

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
2 September 2019

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER ANNUAL REPORT 2018-19

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The Independent Review Officer (IRO) service is set within the statutory framework of the IRO Handbook (2010), linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO changed from the management of the Review process to a wider overview of the child's case including regular monitoring and follow-up between Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Looked After Children (LAC) and for challenging drift and delay. Further details of the role of the IRO are set out in the attached report.

Summary

2. The Annual IRO report is produced by the Children's Safeguarding Unit (CSU) and provides an overview of the work by the IRO Service in relation to Looked After Children, including the Dispute Resolution Process as required by the statutory guidance. The report also provides an overview of the performance of the unit in a range of responsibilities, activities and functions, including Child Protection, training and advice to professionals. The report also highlighting areas for further development.
3. The statutory requirements for individual services to safeguard and promote the welfare of children are set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children, A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (July 2018). Working Together stipulates that the chair of a Child Protection Conference needs to be accountable to the Director of Children's Services, and should be a professional, independent of operational and/or line management responsibilities for the case.

Recommendation

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

Suzanne Joyner
Director of Children and Adults Services

S17 Crime and Disorder	Nil Impact
Health and Well Being	Nil Impact
Carbon Impact	Nil Impact
Diversity	Nil Impact
Wards Affected	Nil Impact
Groups Affected	Children who are at risk of abuse and neglect and their families will be affected as they will receive statutory intervention which will not always be their choice
Budget and Policy Framework	Nil Impact
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	Nil Impact
Efficiency	Nil Impact
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report relates to the service delivered to children who are looked after but not care leavers

MAIN REPORT

Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers

5. 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.

6. The Service has an independent role to ensure that all children, whatever their religious or cultural background, receive the same care and safeguards with regard to abuse and neglect.

7. The service is responsible for the following statutory functions:
 - a) Initial Child Protection Conferences
 - b) Child Protection Review Conferences
 - c) Looked After Children Reviews
 - d) Annual Foster Carer Reviews
 - e) Adoption Reviews
 - f) Disruption Meetings
 - g) Reviews of children placed in Secure Accommodation

8. IROs undertake a range of non-statutory functions including, providing advice and guidance to professionals, facilitating single and multi-agency child protection training, are members of formal panels, management meetings and undertake case learning audits.

Staffing Levels and Caseloads

9. Responsibility for the operational management, performance and development of the Service lies with the Head of Service for Quality Assurance and Practice Improvement, who reports directly to the Assistant Director, Children's Services.
10. During 2018-19 the IRO team has been stable and all substantive posts are currently permanent appointments. At 31 March 2019 there were 5.4 IRO posts; 5.2 post (96%) are permanent and the additional 0.2 post is agency cover to undertake Annual Foster Carer Reviews.
11. The Independent Reviewing Officers are supported by a full time Business Support Team Leader and 5.0 permanent Business Support Officers (one post is term time only).
12. The Independent Reviewing Officer's handbook (2010) recommends that caseloads for IROs need to be between 50 and 70 LAC children. Ofsted's; *Independent Reviewing Officers: taking up the challenge?* (2013) found that the average caseload was slightly above 80 cases and a national benchmarking survey (2013) placed the average caseload for an IRO between 50 and 95.
13. The National Children's Bureau; *The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England* (March 2014) reported that:

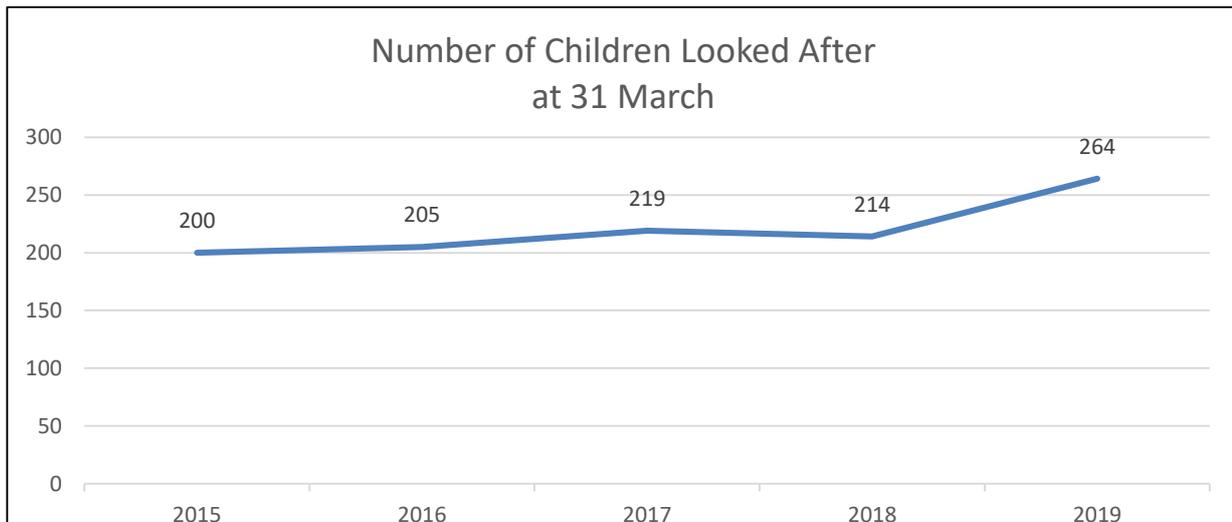
"Being employed by the local authority usually meant carrying out other duties not specified in the IRO guidance. Having to chair child protection conferences as well as looked after children's reviews was mostly, but not universally, seen as a benefit in providing continuity for children subject to a child protection plan who then become looked after. However, other duties, such as conducting Regulation 33 visits or foster carer reviews, were not always seen as appropriate for IROs. There were concerns that these activities could lead to a conflict of interest and compromise IROs' independence."
14. Annual Foster Carer Reviews are currently being undertaken solely by a part-time agency Reviewing Officer to ensure independence and avoid any conflict of interest with in-house foster carers.
15. Over the last 12 months, the requirement around the size of caseloads for IROs in Darlington has increased from an average of 66 children to 71 children which at the upper limit of the statutory guidance. This represents an increase in caseloads of 7.6%.
16. This figure does not include additional work undertaken by IROs:
 - one IRO is a member of the Children's Placement Service Panel (14 Panels held annually)
 - another provides Multi-agency Child Protection training sessions (12 sessions in year).
17. When caseloads are manageable it allows IROs to have sufficient time to provide a quality service to each Looked After Child including meeting with the child before the review to ensure that their views are clearly understood, consulting with social workers

following significant changes, monitoring drift and where appropriate, ensuring that a challenge is made.

- 18. In addition to LAC Reviews and Child Protection Conferences, IROs also undertake monthly case file audits and the chairing of, Secure Reviews and Disruption Meetings.
- 19. There is a statutory requirement in the IRO Handbook to ensure sufficient administrative support to Independent Reviewing Officers in relation to Looked After Reviews. Current responsibilities include the administering and producing a record of Child Protection Conferences as well as the administrative function in relation to Looked After Children. Regular meetings are held with the Business Support Team leader to agree how the team can best support the Children's Safeguarding Unit.

Looked After Children

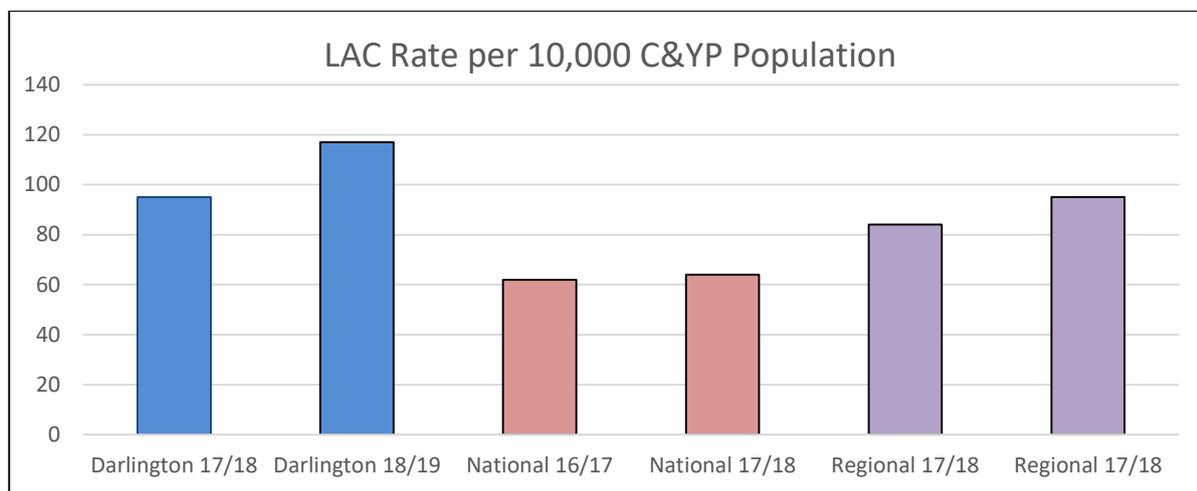
- 20. At the end of March 2019 there were 264 Children Looked After in Darlington, a significant increase when compared to the previous year (214). This follows the relatively stable position that has been in place since 2016.
- 23. The chart below shows the monthly number of Looked After Children (LAC) over the last 5 years.



- 24. The rate in Darlington has remained comparatively high it plateaued with only small increases though 2016 to 2018, however there has been a significant increase in numbers over the last 12 month period.

Looked After Children rate per 10,000

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



26. At the end of March 2019, 264 children were looked after by Darlington a rate of 117.2 per 10,000, a significant increase from the outturn figure for 2017/18 of 95.0 per 10,000.
27. Analysis shows that Darlington continues to have a significantly higher rate of Looked After Children than both the Regional and Statistical neighbours' average. It should be noted the most recent published data is as of 31 March 2018 and there has been a national increase in Children Looked After over the year. The comparator figures for 31 March 2019 will be published in the autumn.

LAC Demographics

Age Looked After Children (as of 31 st March)	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
Under 1	7%	8%	8%	5%	20	8%
1-4	19%	18%	16%	15%	42	16%
5-9	19%	21%	26%	26%	68	26%
10-15	38%	34%	33%	35%	103	39%
16-17	18%	20%	17%	18%	31	12%
Total	200	205	219	214	264	

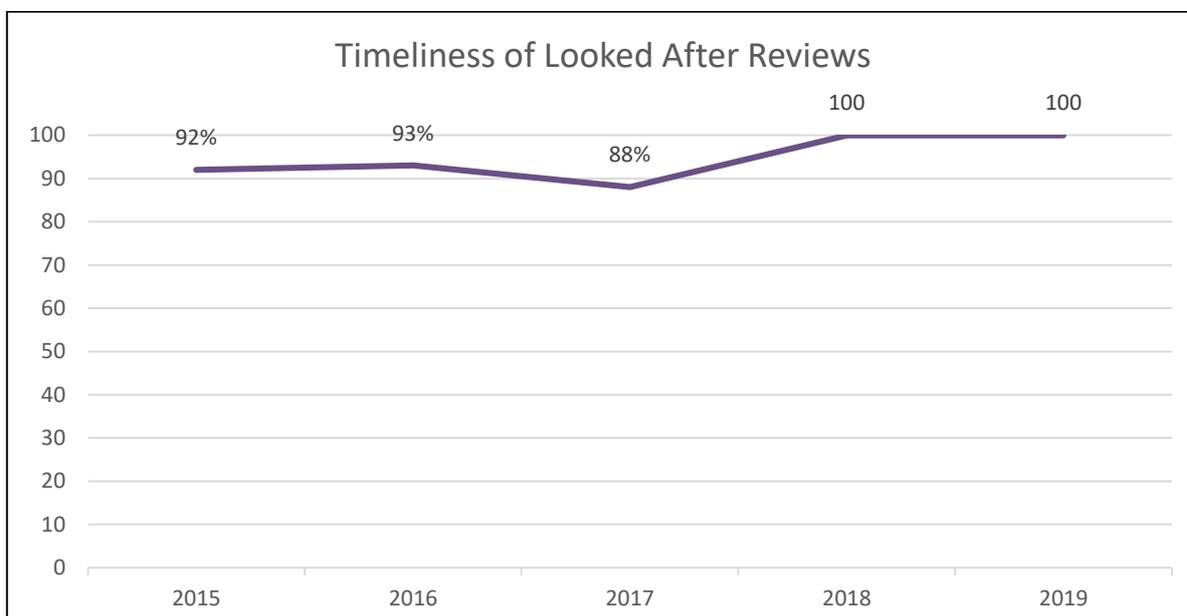
28. The age profile of Darlington's Looked After population has remained stable over the last 4 years. The majority of Looked After Children in Darlington are aged between 10 and 15 years which is similar to the distribution nationally.

Ethnicity of Looked After Children (as of 31 st March)	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
White	94%	94%	90%	92%	239	91%
Mixed	5%	4%	6%	4%	14	5%
Asian or Asian British	2%	1%	3%	3%	8	3%
Black or Black British	1%	1%	1%	1%	3	1%
Other	0%	0%	0%	0%	0	0%
Total	200	205	219	214	264	

29. The ethnic population of Looked After Children in Darlington has remained stable over the previous 4 years. Although this does not match the national distribution, this is

predictable due to the comparative lack of ethnic diversity within the Darlington population as a whole.

Looked After Reviews and Timescales



30. The above chart shows that during 2018-19 performance in relation to the percentage of LAC cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales was 100%, an improvement on the figures for the previous 4 years performance.

LAC Participation and contact with IRO

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

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

- attending their Review and speaking on their own behalf;
- attending their review but having another person speak for them;
- not attending the review but providing their views in a written form or through another facilitative medium; and /or
- not attending the review but briefing an advocate to represent their views

33. 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, 712 individual Looked After Reviews were held, a 24% increase on the 576 held the previous year.

Aged Under 4	C&YP Participation in Reviews (over the age of 4 years)	
	Participated	Did not Participate
169	485 (90%)	54 (10%)

34. The aim will be to increase the proportion of children and young people over the age of 4 that attend their review meeting, and to reduce the number of meetings where there is no views expressed. It should however be noted that some young people chose not to participate in the process.
35. IROs play a key role in actively seeking the views for children who do not wish to attend their reviews and to see what would assist in getting them there. Independent Reviewing Officers ensure that young people are able to make contact with them if they have any concerns. Once a new admission to care is allocated, the IRO will contact the child, if aged 4 or over and make arrangements to meet them prior to their LAC review. All contact details are provided at the time of allocation.
36. The IRO Handbook recommends the IRO meet with the child/young person within their placement, prior to the Looked After Review meeting or as part of the process. With the reduction in IRO caseloads over the last year this contact with young people between reviews has continued to improve. IROs continue to offer the option of attending earlier than the review time to meet with the child or young person on the day of the scheduled review if they have not been able to visit them prior or in circumstances where the placement is at a significant distance from Darlington.
37. The expectation with regards to IRO visiting and maintaining contact are set out in the IRO Standards for Looked After Children and their families as well as a pledge specifically aimed at our looked after children. IROs currently record on the Liquid Logic case management system when they visit, have a telephone conversation, or other form communication, with a child or young person.

Permanence Planning and Adoption

38. At the second LAC Review scheduled within 4 months of a child or young person becoming looked after, the Permanence Plan should be agreed. The IRO will then actively monitor the care planning process to minimize any drift or delay. In 2018/19 all children had their permanency plan discussed at their 4 month review.
39. Additional Looked After Children Reviews are required when a child is to be adopted. When a child becomes the subject of a Placement Order an Adoption Review is required within 3 months of the Order being made. For children moving into an adoption placement additional reviews are held within 28 days and at 3 months regardless of when the last looked after review was held. It is therefore possible for individual children to have up to four Looked After Reviews within a twelve month period.

Dispute Resolution Process

40. One of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the Care Planning process. The Dispute Resolution process reinforces the authority of the IRO and their accountability for decisions made at reviews. IROs will refer to the process

when they feel that is appropriate to follow up on recommendations that have not been auctioned or where the implementation of a Care Plan is delayed. IROs will in the first instance use informal negotiation to resolve issues, and only where this is not successful will a formal challenge be made by instigating the Dispute Resolution Process.

41. The IRO Dispute Resolution Process was revised in September 2018. Monitoring the progress of disputes raised shows that the majority of the challenges in 2018/19 were resolved either directly with the Social Worker or their Team Manager.
42. There is increased evidence of the 'IRO footprint' being evidenced on children's records. The letter form Ofsted following the Focused Visit in February 2019 stated:
 - Independent reviewing officers (IROs) have become more effective since the last inspection (February / March 2018). They appropriately challenge Social Workers and Team Managers to help progress plans and reduce delay for children.

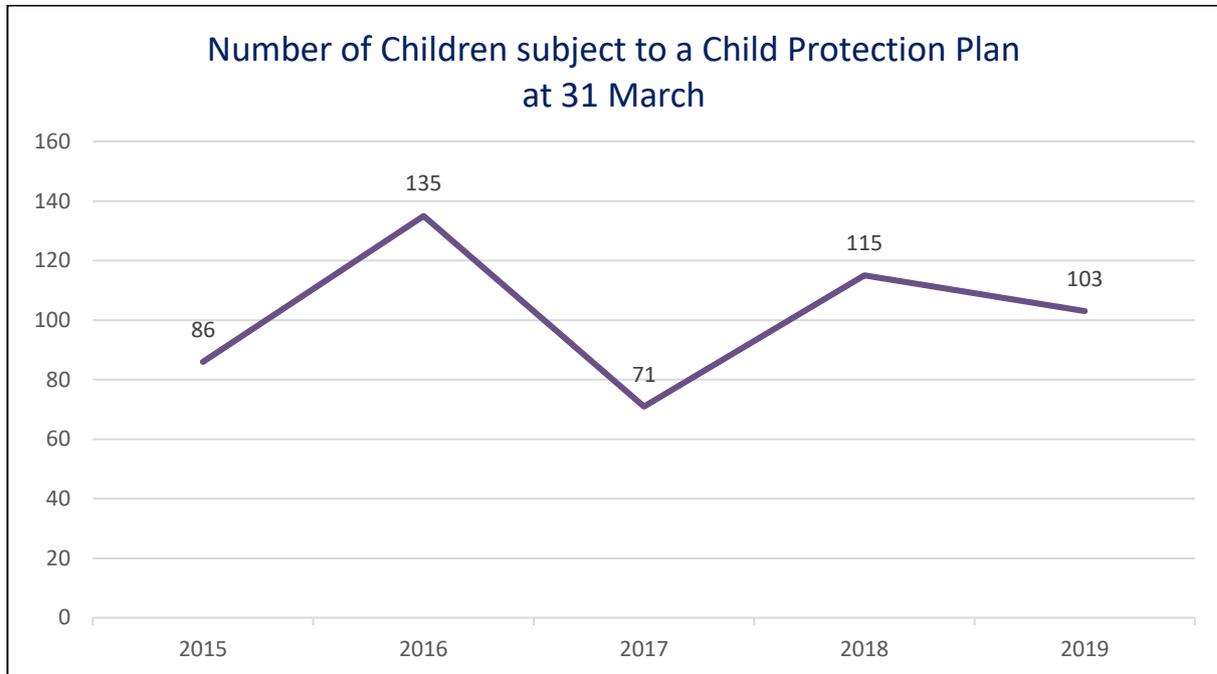
Foster Carer Reviews

43. Local Authorities are required by Regulation 29 (The Fostering Services Regulations 2001) to review the approval of foster carers at least once a year and the Reviewing & Development Service is responsible for undertaking the annual reviews. The additional part-time agency IRO has been retained. Ofsted during their re-inspection of Services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers; commented that it was good practice to have someone other than an IRO undertaking this role due to possible conflicts of interest.
44. Any significant changes to circumstances, or concerns raised at the Annual Review, are referred to the Children's Placement Service Panel.

Child Protection Activity

45. Number of Children subject to Child Protection Plans

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



46. The total number of children with a Child Protection Plan on 31st March 2019 was 103; a rate of 45.7 per 10,000 children under the age of 18yrs. This is a decrease from the figure position at the end of March 2018, when the figure stood at 115 (a rate of 51 per 10,000).

Rate per 10,000 of Children Subject to Child Protection Plans at 31 st March	2017/ 18			2018/19
	Darlington	North East	England	Darlington
National stats table (D1)	51.2	65.7	45.3	45.7

47. The rate of children who were the subject of a Child Protection Plan as of 31 March 2019 is below North East and inline England averages of 31st March 2018. Published benchmark data for 2018/19 will be available later in the year.

Number at 31st March	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Darlington National Stats table (D1)	140	86	135	71	115	103

Child Protection Demographics

48. At the end 2018/19, of the 103 children subject to a Child Protection Plan:

- 2% Unborn, 47% aged under 5 years, 34% aged 5-10 years, 17% aged 11-15 years and 1% aged 16 years+
- 68% Neglect, 23% Emotional Abuse, 4% Physical Abuse, 5% Sexual Abuse.

Note: percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

49. Nationally the most recent published data for March 2018 was:

- 48% Neglect, 38% Emotional Abuse, 6% Physical Abuse, 4% Sexual Abuse and 5% Multiple-categories (note: multiple-categories should not be used).

50. The proportion of Children subject to Child Protection Plan where the risk is Physical Abuse or Sexual Abuse are broadly in line with the national position. The interpretation of the impact of emotional harm in cases of neglect may be inflating the percentage of cases categorised as being at risk from Emotional Abuse.

51. On the 31st March 2018 there were 115 children subject to Child Protection Plans; over the 12 months to 31st March 2019 this had decreased to 103 children. 192 Children had Plans removed and 180 new Plans were made.

CP Plan Activity	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Becoming subject to a CP Plan	124	171	102	138	180
Ceasing to be the subject of a CP	179	122	166	94	192
Increase / decrease	-54	+49	- 64	+44	-12

52. The table above shows overall activity in relation to Child Protection Plans (numbers becoming subject to or ceasing).

53. There were 180 new Child Protection Plans made and 192 children had their Plans discontinued in the year 2018/19, which is a relatively stable position when compared to the larger fluctuations seen in previous years.

54. Over the year, 114 Initial Child Protection Conferences, of which 19 were Transfer Conferences [a combined total of 210 children] and 191 Child Protection Review Conferences were held [375 children].

55. The corresponding figures for the previous year were 85 Initial Child Protection Conferences [157 children], 7 Transfer Conferences [combined total of 173 children] and 135 Child Protection Review Conferences [256 children].

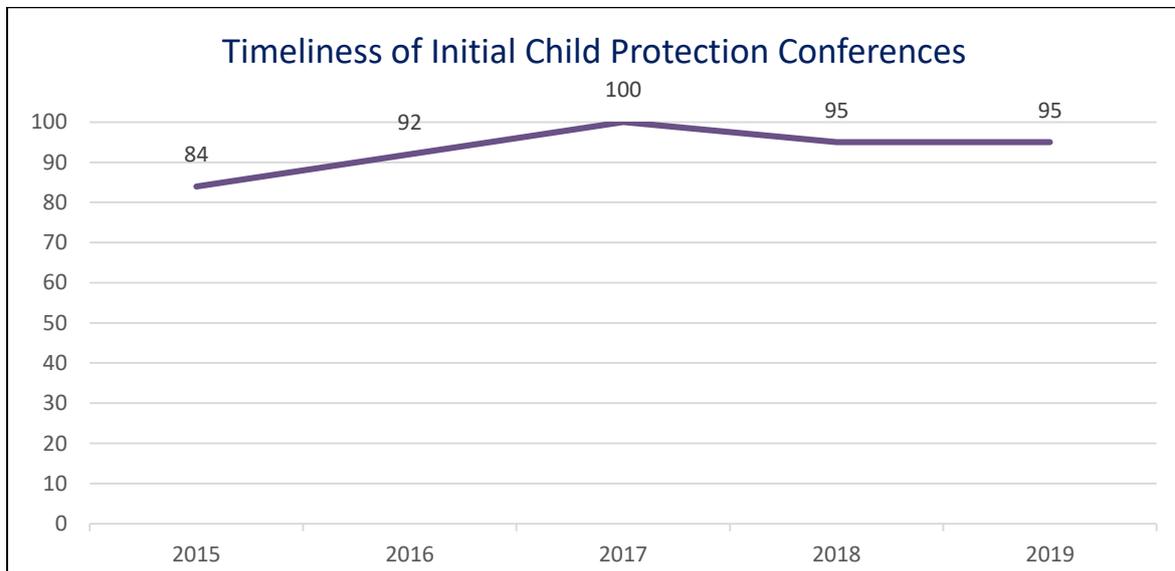
56. The table above shows overall Child Protection Conference activity over the last 5 years. In the last year the number of children who were the subject of an ICPC increased by 34%, from 157 to 210, correspondingly the number of children subject to a Child Protection Review Conference also increased [by 46%].

Meeting Activity	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
ICPC	64	103	72	85	14
Transfer	6	4	6	7	19
CPRC	168	149	194	135	135

57. In the year, the proportion of children subject to ICPCs who were not made subject to a Child Protection Plan was 14.3% similar level to the previous year [12.1%].

58. In Darlington at the end of March, there were no children open to Life-stages who are subject to a Child Protection Plan (i.e. Children with Disabilities). This was the same position over the year April 2018 – March 2019; no child with a disability was subject to a Child Protection Plan. This information is not currently part of the nationally published data so no comparison is available.

Timeliness of ICPCs

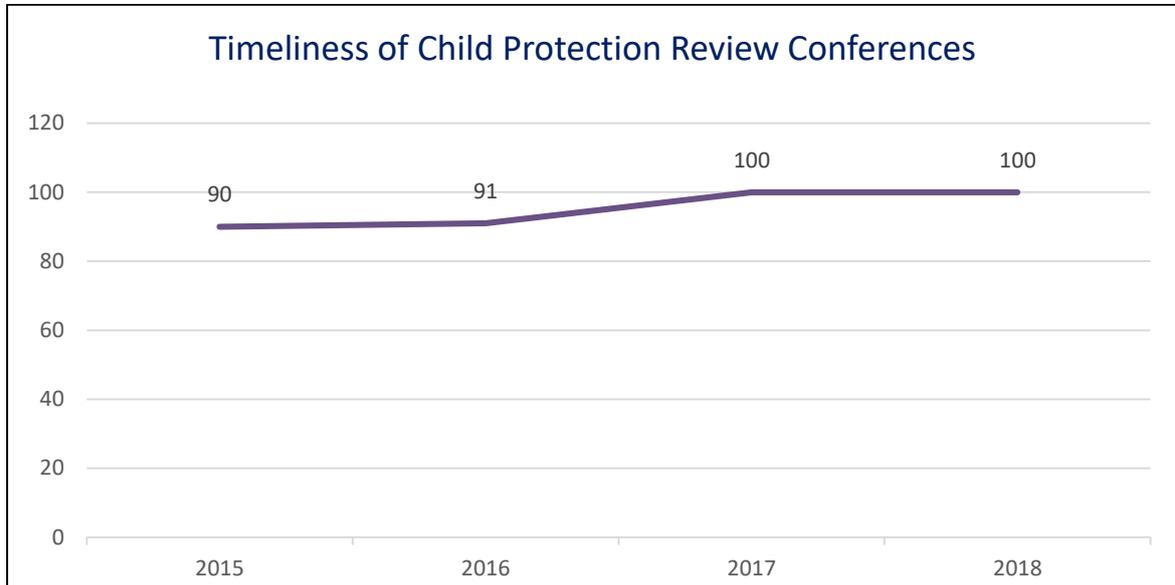


59. The chart above tracks the ICPCs held within the year and records the percentage that are held within 15 working days of the Section 47 enquiry.

60. For the year to 31st March 2019, 134 (95.4%) of children were subject to an ICPC (excludes transfer conferences) that was held within the prescribed 15 working days of the Section 47 Enquiry. This is at the same level as the previous year and remains higher than statistical benchmarks; regional [83%], statistical neighbours [86%] and national benchmark of [77%].

Timeliness of CPRCs

61. 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.



62. The above chart tracks the percentage of Child Protection cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales in the year. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a higher percentage, ideally 100%. In recent years this has been an area of good performance.

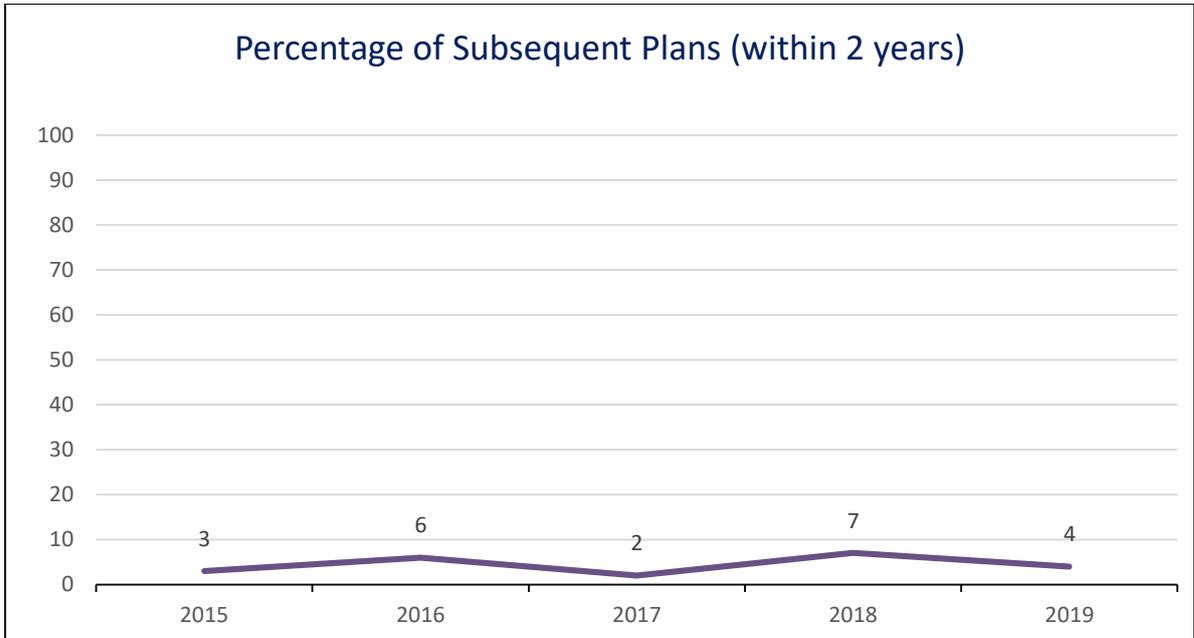
63. For the year to 31st March 2018, all but one of the 191 of Child Protection Review Conferences were held within timescales [99.9%], a slight drop. Again performance in this area remains higher than regional [92%], national [91%] and statistical neighbours [95%].

Child Protection Review Conferences within timescales	2017/2018			2018/19
	Darlington	North East	England	Darlington
	100%	92%	91%	99.9%

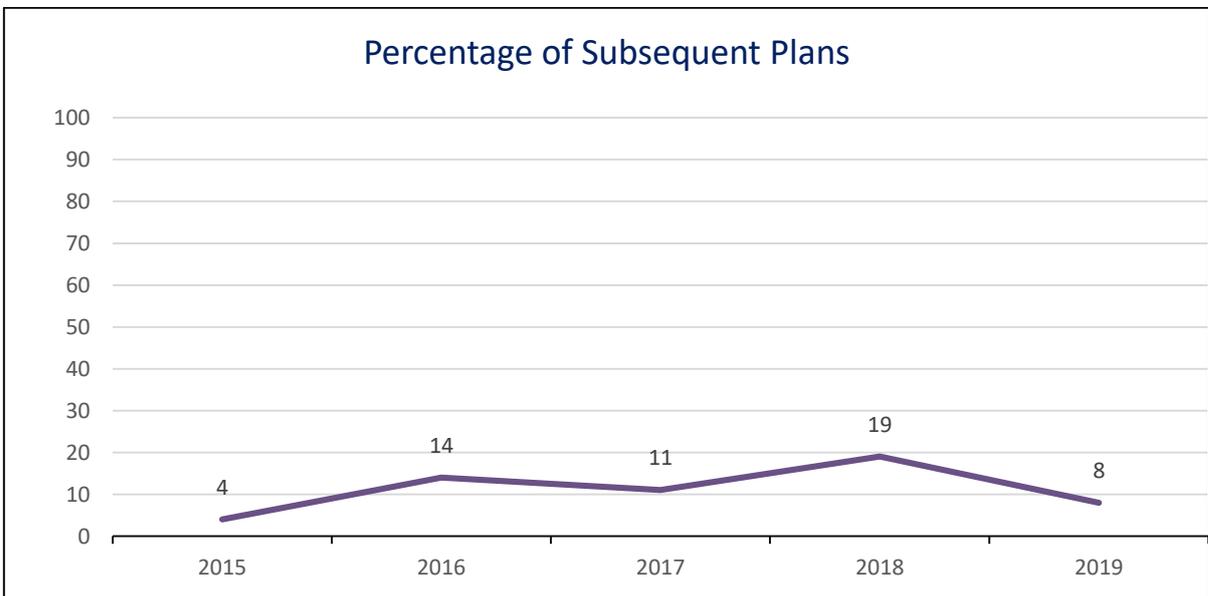
64. Published benchmark data for 2018/19 will be available later in the year.

Second or Subsequent Plans

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

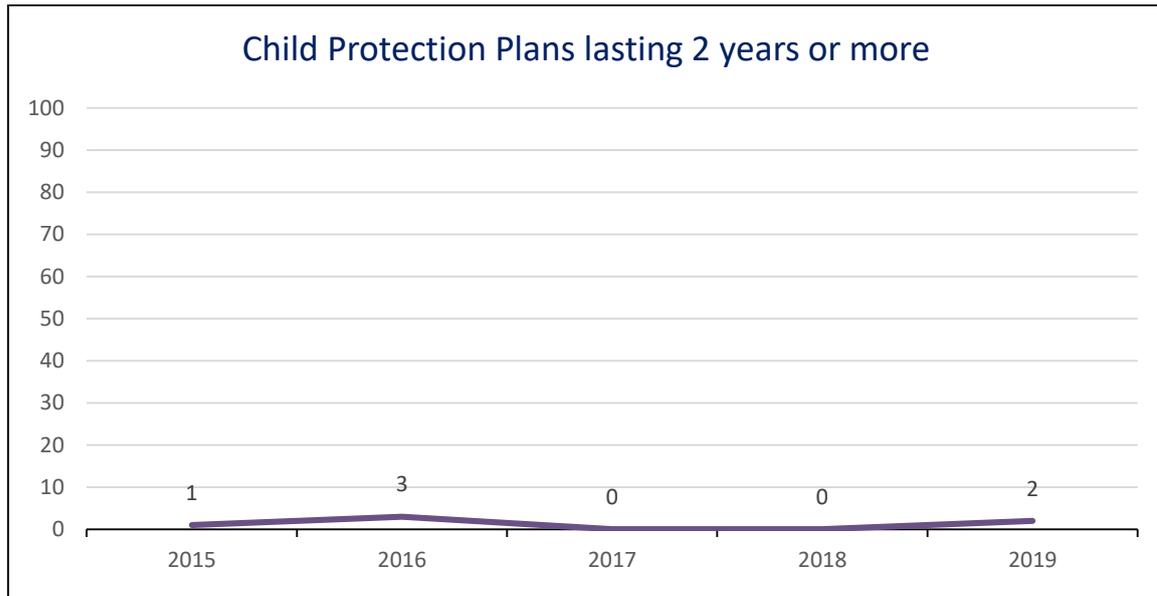


66. This indicator is a proxy for the level and quality of service a child receives. Its purpose is to monitor whether Children's Social Care Services devise and implement a Child Protection Plan which leads to lasting improvement in a child's safety and overall well-being. Good performance for this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



67. National benchmarked data is based on a second or subsequent plan being agreed at any time after a previous plan. Our rate for 2018-19 was 7.8%, this is an improvement on the previous year and continues to better than both the England average of 20.2% and the regional average which is 20.3% (most recent published data).

Child Protection Plans lasting 2 years or more



68. The above chart tracks the number of children who had been the subject of a CPP continuously for two years or longer against the number of children ceasing to be the subject of a CPP during the year, expressed as percentage.

69. 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 CPPs for longer. Good performance is therefore typified by a lower percentage.

70. The period of time that children are subject to a Child Protection Plan is monitored by the Children's Safeguarding Unit Manager with particular attention given to tracking cases where they are:

- Approaching their first Child Protection Review Conference, and
- 15 months after a Child Protection Plan is put in place.

This system has ensured that cases are reviewed in a timely manner, and that there is an appropriate level of scrutiny on the plans made for children and young people.

71. 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 1.6% during the year to 31st March 2019.

72. The percentage of Child Plans ceasing where the plan had lasted more than 2 years in Darlington is currently below both the North East average [2.2%] and England [3.4%] averages at 31st March 2018. Published benchmark data for 2018/19 will be available later in the year.

Family attendance at Conference

73. In the year, out of 95 invitations, parents attended 89 Initial Child Protection Conferences, a total of 94%, in-line with the rate in recent years.
74. In the year, out of 191 invitations, family members attended 173 Child Protection Review Conferences, a total of 91%, again in-line with the rate in recent years. Generally the rate for Child Protection Reviews tends to be lower by a few percentage points.

Year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Percentage of ICPCs attended by parent	95%	97%	94%	95%	94
Percentage of CPRCs attended by parent	91%	94%	91%	91%	91%

75. Over the year to 31st March 2019, no family members with parental responsibility were excluded from attending child protection conferences.
76. A draft Child Protection Plan is produced at the end of the Initial Child Protection Conference enabling professionals and family members to leave the meeting with a copy.
77. The Unit is committed to promoting independent advocacy for children and young people. The Council has a contract with the National Youth Advocacy Service which provides an independent and confidential service. If the young person is not in attendance the IRO should ensure that there is an agreed action for the Core Group regarding how the advocacy role will be communicated to the child or young person.

Management

Quality Assurance

78. In order to ensure that the effectiveness of the Unit and ability to provide a key Quality Assurance function, it is essential that the Independent Review Team have the relevant skills, knowledge and understanding.

79. The quality and effectiveness of the Children's Safeguarding Unit is ensured through:

- Workload Allocation
- Supervision and Personal Development Review (PDR)
- Team Meetings
- Audit
- Training and Development
- Direct Observation

Workload Allocation

80. All Looked After Children and / or children subject to Child Protection Plans are allocated a designated IRO with the intention that where possible the allocated IRO will remain consistent, until the child is no-longer Looked After or subject to a Child Protection Plan. The team has been permanent staffed over the covered by this period of this report, with no staff changes requiring temporary cover. This is positive position when compared to previous years.

81. Allocations are monitored regularly and form part of the discussion in monthly supervision sessions.

Supervision and Annual Appraisal

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

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

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

Team Meetings

84. Scheduled Team Meetings are held a minimum of a 12 times in year and are augmented with development sessions (normally two in year). Team meetings cover a range of practice issues, updates on local, regional and national developments, sharing of good practice, and learning from reviews and inspections. Additional meetings are held with IROs when necessary. Some sessions focus on the work of the IROs, while others have included the Administration staff who support the IROs.

Audit

85. In 2018/19 all IROs have completed Learning Audits in line monthly quality assurance cycle. Following the Ofsted re-inspection (February and March 2018), the Quality Assurance Framework was revised and IROs have been integral to the Learning Audits programme in line with the new arrangements which has included involving the case holder in the audit process.

Training and Development

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

87. Bespoke Disruption Meeting Training for IROs in has been commissioned and will held (sub-regionally) in May 2019.

Observations

88. The Children's Safeguarding Unit is open to external scrutiny. During 2018/19 this has included a programme of observations by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Five Observations were completed by Board Members from October 2018 – January 2019.

89. A programme of direct observations of Looked After Reviews is scheduled to be undertaken by the IRO line manager.

Next steps for 2019/20

90. The following are scheduled for action in 2019/20

a) Create:

- an IRO Manager post.

b) Review:

- arrangements for the completion of Annual Foster Carer Reviews.
- The team structure to ensure there are sufficient numbers of IROs to fulfil statutory functions and reduce previous reliance on agency staff cover.

c) Embed:

- adopted procedures for the IRO Dispute Resolution Process, and Disruption meetings

d) Promote:

- the participation and attendance of young people and their families in child protection conferences.
- the take up of Advocacy services for children and young people.