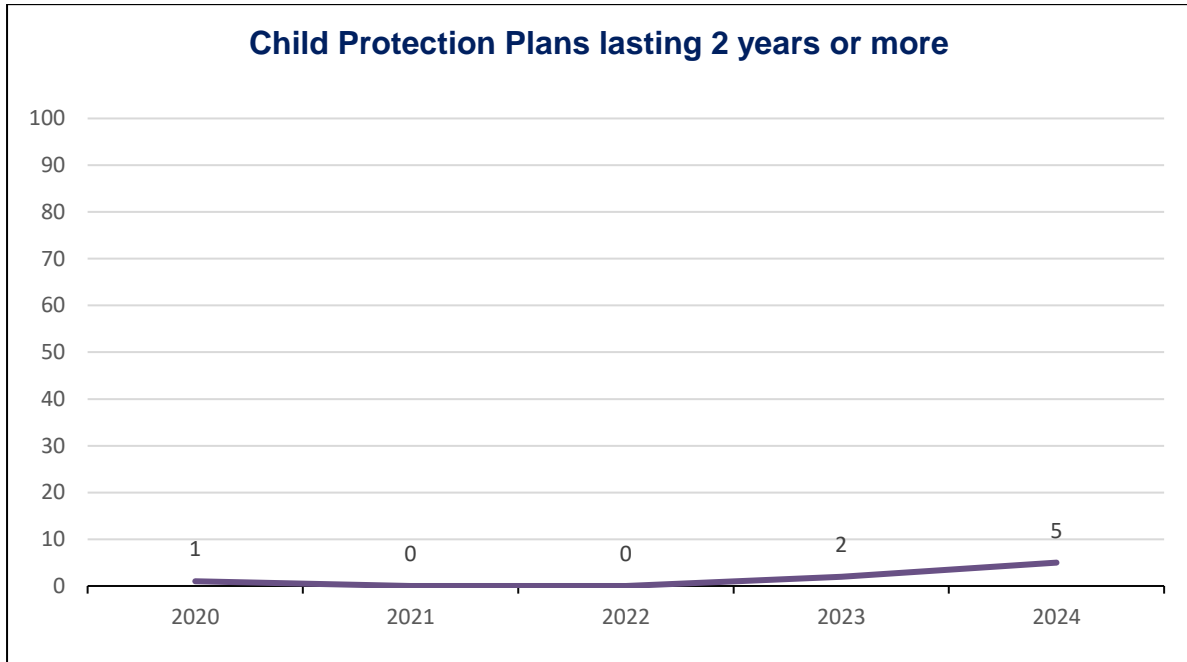


60. The purpose of this indicator is to monitor whether a Child Protection Plan leads to lasting improvement in a child's safety and overall well-being. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a lower figure. However, it is acknowledged that a second or subsequent Child Protection Plan will sometimes be necessary to deal with adverse changes to the child’s circumstances.



61. National benchmarked data is based on a second or subsequent plan being agreed at any time after a previous plan. Our rate for 2023-24 was 18%, a similar position to the previous 2 years. This is slightly better than the National average of 24% and regional average 25% (most recent published data).

Length of Child Protection Plan



62. 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.

63. 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.

64. The percentage of Child Protection Plans ceasing where the plan had lasted more than two years in Darlington [4.6%] is similar to the regional average [1.7%] and national [3.9%] (most recent published data).