



Independent Reviewing Officer

# Children in Care

## Annual Report Summary

### 2020/21



# What do IROs do?

The law states that all children and young people that become looked after must be appointed an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). The IRO Handbook (2010) sets out the requirements of the IROs in supporting children and young people who are in the care of the local authority. An IRO has an important role in making sure that children and young people's care plans meet their needs. IROs are there to make sure that reviews are run properly, that children and young people's views are listened to and their best interests are protected, and to ensure that children are only looked after as long as necessary.



IROs also make sure that they talk to the local authority when they are worried about whether plans are progressing for children or young people. IROs will challenge the local authority if they disagree with the local authority's plan for a child or young person. IROs will also tell the local authority about things that they are doing particularly well.

IROs in County Durham also chair child protection conferences and work within the Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership (DSCP).

## Children and young people in the care of County Durham

The IROs chair Child Looked After Reviews (CLAs) for all children, including those placed for adoption, those in short break respite care, young people who are remanded into the care of the Local Authority.

# The Child's Journey

The information below contains the key stages in the child's journey when being care for by the Local Authority and how the IRO assists the child or young person in this process.

	Stages in child's or young person's journey	What is it like for the child or young person?	How does the IRO assist?
STAGE 1	Child or young person becomes Looked After.	Confusing to be placed away from parents and unsure what is going to happen.	Contact is made with the child or yp within 5 working days to inform them who their IRO is and what they do. The IRO will contact them to arrange a visit.
STAGE 2	Child or young person meets with the Social Worker (SW) to plan their Looked After Review (LAR) 15 days before the looked after review takes place.	Confusing to meet someone new and will not know what to expect.	Social Worker and IRO conduct a pre review discussion together to consider the issues for the looked after review.
STAGE 3	A pre review visit is arranged between the child/young person and the IRO.	Confused by process and not sure what the review is about.	IRO visits the child/young person to prepare for the looked after review, obtain views and help the child/young person chair the review if that is what they would like to do.  Wherever possible it will be the same IRO who conducts all subsequent reviews.
STAGE 4	Within 20 working days a looked after review is held and short term plan is agreed with recommendations.	Young people comment that they like to chair their own meeting.	The IRO supports the child to provide their views and chair the meeting if appropriate.  The IRO will provide a contact slip for the child to contact and will negotiate the time and place of the next review and who will attend.  The IRO will challenge the local authority on the plan if appropriate, read the assessments and consider if the plan is appropriate for the young person.
STAGE 5	3 month looked after review and permanent plans agreed.	May be confused about the plan and what happens next.	The IRO supports the child to provide their views and chair the meeting if appropriate.  The IRO will provide a contact slip for the child to contact and will negotiate the time and place of the next review and who will attend.  The IRO will read the court bundle and all assessments, discuss with the Children's guardian to determine views on the plan.  If the IRO is unhappy with the progress of the plan they can instigate the DRP process to challenge the LA. If the case is in court the court need to be made aware of the IRO's concerns.
STAGE 6	6 month reviews and permanent plans.  The process continues every 6 months until the child is no longer looked after.	Young people comment that they like to chair their own meeting.  The following is a quote for a young person who chairs their own review:  <i>"Think it's a good thing and allows me to talk about what I want!"</i>	The IRO supports the child to provide their views and chair the meeting if appropriate.  The IRO conducts monitoring and pre review discussion with the SW and is updated on any significant event. The IRO will consider if a review needs to be held as a result.  The IRO will read the court bundle and all assessments, discuss with the Children's guardian to determine views on the plan.  If the IRO is unhappy with the progress of the plan they can instigate the DRP process to challenge the LA. If the case is in court the court need to be made aware of the IRO's concerns.

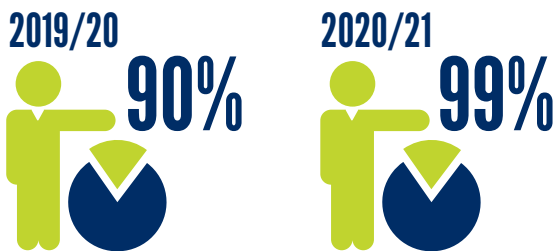
# Summary of Development Activity 2020/21

Issues identified 2020/21	Response
<p>Need to increase the timeliness of children's plans of permanence being ratified</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● IRO Performance Clinic established to offer a reflective space for IROs to work through any issues of delay in care planning.</li> <li>● Supported the reviewed of the Permanency Strategy and co-delivered briefings across the service.</li> <li>● Established communication plan between the IRO Service and Legal Services to support in setting timetables for care proceedings in line with Care Planning regulations.</li> <li>● Operations Manager attendance at Strategic Legal Panel to offer guidance and support in care planning timeframes.</li> <li>● Reporting data sets now agreed to support Team Managers and IROs future planning for the 4-month review.</li> <li>● Change to the IRO chair report to allow tracking of this to strengthen the timeliness of plans ratified.</li> </ul>
<p>Use the Signs of Success framework to ensure that care plans are developed with children, young people and their network and that children and young people are more involved in the care planning process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● We have remained consistent involving children who have been involved in the reviewing process and their CLA reviews. This has included face to face visits, virtual video call visits and some children report that the virtual meetings have been much more in line with their lifestyles thus attending their meeting.</li> <li>● Covid-19 has hindered our ability to carry out face to face meetings consistently, however, we have had some lovely success stories where children have engaged with the reviewing process via video links showcasing educational skills and life skills within their meetings.</li> <li>● There has been an increase in IRO activity on case files, with more pre-review discussions taking place, children speaking with IROs prior to their meetings and engaging in conversations with IROs in-between meetings.</li> <li>● The IRO Service have taken the lead in creating an Advocacy Working Group, chaired by the IRO Operations Manager. There has been a drive in increasing the accessibility of an advocate and Independent Visitor for all children. A work plan has been established and reviewed by commissioning services.</li> </ul>
<p>Use the Signs of Success framework to structure review meetings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Group supervision now embedded monthly.</li> <li>● Training with all IROs on the use of language was carried out.</li> <li>● Group Supervision identified a common approach to the use of 'best questioning', 'use of harm matrix' and 'introducing the use of trajectories'.</li> <li>● Some scaling questions are now seen within meetings to measure impact.</li> <li>● All children who are permanently matched, placed over 2 years and/or the IRO feels should- receive a letter to the child as the notes of the meeting, rather than in impersonal set of notes.</li> <li>● A working group has been established to review the most appropriate way to review the child's Care Plan, Personal Education Plan (PEP), Strength Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ) and Looked After Health Assessment as a holistic approach. Further developments will be part of the forthcoming year.</li> </ul>

Issues identified 2020/21	Response
<p>Review the Dispute Resolution Process so that when there is a challenge made by IROs it makes a genuine difference for children and young people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A working group was established across all areas of Social Care to devise better ways of working in partnership taking a strength-based approach.</li> <li>● Resolution Process Presentation delivered by Team Managers and IROs in joint approach to the full workforce.</li> <li>● Review of IRO dashboard to enable quantitative and qualitative data to be produced about nature of challenge IROs make and how these are resolved to make a difference for children and their families.</li> <li>● Resolution Process has brought about more reflective conversations with a focus on practice and needs of the child to agree outcomes for children in real time, unlike the built-in delay created by email exchanges and systems.</li> </ul>

## Timeliness of reviews

Despite the impact of Covid-19 we have continued to review Care Plans for all children in a timely way. 99% of our Children’s Reviews were held within timescales, an improvement from the 90% in 2019/20.



Children’s Reviews held within timescales

## A new approach to the Dispute Resolution Process

The IRO service continues to have a Dispute Resolution process, however as Durham has adopted a strength-based relational practice model (Signs of Safety) we have reviewed our Dispute Resolution Process and renamed this the ‘Resolution Process’. The aim is to have a greater number of challenging but effective conversations between IROs and social work teams that make a real difference for children.

The number of resolution conversations that have taken place this year has remained relatively static. The primary reason for a resolution conversation has been delay in achieving a plan of permanence for a child or young person.



The number of resolution conversations

## Secure Reviews

The IRO Service provides the Independent Panel Chair for all Secure Reviews. This is a separate IRO to that of the child’s allocated IRO. Of these 2 children, 1 child has left Secure in a planned way at the time of this report.



2020/21  
2 children have required secure accommodation

## Private Fostering Reviews

The IROs carry out Private Fostering Reviews on an annual basis. There have been 13 children between March 2020 - April 2021 who have required a Private Fostering review. 100% have all been held within timescales.

**13 children who have required a private fostering review**



have been held within timescales

## Disruption Meetings

The IRO Service chair disruption meetings for children who have moved in an unplanned way who have been in their placement for 2 years or more, permanently matched or the issues are complex and require an independent chair.

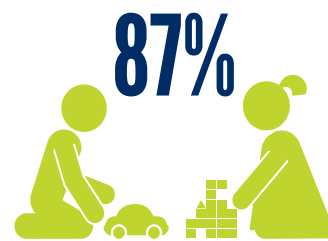
2020/21



The IRO Service have chaired 4 disruption meetings within 2020/21

## Foster Care Reviews

273 Foster Care Reviews



were within timescales



## Feedback from children and young people

The participation of children and young people in their own reviews is vitally important and the table below shows how successful we have been in promoting this participation:

### How child participated in their CLA Review

### Total Number of children

Child was under 4 years of age at the time of the meeting

663

Child attended and spoke for themselves

971

Child attended and advocate spoke

112

Child attended and gave views non-verbally  
(Children with Disabilities)

8

Child attended without contribution

15

Child did not attend, advocate shared views

475

Child did not attend, views sent

741

Child did not attend or share views

51



We have established a CICC IRO consultation Group which meet termly on a Saturday morning to review changing practices within the IRO Service. This group has developed an IRO information leaflet to share with children and young people prior to their first meeting. This explains the role of the IRO, IRO profile and contact information for the IRO allocated to the young person. The consultation group is currently making an animation video to explain what a looked after review is and what to expect from the IRO Service. This is hoped to be live on the CICC website in May 2021.

The IRO Service has been successful in achieving Investors In Children (IIC) Status Gold award for 10 years' service to children and young people.

# Key Priorities for 2021/22

Issues identified 2021/22	Improvement Plan
<p>To improve on the quality of care plans for children and young people and ensure these plans are formed with children and their families.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Focus on the timeliness of plans ratified at the child's 4-month review with a clear rationale for decision making.</li> <li>● Improve on the IROs voice within Care Proceedings to ensure their views are represented in court.</li> <li>● Clear reviewing processes to be established for all children who are living at home under a Care Order to ensure this is not longer than necessary and does not exceed 18 Months.</li> <li>● IROs will promote the use of trajectories in care planning for all children to avoid drift and delay.</li> <li>● Bi-Monthly working group established focusing on the need for advocacy support.</li> <li>● Animation video is being created to explain the child looked after review meetings and how children and young people can feed into this reviewing process.</li> </ul>
<p>Continue to support Social Care and the IRO Service to embed Signs of Safety as the practice model.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The IROs will continue to have monthly Signs of Safety group supervisions, with a focus on 'Best Questioning', 'Use of Harm Matrix' and 'Use of trajectories' when reviewing care planning and managing risk. This is something which will be a key priority for the service moving into 2021-22.</li> <li>● IROs will promote the use of trajectories, words and pictures and safety plans in aspects of care planning.</li> </ul>
<p>We want our children to have good prospects when leaving care.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The IRO Operations Manager is researching across the partnership, into the merit of the IRO offering up to two care leaver reviews for young people who are more complex or require that higher level of scrutiny and oversight when making that transition to care leaver.</li> <li>● Work with the Pathways/Young Peoples Service towards ensuring transitions for care leavers have a trajectory for leaving care with aspirational goals. This will include looking at care arrangements such as 'Staying Put', 'Supported Lodging' and reunification with family.</li> <li>● IROs will continue to work with the CICC in ways to promote the child and young people voice in care planning.</li> </ul>
<p>To support Social Care to make continuous improvement to the service they provide for children and young people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The IRO service will provide updated on lessons learnt from disruption meetings, dip samples, outcomes from informal and formal resolutions meetings and audits- to Social Care regarding any themes, trends and learning from these meetings at the Quality Improvement Board (QIB).</li> <li>● The IRO Service is working with the Residential Quality Improvement Manager to review how the resolution process could be replicated for children who move when living in a residential care home to build on placement stability.</li> <li>● A Quality Assurance Framework will be devised looking at how the role of the IRO can support the improvement of quality of practice in Social Care.</li> </ul>



# Feedback

““ The review meeting was well planned and managed in a professional manner by the Designated Independent Reviewing Officer (DIRO).

Panel consideration was thorough, reflecting on matters which led to the most recent admission, previous placement breakdowns and exploring risks. Panel members were given appropriate time by the DIRO to discuss, question and clarify any queries or concerns. The DIRO ensured that our discussions were fair, considered risks to all options, and were relevant.”

Feedback from an independent person on a secure review

““ I really wish I had communicated with you when all this started in the very beginning. It is evident that you care about your job role just from the brief conversations we have shared. You have shown me empathy and compassion when others haven't which goes a very long way.”

Feedback from a mum to an IRO

““ She listened to him and she answered the best way she could so he is happy and not on edge as much. Thank you for dropping everything to listen to him, this means a lot to me, from my heart thank you.”

Feedback from a mum to an IRO about her son

**For further information or to discuss anything in this report please contact**

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