



Independent Reviewing Officer

# Children in Care Annual Report Summary 2021/22



# What do Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) do?

The IRO service works within the guidelines of the IRO Handbook (2010). IROs monitor care planning to make sure the plans meet the needs of our children and young people, helping them to thrive and achieve their full potential. We want all of our children and young people to have aspirational goals that build on their strengths. If care plans are not helping our children achieve their goals, then we have a responsibility to challenge the system to ensure that the child/young person remains central to all our work, and that we find solutions as quickly as possible to any barriers that may be identified.



IROs make sure that they talk to the council when they are worried about whether plans are progressing for children/young people. If we disagree with a council's plan for a child/young person we will challenge the council. We will also tell the council 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 (CLA) for all children, including those placed for adoption, those in short break respite care and young people who are remanded into the care of the council.

# 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.

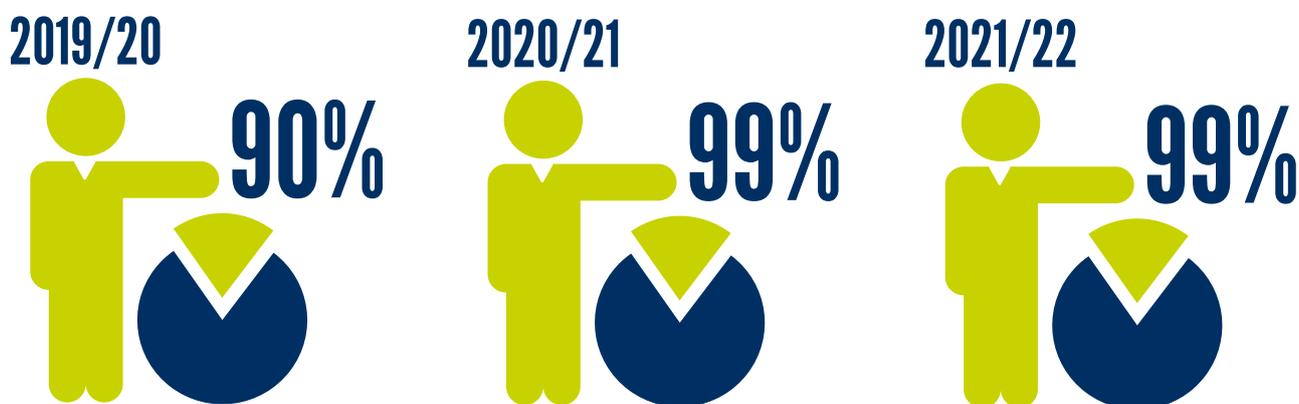
	Stages in child's or young person's journey	What is it like for the child or young person?	How does the IRO assist?
STAGE 1	Child or young person becomes Looked After.	Confusing to be placed away from parents and unsure what is going to happen.	Contact is made with the child or yp within 5 working days 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 2021/22

Issues identified 2021/22	Response
<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>● IROs check the quality of care plans and if a plan for when a child will return home is not in place (linked to Signs of Safety framework), they will challenge the council.</li> <li>● Continued to focus on the timeliness of care planning for children.</li> <li>● Improvements have been made within Care Proceedings to ensure the views of IROs are represented in court. Regional work has been carried out and within the North courts the IRO views are a standing agenda required for Final Hearing.</li> <li>● An animation video has been created to explain the child looked after review meetings and how children and young people can feed into this reviewing process. This is on the Children in Care Council (CiCC) website and was shared at the Corporate Parenting Panel. The timeliness of plans ratified.</li> </ul>
<p>Continue to support Children's Services and the IRO Service to embed Signs of Safety as the practice model.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The IROs continue to have monthly Signs of Safety group supervisions, and this will remain a key priority for the service. IROs promote the practice framework of Signs of Safety in aspects of care planning. We have seen some lovely examples of picture books created for young people moving on to adulthood.</li> </ul>
<p>Use the Signs of Success framework to structure review meetings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● IROs continue to work with the CiCC to promote the children and young people's voices in care planning. This includes creation of the video, IRO Guide, IRO role words and pictures and regular meetings with the IRO Consultation Group.</li> <li>● IROs work with the Pathways/Young Peoples Service to ensure young people leaving care have a plan with aspirational goals. This includes looking at care arrangements such as 'Staying Put', 'Supported Lodging' and going back to their family. They meet quarterly to look at how this can be done consistently for all young people leaving care.</li> <li>● The IRO service are looking into whether the service can review care planning for young people moving into adulthood. This has been a more complex piece of work and requires further time to review alongside any changes with the current Care Review Process published in June 2022.</li> </ul>
<p>To support Children's Services 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 update the Quality Improvement Board (QIB) with any lessons they have learned or trends, from sampling, resolutions meetings and audits.</li> <li>● The IRO service is working with the Children's Homes to make sure care planning meets the needs of all our children. This work will continue into 2022/23.</li> </ul>

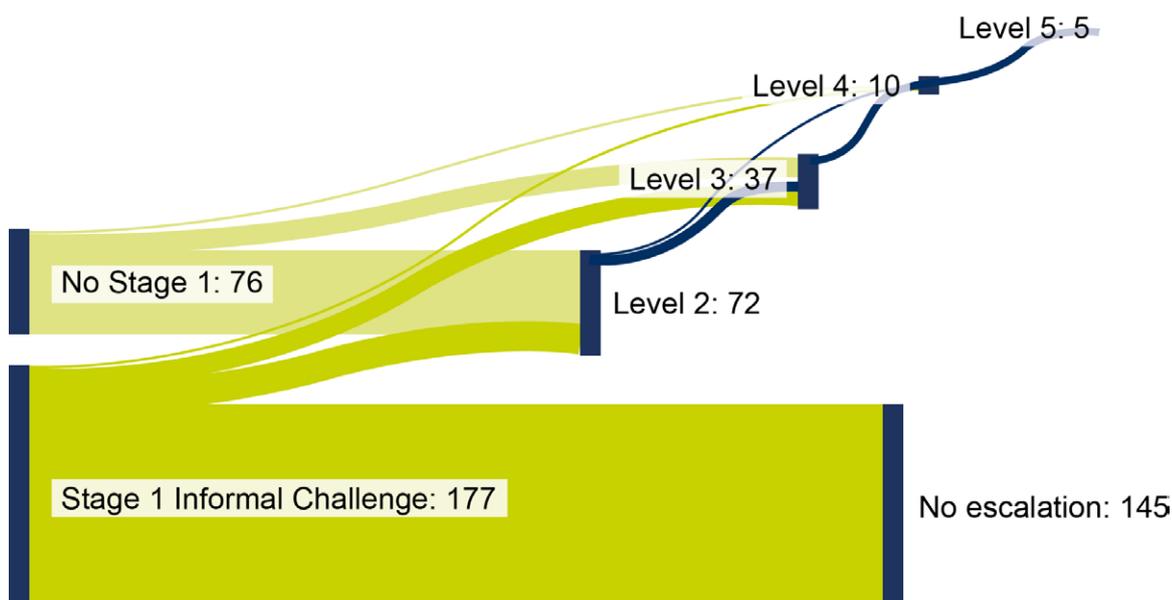
## Timeliness of reviews

We have maintained a high level of performance for child and young people CLA Reviews with 99% of CLA reviews held in timescales.



## Challenge from the IRO Service

The IRO service continues to have a challenge 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, and help to change how work is carried out. Where children have delays in care planning which cannot be agreed or progressed by their social worker, formal challenges are raised and discussed in a Resolution Meeting. The Ofsted Inspection May 2022 stated, "IROs know their children well and provide effective oversight of children's care plans."



The number of formal resolutions that have taken place this year has increased, with the majority of these in line with a national lack of placements.



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 the child's allocated IRO for care planning.



## Private Fostering Reviews

The IROs carry out Private Fostering Reviews on an annual basis. There have been 8 children between March 2021 - April 2022 who have required a Private Fostering review. These have all 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. This is to ensure that children and young people's views are shared and heard. But also to support with any issues or worries raised can be resolved.



Disruption meetings are undertaken by the Fostering Service and the IRO service

## Foster Care Reviews

There were 285 Foster Care Reviews carried out, 94 % of which were within timescales. This is an increase from 87% the previous year 2020/21 and 84% completed in timescales during 2019/20.



# 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	561
Child attended and spoke for themselves	968
Child attended and advocate spoke	40
Child attended and gave views non- verbally (Children with Disabilities)	9
Child attended without contribution	19
Child did not attend, advocate shared views	493
Child did not attend, views sent	783
Child did not attend or share views	38

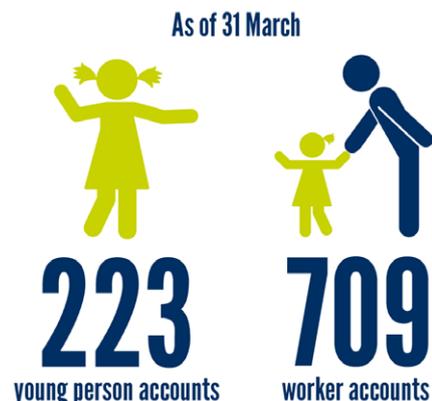


We have established a CiCC IRO consultation Group which meet termly to review changing practices within the IRO Service. The consultation group has made an animation video to explain what a looked after review is and what to expect from the IRO Service. Children in our Care (CIC) ([durham-scp.org.uk](http://durham-scp.org.uk)).

We have created an IRO Guide for young people and families to understand what the role of the IRO is.

We have created an IRO Words and Pictures which is a visual road map of what an IRO does during the review process.

We have started to use the Mind of My Own (MOMO) App to gather meaningful feedback. This has taken off well in Foster Care Reviews and our next steps are to look at preparation for meetings and feedback on how the meeting has gone.



## Feedback

“ The best thing about the IRO is that they listen , there is nothing they can improve on, just keep listening to us, thank you! ”

Feedback from a Foster Carer and their panel young person.

“ D and I would like to thank you for a most illuminating meeting this morning. ”

Feedback from a Foster Carer and their panel young person to an IRO .

“ I wanted to pass on my gratitude for your approach with S at the CLA meeting last Thursday. You were extremely person-centred, empathetic, and explained things very clearly to S taking into account her learning disability and her level of understanding. You were very clear on the plans moving forward which was very helpful for both me and S. ”

Feedback from a social worker.

# Key Priorities for 2022/23

Core Standard	Key Actions
<p><b>Standard 1</b></p> <p>To actively seek, encourage and promote the voice of the child and their family in care planning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● IRO Service to work in partnership with the CiCC to map the CLA Review process and create a more child friendly, outcome focused review process for all children and young people.</li> <li>● Collate feedback from MOMO statements to review and strengthen the voice of the child within CLA Reviews.</li> <li>● Develop a feedback loop to review and strengthen the voice of the child’s parents within these meetings and how satisfied they are with the care provided to their child/ren.</li> <li>● Launch the Journey Through Care Review Road Map (IRO Words and Pictures)</li> <li>● Raise profile of NYAS/Independent Visitor and use of advocacy.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Standard 2</b></p> <p>To provide challenge, scrutiny and oversight of care planning and challenge where things have not progressed for a children or young people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● IROs will review and challenge where care planning regulations have not been complied with.</li> <li>● IRO monthly practice clinics will focus on the quality of Pathway Plans and the transitions for our older young people.</li> <li>● IRO Service Manager will produce a quarterly report with findings and practice themes to “hold Children’s Services to account as corporate parents” IRO Handbook.</li> <li>● Establish a “What good looks like” framework for reporting views of the IRO within the court process taking into considerations from the Public Law Working Group (PLWG) recommendations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Standard 3</b></p> <p>To promote effective working relationships where practitioners work systemically to improve outcomes for children and young people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● IRO case allocation system to be reviewed.</li> <li>● We will strengthen working relationships with partner agencies such as the DSCP for our children in care services.</li> <li>● Review how we quality assure and review a child’s care planning journey to be ‘more than just a meeting’ but a holistic review of the child’s journey.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Standard 4</b></p> <p>To promote quality assurance as an expert practitioner from a ‘birds-eye view’ of practice, which will feed into change and shape service delivery for children and young people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● IROs will start to complete collaborative audits and the outcomes will directly inform and impact upon practice.</li> <li>● IRO’s to be part of multi-agency audits.</li> <li>● The IRO service will provide quality assurance and learning from dip samples to the Quality Improvement Board (QIB).</li> <li>● IROs will undertake peer observations of practice to inform learning and bring consistency.</li> <li>● Streamlining the reviewing process for CLA reviews within LCS system to ensure all documents such as PEP, EHCP, SDQ and LAHA as part of the overarching care plan for the child/young person.</li> </ul>

## Key Priorities for 2022/23 continued

Core Standard	Key Actions
<p><b>Standard 5</b></p> <p>To have meaningful positive impact for the children and young people we seek to serve.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Improve on the consistency and quality of IRO oversight for children on files. This is to include a clear rationale for decision making and written in a language the child understands. To include the evidence of impact for children and young people.</li> <li>● Increase the usage of advocacy and move to an 'opt-Out Service' as a longer-term goal from the Care Review 2022.</li> <li>● All children to receive a letter as the notes of their meeting, to explain what was discussed, the decisions that were made and who they can talk to if they are not happy with this.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Standard 6</b></p> <p>We will invest in our workforce to ensure social worker practice will flourish.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Launch the IRO Development plan.</li> <li>● Strengthen the Regional IRO Management Partnership. Feed into national research, development and debates through the NIROMP working group.</li> </ul>

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

**Sharon Davey, Operations Manager, IRO Service**

 [sharon.davey@durham.gov.uk](mailto:sharon.davey@durham.gov.uk)

 03000 266214