

# Safeguarding Children Unit (SCU)

## 2017/18

The Contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers' and Child Protection Chairs to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Looked After Children in Gateshead



Care, Wellbeing and Learning

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## Foreword by Cabinet Member and Strategic Director

It gives us immense pleasure to introduce Gateshead Council's 2017/18 Safeguarding Children Unit (SCU) annual report. As Lead Member for Children and Young People in Gateshead and Strategic Director of Care, Wellbeing and Learning we are deeply committed to ensuring the services provided to our most vulnerable children and young people are effective, ensuring we are meeting our statutory duties and keeping children safe.

The Safeguarding Children Unit is responsible for the convening and chairing Child Protection (CP) and Looked After Children (LAC) statutory reviews. The annual report 2017/18 outlines the performance of the service, the context and requirements within which it operates, the effectiveness and impact of the service and planned developments in 2018/19.

The report highlights how the service continues to meet its core business of ensuring CP and LAC reviews are held in a timely manner with both figures in 2017/18 being above national average. In addition, it sets out the progress that has been made in a number of key areas previously identified for development.

Moving forward the SCU has identified 3 key priority areas which have been endorsed by Portfolio holders and the LSCB, for development during the course of this year and beyond. The report includes a comprehensive action plan for how the unit will seek to implementing these priorities, which are:

- Priority 1 - Ensuring the effectiveness of IRO Role
- Priority 2 - Ensuring staff are suitably skilled, qualified and have the capacity to perform the duties of the role effectively
- Priority 3 - Ensuring the voice of the child is heard, listened to and acted upon

We are proud of the work carried out by the staff in the Safeguarding Children Unit, in partnership with all partners, to ensure the services we provide to our most vulnerable children and young people are keeping them safe and achieving the best possible outcomes.

**Councillor Gary Haley**  
**Cabinet Member for Children and Young People**

**Caroline O'Neill**  
**Strategic Director of Care, Wellbeing and Learning**

# 1. Introduction / Purpose of the service and legal context

## Purpose of the report

The statutory guidance for the Independent Reviewing Officers (the IRO Handbook) specifies that the manager of the IRO Service 'should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of members of the corporate parenting board'.

This report has been prepared in accordance with the requirements set out in the Statutory Guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers (2010) and will be reported to Cabinet, the Corporate Parenting Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Local Safeguarding Children's Board.

The Annual IRO report is produced by the Children's Safeguarding Unit which sits within the Quality Assurance function of Care Wellbeing and Learning. The report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Service in Gateshead Local Authority. The report identifies good practice, as well as highlighting areas for further development in relation to the IRO function. In addition, the report provides an overview of the other activities and functions of the Children's Safeguarding Unit, including information on the performance of the unit in a range of responsibilities.

The report covers the period 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018 and should be read in conjunction with: Annual Report – Local Authority Designated Officer 2017/18.

## National Context

The Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010) and is linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011.

Local Authorities are 'corporate parents' for the children and young people they are looking after, and effective care planning is essential for the children's wellbeing and the best possible outcomes. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) were nationally introduced to represent the interests of looked after children, monitor the way local authorities implement their plans, and ensure that the wishes and feelings of children are fully considered.

Their role was strengthened through the introduction of statutory guidance in April 2011. 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 in the implementation of care plans including the regular monitoring of the care plan in between reviews.

In November 2011, the Family Justice Review reported that 'the work of the IROs and their impact needs to be more clearly seen and understood'. If a dispute between an IRO and the local authority cannot be resolved locally, ultimately the IRO can refer the case to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).

## The Legal and Statutory Context

Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced the statutory role of the IRO, with responsibility for the process of reviewing children in care cases. Under this and the subsequent Review of Children's Cases (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2004, Local Authorities are required by regulation to:

- Appoint IROs to review all looked after children's cases
- Monitor the authority's function in respect of the review
- Refer a case to the Children and Families Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), if the failure to implement the care plan might be considered to breach the child's human rights. (The Dispute Resolution Process)

All children in care, including those in adoptive placements prior to an Adoption Order being made, are covered by these regulations.

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and the subsequent 'Care Planning Placement and Review Regulations' developed the role of the IRO and introduced additional statutory requirements. The Regulations supported by specific guidance on the role of the IRO came into force on 1 April 2011. The new duties and responsibilities for IROs include:

- Additional visits to the child outside of their reviews
- Visits to children's placements if the looked after review was not held there
- Additional meetings with other key professionals, including the social worker and the children's guardian
- Track the planning and decision making more closely ensuring positive outcomes for the child.
- Reading court bundles and potentially attending court.

The Out of Authority Placement of Looked After Children Supplement to The Children Act 1989 Volume 2: Care planning, placement and case review guidance July 2014 states that the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) must be consulted before any final decision is made about making an out of authority placement, whether distant or not, to enable the IRO to discuss the proposed arrangements with the child.

The child's wishes and feelings should be taken into account, and where appropriate, the child's relatives or parents should be consulted. (The Children's Homes and Looked after Children Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2013 – Part 3:7).

The National Children's Bureau research entitled 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings with regard to the efficiency of IRO services and outlines a number of important recommendations at a National Level, Local Authority Level, and IRO Service Level, which are considered in this report. The foreword was written by Mr. Justice Peter Jackson; in it he makes the following comment:

*"The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO Service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or we are failing."*

## 2. The Safeguarding Children Unit (SCU) in Gateshead

The Safeguarding Children Unit (SCU) is committed to achieving the best outcomes for all children and young people in Gateshead, particularly the most vulnerable, such as those children who are looked after and those subject to Child Protection plans through an ethos of continuous improvement in safeguarding performance and service delivery.

The SCU has an independent role to ensure that all children, whatever their religious or cultural background, receive a high quality and consistent care and safeguards in response to abuse or neglect.

The SCU is responsible for the following functions:

- The convening and chairing of Child Protection Conferences
- The convening and chairing of reviews for Looked After Children
- The convening and chairing of reviews for children placed for adoption
- The convening and chairing of Secure Accommodation Reviews
- The provision of independent oversight of all CP and LAC cases between reviews and conferences
- The convening and chairing of reviews of Foster Carers
- The Monitoring and reviewing all Private Fostering arrangements
- Provision of the role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) in respect to allegations against staff who work with children
- Contributing to single and multi-agency practice development

The SCU has additional responsibilities to the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) in terms of contributing to case reviews, performance monitoring, audit and quality assurance, children's participation and training.

## 3. Staffing Profile of the Safeguarding Children Unit

### The Independent Reviewing Officer in Gateshead.

To fulfil their challenge role IROs must have an appropriate level of experience and authority. In Gateshead all IROs are qualified, registered and experienced social workers.

All the IROs have extensive experience of communicating and working with children and young people, including three who have worked in residential care and all have knowledge about what contributes to good quality practice in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, including an understanding of the relevant legal processes. Four IROs are experienced children's social work team managers. A number of our IROs have been working for Gateshead for many years and they are very familiar with the organisation and the services provided, however during the course of the year staff who have worked in other authorities have joined the team which has provided an opportunity to learn from practice in other areas.

## Current Staffing Structure

Responsibility for the activity and development of the Unit lies with the Service Manager Quality Assurance, who reports directly to the Service Director of Joint Commissioning, Performance and Quality. For independence the line management of the SCU is removed from operational Children's Social Care, which strengthens its independence and supports its role of challenge, however being part of the Care, Wellbeing and Learning Group maintains collaborative links with social work services.

The Service Manager for Quality Assurance is a member of the LSCB, ensuring the Safeguarding Unit is represented and well placed to provide quality assurance of inter-agency working and again supports its independence.

The staffing structure includes:

- Service Manager Quality Assurance
- 1 fte Principal IRO - responsible for the allocation of work, support and clinical supervision of the IROs.
- 1 fte Operational Team Manager responsible for overseeing business processes within the SCU and operational matters
- 9.1 fte (12 actual persons) Independent Reviewing Officers
- Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) (carries a small CP and LAC caseload)
- IRO for Foster Carer Reviews

The staff team have backgrounds in working with children who have suffered significant harm from abuse and neglect and children with attachment difficulties, both as looked after children and children subject to child protection plans and child in need plans living in the community, including working with disabled children, care leavers and young people who have offended. IROs have developed working partnerships with the Jewish community, voluntary sector, internal and external partners, and ethnic groups, including the use of interpreters for both meetings and the translation of documents.

The team is supported by: 1 fte Business Support Co-Ordinator, 6 fte Senior Safeguarding Clerks who minute Child Protection Conferences and 2.3 fte Operational Support Assistants

In early 2017 the SCU had a number of challenges in recruiting and retaining its full complement of IRO's. In February 2017, as a result of these challenges, the Chief Executive of the council requested a full review of the service to consider staffing and capacity issues, the review resulted in agreement to increase IRO capacity to address capacity issues within the team and ensure IRO's are able to fulfill all roles and responsibilities in line with the IRO Handbook. This represents significant investment within the SCU and demonstrates Gateshead's commitment to achieving best outcomes for vulnerable children.

## 4. Review of progress with 2017/18 plan

### Completion of the SCU Review

This was completed by June 2017 and presented to Senior Managers. Previously temporary IRO posts were made permanent and additional agreement was given for the creation of a further permanent IRO posts to reduce caseloads.

As part of the recruitment process for new staff, members of One Voice (our children in care council) were invited to participate in the interview process for the appointment of new IRO's which they did wholeheartedly and with much enthusiasm. These young people were noted to be extremely astute and ensured that the right people for the posts were appointed, and this has been carried forward into other interviews during the year. And will be used in any future recruitment of SCU staff.

This is significant investment within the SCU has brought caseloads down more in line with government guidelines, enabling the IRO's to fulfill all their duties and responsibilities in line with the IRO Handbook.

### Effectiveness of the IRO role:

As discussed previously there has been significant investment in the SCU in terms of additional staff. Caseloads have seen a corresponding decrease allowing the IROs to fulfill all the duties and responsibilities associated with their role.

The use and evidence of challenge is a critical function of the IRO team. To support this the recording of the Dispute Resolution process has been streamlined on the Care First system in order that IROs are clear about where to record their use of challenge. This facility allows for notifications to be sent to the relevant Social Worker, Team Manager or Service Manager. It will allow for reports to be run to identify the extent of IRO activity on Care First. Audit of IRO activity is essential in understanding variability in practice and the extent to which the IRO 'footprint' is evidenced. In addition, these alerts need to be addressed by Senior Managers where they have not been appropriately responded to.

This new recording method has highlighted that work remains and is ongoing to ensure consistency of practice between individual IROs and thresholds for challenges. This will be important moving forwards to ensure work is appropriately and consistently evidenced.

An additional case tracking assessment tool has been introduced on the Care First system to prompt IROs to track cases in between reviews, if they have not already done so. This will serve as a reminder to IROs to check whether recommendations have been followed thereby increasing the oversight and scrutiny of care plans and avoid unnecessary drift and delay for children.

Audit work has been undertaken focusing on child protection plans lasting two years or more. A Designated Review Process for CP cases lasting 15 months or more has been introduced which will provide an opportunity to scrutinise the efficacy of the child protection plan and identify any obstacles to its successful implementation.

Interface meetings between the IROs and Team Managers have continued to take place and have provided good opportunities for improved communication, and the Principal IRO attends monthly



performance clinics chaired by the Director of Children and Families with Children's Social Care managers to feedback on practice issues.

### **Training, Development and Learning:**

Additional and new staff coming into the unit has had the benefit of IROs being able to share their good practice and discuss different ways of working. There is a culture of continuous learning and this is being built upon with IROs peer observations and discussions.

All IROs have been involved in the development of new Child Protection and Looked After Children's Care Plans. All have had training focusing on outcome based care planning. In addition, all IROs have attended recent Safeguarding learning events in response to case reviews.

The LADO attended the National LADO conference in Doncaster in May 2018. The learning from this event will be taken forward through the LADO annual report.

Through the regional IRO Manager's Group, a regional IRO Conference has been planned for October 2018 to which all the IROs from our neighbouring 6 authorities have been invited – Northumberland, North and South Tyneside, Newcastle and Sunderland. At the conference there will be a number of speakers from the judiciary, CAFCASS, NAIRO, Ofsted, the Children's Safeguarding Network and the Children In Care Council. There will be afternoon workshops to encourage inter-authority communication and the sharing of good practice. It is intended that these workshops will identify priorities for IROs for the forthcoming year. The Regional IRO work plan will be expanded to include all 12 North Eastern Local Authorities in the coming year and will be accountable to and overseen by the Children's Safeguarding Network.

### **Voice of the Child:**

With significant investment in the SCU this year, this has enabled more Looked After children to receive visits from their IRO in between their review meetings, should they wish. As such IROs are more in tune with the wishes and feelings of children prior to their reviews and more alive to the issues they are facing.

The IROs work closely with the Children's Rights Officers in terms of advocacy. The take up of advocates remains low in Gateshead for both Looked After Children and children who are the subject of Child Protection plans. Consideration is being given in the coming year whether the use of an advocate should be an opt-out policy rather than an opt-in.

### **Ensuring Safeguarding Processes are fit for purpose:**

The Designated Review process mentioned earlier was approved and implemented, providing an opportunity to scrutinize the efficacy of the child protection plan and identify any obstacles to its successful implementation in longer term cases.

In response to the findings from 'Polly's Story' (a deep dive case review) the LSCB professionals escalation process has been re-launched. Conference chairs routinely remind conference members of the escalation process, should they not agree with the outcome from a child protection conference thereby ensuring more robust procedures are in place for safeguarding purposes.

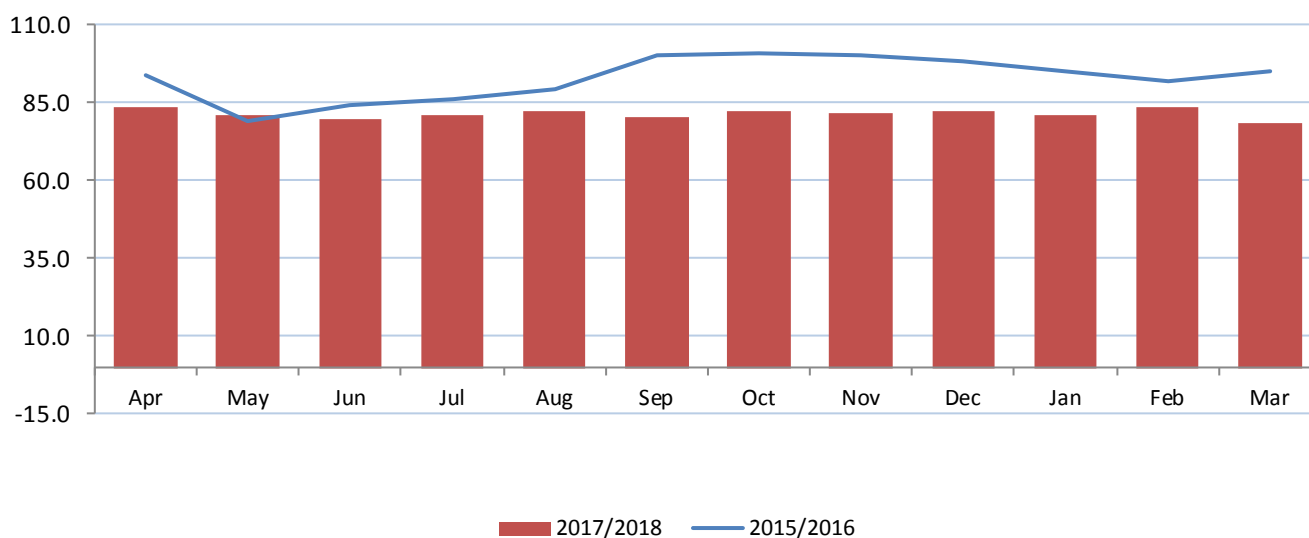
## 5. Core business activity of the Safeguarding Children Unit

### IRO caseloads

The IRO Handbook suggests that an IRO caseload should be between 50 to 70 Looked after Children. This represents good practice and ensures the delivery of the full range of functions which are set out in the handbook and the provision of a quality service.

Based on the number of LAC at the end of March 2018 the average number of LAC cases per IRO stood at 48.5. Based on the number of CP at the end of March 2018, the average number of LAC cases per IRO stood at 36.4. Taking into account double protection cases, this equates to around 82 cases per IRO. This is 13% lower than last year, when the average caseload stood at 95.

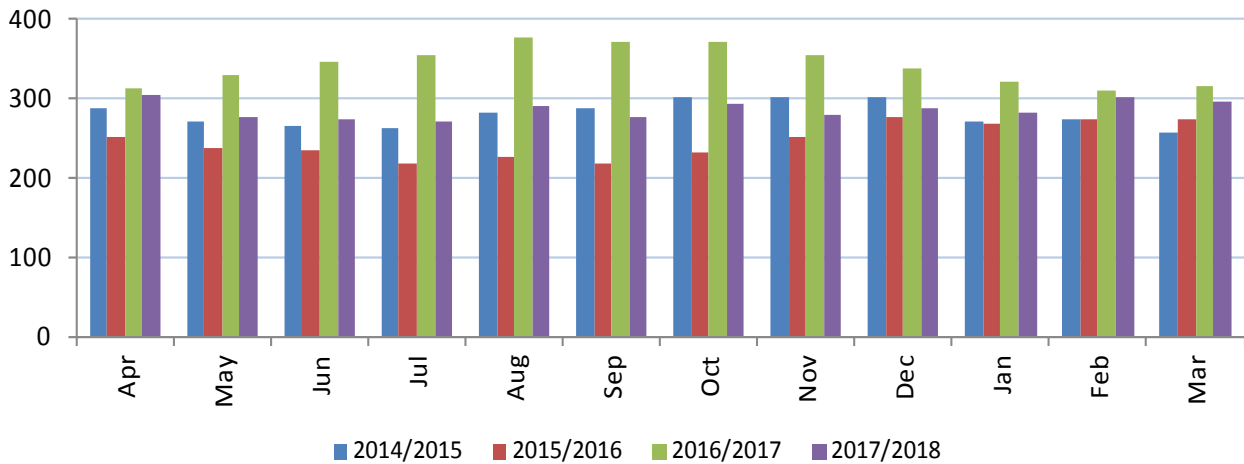
**Average IRO Caseload (LAC & CP cases only)**



The size of caseload alone does not indicate the overall workload for each individual IRO as individual roles and responsibilities vary within the team as described throughout this report, including training, Private Fostering, Complex Abuse meetings, Secure Reviews, ICS / Carefirst developments, together with input into audits and case reviews.

### Child Protection – numbers and review activity

## CP Numbers

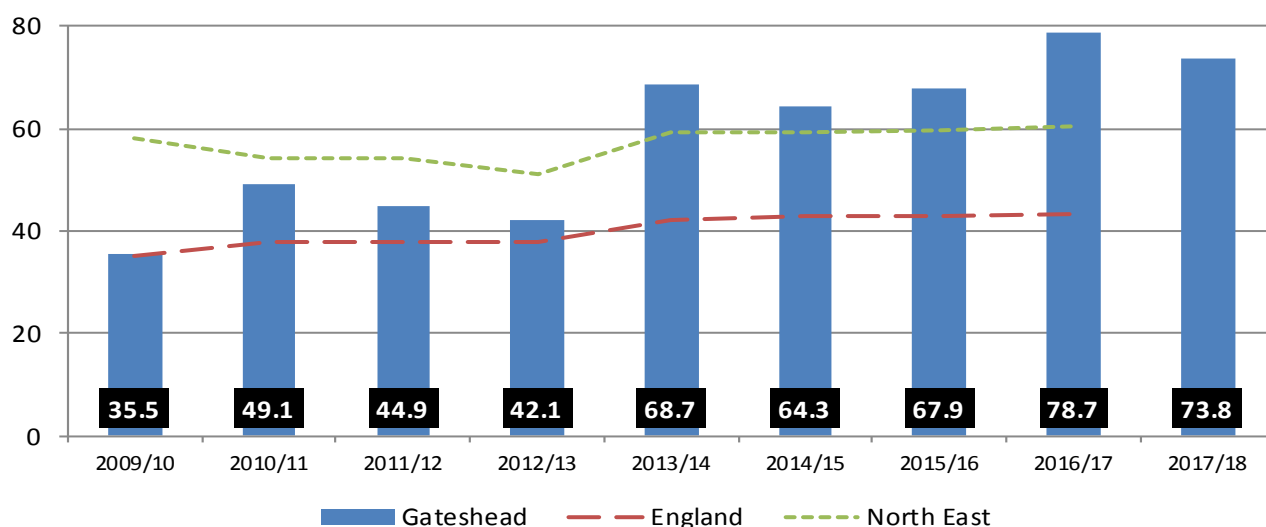


The chart above shows the number of children who were subject to a child protection plan at the end of each month for the last four years, and whilst this figure has decreased to 295 at the end of March 2018, this figure is still 8.1% higher than the March 2016 figure of 273. During the year despite the relatively stable headline figure for looked after children, the SCU has seen the impact of increasing complexity of families coming into the child protection conference process.

During the period, 417 initial child protection conferences were held and 354 children became subject to a child protection plan. These figures are lower than in 2016-17, when there were 455 initial child protection conferences and 397 children became subject to a child protection plan.

Rates per 10,000 are used as a method of benchmarking local authorities CPP and LAC numbers against each other, using a more comparable method than simply comparing actual numbers. Figures are expressed as a ratio and are calculated by dividing the local authorities' actual numbers by its total 0-17 child population estimate, sourced from the Office of National Statistics (ONS).

### Child Protection Plan numbers per 10,000



The chart above shows that whilst Gateshead’s CP rate per 10,000 was lower than last year, Gateshead is notably higher than the England and regional average.

#### **CP Reviews held within timescale**

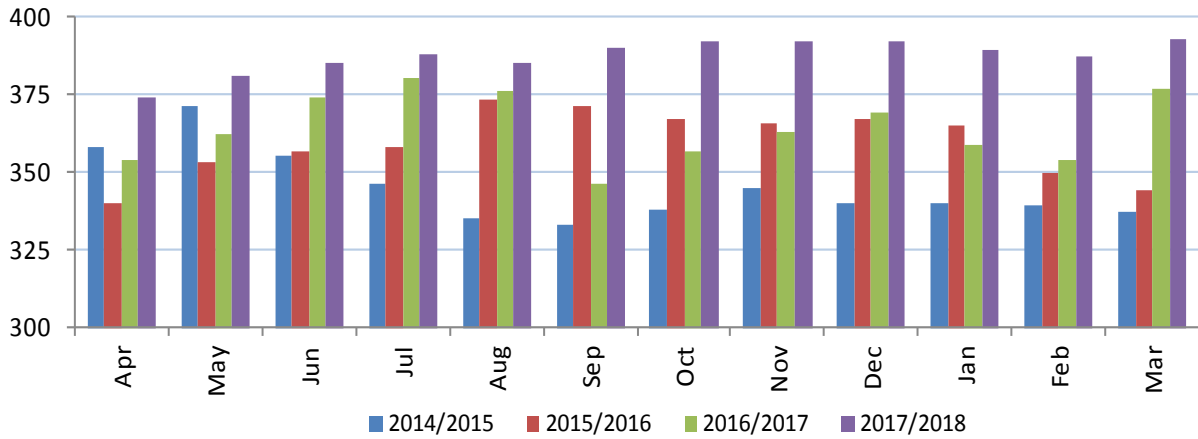
Rigorous monitoring process ensured that 100% of children had their CP reviews held within timescale which is above both the national, North East and statistical neighbour averages.

#### **Looked After Children – numbers and review activity**

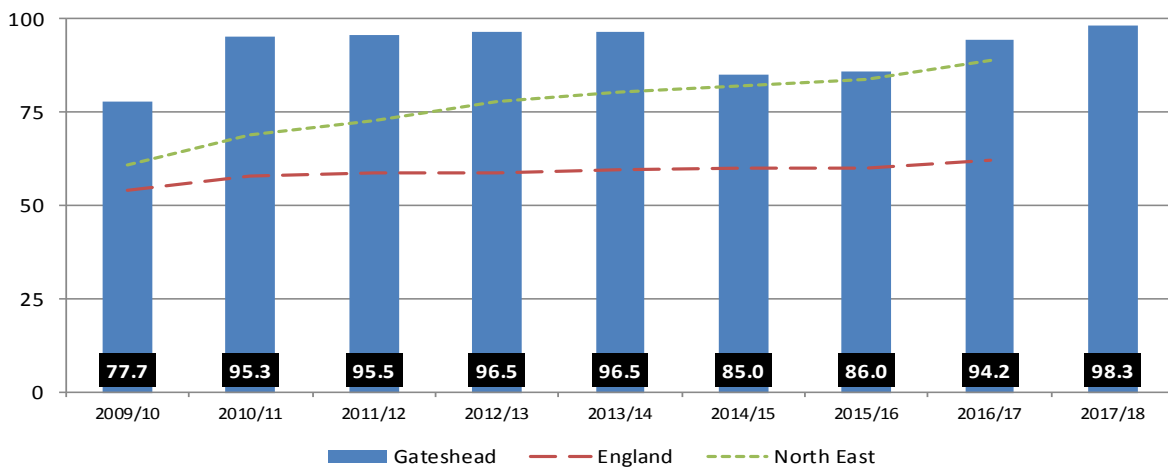
At the end of March 2018 there were 393 looked after children. This equates to 98.3 per 10,000 children and is higher than the number of looked after children at the same time last year (380/95 per 10,000). During 2017-2018 the number of children becoming looked after fell slightly compared to previous years, however, so did the numbers of children leaving care, which resulted in an

overall increase of the LAC figure.

### LAC Numbers



### Looked After Children numbers per 10,000



Gateshead continues to have higher numbers of looked after children compared with the regional rate of 92, and Gateshead’s statistical neighbors’ rate of 89.2. It is also significantly higher than the national rate of 62 per 10,000 (SSDA903 2016-2017).

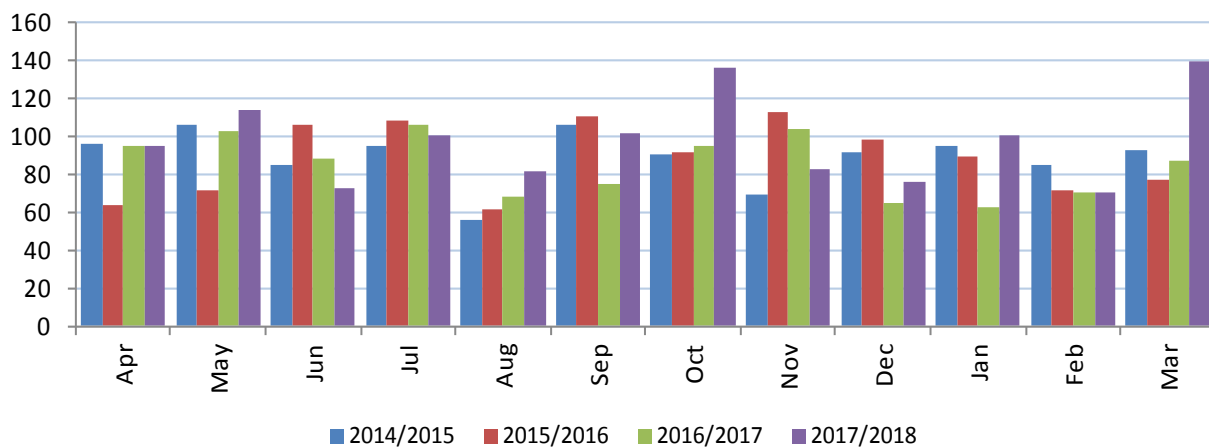
The chart above also shows Gateshead has historically had higher numbers of looked after children than the regional and national average. The gap between Gateshead and the national average remains significant, and in the past year Gateshead’s looked after population has once again risen above the regional average for the North East

### LAC Reviews held within timescale

99.5% of Looked after children had their reviews held within timescale which is above the national average of 91%; of the 376 eligible Looked After children at the end of March 2018, there were two siblings that had a review out of date due to adverse weather conditions.

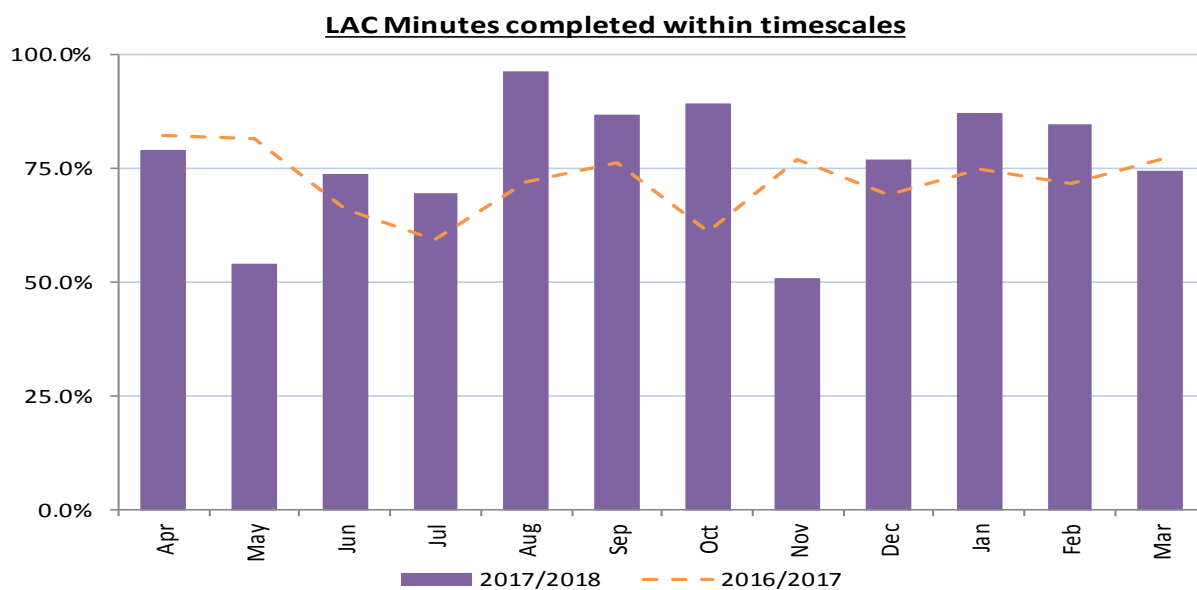
Work is ongoing to ensure that children and young people are sufficiently engaged in their LAC reviews. The number of reviews held in 2017-18 is higher than the number held during 2016-17, most notably due to spikes in reviews held in October 2017 and March 2018. The chart below illustrates the distribution of reviews over the course of the year.

### LAC Review Meetings



During April 2017 to March 2018, 75.6% of LAC minutes were completed within the locally set target of

20 working day timescale by the IROs (844/1115 meetings whose target completion date was within the period). This represents a small increase in performance compared to last year's figure of 72%. Overall, there were 10% more meetings held during 2016 – 2017 (1173 meetings held compared to 1061).



### Inclusion of Personal Educational Plans (PEPS) in Care Planning

Promoting the educational achievement of Looked after Children is a key priority for IROs. All looked after children must have a care plan, of which the PEP is an integral part.

The IRO should ensure that:

- The PEP's effectiveness is scrutinised in sufficient detail as part of the statutory review and at other times if necessary.
- Where a child has special educational needs, the IRO should ensure that the PEP review is linked with any review of those needs.
- The IRO should raise any unresolved concerns about a child's PEP or education provision with social workers and the Virtual School Head. However, some PEPs continue not to be updated/completed, which continues to be challenged by IROs with members of the care team.

The majority of children and young people who are LAC remain in their current schools when accommodated only transferring to more local schools if they are matched on a long-term basis with their foster carers and where this meets the needs of the child. This promotes improved educational outcomes as well as placement stability.

### Inclusion of Health Assessments in Care Planning

The number of children who have been looked after for 12 months or more has increased from 250 in 2016-17 to 269 in 2017-18. Of these, 265 (98.5%) had up to date health assessments, 262 (97.4%) had up to date dental checks and 253 (94.1%) had up to date immunisations.

The health plan or report from the most recent health assessment should be provided to the IRO at

least three working days before the LAC review. Depending on the age and understanding of the child, the IRO may decide it is appropriate to discuss with the child whether s/he is happy for this information to be shared at the review.

The IRO will ensure consideration is given at the review to both the physical and emotional health of the child, including an update on any significant health issues or ongoing treatment. The IRO must be satisfied that any actions identified in the health plan are being implemented within an agreed timescale that will meet the needs of the child. In addition, the IRO will monitor with the child /young person and his/her carer when dental checks and optician appointments have taken place.

During the year a joint qualitative audit was undertaken with the health services for Looked After Children to consider the detail of health assessments and information presented to LAC reviews.

The most notable finding was that health information from IHAs is not always available or considered at the time of the first LAC review although it is noted that a lot of the issues are being captured from 'other sources'.

The statutory guidance 'Promoting the health and wellbeing of looked after children' (DFE, DOH 2015) states that the health plan should be available for the first statutory review by the IRO of the child's care plan. It is acknowledged that this is a very challenging timeframe and has historically been impacted upon by the overall poor timeframes of the IHA. Multi agency collaboration has seen a recent improvement on the timeframes for IHAs in Gateshead. This issue is monitored and reviewed by the LAC Corporate Parenting Be Healthy Workstream, which has IRO representation.

Recommendations were made in relation to Looked After Children's Reviews following the initial meeting. These included that the most recent health action plans should always be made available and reviewed at LAC review meetings to ensure that when health actions are achieved health outcomes are clearly recorded and outstanding health needs are identified and progressed. (*Health assessments are completed 6 monthly for under 5's and annually thereafter*). That the views of children related to their health needs (age appropriate) should be available on the health summaries and documented within LAC review minutes. It is important that the processes within both Children's Services, the Safeguarding Children Unit and the LAC health team ensure that health assessments are available and shared to support these recommendations.

### Placement stability

Ensuring LAC have safe and stable places to live is a priority for Gateshead and IROs work to ensure placements are appropriate for the child to remove the need for unnecessary moves. Placement stability in Gateshead is good, during the period of April 2017 to March 2018 there were 24 (6.1%) Looked after children who had had 3 or more placements and 82.5% of LAC were in long-term stable placements. Both figures compare favorably to comparator averages.

### Foster Carer Reviews

There is an identified Independent Reviewing Officer responsible for reviewing foster carers on an annual basis and reporting to the Fostering Panel. The current IRO was appointed, on a permanent basis, to the post in November 2017. He has extensive experience within the field of fostering and social work management enabling him to successfully complete his role within this field.



This IRO provides an independent and consistent review for foster carers and links well with the supervisory Social Workers in the Local Authority fostering team to ensure foster carers are supported in providing the right care for the children they look after.

The number of foster carer reviews has remained fairly consistent over the past few years, and reflects the number of carers provided by the local authority. There are regular meetings with the Fostering team and LAC Service Manager to feedback any themes and patterns from the reviews and also to highlight any learning or training opportunities.

Some patterns and themes to be highlighted this year include: the challenges brought from recruitment and retention of foster carers, the numbers of children with complex and challenging behaviors who remain accommodated with Local Authority foster carers being a testament to their skills and experience, the high regard that carers have for the training opportunities and the support offered by the fostering service, the placement stability within Gateshead which continues to be consistently high compared to national figures. Foster carers have also highlighted the wait for children's mental health services where children have complex needs and are not yet in permanent placements. This highlighted need has been escalated to the relevant agencies.

### **Local Authority Designated Officer**

In Gateshead there is a full time LADO who deals exclusively with allegations made against professionals who work with children. This ensures a consistent link to partner agencies and colleagues within the Local Authority. In addition the LADO delivers training to businesses and partner agencies to enhance local knowledge of procedures and processes to safeguard both children and staff from allegations.

The staff member undertaking the LADO function holds a small caseload of child protection and Looked After Children, ensuring he is familiar and up to date with child protection processes.

More information relating to allegations activity over the latest year is available in the separate Annual Report – Local Authority Designated Officer 2017/18.

## **6. Challenge and Quality Assurance**

### **Management Oversight and Dispute Resolution Process**

Gateshead, as a Local Authority is accountable for all children and young people in their care and needs to ensure that timely decisions based on clear assessments of their needs have been completed, and drift has been avoided.

The Dispute Resolution Procedure ensures any issues of practice and standards identified by the IROs are resolved. It identifies the issues and standards, which the IRO will bring to the attention of staff and managers. It identifies the level of management that the issues will be raised with initially and the different stages thereafter. The protocol acts as a check and balance of the tasks that need to be done.

Where all other methods of resolving a problem have proved unsuccessful, the IRO should use

his/her power to refer a case to CAFCASS so that legal proceedings can be brought – this may be for further family proceedings (e.g. for discharge of a Care Order for contact), a freestanding application under the Human Rights Act or an application for judicial review. While the types of situations which lead to such a referral are not defined, it is anticipated that they will involve significant failure to meet a child's needs.

Gateshead's IROs have not had to refer any cases to CAFCASS as issues have been resolved locally with senior managers. However, there is a clear dispute resolution procedure in place should this be necessary, which is evidenced by the completion of alert forms on Carefirst. IROs also have access to independent legal advice if it is required.

During this reporting period, there have been no recorded reasons to progress to a Dispute Resolution Process with senior managers.

IROs have positive professional relationships with the Safeguarding and Care Planning and LAC teams. As a result, where issues have arisen, informal discussions have taken place between the IRO, social worker and their team manager to resolve issues on a daily basis. Examples of these include:

- Quality of reports presented to meetings is addressed with Team Managers- following the challenge the Care Plans were individualised satisfactorily.
- Reports not being presented in a timely manner prior to meetings by workers.
- Reports not being shared with parents in a timely manner.
- Where there have been disagreements between young people and their social workers, the use of advocates or the involvement of the Children's Rights Officer has been actively sought.

IROs have continued to highlight examples of good practice which include:

- A number of examples of Social Workers from the Safeguarding teams who clearly knew the family they were working with and the issues they faced very well and were confident to challenge parents in conference appropriately, openly and honestly.
- Social workers' reports and updated care plans completed within time scale and of a high standard.
- Ensuring the voice of the child is heard.
- Updating and sharing information with the allocated IRO in order to plan effective, timely review meetings.
- Good quality direct work with children in child protection and looked after children.

The system to record challenges made by the IRO has been streamlined. IROs have made improvements in relation to leaving their footprint on the child's file in terms of their lived experiences, wishes and views however it is recognized that there remains further work to complete in this respect in terms of consistency and threshold.

IROs are aware that they have individual responsibility for the quality of their practice. They do not work in isolation and a supportive culture has been created in the Safeguarding Children Unit which encourages them to operate effectively. They regularly discuss difficult cases with their colleagues, the Principal IRO, the Service Director and the Service Manager Looked after Children. The Service Manager for Children's Commissioning and Performance has attended team meetings to drive forward improvements in performance.

## Engagement with Services

A key part of the role for IROs is developing trusting relationships with the children for whom they are reviewing officers. The SCU works hard to maintain the stability of those relationships for our children and young people to ensure that IROs can be genuine advocates for them, ensuring that the decisions made during the care planning process are made in children's best interests.

With caseloads on a downward trajectory due to increased staffing, more looked after children receive visits from their IROs, should they so wish.

IROs are now routinely invited to Decision Making Meetings and asked for their views in informing the care planning process. This can often involve robust discussions in order that the best outcomes are reached for the child

## Summary of IRO key performance indicator outturns

The Safeguarding Children Unit has continued to provide effective and timely services across the full spectrum of its responsibilities. It has, through the Annual report and work plan identified areas for improvement and has endeavored to drive forward improvement both in terms of its own performance and the outcomes achieved across Children's and Families Services and the wider Children's partnership. The volume of business addressed by the unit has remained high and this has meant that progress across the priorities has been variable.

The LADO service has remained strong, providing an effective response to an increasing number of enquires and referrals. The LADO has endeavored to raise awareness across the children's workforce of the need for robust safeguarding procedures and the importance of all parties taking a shared approach to keeping children safe.

There needs to be continued improvement in ensuring the participation of children in child protection conferences and at their Looked After Children reviews. We need to improve the use of MOMO over the forthcoming year and have further discussion regarding the use of advocacy for children. This is a priority moving forward.

There are also strong links between the Unit and One Voice which provides the opportunity for children's views to inform the development of services for looked after children. It also provides a forum in which to seek feedback on the effectiveness of the IRO service.

Retaining experienced IRO staff has again been challenging however the increased capacity in the team it is anticipated that this will have a positive impact upon caseloads and the ability of the IRO's as a staff team to scrutinise care plans, reduce drift and delay and improve outcomes for children.

As such, the Safeguarding Children Unit continues to operate from a strong base, but recognises the need to further strengthen its practice and processes. The action plan which follows demonstrates this awareness and will lead to further improvement.

## Case Studies – evidence of impact of the role of the IRO

### Case Study 1

LP is a young woman in a foster placement with her baby.

Her Pathway plan for moving on independently was considered by the IRO in her Looked After Review and approved. However, LP was very concerned that she would be allocated a flat in her chosen area and had been told as such by the social worker in liaison with the Housing company. LP was clear she wanted a house for her and her baby. She wanted to avoid further moves and upheaval.

The IRO discussed the situation with a representative from the Housing company, making representation for LP and the very good reasons why she required a different property. The IRO was advised that LP could bid for a property in her own right. This information was passed on by the IRO to LP and the Social Worker. LP is now living in her own house, complete with garden and has no plans to move again.

## **Case Study 2**

AP is a young man aged 15 years in a residential placement out of borough. He has been a looked after child for 4 years. He has had 5 social workers and 1 IRO. His IRO visits him regularly in between his reviews and he will telephone to discuss difficult days or decisions with her.

AP has challenging behaviours and his placement recently threatened to give notice. The IRO met with the Director of Children's Services, the Service Manager for Looked After Children and the care provider to discuss the difficulties within the placement and their contractual obligations. The IRO was well placed to give a thorough overview of the history and to represent AM's wishes and feelings.

In addition the IRO arranged, following discussion with the Care team, an opportunity for AM to meet with his previous foster carer, with whom he had a significant attachment, in order for AM to gain closure as the placement had ended on a less than positive note. This will hopefully enable AM to move forward more positively.

## **Case Study 3**

IROs are very good at identifying talents and strengths in our children and young people who are looked after. Exploiting children's talents promotes feelings of mastery and control in their lives, increasing and improving resilience.

One IRO has supported a young woman who has a talent for play writing and acting. The IRO pushed for a place at the Live Theatre for her and offered to meet with her and walk in with her.

Another IRO is working with a young man who is incredibly talented at football. She requested that the Local Authority fund buying his football boots and celebration tie. He has since won Player of the Year at his club.

Another IRO challenged the school when a young man who is looked after was unable to go on a trip to a football academy due to the cost. The IRO liaised with REALAC and the Director of Education to request that the school fund the trip with the Pupil Premium. afforded to all Looked After Children.

## **Case Study 4**

A fundamental role of the IROs is to identify drift and delay in a child's care plan.

One IRO contacted the Director of Children's Services to challenge the delay in initiating care proceedings for a young person in local authority care on a voluntary basis. This escalation proved necessary following previous alerts and emails not being responded to.

Another IRO liaised with health professionals for a child placed in an adoptive placement whose adoptive parents were informed they would have to wait for four months for Speech and Language intervention. The Looked After Health Nurse has informed the family that she has secured an appointment within three weeks' time.

One IRO identified delay in progressing planning for a young person in moving to a residential placement. The plan was not progressing despite this being the aim. In discussion with the Team Manager, it was acknowledged that the case had drifted. New dates were set and the young person is now in her long-term placement.

Another IRO learnt that a Looked After Child was not being given his full entitlement to leaving care services as there was a dispute between the teams as to his eligibility. The IRO alerted the Service Manager and ensured this young person receives continued help and support post 18 years.

### **Voice of the child (Engagement of children and young people including advocacy)**

The 393 open LAC cases at the end of March 2018 accounted for 917 LAC reviews undertaken during the year. 60 children were under 4 years old. 120 children attended their reviews and were able to express their views directly. For the remaining children and young people who were not present at their LAC reviews, they gave their views indirectly, either through consultation forms or an 'advocate'. Advocates speaking for children have continued to include family members, trusted teachers or carers. Not all children choose to use a formal advocate.

In most cases IROs have offered children and young people a discussion in private prior to their review, subject to age and understanding. A formal pre-meeting has not taken place in some cases, for example, where the young person chooses not to meet his/her IRO prior to the review because his/her placement remains stable, there have been no significant changes planned for the foreseeable future and the IRO and child/young person have already established a relationship or a young person chooses not to talk to his/her IRO. This is in addition to a visit by the IRO in between reviews.

Special efforts are required to accommodate the individual needs of Disabled children and young people in their LAC reviews. Parents, residential care staff, the involvement worker and Children with Disability Team members all work hard to ensure that the views of Disabled children and young people are known and reflected in the reviews.

The reviews are intended to be participative, providing an opportunity particularly for the child/young person to contribute, according to age and understanding. They are also intended for the participation of parents, carers and others involved in implementing the child/young person's care plan and in planning for the future.

The Senior Clerk who has responsibility for arranging LAC reviews ensures a letter is sent to the child young person informing him/her of the name of his/her IRO. In addition, IROs give each child at his/her LAC review a card, which contains their contact details and how to obtain an advocate or independent visitor, if identified to be appropriate.

## Advocacy

The SCU is committed to promoting independent advocacy for children and young people. Gateshead Borough Council continues to have a contract with Action for Children which provides an independent and confidential service. The unit has a responsibility in ensuring that children and young people who are subject to Child Protection Plans and those looked after are aware of the Advocacy Service and how to access it. All children and young people who become looked after are provided with details of the role of advocates, how they can provide support and how they can be accessed.

The IROs work closely with the Children's Rights Officer and the Inclusion Officer to ensure the voice of the child is heard and to offer an advocacy role within the LAC process.

## 7. Key priorities for 2018/2019 – action plan

Priority 1 - Ensuring effectiveness of IRO Role				
Objective	Action	Timescale	Lead	Update
1.1 To ensure challenge thresholds are consistent and applied uniformly by individual IROs	Development day is planned for all IRO's to agree challenge thresholds and apply a uniform approach.	January 2019	Principal IRO and Service Manager	
	Peer observations to take place	November 2018	IRO staff	
1.2 To ensure challenge is responded to by workers and Managers and where this does not occur, that escalation is driven forward by the IRO and the service manager	Performance data regarding IRO challenge will be captured on a weekly basis and discussed with Senior Managers at regular monthly meetings.  Alerts/Drift and delay assessments will be discussed within supervision.	November 2018	Performance team/Principal IRO/IRO staff team	
1.3 To ensure that IRO challenge, advice and support to operational Social Work teams is appropriately recorded and captured	Performance data regarding IRO challenge will be captured on a weekly basis and shared with the IRO staff team.  Regular audits to take place to evaluate the IRO footprint on a child's file.  Sharing of file audit outcomes to take place within supervision and team meetings.	October 2018	Performance team/Principal IRO/IRO staff team	
1.4 Ensure themes from challenge advice and support is reported regularly to staff across the group and partnerships to identify areas for development thereby driving good practice and improvements	Themes will be drawn from audits and performance data and discussed with Senior Managers on a monthly as part of CCMT basis to feed into training, policy and procedures.  The Principal IRO will continue to be responsible for chairing the Policy and Procedures group for the LSCB.	November 2018	Principal IRO	

## Priority 1 - Ensuring effectiveness of IRO Role

Objective	Action	Timescale	Lead	Update
1.5 To ensure all plans developed by the service are of consistently good quality	<p>File audits will identify any learning needs in terms of the formulation of robust plans and planning.</p> <p>Regular supervision will identify training needs. Peer observation and observation by Principal IRO will ensure good practice is shared and learning needs identified.</p> <p>Good practice guidance for construction of plans to be drafted and developed in conjunction with Children and Families Service</p>	November 2018	<p>Principal IRO/Team Mangers</p> <p>IRO staff team/Principal IRO</p> <p>IRO staff</p>	
1.6 Ensure IROs provide rigor in their role and are effective in ensuring plans progress, avoid drift and delay, and meet children's needs	<p>Regular supervision will take place and performance information scrutinized to ensure effective challenge is taking place.</p> <p>File audits will ensure the IRO footprint is in evidence on a child's file.</p> <p>Evaluation sheets will be used to collate the views of professionals, children and parents/carers of IRO performance in child protection and LAC meetings. These will provide learning and reflective supervision.</p>	<p>October 2018</p> <p>October 2018</p> <p>January 2019</p>	Principal IRO	
1.7 To ensure that drift or delay in cases is highlighted by the IRO and escalated immediately to Senior Managers	<p>Performance information will be scrutinized to ensure any drift and delay is recorded and challenged. This information will be given to Children's Services managers at monthly meetings.</p> <p>IRO's are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities and that drift should be escalated to the Director appropriately.</p>	October 2018	IRO staff/Principal IRO	



## Priority 2 - Ensuring staff are suitably skilled, qualified and have the capacity to perform the duties of the role effectively

Objective	Action	Timescale	Lead	Update
2.1 Ensuring that the re-structure of the Quality Assurance function of the Quality Assurance and Commissioning Service meets the needs of the SCU in improving performance, driving standards and ensuring consistency and quality of practice	Service Manager to present proposed restructure to Senior Managers, Finance department and Human Resources. A proposed structure has been devised which will ensure a full time Service Manager for the unit and 2 full time Practice Supervisors ensuring a coherent service and enabling consistent performance which can be scrutinized to improve outcomes for children	December 2018	Service Manager Quality Assurance	
2.2 Ensuring SCU staff continuously improve and develop, and use an evidenced based approach to their work	Relevant training opportunities will be available and sourced for the IRO staff team ensuring a systemic evidence base.  Training is considered within supervision.	January 2019	Principal IRO	






### Priority 3 - Ensuring the voice of the child is heard, listened to and acted upon:





Objective	Action	Timescale	Lead	Update
3.1 Ensure every child receives a visit from their IRO, where they want one. And this is recorded clearly within the child's electronic record	<p>Ensure all IRO posts are successfully filled with experienced workers to ensure caseloads are in line with government guidelines.</p> <p>Performance data will be scrutinized to ensure children receive a visit from their IRO should they so wish. If they do not wish to receive a visit the reasons for this will be recorded and respected.</p>	January 2019	<p>Principal IRO/Service Manger QA</p> <p>Principal IRO/IRO staff</p>	
3.2 Ensure every child has the opportunity to have an advocate; to consider the use of advocates as an opt-out policy for children in the Child Protection arena	Further discussion to take place with Children's Rights Officer, Commissioning team and Senior Managers in Children's Services.	January 2019	Principal IRO/Children's Rights Officer/Senior Managers Children's services	
3.3 That children's participation in their Looked After Reviews and Child Protection Conferences is strong and that their wishes and feelings are carefully considered within the care planning process.	<p>Performance data will be used effectively to cross reference where children most attend their meetings. This information will be used to effectively improve children's participation in LAC reviews.</p> <p>Every child will be offered a visit from their IRO before their LAC meeting, encouraged to attend their LAC meeting and their wishes and feelings shared and recorded.</p> <p>Advocates will be considered as an 'opt-out' policy for children within the child protection process.</p> <p>The use of MOMO will be further supported and encouraged with iPads issued to all IRO's.</p> <p>Children's participation within the Child Protection process will be recorded within the minutes of conferences. .</p>	January 2019	Principal IRO/IRO staff	

### Priority 3 - Ensuring the voice of the child is heard, listened to and acted upon:

Objective	Action	Timescale	Lead	Update
3.4 Work closely with the Children's Rights Officer as critical friends to ensure the voices of our children are strong, loud and clear in all the work of the unit	<p>Looked After Children and/or Care Leavers will be included on interview panels for new IRO's and any/all subsequent posts.</p> <p>One Voice will be invited to attend the IRO regional conference to showcase some of their work.</p> <p>The Children's Rights Officer and Inclusion Officer will move from their current place within Early Help to be line managed within the Quality Assurance team in order to forge stronger and closer ties.</p>	December 2018	Principal IRO/Service Manager QA/Children's Rights Officer	

## Appendix 1 - GATESHEAD IRO KEY PERFORMANCE MEASURES

No.	Performance measure	April-March 2016-2017	% April-March 2016-2017	April-March 2017-2018	% April-March 2017-2018	Progress since last year	RAG rating	Commentary
1	Percentage of child protection cases which were reviewed within required timescales	242/242	100.0%	210/210	100.0%		<span style="background-color: green; color: white;">RAG</span>	Of the 210 children who have required reviews in between April and March 2018, who have been CP for at least three months and are currently CP, all have received their reviews within timescale.
2	Looked after children cases which were reviewed within required timescales	322/326	98.8%	374/376	99.5%		<span style="background-color: green; color: white;">RAG</span>	99.5% of Looked after children had their reviews held within timescale which is above the national average of 91%; of the 376 eligible Looked After children at the end of March 2018, there were two siblings that had a review out of date due to adverse weather.
3	% of IRO's appointed within 5 days of child becoming LAC (must be appointed prior to the first review)	151/201	75.1%	131/177	74%		<span style="background-color: yellow; color: black;">RAG</span>	Of the 177 children who have become LAC in the last 12 months, 131 were assigned an IRO within 5 working days (74%).
4	% of LAC review minutes completed within 20 days	751/1019	72.2%	844/1115	75.6%		<span style="background-color: yellow; color: black;">RAG</span>	During April 2017 to March 2018, 75.6% of minutes were completed within the 20 working day timescale by the IROs (844/1115 Meetings). This represents an increase in performance compared to 2016-2017.
5	% of children and young people looked after for 3 years or less who have the same IRO throughout	145/184	81.0%	206/242	85.1%		<span style="background-color: yellow; color: black;">RAG</span>	206 out of 242 LAC who have been looked after for three years or less have had the same IRO as a meeting chair in 85.1% of their reviews.

No.	Performance measure	April - March 2016-2017	% April - March 2016-2017	April - March 2017-2018	% April - March 2017-2018	Progress since last year	RAG rating	Commentary
6	Proportion of ICPCs held within 15 days of S47 starting	447/455	98.2%	402/417	96.4%			15 ICPCs were held out of timescale between April 2017 and March 2018. Performance in this measure still remains high when compared with national figure (78.3%).
7	Proportion of outline CP plans distributed within 1 day of review (conferences)	624/625	99.8%	499/499	100%			All plans were distributed within timescale during 2017-2018.
8	Proportion of CP minutes distributed within 20 working days of conference (conferences)	736/790	93.5%	689/698	98.7%			During April 2017 to March 2018, 689 child protection minutes were distributed within the 20 working day timescale (98.7%). This represents an increase in performance compared to last year, which has been aided by consistent weekly monitoring and supervision.
9	LAC/CP cases with an assigned IRO	LAC 357/357 CP 313/313 LAC/CP 19/19	100% 100% 100%	LAC 393/393 CP 295/295 LAC/CP 14/14	100% 100% 100%			All cases had an IRO allocated on 31/03/2018.

