

Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing
Officer Service - Child Protection & Children in Care

Report of John Pearce, Director of Children and Young People's
Services, Durham County Council

Electoral division(s) affected:

None.

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This annual report has been produced by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) service in line with statutory guidance and covers the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. It provides an overview of the work undertaken by the service in relation to child protection and children who are cared for by the local authority.
- 2 The report highlights what is working well, what we are worried about and areas for improvement. It identifies emerging themes, areas of strength, and identifies priorities for 2023/24.

Executive summary

- 3 During the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) for Durham in May 2022 Ofsted found that '***IROs know their children well and provide effective oversight of children's care plans***' and that, '***child protection conferences involve parents and extended family members. Child protection chairs welcome participation of children at child protection conferences.***'
- 4 The IROs and child protection conference chairs are all qualified, experienced social workers registered with Social Work England (SWE). We have continued to implement our strength-based model of practice (Signs of Safety) and have worked closely with our partners, both at national and local level in developing practice and documentation. We have continued to be influential at a regional level in arranging training for IROs and developing practice. We have embraced advances in technology arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and offer a hybrid meeting model to ensure parents, children, and professionals are able to meaningfully engage in child protection conferences and child in care reviews.

- 5 In response to the wishes of children and young people in Durham, we are adapting and challenging one another in our use of language, 'looked after' is replaced with 'cared for', family 'contact' replaced with family 'time' and 'care leaver' replaced with 'care experienced'. Our use of language will continue to be reviewed in line with children's views and wishes.
- 6 We have strengthened our tracking mechanism of children's plans to evidence the voice of the child and the impact that intervention is having upon them as individuals. We have also updated our Dispute Resolution Process to strengthen how we evidence the impact of IRO challenge and influence upon outcomes for children.
- 7 We have undertaken joint audit work with social care to understand in more detail a small increase in 2022/23 in the number of children with a repeat child protection plan.
- 8 We have worked with partners to understand and address barriers in relation to agency representation at Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) and we are beginning to see improved attendance as a result. We have led a multi-agency working group to create a single report template for child protection conferences and produced accompanying training. Via consultation we have secured majority agreement from partners to adopt this across the partnership and this is due to be launched in September 2023.
- 9 We have maintained a high level of performance in 2022/23 including 85% of ICPCs held in timescale, 98% of Review Child Protection Conferences (RCPCs) held in timescale, with 92% of children participating in their reviews and 96% of cared for reviews held in timescale with 98% of children participating in their reviews. We continue to deliver a consistently high level of performance for timeliness of Foster Care Reviews with 96% held in timescales.
- 10 Over the last year there has been an increasing volume of rearranged meeting requests. Reducing this trend moving forwards is a priority focus area for the service to prevent this from continuing to increase and mitigate any impact upon service delivery.
- 11 A key focus for the year ahead will be to continue to evidence the voice of the child by encouraging children to chair their own cared for reviews and increase participation, feedback and attendance at child protection conferences and child in care reviews and increasing pre review visits to children who are cared for, by their IRO.
- 12 We plan to further develop the performance dashboard and feedback methods for the IRO service to strengthen how we collate and analyse our learning from families to shape practice and future service delivery.

- 13 We will continue to embed our Signs of Safety/Signs of Success model by providing our IROs and Conference Chairs with learning and training opportunities and influence the future development of Signs of Safety systems and paperwork.
- 14 We will be working with our partners regionally and nationally in response to recommendations from the care review so that we are aligned with other regional models and further strengthen skills and practice for children.

Recommendation

- 15 Corporate Parenting Panel is requested to:
 - (a) Note the content of this report.

Background

- 16 Working Together 2020 sets out the requirement for local authorities to ensure that they identify Child Protection Conference Chairs who are accountable to the Director of Children's Services, and who are independent of operational or line management responsibilities for the cases that they are reviewing. In Durham, our IROs fulfil this role.
- 17 The Independent Reviewing Officer service operates within the framework of the IRO Handbook. This is statutory guidance issued to local authorities in 2011. IROs have a responsibility to monitor and scrutinise care planning and plans for children and young people who are in care and ensure they are timely, effective and that our children and young people thrive and achieve their full potential.

Role of Independent Reviewing Officers

- 18 Our IROs chair reviews for children who are cared for by Durham County Council. IROs have an important role in making sure that decisions made in respect of any child in care, are decisions that are in the best interest of that the child or young person.
- 19 Children and young people in Durham were involved in creating a fantastic resource to help children, their families, and networks to understand what it means to be a cared for child in Durham. This is accessible to children, parents, carers and professionals via the Durham Safeguarding Children's Partnership (DSCP) website.
- 20 The primary role and responsibilities of our IROs is to:
 - Review and scrutinise care plans to ensure they are legally compliant and in the best interests of the children;
 - Chair review meetings for children and young people in our care;
 - Ensure that the voice of the child is heard and given appropriate weight within care planning;
 - Promote corporate parenting to enable positive outcomes for children who experience care;
 - Chair placement order and adoptive placements, ensuring they are appropriate to the child's needs; and
 - Provide a quality assurance and scrutiny function, and where appropriate challenge to Children's Social Care in relation to practice.

- 21 Another key role for our IROs is to resolve problems within the care planning process. Where problems are identified in relation to a child's plan, such as implementation of the plan or decisions relating to it, the IRO will try to resolve the issue informally with the social worker or their manager. The IRO will make a record of this initial informal resolution process on the child's file. If the matter is not resolved in a timescale that is appropriate to the child's needs, the IRO will consider taking formal action in line with our Resolution Process.
- 22 IROs are well placed to identify both strengths and worries in relation to practice, including general themes, strengths, and weaknesses in relation to Durham's corporate parenting responsibility for cared for children. Thematic concerns are identified and raised with senior operational managers, with a level of timeliness appropriate to their impact on the safety and welfare of children.

Role of Child Protection Conference Chairs

- 23 Child Protection Conferences are meetings that take place when we are worried that a child may be at risk of significant harm. Children and young people in Durham have been involved in creating a fantastic resource to help children, their families, and networks to understand what a Child Protection Conference is. This is accessible to children, parents, carers and professionals via the DSCP website.

Professional Profile of the Children Independent Reviewing Team

- 24 The IRO service sits within the safeguarding and professional practice service area and is managed by the Strategic Safeguarding and Professional Practice Manager. It is managed independently of children's social care line management. Our management capacity includes a strategic manager, two service managers and a business manager. This provides us with the required management capacity to lead and develop our service and provide appropriate levels of support to our workers including via regular one to one supervision, group supervision and monitoring.
- 25 We have 23 members of staff / 20.6 full-time equivalents (FTE) Independent Reviewing Officers / Child Protection Chairs who are all registered social workers with at least five years post qualifying experience. There are also two foster care review officers in our service who are responsible for chairing foster care review meetings and disruption meetings.
- 26 Our Quality and Review Team provides minute taking services and administrative support to the whole IRO service.

- 27 The profile of our team is diverse, offering a wide range of knowledge and practice experience. We have benefitted from a stable group of Independent Reviewing Officers and Conference Chairs through 2022/23 and have kept changes of Independent Reviewing Officers for children to a minimum with only one IRO leaving the service this year due to promotion within Durham County Council. Although two additional full time IRO posts were created this year to support the increased in demand for meetings, these have been difficult to recruit to therefore in 2022/23 we had two agency IROs in the service to cover these posts and to cover long term sickness.

Caseloads

- 28 The overall average caseload for our IROs is 84 which is a slight increase from the previous year. The current IRO handbook advises that IROs should have a caseload of between 50 and 70 and we continue to await central government's updated IRO handbook for further guidance regarding caseloads. The IROs have a dual function within Durham to chair child protection conferences and cared for child reviews. We have excellent administrative support that mitigates the impact of these higher caseloads.
- 29 All workers within our service receive monthly individual supervision and have access to informal supervision when required. Group supervision is also arranged monthly, and this provides the IROs with a reflective space to develop and practice their skills in using the Signs of Safety model. There continues to be a real commitment by the management of the service to ensure that the level of supervision and support is of the highest standard and this is reported on at monthly Children's Social Care (CSC) performance meetings.

Learning, Development and Practice Improvement

- 30 As part of our commitment to the ongoing learning and development for our staff, our IROs have had access to a range of learning opportunities throughout the year. These have included legal briefings, staff briefings, DSCP training, and IRO specific training delivered by Edgehill University and funded by the North East Regional Network. We hold monthly team meetings at which research, practice guidance and learning lessons reviews are discussed and disseminated and have held strategic management-led workshops to continue to strengthen the voice of the child within recording. We also hold monthly performance clinics which have focused on ensuring IRO grip of performance such as IRO visits, progressing plans to discharge care orders where children are placed at home with their parents and also ensuring children in long term foster care have their placement with their carers formally agreed in line with their permanence plan. We also continue to learn from audit activity and feedback.

- 31 We identify training requirements through the supervision and appraisal process, training analysis and informed by external peer reviews, observations, and inspections. Some examples of the training which has been undertaken within this reporting year includes Mental Capacity Act Awareness, GDPR, Domestic Abuse - Homicide Timeline / Cyber Stalking / Gypsy Roma Traveller Experiences, Local Authority Designated Officer, Mental Health Awareness, Lone Worker Monitoring, Practice Educator, Suicide Awareness.
- 32 In addition to the above training courses the IROs/Conference Chairs have continued to access the Community Care Inform database and Signs of Safety learning space which provide updates to articles and research in areas of social work practice. IROs are supported to have half a day's space each month to support their continuous professional development to ensure they meet the SWE requirements each year.

Regional, National and Local Links

- 33 Our management team meets quarterly with IRO managers from across the North East. This regional group considers changes to policy and practice, gathers relevant statistical information at a regional level, works towards consistent practice in the region and has led to the development of a regional training plan for IROs.
- 34 We have quarterly communication and working practice meetings between the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) and our service. We also have quarterly meetings with Durham Police which has been extended to include representatives from Children's Social Care senior management to further support and strengthen working relationships.
- 35 We seek to maintain direct working relationships and links with Durham County Council Children's Social Care services. The management team meets regularly with service managers in social care. There is an IRO linked to each team within children's services. The IRO attends their team meetings periodically to share practice themes and discuss strengths or worries that they may have across both services.
- 36 The IRO service managers offer an advisory role within several panels and working groups in children's social care. These include Strategic Legal Panel; DSCP subgroups; Contextual Safeguarding Working Group; Advocacy Working Group; and the Voice and Change Group.
- 37 IROs have taken responsibility for specific practice areas and are part of working groups to share good practice, support in service delivery and forge good working relationships. These include Harbour Domestic Abuse Service, Humankind's drug and alcohol service, Children In Care Council, Investing in Children, North East Unaccompanied Asylum-

Seeking Children, Residential Children’s Home Group, Private Fostering Group, Staying Put Working Group, Fostering Support Groups, National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) and Independent Visitor service.

38 We continue to liaise with our local partners and are represented at the following groups:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Durham Safeguarding Children’s Partnership (DSCP) • Regional NE12 IRO Managers Group • Liquid Logic Operational Group • Children in Care Council (CiCC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate Parenting Board • Strategic Legal Panel • SoS Partnership Group • Quarterly meetings with Durham Police • Quarterly meetings with CAFCASS • DCC Legal and Safeguarding Meeting
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39 Attendance at the above groups provides the opportunity for improved working arrangements, which in turn leads to better outcomes for the children and families that we work with. It provides an opportunity to influence practice and procedural developments, which ultimately supports Durham County Council to deliver positive outcomes for the children of Durham.

40 We support partners via training and development sessions. For example, we delivered a briefing across the partnership during Safeguarding Week (November 2022) to support staff in preparing for attending child protection conferences and delivered a session to newly qualified social workers on the role and purpose of the IRO.

Development Activity 2022/23

41 The IRO service’s key priorities and practice standards are shown in the table below. A summary of the development activity undertaken against these key priorities in 2022/23 is attached at Appendix 2 and the planned activity in 2023/24 is attached at Appendix 3.

2022/23 Priorities	
Standard 1	To actively seek, encourage and promote the voice of the child and their family in care planning.

Standard 2	To provide challenge, scrutiny and oversight of care planning and challenge where things have not progressed for a child or young person.
Standard 3	To promote effective working relationships where practitioners work systemically to improve outcomes for children and young people.
Standard 4	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.
Standard 5	To have meaningful positive impact for the children and young people we seek to serve.
Standard 6	We will invest in our workforce to ensure social work practice will flourish.

Resolution Process & Learning

42 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 on the ground and shape practice. For those where children have delays or drift in care planning which cannot be agreed or progressed at a frontline practice level, formal challenges are raised and discussed in a Resolution Meeting. As quoted in the Ofsted Inspection May 2022, "***IROs know their children well and provide effective oversight of children's care plans.***"

43 The number of informal challenges that have taken place this year for a child under a child protection plan or child looked after care plan was 151.

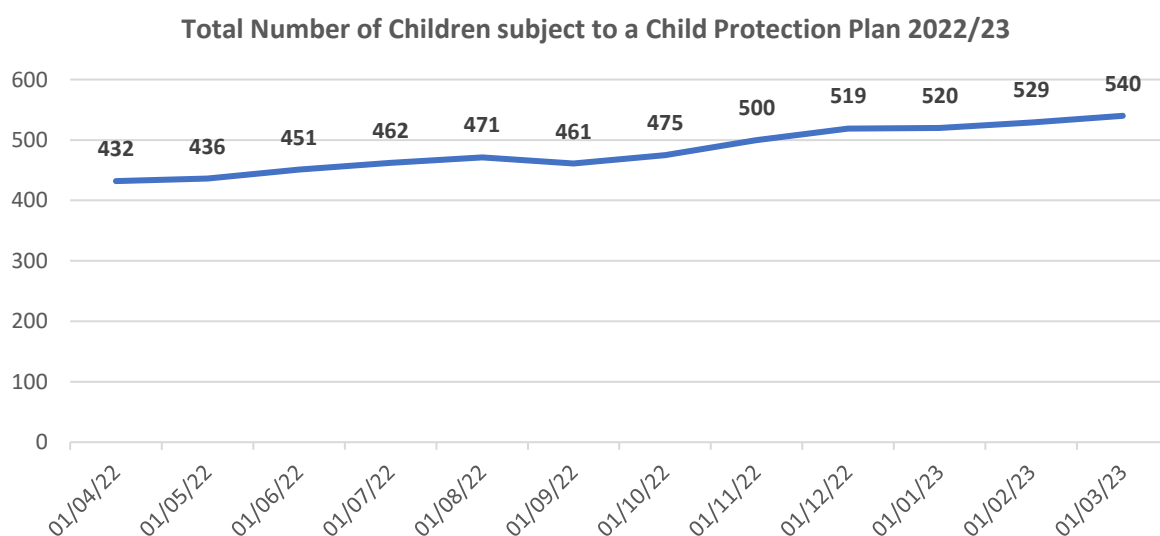
44 The number of formal challenges increased to 222 in 2022/23 from 136 in 2021/22, 100 in 2020/21 and 106 in 2019/20.

DRP Level	Total number of challenges	CLA	CP	No Status (Null)
2	120	100	7	13
3	68	49	6	13
4	33	29	2	2
5	1	1	1	

- 45 The most common reason for a level two challenge has been due to a delay in achieving a plan of permanence or a final plan not being ratified for a child. The reason for level three challenges varied but included reasons such as unregistered provisions, lack of progress in achieving a permanence plan, reports or social workers not being available for meetings. Level four challenges are escalated to a strategic manager and level five to the head of service. The main reason for these challenges has been in relation to children being in unregistered or unregulated placements. During the year 2022/23 there have been 14 young people reviewed at level five. Formal meetings have been held for all these young people with the oversight of the head of service. The IRO service has offered additional monitoring, scrutiny, and focused challenge within care planning to ensure our children are in the right placement which meets their needs.
- 46 The primary reason for resolution conversations has been delay in achieving a plan of permanence for a child or young person. We know this remains a key priority for the whole service, so you would expect to see these challenging conversations about this issue. Our ongoing aspiration is to ensure that where these conversations take place, and they are having the intended impact for children and young people. Deeper analysis of the impact of challenges is not always possible from the system currently in place therefore developing a methodology to understand the effectiveness of these challenges and analyse learning from the resolution process is an area for development over the coming year.

Impact of Child Protection

Performance Summary



- 47 As of 31 March 2023, there were a total of 540 children in Durham who were subject to a Child Protection Plan. This equates to a rate per 10000 children of 55 which is above national (42) but below regional north east (63) comparators.
- 48 Durham's rolling 12-month figure for 2022/23 is 85% (712/834) of all ICPCs completed within 15 working days. This is higher than national (79%) and in line with regional (85%) comparators and an increase in performance from 81% (578/713) in 2021/22 despite an increase of 121 in the overall number of ICPCs held.
- 49 In 2022/23, 98% of review child protection conference's (1352/1377) were held within timescales. This is an increase from 93% in 2021/22.
- 50 Children who were subject to a child protection plan for over 18 months accounted for 4.1% (26 children), a reduction from 5.2% (38 children) in 2021/22. The proportion of children who ceased to be subject to child protection for over 24 months in 2022/23 was 0.3% (2 children) which is a reduction from 0.4% in 2021/22 and remains lower than in our comparators (national 4%, regional 2%, 2022/23).
- 51 In 2022/23 the number of children subject to child protection plans for a period of 0-3 months was 18% (117/730) which is a slight increase from 2021/22 (16%) but in line with national (18%) and slightly above regional comparators (16%). In most cases, children who cease to be subject to a protection plan at 0-3 months have become cared for.
- 52 Whilst the number of children on a child protection plan for over 18 months has reduced, the number of repeat children protection plans in 2022/23 has increased slightly from 19% in 2021/22 to 21% (161/770) in 2022/23. In 2021/22, 19% of child protection plans which started were a repeat, including 6% within two years of a previous plan. The overall repeat rate was in line with our Regional (21%) and lower than national comparators (23%).
- 53 Audit work was undertaken in relation to this cohort following data analysis indicating there was a disproportionately high number of children in the south of the region with a repeat child protection plan. This was less of a concern when the overall numbers were considered within the context of family units and did not identify any practice issues specific to South Durham in relation to repeat child protection plans.
- 54 Reassuringly, there was evidence of improved practice for children with repeat child protection plans were being routinely considered at legal planning meetings with Public Law Outline (PLO) instigated where necessary. There was learning for the wider service about ensuring early identification of a network and evidencing effective tried and tested

safety plans with families so that there is a family / community system in place to safeguard children in the longer term.

Participation and Views – Child Protection

- 55 During the ILACS inspection of Durham Children’s Services in May 2022 Ofsted found that **‘Child protection conferences involve parents and extended family members. Child protection chairs welcome participation of children at child protection conferences.’**
- 56 When children attend a conference, the Conference Chair will invite them into a pre-meeting before the beginning of the meeting to support their engagement via several methods including telephone contact, conference calling, Microsoft Teams, and face-to-face meetings. Where a child is not attending a conference, the Conference Chair will encourage the professionals working with the child to collect their views using the child protection conference pack or the Mind of My Own application which is a digital participation tool and offer where appropriate a referral for advocacy.
- 57 Within 2022/23 we received two new complaints relating to the IRO service both of which were resolved at stage one of the Council’s Corporate Complaints Policy. The Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership (DSCP) received no complaints regarding multi-agency child protection conferences in 2022/23.
- 58 In 2022/23 the response rate from electronic parental questionnaires has been extremely low. As an alternative, Conference Chairs have encouraged families and professionals to provide direct feedback to the service. Comments have been positive, with parents and professionals indicating a positive experience in conference, some of which include:

“A found attending the conference online a lot better and easier for her. A liked the fact that she was able to express her views directly and felt that her voice was important, that she had been listened to and heard.”

Feedback from a young person who chose to attend their conference virtually, April 2022

"The process has been clearly explained and a massive help and although nobody wants to enter the CP Process it has been a blessing to have the support and intervention and goals in place. The meetings have been informative and it is useful.....to gather views and scores to hear how safe or improved things are...."

Feedback from parents and grandmother, September 2022

"I found the conferences to be ok, I do not have a preference for physical or virtual having experienced both, but I suppose it is nice to be in a room with people. It was good to have a call from the IRO before the review and once I knew who they were and why they were calling, I found this was helpful"

Feedback from a father, July 2022

"I wanted to compliment the way the Conference Chair ran the ICPC. She was very prepared with best questions and I feel it worked really well that she asked the professionals all the same questions in the signs of safety way"
Irene had such a lovely nature and spoke to the mam with care and consideration. She really listened to the mam and sat next to her and comforted her throughout whilst being professional.

Early Help Practitioner, May 2023

"I would just like to feedback, firstly how welcoming the Conference Chair is and also how much she values our input from health. This is really apparent and is a lovely demonstration of multiagency working together to safeguard children. It is very clear that she has an excellent approach with the families, holding conferences very much at their level and gaining their perspective...."

Feedback from Specialist Nurse, September 2022

Impact of Cared for Children

Performance Summary

- 59 As of 31 March 2023, there were 1072 children in the care of Durham County Council. This equates to a current rate of 108 per 10000 which is above national (70) and just slightly below regional north east (110) comparators.

- 60 Within this reporting year although there has been a slight decrease from 2021/22 figures (99%), we have maintained a high level of performance for timeliness of child and young people's review meetings with 96% (3027/3165) of child in care reviews held in timescales. This is against the backdrop of an increased number of children in our care.
- 61 In 2022/23, the IRO service has ratified 208/271 care plans for children in our care, compared to 213 in 2021/22. 139 children had their final plan ratified within six months of becoming cared for (51%). 37 children (14%) within eight months, 27 children (10%) within 12 months and 5 children (2%) over 12 months. 63 (23%) children did not have their final plan ratified where the plan ratified target date fell before 31st March 2023. In most of these cases, the delay related to ongoing court proceedings.
- 62 The IRO service provides the Independent Panel Chair for all Secure Reviews and on occasion another IRO will act as a panel member. These IROs are not the child's allocated IRO and for independence, will not have been involved in their care planning. During 2022/23 we chaired 16 Pre-Secure Planning Meetings (23 in 2021/22) in relation to 8 children (11 in 2021/22). We have chaired 33 Secure Reviews (19 in 2021/22) in relation to 10 (7 in 2021/22) children living in Secure Accommodation throughout the year.
- 63 The IROs chair Private Fostering Reviews on an annual basis. There have been 15 new private fostering arrangements between April 2022 - March 2023 who have required a Private Fostering review which is an increase from eight new arrangements in the previous year.
- 64 We have one full time Foster Care Reviewing Officer (FCRO) and one part time Foster Care Reviewing Officer. The timeliness of foster care reviews is a real strength within the IRO service which are held alongside colleagues within the fostering service. There were 216 Foster Care Reviews carried out, 96% of which were within timescales. This is an increase from 94% in 2021/22 and equates to eight reviews out of timescales.
- 65 The IRO service chair disruption meetings for children who have moved in an unplanned way from their home after living there for two years or more and who are permanently matched with their foster carers, or the issues are complex and require an independent chair.
- 66 From September 2022 the responsibility for chairing disruption meetings has sat within the IRO service and chaired by the two FCROs. Both these officers have been instrumental in updating the disruption meeting procedure during this year which has been approved by the strategic manager for fostering and has been shared with staff. The procedure

will ensure there is a consistent approach in the preparation of and the chairing of these meetings and enable consistent oversight in one service area of any lessons to be learned and feed into any strategic planning or training which may be required.

- 67 To date, the FCROs have chaired 5 disruption meetings from 1 September 2022 to 31 March 2023. The key themes from these meetings have been around the changes in social workers both within the fostering service and the child’s social work team and the impact this has had on supporting the placement. In none of these meetings was there any evidence that the foster carers had not acted appropriately leading to the placement ending.
- 68 There has been significant improvement in the IROs voice within Care Proceedings to ensure their views are represented in court. IRO standalone statements are now routinely written and submitted to court for the final hearing. Feedback from CAFCASS is that these statements are comprehensive and valued.

Participation and Views – Cared for Children

- 69 The participation of children and young people in their own reviews is vitally important to the IRO service and the table below shows how successful we have been in promoting this participation below. This was recognised in the Ofsted Inspection in May 2022 which states, ***“IROs visit children in their homes to gain their views. Parents, carers, and children are encouraged to participate in their review meetings. This helps to ensure that children and their families are held at the centre of decision-making and planning.”***

How Child Participated in their CLA Review	Total number of children 2021/22	Total number of children 2022/23
Child was under four years of age at the time of the meeting	561	637
Child attended and spoke for themselves	968	1256
Child attended and advocate spoke	40	58
Child attended and gave views non- verbally (Children with Disabilities)	9	20
Child attended without contribution	19	48
Child did not attend, advocate shared views	493	461

How Child Participated in their CLA Review	Total number of children 2021/22	Total number of children 2022/23
Child did not attend, views sent	783	979
Child did not attend or share views	38	68

- 70 A group of young people from Durham’s Children in Care Council (CiCC) along with a group of IROs developed an animation video to explain what a looked after review is and what to expect from the IRO service, which is on the CiCC website. This is also accessible to children, parents, carers and professionals via the DSCP website.
- 71 We continue to share our IRO profiles with young people when they first become cared for and over the coming year the IRO profiles will be refreshed to ensure they are up to date and have a consistent format. We will do this in consultation with the Children in Care Council and the Participation and Engagement Officer.
- 72 We have refreshed the IRO Guide for Children and Young People (attached as Appendix 4) and families to understand what the role of the IRO is. These will be included in the new Entry in Care Packs that are being introduced.
- 73 We have created an IRO Words and Pictures (attached as Appendix 5) which is a visual road map of the care plan journey through the review process for children in our care.
- 74 We encourage carers and young people to express their views on how they find their review meetings.
- 75 We have two IROs linked to the CiCC who are the key points of contact between the IRO service and the CiCC and who actively feedback children’s views to support changes where needed, but also to celebrate the successes we find.
- 76 We continue to report direct to the Corporate Parenting Board and seek feedback from the Investing in Children Group to inform our service needs and developments for the future.
- 77 We have continued to raise the profile of the Independent Visitor (IV) service and strengthened links between the IV service and the CiCC. This has led to a significant increase in requests for, and identification of, Independent Visitors with 55 children matched children with an Independent Visitor.

- 78 The IRO service is very proud of its success in achieving Investing in Children (IiC) Status Gold award for 10 years' service to children and young people last year. We have continued to meet the criteria this year and are applying to renew this in 2023/24.
- 79 The IRO service will lead on a project through 2023/24 to revise the children in care review process to ensure it is sufficiently innovative, child focused and aligned with the Signs of Safety framework, and we will engage our children in care to support with this.

The CIC Review was well run, times well and everyone in the meeting was able to participate well. The IRO was thorough and made sure everyone had all the information they needed. This was child centred and made sure that everyone knew what needed to happen for the children. The IRO was good at introducing the Signs of Safety practice model with the use of scaling questions before making any recommendations.

From a professional

In closing, my wife L and I would like to thank you for all your involvement with K over the years from the bottom of our hearts. A great many times you have been the voice of logic and reason when things were in some bad places. For that we will remain eternally grateful.

Feedback from a parent at their son's exit from care review.

M felt that she had not been supported as she should have been via her moving on support plan. M has felt very supported by her IRO through the process, in listening to her wishes and feelings and raising these on her behalf.

Feedback from a young person through NYAS

Conclusion

- 80 The IRO service has continued to effectively chair Child Protection Conferences and Child in Care reviews and review children's plans throughout 2022-23 in a timely way.
- 81 Whilst the number of children who are subject to child protection plans is on an upward trajectory over the last year, when considered within the context of National and Regional benchmarking data, this appears to be in line with our comparators.
- 82 A focus for the coming year will be to increase child participation and attendance at child protection conferences and child in care reviews and use feedback from families to support further development of practice across the service. A significant piece of work will be to undertake a whole system review of the children in care review process to ensure it is sufficiently innovative, child focused and aligned with the Signs of Safety Framework

Background papers

- None.

Other useful documents

- None.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The statutory duties of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) are set out in section 25B (1) Children Act 1989 with further statutory guidance contained in the IRO handbook, which sets out the IRO in relation to case management and review for looked after children.

There are two clear and separate aspects to the function of the IRO:

- i. chairing the child's review; and
- ii. monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.

Finance

The report notes the additional investment made in the IRO service this year of two additional IRO posts.

Consultation

This report will be shared with the DSCP.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

None.

Climate Change

None.

Human Rights

None.

Crime and Disorder

None.

Staffing

Demand within the IRO service is currently being managed by additional IROs on an agency basis. These pressures are kept under regular review.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

None.

Procurement

None.

Appendix 2: Development Activity against Key Priorities and Practice Standards 2022/23

2022/23 Priorities	Response
<p>Standard 1</p> <p>To actively seek, encourage and promote the voice of the child and their family in care planning.</p>	<p>The IRO service has continued to champion the voices of children and their families within their reviews and care planning.</p> <p>A Task and Finish group is in the final stages of developing the feedback mechanism for children and families who attend child protection conferences to inform service delivery. Durham's Children's Participation Officer is involved to ensure we are asking the right questions, in an accessible way. It is anticipated that a new feedback system will go live in Autumn 2023.</p> <p>All IROs / Conference Chairs have their own Mind of My Own account which means that children and young people can share their thoughts, views and wishes with their IRO / Conference Chair directly and at any point during the review period.</p> <p>In October 2022 Children's Services in Durham adopted an opt-out arrangement with NYAS meaning that all children over the age of 11 who are being considered at an ICPC should be automatically referred by their Social Worker so that an advocate can be appointed to discuss with them how they can be supported to participate / share their views in their meeting.</p> <p>All IROs continue to raise the profile of NYAS and the Independent Visitor Scheme in meetings and discussions with social workers to ensure children have access to advocacy services to support their voice to be heard.</p> <p>We have launched the Journey Through Care Review Road Map (IRO Words and Pictures)</p>

2022/23 Priorities	Response
	<p>IROs support children to participate in their reviews and chair these where they wish to do so.</p> <p>The IRO service sends consultation forms to children and young people before their review meeting and encourage children to complete these for their meeting.</p> <p>IRO visits to children in care before their review meeting is improving however it is recognised this is an area for further development over the coming year.</p>
<p>Standard 2</p> <p>To provide challenge, scrutiny and oversight of care planning and challenge where things have not progressed for a child or young person.</p>	<p>Conference chairs are seeing improvement in relation to the quality of child protection plans which are aligned with the SOS practice approach.</p> <p>A focus for the coming year in relation to this standard will be on developing the consistency across the service of the conference chair approach to challenge when child protection plans are not progressing or in line with the child/family aspirations and needs and where protection plans have not been written with involvement of children and their families.</p> <p>IROs use the Resolution Process to effectively challenge drift and delay both informally and formally. They have curious conversations with social workers and managers to resolve issues as quickly as possible in the best interest of the child and escalate matters when required. All children who are placed in unregistered or unregulated care provisions have their arrangements scrutinised at level four or five ensuring the Senior Leadership Team and Head of Service have oversight of these arrangements to ensure swift and effective exit planning.</p> <p>All IRO's are now routinely writing statements for the final hearing in care proceedings which reflect their involvement and scrutiny of the care planning process and their views about</p>

2022/23 Priorities	Response
	the final care plan proposed by the Local Authority.
<p>Standard 3</p> <p>To promote effective working relationships where practitioners work systemically to improve outcomes for children and young people.</p>	<p>In November 2022 the IRO service led a task and finish group to understand and address the barriers in relation to agency representation at ICPC's and help partners to develop internal processes in relation to ensuring agency representation at ICPC. We will monitor attendance and feed this on a quarterly basis into the DSCP as an assurance measure in the year ahead.</p> <p>In 2022/23, the IRO service led a multi-agency working group to create a single report template for child protection conferences and accompanying training and via consultation secured agreement from partners to adopt this across the partnership. This is due to be launched in September 2023.</p> <p>There is an IRO linked to each team within children's services. The IRO attends their team meetings periodically to share practice themes and discuss strengths or worries that they may have.</p> <p>IROs arrange monitoring meetings and pre review discussions with social workers to ensure children's care planning is on track and to prevent or challenge drift and delay.</p> <p>The IRO service managers offer an advisory role within several Panels and working groups in Children's Social Care. These include Strategic Legal Panel; DSCP subgroups; Contextual Safeguarding Working Group; Advocacy Working Group; and the Voice and Change Group. IROs are linked to various partner agencies who are periodically invited to IRO Team Meetings which forges good working relationships and benefits mutual learning and development.</p>
Standard 4	The IRO service has continued to be involved in a range of quality assurance activity across

2022/23 Priorities	Response
<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>	<p>Children's Services and reported learning into the Quality Improvement Board, in addition to providing feedback on practice themes, data analysis and areas for development.</p> <p>All IROs have completed training in readiness for undertaking quarterly Collaborative Evaluations to further drive and develop service delivery for children and young people from April 2023.</p> <p>Service managers within the IRO service has undertaken Collaborative Evaluations on a quarterly basis.</p> <p>IROs undertake peer observations of new staff during their induction period to support professional development and consistency of IRO practice. Developing a regular peer review programme will be an area for further development over the coming year.</p>
<p>Standard 5</p> <p>To have meaningful positive impact for the children and young people we seek to serve.</p>	<p>An IRO is leading on developing a pilot for sending letters to children following their child protection conference in Autumn 2023.</p> <p>Audit activity and supervision demonstrates improved IRO oversight and impact on children's file. Moving forwards, the service will be working on continuing to develop the consistency of the quality of IRO recordings and supporting children and young people to ensure they understand how to share positive news, challenge, or complain and ensure feedback is provided to them.</p>
<p>Standard 6</p> <p>We will invest in our workforce to ensure social work practice will flourish.</p>	<p>Preparation for Child Protection Conference's Part Two training is currently in development with the DSCP. This has been revised to be a virtual session to increase reach and accessibility for partners and is due for roll out in late 2023.</p> <p>The service has remained stable with one IRO and one service manager who have left the service in the last year due to promotion within</p>

2022/23 Priorities	Response
	<p>Durham County Council's Children in Care Service. There was a successful growth bid in early 2023 for two additional full time IROs. There have been some regional recruitment challenges and to date these posts are pending appointment.</p> <p>All staff have access to the extensive training programme within the Council. IROs have all completed the SOS 5-day advanced training course and are integral to the embedding of this practice model across the service.</p> <p>A newly appointed service manager joined the IRO service in January 2023 following progression of the previous postholder within Durham County Council which led to a vacancy within the service for a four-month period.</p> <p>IRO service managers attend the regional IRO Service Manager Group on a quarterly basis to feed into regional and national research and development. This group has been instrumental in developing regional IRO training (due to take place in November 2023) and seeking agreement from the ADCS in establishing Regional IRO Practice Forums to allow IROs to discuss and share good practice on a themed topic. Forum dates have been scheduled in September 2023 and January 2024.</p>

Appendix 3: Planned development activity against the Key Priorities and Practice Standards 2023/24

Area for Development	Key Actions
<p>Standard 1</p> <p>To actively seek, encourage and promote the voice of the child and their family in planning.</p>	<p>IRO service to revise the children in care review process to ensure it is sufficiently innovative, child focused and aligned with the Signs of Safety Framework. We will engage our children in care and their networks to inform and support with this.</p> <p>Increased evidence of IRO visits to children and young people.</p> <p>Collate feedback from MOMO statements and consultation forms to review and strengthen the voice of the child within their care journey.</p> <p>Launch the new feedback mechanism for children and families who attend child protection conferences.</p> <p>Continue to raise profile of NYAS / Independent Visitor and use of advocacy for both children in our care and children subject to child protection plans.</p>
<p>Standard 2</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>	<p>IROs/Conference Chairs will review and challenge where there is drift and delay in progressing child protection or care plans for children and young people.</p> <p>The IRO service will develop a methodology to understand the effectiveness of these challenges and analyse learning from the Resolution Process.</p> <p>IRO monthly practice clinics will focus on areas that require strengthening and we will use performance data to inform key themes.</p> <p>Peer and manager observations of meetings will take place which will provide further oversight and scrutiny of care planning and</p>

Area for Development	Key Actions
	ensure there is a consistent approach to chairing meetings.
<p>Standard 3</p> <p>To promote effective working relationships where practitioners work systemically to improve outcomes for children and young people.</p>	<p>IRO's will continue to embed the Signs of Safety Model and have curious questions with practitioners to progress planning for children and young people subject to a child protection or care plan, in a timely manner.</p> <p>We will continue to strengthen working relationships across Children's Services and with a wide range of partner agencies and service groups in the best interest of our children and families.</p> <p>IRO's will continue to attend Team Meetings across the service to support effective and supportive communication between children's social car teams and the IRO service.</p> <p>Monitoring meetings and pre meeting discussions for children on a child protection plan or care plan will support relationship building, whilst focusing on progress and outcomes for children and young people.</p>
<p>Standard 4</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>	<p>IROs will complete quarterly collaborative audits which will directly inform and impact upon practice.</p> <p>The IRO service will provide quality assurance and learning from dip samples to the Quality Improvement Board (QIB).</p> <p>IROs will undertake peer observations of practice to inform learning and bring consistency.</p>
<p>Standard 5</p> <p>To have meaningful positive impact for the children and young people we seek to serve.</p>	<p>Improve on the consistency and quality of IRO oversight for children on files. This is to include pre review meeting discussions, monitoring meetings and visits to children and young people by their IRO.</p> <p>IRO service will have a continued focus and scrutiny on monitoring and supporting</p>

Area for Development	Key Actions
	<p>placement stability and permanence planning so that children in our care have a stable, permanent home in a timely way.</p> <p>Promote the use of MOMO and advocacy for children and young people so their voice is heard, and they share their views about decision making.</p> <p>IRO service to revise the children in care review process to ensure it is sufficiently innovative, child focused and aligned with the Signs of Safety Framework. We will engage our children in care and their networks to inform and support with this.</p> <p>Renew our Investing in Children Status in 2023/24.</p>
<p>Standard 6</p> <p>We will invest in our workforce to ensure social worker practice will flourish.</p>	<p>All IROs have access to the Council’s annual training and development programme which supports their continuous professional development and renewal of their SWE registration.</p> <p>We will continue to work with the Regional North East Partnership to support learning and development. Three IROs will attend four training days along with IRO’s from across the region in November 2023 and share learning with the rest of the team. The focus of this training, delivered by Edgehill University will be on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IRO’s and Contextualised Safeguarding. • The impact of the placement sufficiency crisis for children in care. • The challenges faced within Local Authorities and meeting the needs of UCAS. • A focused session on neglect. <p>Preparation for Child Protection Conference’s Part Two training is currently in development with the DSCP. This has been revised to be a</p>

Area for Development	Key Actions
	<p>virtual session to increase reach and accessibility for partners and is due for roll out in late 2023.</p> <p>Recruit suitably experienced IROs into the vacant posts to ensure caseloads are manageable to enable consistent oversight and scrutiny of care planning.</p>

Appendix 4: IRO Guide for Children and Young People

Attached as a separate document.

Appendix 5: IRO Words and Pictures

Attached as a separate document.