

Safeguarding Children Unit (SCU)

Annual Report 2018/2019

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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1. Introduction / Purpose of the service and legal context

Purpose of the report

The completion of this report is a requirement of The Adoption and Children Act 2002. 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 2018 to 31 March 2019 and should be read in conjunction with:

Annual Report – Local Authority Designated Officer 2018/19

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).

2. The Safeguarding Children Unit (SCU) in Gateshead

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 whether we are failing.

The Safeguarding Children Unit 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.

This year the Safeguarding Children Unit has embraced the strengths and relationship based systemic practice model adopted across Children's Services – Gateshead CAN. This is an overall approach which draws on all the tools, techniques, methods and models from all strengths- based, person-centred and system-centred theories. It recognizes that practice and relationships have not always been prioritized within social work. CAN emphasizes the positive, creative and can-do attitude that underpins our social work practice. This overarching systemic approach is supporting social workers with a range of tools to develop the effectiveness of their practice with children and families. This means that children and families are benefiting from a tailored approach to their individual needs.

The SCU has an independent role to ensure that all children, whatever their religious or cultural background, receive high quality, 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
- The role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) in respect to allegations against staff
- Contributing to single and multi-agency training
- Chairing Complex Abuse Strategy meetings.

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 four 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. Five IROs are experienced children’s social work team managers. Many of our IROs have been working for Gateshead for several years and they are very familiar with the organisation and the services provided. Others have been recruited from different authorities and bring with them new ideas and ways of working.

The range of reported skills and knowledge that IROs need in order to fulfil their duties is illustrated through the comments of one of the IRO managers who contributed to the NCB’s The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England Report March 2014:

“[IROs] need a really in depth knowledge obviously about the IRO responsibilities, so they do need to understand the Handbook. They need to understand the care planning regulations, Working Together, the whole framework; legislative framework that works with looked after children and what children subject to safeguarding procedures are subject to really. They also need those personal skills and abilities to, for instance, manage multiagency meetings and they need to be mindful of issues around group dynamics and that ability to work across agencies really and bring that work together to focus on the needs of the child. And they need to be able to manage their professional accountability and their professional authority in a way that enables effective challenge really because that’s one of the key things..” (IRO Manager).

Current Staffing Structure

The SCU is undergoing further staffing restructure. A Service Manager for the unit was appointed

in March 2019 following recognition that the previous posts of Principal IRO and Operational Team Manager did not fully support the key role of challenging the Local Authority when necessary.

Therefore, responsibility for the activity and development of the Unit lies with the Service Manager Safeguarding Children Unit, who reports directly to the Service Director for Commissioning and Quality Assurance. Responsibility for the line management of the Safeguarding Unit is removed from operational Children's Social Care, which strengthens its independence and supports its role of challenge, whilst maintaining collaborative links with social work services.

It is further proposed that two Practice Supervisor posts are created to support the role of the Service Manger and assume the clinical supervision of the IRO's. It is envisaged that these 2 new posts will drive forward practice improvement and performance in the key areas of plans, planning quality assurance and challenge.

The staffing structure includes:

- Service Manager, Safeguarding Children Unit
- Operational Manager responsible for overseeing business processes within the SCU and operational matters.
- 10.1 FTE Independent Reviewing Officers. Within this, one FTE post covers the LADO role and responsibilities and one FTE covers all the reviews of foster carers for Gateshead.
- The team comprises 5 males and 8 females.
- 4 team members work on a part time basis

All the Independent Reviewing Officers are now permanent members of staff. There are no agency workers currently employed which is positive and increases consistency in the relationships we have with children.

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. This includes 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 senior operational support coordinator, 7 FTE senior clerks and 1 apprentice.

During 2018 the SCU had a number of challenges with unprecedented levels of sickness within our Business Support team. This had an impact upon the ability to produce minutes of conferences in a timely manner. Agency workers for business support have been employed to provide extra resources. It is hoped and anticipated that this has now been rectified.

Wider staffing changes in terms of word processing support have impacted on the timeliness of LAC Chairs reports being produced. The SCU has limited work processing support now and IRO's are, in the main, responsible for producing these reports. The SCU has invested in technological assistance in this respect with iPads and Voice to Text headsets.

4. Review of the 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. Peer observations to take place	January 2019 November 2018	Principal IRO and Service Manager IRO staff	Development day held February 2019. Regional Challenge Framework adopted and implemented January 2019. Peer observations have taken place. Further observations are planned. Further work is needed in this respect and this will be a priority for next year's action plan.
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	Performance data is discussed at CCMT on 3-monthly basis. Further work is needed in this respect and this will be a priority for next year's action plan.
1.3 To ensure that IRO challenge, advice and support to operational Social Work teams is appropriately recorded and	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	October 2018	Performance team/Principal IRO/IRO staff team	Performance data is shared weekly with the IRO team. Regular discussions take place within

<p>captured</p>	<p>child's file.</p> <p>Sharing of file audit outcomes to take place within supervision and team meetings.</p>			<p>team meetings to share practice.</p> <p>IRO footprint is more evident on the child's file to evidence IRO challenge.</p> <p>Further work is needed in this respect and this will be a priority for next year's action plan.</p>
<p>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</p>	<p>Themes will be drawn from audits and performance data and discussed with Senior Mangers on a monthly basis to feed into training, policy and procedures.</p> <p>The Principal IRO will continue to be responsible for chairing the Policy and Procedures group for the LSCB.</p>	<p>October 2018</p>	<p>Principal IRO</p>	<p>Themes continue to be shared with staff – Team managers, Service Mangers – to improve practice and identify areas of issue.</p> <p>This group is no longer in operation and has been incorporated into the Learning and Improvement group.</p>
<p>1.5 To ensure all plans developed by the service are of consistently good quality</p>	<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.</p> <p>Peer observation and observation by Principal IRO will ensure good practice is shared and learning needs identified.</p>	<p>October 2018</p>	<p>Principal IRO/Team Mangers</p> <p>IRO staff team/Principal IRO</p> <p>IRO staff</p>	<p>File audits continue to share learning with the IRO staff</p> <p>Development day held within SCU in February 2019 to reinforce learning from systemic training and improve plans.</p> <p>The new review</p>

	<p>Designated review process will identify any plans which have not been considered robust or dynamic enough to ensure progression and good safeguarding outcomes.</p>			<p>process is currently being embedded within the unit. Early indications are positive in identifying drift. This has not been as speedily adopted as anticipated with unprecedented levels of sickness within Business Support.</p> <p>Further work is needed in this respect and this will be a priority for next year's action plan.</p>
<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>	<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>	<p>Principal IRO</p>	<p>Feedback from social work teams is that IRO challenge is rigorous.</p> <p>The regional challenge framework has been adopted and implemented to ensure consistency in challenge.</p> <p>Audits continue to evidence the increased IRO recording of activity.</p> <p>Ofsted indicated that further work is needed in terms of IRO</p>

				challenge and scrutiny and this will be a priority moving forward with next year's plan.
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	<p>Performance information is scrutinized on a weekly basis to ensure themes and practice are identified.</p> <p>Ofsted indicated that further work is needed in terms of IRO challenge and scrutiny and this will be a priority moving forward with next year's plan.</p>

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 agreed 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	<p>Service Manager has been appointed to the post (April 2019).</p> <p>The two Practice Supervisor posts will be created in August 2019.</p>

<p>2.2 Ensuring SCU staff continuously improve and develop, and use an evidenced based approach to their work</p>	<p>Relevant training opportunities will be available and sourced for the IRO staff team ensuring a systemic evidence base.</p> <p>Training is considered within supervision.</p>	<p>January 2019</p>	<p>Principal IRO</p>	<p>All IRO's have prioritized the systemic training rolled out to social work staff.</p> <p>A regional programme of specialized training for IRO's is being proposed and implemented by the NE12 group.</p> <p>Regional IRO Conference was held in October 2018 with a further conference proposed for October 2019.</p> <p>Further work is needed in terms of achieving consistency of approach in Conferences and LAC meetings – this will be a priority for next year's action plan.</p>
<p>2.3 Ensuring the SCUs work informs and is informed by strategic plans and relevant operational groups and processes – enabling staff to contribute and respond to the wider agenda</p>			<p>Principal IRO/Service Manager Quality Assurance</p>	<p>Service Manager has been appointed to the SCU (April 2019) to promote strategic planning.</p> <p>The two Practice Supervisors will be appointed in August 2019 to ensure the unit improves performance and is able to contribute to the wider Council agenda.</p>

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 all 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>	There are no IRO vacancies within the SCU. All posts are filled with experienced, permanent staff. There are no agency workers. There is currently 1 IRO on long term sick leave. Cases remain at manageable levels to allow IRO's to fulfill all roles and responsibilities associated with the post.
3.2 Ensure every child knows and understands their care or child protection plan				The LAC Chair's report has been re-organised to follow the layout of Children's care plans to encourage the use of the Care plan as a working document at reviews.
3.3 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	The 'opt-out' policy has been discussed and not considered appropriate for the majority of Looked After Children or those subject to Child Protection plans. IRO's remind and reinforce the use of advocates within all meetings. This is now a standard question within the LAC Chair's report.
3.4 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</p>	January 2019	Principal IRO/IRO staff	IRO visits and discussions with children have increased as the team has gained capacity. It is anticipated that all looked after children will have this

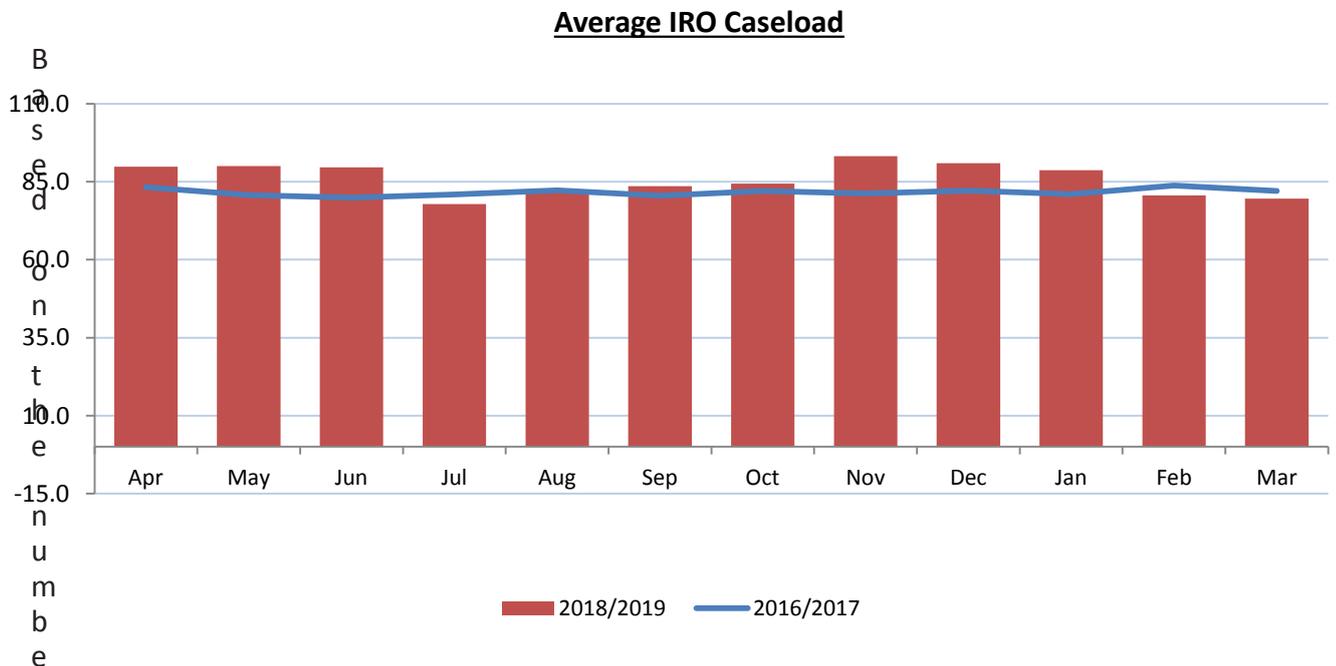
	<p>shared and recorded.</p> <p>Advocates will be considered as an 'opt-out' policy for children within the child protection process.</p> <p>The use of MOMO will be further supported and encouraged with iPads issued to all IRO's.</p> <p>Children's participation within the Child Protection process will be recorded within the minutes of conferences. Discussion will take place with IRO staff regarding the alteration of the Chair's report to accurately capture the views of the child/ren and their lived experience.</p>			<p>opportunity.</p> <p>This was not considered to be an effective way forward.</p> <p>The use of Mind of My Own has continued to be encouraged amongst a tool box of consultation techniques. It is not clear as yet whether the contract will be renewed.</p> <p>This remains an outstanding piece of work and will be addressed in the forthcoming work programme.</p>
<p>3.5 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>	<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>IRO's will work closely with the Children's Rights Officer at events where looked after children participate eg REALAC awards</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</p>	<p>December 2018</p>	<p>Principal IRO/Service Manager QA/Children's Rights Officer</p>	<p>Looked After children/ care leavers now interview, as standard, any new applicants for IRO and/or manager posts.</p> <p>Unfortunately, the Achievement Awards in 2018 were postponed.</p> <p>The Children In care council presented at the IRO conference and had a positive impact upon those in attendance.</p>

	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.			Achieved.
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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. There were 8 FTE IROs in the unit at the end of March 2019 who have responsibility for our Looked After Children and children subject to Child Protection plans.



At the end of March 2019 (380), the average number of LAC cases per IRO stood at 47.5. Based on the number of CP at the end of March 2019 (262), the average number of LAC cases per IRO stood at 32.5. Taking into account double protection cases, this equates to 79 cases per IRO. This is 4% lower than last year, when the average caseload stood at 82.

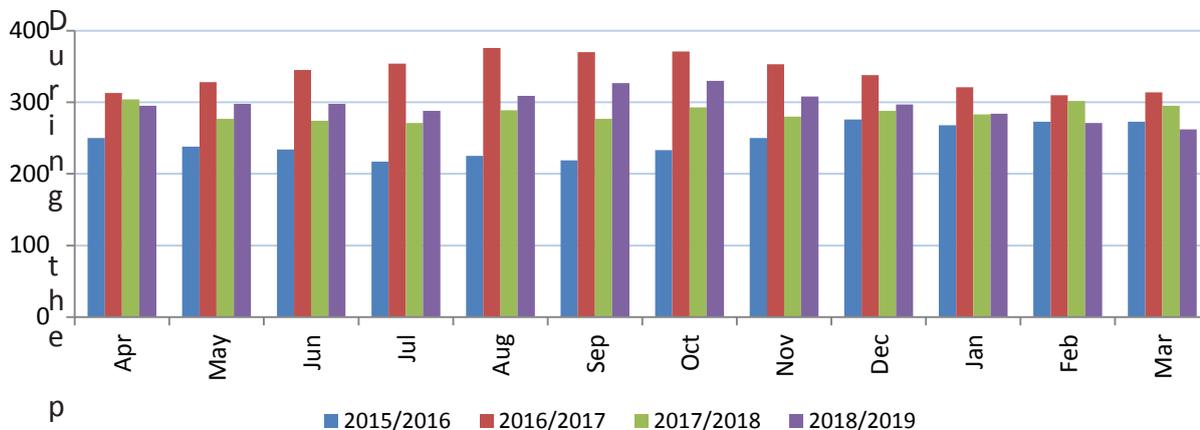
The size of caseload alone does not indicate the overall workload for each individual IRO as individual roles and responsibilities vary within the team as described throughout this report, including training, Private Fostering, Complex Abuse meetings, Secure Reviews, ICS / Carefirst developments, together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

Child Protection – numbers and review activity

During the year despite the relatively stable headline figure for looked after children, the SCU has seen the impact of increasing child protection activity and increasing complexity of families coming into the child protection conference process. The chart below 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 262 at the end of March 2019, it did peak at a 2-year high figure of 330 at the end of October 2018. The March 2019 figure represents an 11.2% decrease compared to the March 2018 figure.

CP Numbers

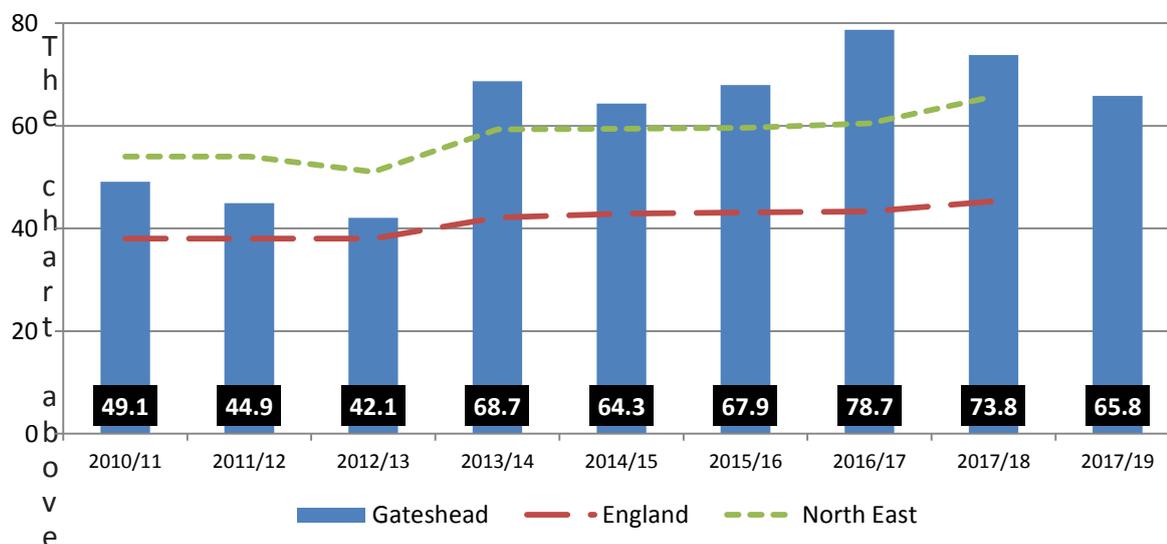


During the period, 368 children were subject to an initial child protection conferences and 307 children became subject to a child protection plan. These figures are lower than in 2017-18, when there were 405 initial child protection conferences and 354 children became subject to a child protection plan.

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).

The charts which follow benchmark Gateshead's rates per 10,000 of children subject to a CPP and rates per 10,000 of LAC, against average rates for comparator groups of North East authorities and England as a whole.

Child Protection Plan numbers per 10,000



shows that whilst Gateshead’s CP rate per 10,000 was lower than last year, Gateshead is notably higher than the England average but is coming into line with the regional average.

This data captures the quantity succinctly, but it is also important to look at the quality of child protection work which is undertaken within the Local Authority. We know that generally our conferences and strategy meetings are well attended by partner agencies and this was noted by Ofsted in their inspection visit in March 2019.

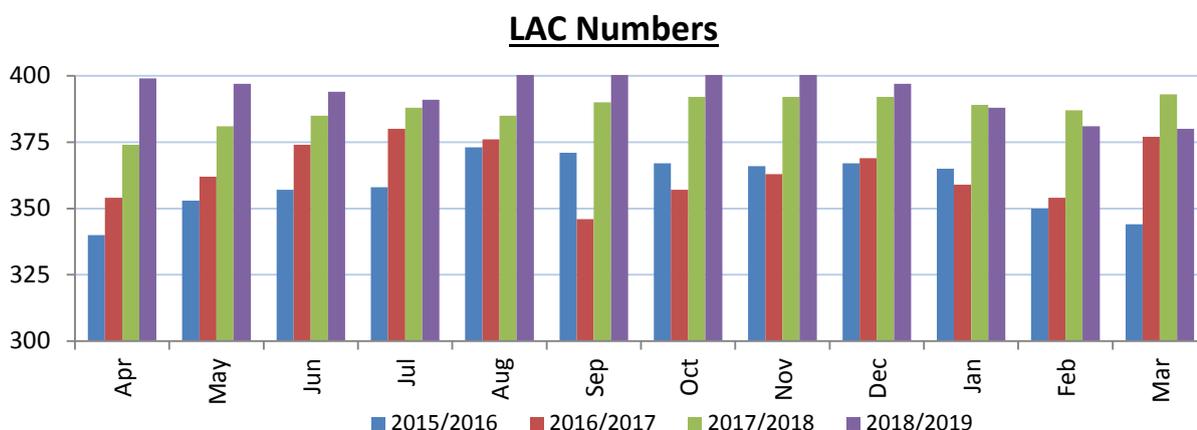
‘Child protection conferences, core group meetings and child protection reviews are well attended and are effective in ensuring that risks posed to children are fully understood and reduced so that children can remain safely within their families wherever possible.’

Moving forward, it is proposed that performance information relating to the quality of work provided will also be captured and shared with the Safeguarding Board in terms of multi agency contributions, attendance, advocacy and decision making.

Looked After Children – numbers and review activity

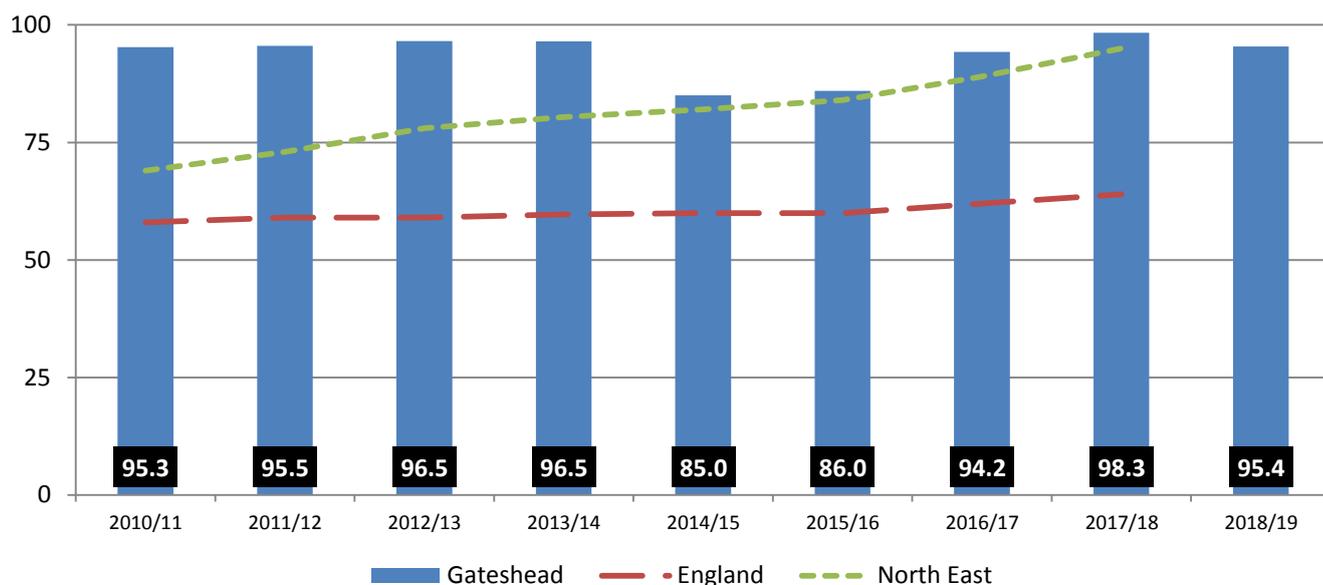
At the end of March 2019 there were 380 looked after children. This equates to 95.4 per 10,000 children and is lower than the number of looked after children at the same time last year (393/98.3 per 10,000).

During 2018-2019 the number of children becoming looked after climbed to a high of 406 in September 2018, but steadily decreased to 380 by March 2019, the lowest LAC figure in Gateshead since April 2017.



Gateshead’s rate of Looked After Children is now in line with the regional rate of 95 but it is still significantly higher than the national rate of 64 per 10,000 (SSDA903 2017-2018).

Looked After Children numbers per 10,000

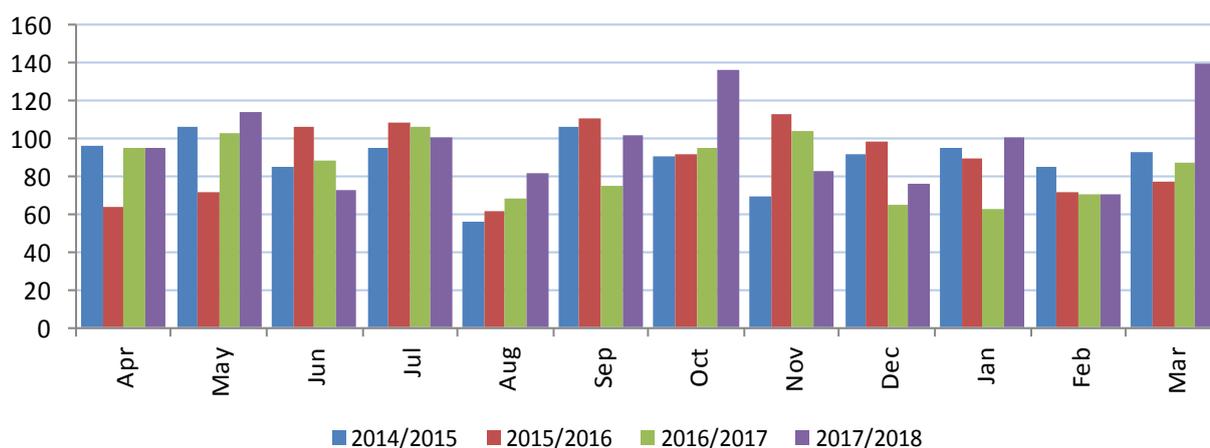


LAC Reviews held within timescale

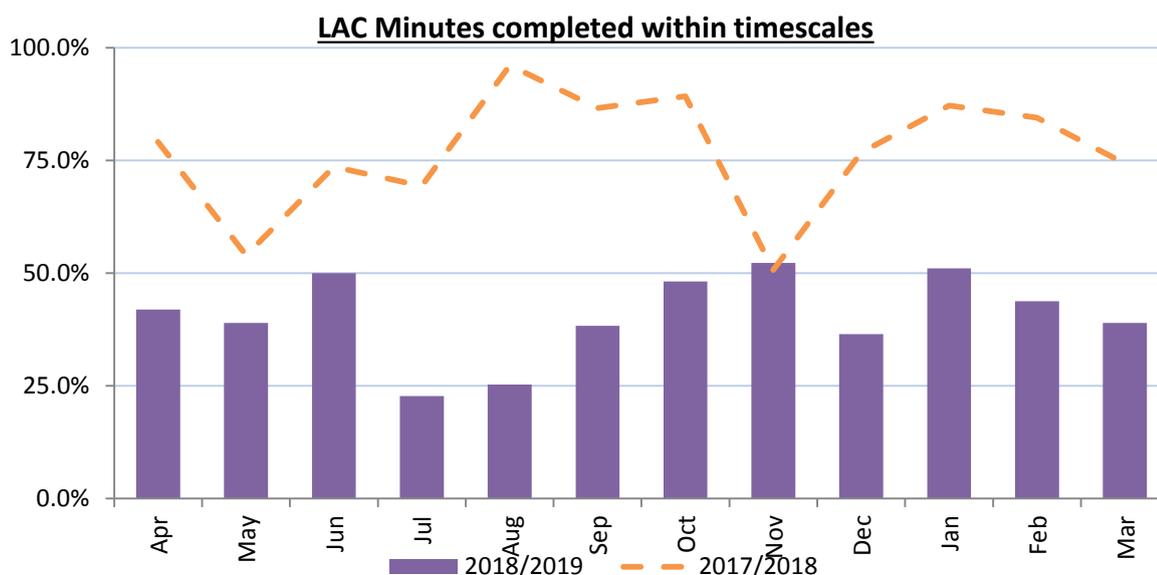
99.1% of Looked after children had their reviews held within timescale. Of the 352 eligible Looked After children at the end of March 2019, there were three children that had a review out of date.

Throughout 2018-19, 245 children attended 1,145 reviews, compared to 2017-18 when 197 children attended 917 reviews. This is an upwards trajectory that we are working hard to continuously improve. Attendance at their own looked after review is only one way our children can have their voice heard. Consultation documents, Mind of my Own app, emails and telephone conversations are other mediums employed by the IROs to ensure looked after children are fully involved in their own care planning.

LAC Review Meetings



18 to March 2019, 40.8% of LAC minutes were completed within the 20-working day timescale by the IROs (434/1062 meetings whose target completion date was within the period). This represents a large decrease in performance compared to last year's figure of 75.6% and is further discussed in the body of this report.



Inclusion of Personal Educational Plans (PEPs) in Care Planning

Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked after Children is a key priority for all 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.

The timeliness of PEPs for children who are placed out of borough was raised as an area for improvement within Gateshead's recent Ofsted inspection and IRO's will be driving this forward with robust challenge to other education authorities, schools and social workers.

Inclusion of Health Assessments in Care Planning

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 and his/her carer when dental checks and optician appointments have taken place.

The number of children who have been looked after for 12 months or more has increased from 269 in 2017-18 to 277 in 2018-19. Of these, 269 (97%) had up to date health assessments, 266 (96%) had up to date dental checks and 264 (95%) had up to date immunisations.

Joint qualitative audits have been undertaken with the health services for Looked After Children for the past 3 years. These audits consider the detail of health assessments and information presented to LAC reviews and measure improvements in the availability and use of health plans at initial and review LAC care plan meetings.

Improvements have been seen in the timeframes for initial health assessments completed by the LAC health team with the impact of health plans now being available for a small number of the initial LAC reviews. The findings show that the risk of missing significant health issues from the care plan continues to exist with a direct correlation to missing health plans. Health professionals attended the LAC reviews as expected for all under 5's. However, capturing the voice of the child remains poor in relation to their health needs and is an area for improvement for the IRO's for all children.

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.

Recommendations were made and 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.

The audit has been reviewed, amended and repeated in April/May 2019 to provide further comparison data.

Placement stability

During the period of April 2018 to March 2019 there were 32 Looked after children (LAC) who have had 3 or more placements. The total number of LAC at the end of the period was 380

(8.4%). At the same time last year there were 27 out of 393 Looked After Children who had 3 or more placements (6.9%).

During the period of April 2018 to March 2019, 102 children have been in their placement for at least 2 years out of the 129 children who have been looked after for 2 and a half years or more (79%). At the same time last year there were 104 out of 126 (83%). Despite this reduction however, placement stability remains good compared to regional (70%) and England averages (73%).

Placement stability has been a consistent strength in Gateshead, however the reduction in the proportion of children in long term stable placements was identified as an area for audit in order to understand the reasons behind the reduction and identify any learning for improvement.

The audit identified different reasons for placement breakdown including a small number of those in the adoption process, a small number were the result of allegations made against carers and a small number were where the foster carer had resigned. In addition, a number of young people changed placement as the result of requiring residential care to meet their needs, and a number of children had issues regarding challenging behaviours which impacted on the stability of the placement.

Some recommendations from the audit include how to grow the market of solo placement carers for those children with challenging behaviours and how we might target particular groups to recruit carers to care for these children.

As the population of looked after children reached a 2 year high in October 2018 this placed the fostering service under considerable pressure with placement capacity. Many of the children leaving care do so by way of Special Guardianship orders or Child Arrangement orders to family members which does not release general placement capacity. Being able to match children with prospective carers as well as considering the potential dynamics within a placement with other looked after children and/or birth children becomes increasingly difficult under these circumstances and can sometimes destabilise otherwise stable situations. The fostering service is acutely aware of this difficulty and strives hard to match children appropriately, but also offers increased support visits when placement fragility is evident.

Feedback from foster carers from their annual reviews consistently tells us they value the training and support provided by the Local Authority.

Care Leavers

Our Ofsted focussed visit in March 2018 found: "The council provides an impressive range of accommodation options, and this provides choice for young people. Most young people are in suitable accommodation with those not provided with accommodation accounted for by four young people being in custody and one young person being of no fixed abode." (Ofsted March 2018)

At the current time 3 of our care leavers are in unsuitable accommodation; all being in

custody.

Over the course of the last 12 months we have continued to see improvements in key performance indicators linked to Care Leavers. Almost all our care leavers are in suitable accommodation. A new Service Model for supported accommodation is operating with a good range of accommodation options. Staying put is actively promoted and is increasing.

With our partners the Education, Employment and Training (EET) offer has been improved for Care leavers. The EET panel regularly monitors all young people from the age of 15 years to identify those in need of additional support. Focused interventions can then be planned, and progress monitored.

Over the course of the past 12 months 92 of our 174 care leavers (52.9%) were in some form of Education, Employment or Training which is lower than the England average of 54.9% and the North East average of 55.9%. However, the trajectory in Gateshead is upwards and it is anticipated that this will continue.

Timely distribution of IRO reports

During April 2018 to March 2019, 40.8% of LAC minutes were completed within the 20-working day timescale by the IROs (434/1062 meetings whose target completion date was within the period). This represents a large decrease in performance compared to last year's figure of 75.6%.

Word processing capacity across the Council as a whole has significantly decreased and IRO's are expected to be able to type proficiently as part of their role. For those less skilled in this respect, investment in technology in the form of iPads and Voice to Text recognition headsets are currently being trialed.

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 IRO for Foster carer reviews has completed 176 annual reviews in the past year, of which all were within timescales (100%). 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 but was also noted by Ofsted in the short inspection in March 2018:

'.. there remain gaps in the timely provision of assessment and direct support to children from CAMHS. This continues to be robustly challenged by the DCS and by the local authority overview and scrutiny committee.'

Local Authority Designated Officer

Last year the LADO reported a 43% increase in enquiries. Many of these enquiries constituted advice, assistance and guidance for partner agencies and did not result in actual referrals to the service. This was seen in the corresponding consistent figure of strategy meetings held.

In response to the increase in LADO enquiries and to increase capacity in this respect, a second IRO now undertakes LADO duties 2 days weekly. In addition, there is a duty system operated within the team to provide cover if the LADO is out of the office, on annual leave or sick leave. This ensures consistent links to partner agencies and colleagues within the Local Authority but also provides extra capacity and increases the knowledge and experience throughout the team.

Both staff members undertaking the LADO functions hold a small caseload of child protection and Looked After Children, ensuring they are familiar and up to date with child protection processes.

The LADO also delivers training to businesses and partner agencies to enhance local knowledge of procedures and processes to safeguard both children and staff from allegations.

In the recent OFSTED inspection (March 2018) the LADO function was found to be robustly managed. The performance framework was noted to require development in order to underpin effective tracking and monitoring of allegations and concerns. A new performance framework is now in place which identifies and tracks all enquiries and referrals received.

More information relating to allegations activity over the latest year is available in the separate Annual Report – Local Authority Designated Officer 2018/19.

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.

IROs have generally positive professional relationships with all the social work 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. These are mainly compliance issues. Examples of these include:

- Quality of reports presented to meetings is addressed with Team Managers - following the challenge, Care Plans were updated 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.

It is important for IROs to move away from challenging compliance issues and look at quality of practice and the impact that this has on the child and the child's lived experience. This is not to say that compliance issues will not be highlighted and addressed. These issues should be identified by capturing performance data and addressed by senior managers as necessary.

In January 2019 the Safeguarding Children Unit adopted the Regional Challenge framework. This had been shared within the NE12 with IRO Managers and provides a consistent framework across the NE region for situations which arise on a regular basis. This will improve

the consistency of IRO challenge across the team.

IROs also continue 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 and evidenced within plans and planning.
- 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.

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.

At the recent Ofsted inspection (March 2019) it was noted that 'Greater scrutiny is needed by Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and managers to ensure consistent quality of plans for children in care. Children's written plans do not reflect the work that is being done to improve their lived experiences. The plans are overly generic and lack focus and timescales for monitoring progress. However, it is evident that focused interventions are making a difference...'

Plans are in place across the whole service to improve the quality and consistency of written plans, including the use of IRO challenge when practice falls short. This will form one of the key priorities in the 2019-2020 action plan. In addition, a specific peer review of the SCU is planned for July 2019 which is anticipated to highlight areas of improvement and strengths on which to build.

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. The strong culture of learning within Gateshead was commented on as a key strength by Ofsted (March 2019).

'Social work practice in Gateshead is flourishing. Leaders and managers have created a culture in which social workers are valued and feel valued. Staff are positive about the support, guidance and training they receive and the visibility of senior managers.'

Engagement with Services

Ofsted found in March 2019 that there are well established and developed strategic partnerships which are supporting effective multi-agency working within the Local Authority. 'Child protection conferences, core group meetings and child protection reviews are well attended and are effective in ensuring that risks posed to children are fully understood and reduced so that children can remain safely within their families wherever possible.' (Ofsted March 2019).

In addition, it was noted by Ofsted that 'Children's reviews are well attended and consider the progress of the child, with particular attention given to children's achievements. Children attend their meetings where it is appropriate to do so or contribute their views'.

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.

In considering the challenges made by the IROs it is important to evaluate the impact on the child; how does the challenge benefit the child and in what way. Moving forward and as a priority for the coming year, the quality of the challenge made needs to be evaluated in terms of how this has contributed to improving the lived experience of the child. This is difficult to evaluate however there is an expectation that challenge needs to move away from compliance issues and prioritise those issues which are important for children.

Case Studies

Case Study 1

KC is a young girl subject to a child protection plan. Her mother is described as difficult to engage and was reluctant to come to conference, often avoiding meetings and visits. She has support in terms of her mental health. The allocated IRO went to great lengths to meet with mum and grandmother to gain their views and establish a workable, achievable child protection plan. He telephoned her a number of times, completed a joint visit with the social worker which entailed waiting for mother outside of a nearby supermarket, but which succeeded in engaging mother meaningfully in the process.

Case Study 2

IROs advise looked after children about their rights within the care system. One IRO supported a child to remain in her placement by advocating on her behalf, advising her how to make a formal complaint, referring her for a formal advocate and advising her how to access legal advice in terms of her own legal status. This child now remains in her current placement which she considers to be her home.

One child was unhappy with his social worker, who he felt was not suited to him in terms of her personality. He telephoned his IRO to ask if she was able to help. The IRO felt that this 'personality difference' may start to affect the child's ability to confide in his social worker and affect the ability of the plan to progress with those issues which were important to the child. A different social worker was allocated.

Case Study 3

IROs are 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. IROs are keen to explore the use of the Pupil Premium for Looked After Children in schools. This money should be assigned to promote the education of the individual child. IROs have made agreements with schools that the money is used for amongst other things, singing lessons, music lessons, football trips and educational trips abroad.

Case Study 4

A fundamental role of the IROs is to identify drift and delay in a child's care plan. In one case of a new born baby, challenge was escalated to Director level to highlight delay in initiating care proceedings. The child was subsequently given a new Social Worker with capacity to drive forward his plan.

In another case drift was identified in terms of pursuing contact plans with extended family members due to Social Worker sickness and agency workers assuming responsibility. A meeting was arranged which clarified timescales and gave renewed rigor to the plan.

IROs have also identified where long term matches between children and foster carers have not taken place and highlighted the need for these to be pursued.

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

The 380 open LAC cases at the end of March 2019 accounted for 872 LAC reviews undertaken during the year. 66 children were under 4 years old. 83 children attended their reviews and were able to express their views directly. This is a relatively static figure in comparison to previous year's data.

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'.

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.

Throughout 2018-19, 245 children attended 1,145 reviews, compared to 2017-18 when 197 children attended 917 reviews. Efforts are always made to engage children in a meaningful way in their reviews so that their voice is heard, evidenced and contributes to their care plan and any decisions made. Children under 4 are not expected to participate fully in the same way however their behavior is always noted as an indication of their emotional wellbeing.

An audit of children's consultation documents is to be undertaken with the Children's Rights Officer to cross reference the areas identified by the child for discussion in his/her review with the IRO Chair's report and the subsequent Care plan. This will identify whether the views of

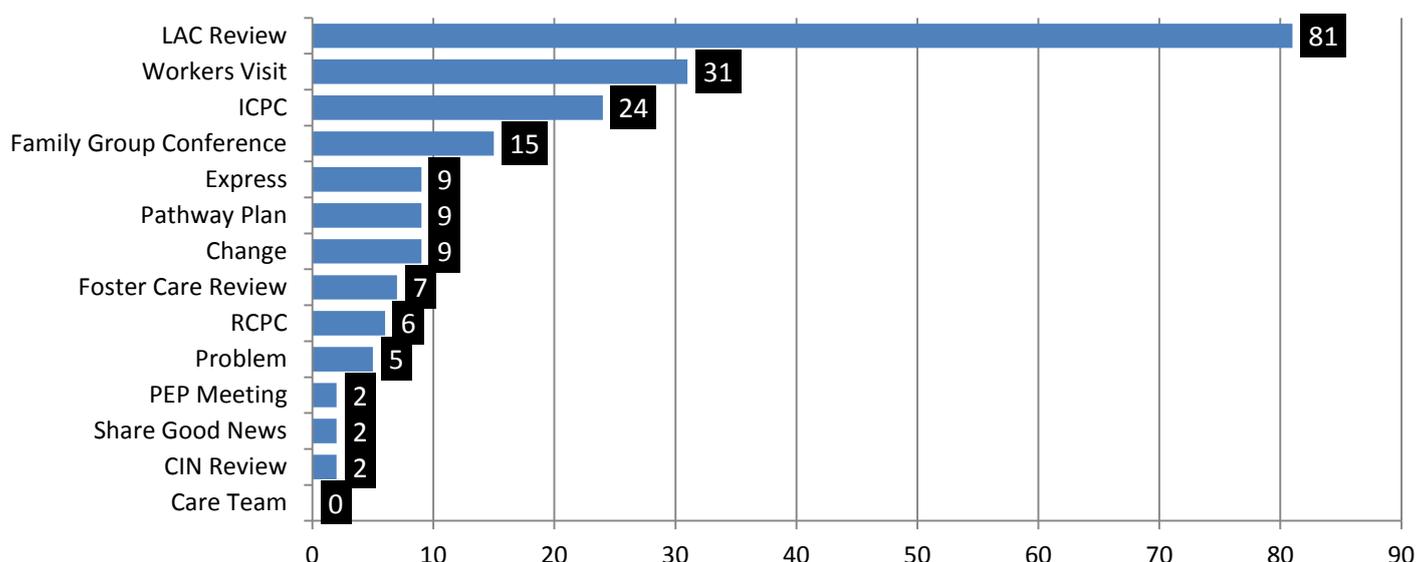
the child have been discussed within the meeting and further, influenced his/her care plan. This is an important area of work and will drive forward best practice with the IROs.

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.

Mind of My Own April 2016 - March 2017



Advocacy

Between 1st April 2018 and 18th April 2019 151 children and young people have been supported to share their views and be heard in a variety of formats.

In Gateshead children and young people can opt to receive support from an advocate from an internal service or commissioned provider.

Children and young people are informed of the advocacy offer by social workers or IRO's and information is included in publicity which is shared with children and young people. Advocacy is also included in our complaint's leaflets for children and young people. The Children's Rights Officer (CRO) attends team meetings and service briefings to remind staff of the offer available to children and young people. Information about advocacy can be found on the

council’s website, by searching for “children’s advocacy”. This information includes a short animation, created by children and young people.

Advocacy is a fixed agenda item in both LAC reviews and CP conferences, with IRO’s asking if referrals have been considered, if not already ongoing.

Figure 1 shows the number of children accessing advocacy services by either family support workers, NYAS or the children’s rights and engagement team. Figure 2 shows what young people are being supported with. This demonstrates that more than 70 children (the majority) were supported to share their views for child protection conferences.

Figure 1: Advocacy Breakdown – by service

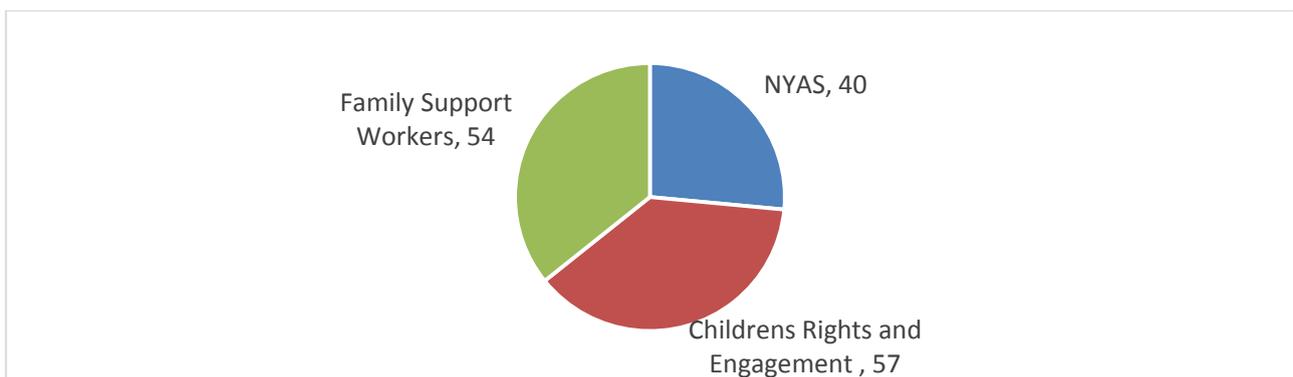
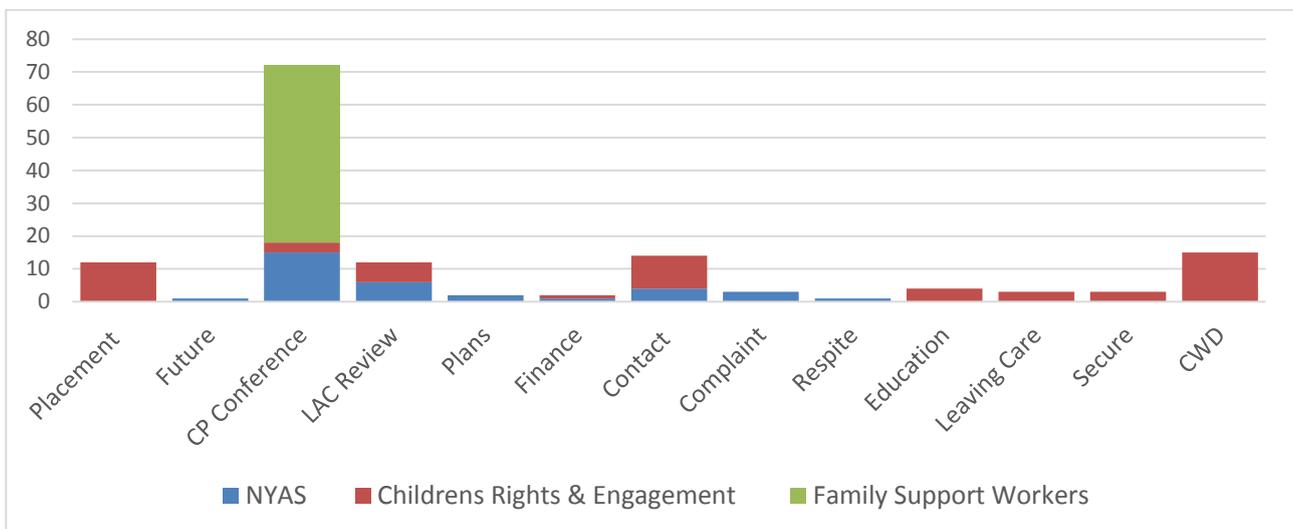


Figure 2: Themes of advocacy support offered



NYAS are the independent provider of advocacy services in Gateshead. They are commissioned regionally, under the NE10 agreement. The current contract started in November 2018, however they also previously held the contract.

In this period 40 children and young people have been supported by NYAS. On average they have received seven hours of support each.

CASE STUDY:

Child A and Child B were living with their mother and on a CP plan. The children's father was living separately and was having twice weekly supervised contact with the children. The children struggled to engage with professionals and it was hoped that through effective advocacy their views, wishes and feelings could be represented in the process. The advocate visited the children and gathered their views. At a core group meeting, the advocate was able to feedback that the children would like to resume overnight contact at their father's flat, and that they both especially wanted Pip the dog to be included in the contact sessions.

The advocate was able to feedback that the children would like a timetable set out so that they know when they will be seeing their dad. The advocate also expressed the children's view that the Social Worker and any other professionals working with them do not go into school to see them. The Social Worker thanked the advocate for their involvement and agreed that he would only meet with the children at the family home unless it was felt necessary to meet with them at school.

Feedback from a young person:

"I liked having an advocate who listened to me and was able to tell people what I wanted. He listened to me and didn't try to make me see things differently or try to change my views. He came to the Looked After Reviews and either spoke for me or supported me when I said anything. He came to check up that everything had happened from the Looked After Review and saw me in my new placement to make sure I was OK."

Children's Right and Engagement Team

During August 2018 the Children's Rights and Engagement Team; Children's Rights Officer (CRO) and Engagement Officer (EO) joined Health and Social Care Commissioning and Quality Assurance and sit within the Quality Assurance function of the service to ensure the ongoing independence of the roles.

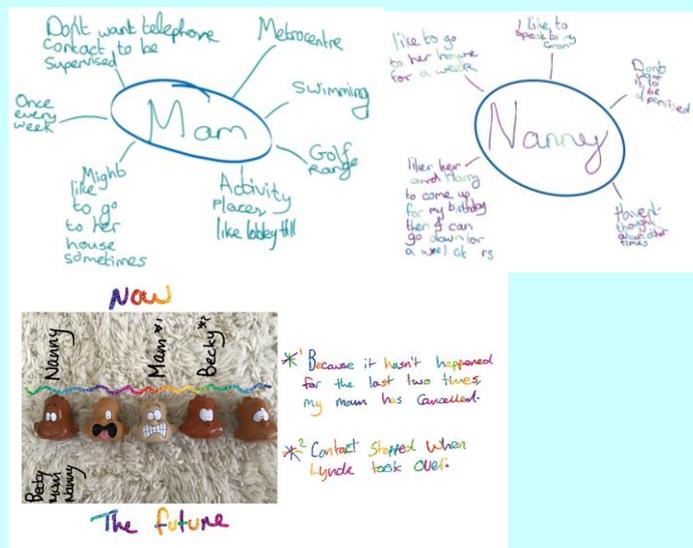
Our CRO has worked in Gateshead in this role for 16 years and has good relationships with children and young people.

The CRO and EO can offer quick interventions in a timely manner, offering a responsive service, creating change quickly for young people. Children and young people are informed of the services offered by NYAS by their social workers and IROs.

In this period, they have advocated for 57 children and young people.

Case Study 1:

D and his birth family were unhappy with changes to contact arrangements. The CRO visited D on two occasions and used a variety of methods to capture D's views of his contact, including the use of Mind of My Own and Emotion Faces and interactive features on an Ipad. Following the CRO's meetings with D, a discussion took place the following day with his IRO, allocated Social Worker and their Team Manager. D's views were taken into account straight away and contact was reviewed, including reinstating his Aunt's contact, immediately.



T was known to the CRO as he had previously taken part in a creative art project. T had a number of placement moves and a secure order was granted. The CRO has visited T on several occasions, to gather his views, which have been shared in his LAC and Secure Accommodation Reviews. As well as gaining his views, the CRO has spent time with T, playing games and providing a familiar face. The CRO has been asked to assist with T's transition plan from the secure unit. During one visit, the manager of the unit commented, how nice it was to see a professional get down to the child's level and spend quality time with them

Following a recent review of advocacy services, budgetary and management oversight of the Advocacy contract has also moved into the Quality Assurance function from Children's Services.

This will give greater oversight and independent management of the advocacy offer to children and young people.

Children and Families Support Workers

Since 2016 the Family Support Workers have had a role to play in gathering children and young people's views and advocating for them in meetings, if the child agrees.

In the 2018-19 period 54 children and young people have been supported to share their views for child protection conferences. This has been facilitated using Mind of My Own or paper-based tools. 32 were for initial CPC and 22 were for repeat CPCs.

Additional Information

Increased capacity in the safeguarding children unit has led to an increase in visits to looked after children, which are another means of promoting the use of advocacy and gaining the wished and views of children and families, which has a direct impact on their care planning

Families Rights and Advocacy Gateshead are a newly formed group of parents and family members who have experience of Children's services in Gateshead. The group are working on their objectives and have had early discussions about their purpose. The group are keen to see what peer support they can offer to other families and want to work with the authority to improve services.

Summary of IRO key performance indicator outturns

The Safeguarding Unit has continued to provide effective and timely services across the whole spectrum of its responsibilities. It has, through the Ofsted inspection, identified key priorities in moving forward for the coming year.

The volume of business undertaken by the unit has remained relatively consistent with Looked after children figures reaching a two year high in October 2018. That figure had decreased positively and safely by March 2019.

The LADO service has remained robust providing effective responses to enquiries and referrals. The new performance tracking system will assist in the collection of accurate data and ensure timeliness in referrals and outcomes.

There needs to be improvement in ensuring the participation of our children in their Looked After process. Further audit will identify how the voice of the child translates into actions/influence on their care plan. This is central to the work of the IROs and is a key priority in line with the National agenda.

In addition, we need to improve the participation of children in the child Protection process ensuring that the lived experience of the child is shared and affects the plan.

Strong links remain between the Unit and One Voice which provides the opportunity for children's views to inform the development of services for looked after children. One Voice representatives have been key in interview selection offering a children's perspective. This also provides a forum in which to seek feedback on the effectiveness of the IRO service. All the representatives when asked, understood the role of the IRO and offered examples of how their IRO represents their voice and understands their needs. Several also gave examples of how they had contacted their IRO outside of the review process to discuss issues.

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.

7. Key Priorities for 2019/2020 – 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	A further Development day is planned for all IRO's to agree challenge thresholds and apply a uniform approach.	September 2019	Service Manager SCU	
	The Development day will also include information re QA processes in order that IRO's fully understand their QA role and responsibilities and how this sits within the broader QA function in the service.	September 2019	IRO staff	
	The forms used to capture performance data will be further streamlined to simplify the process.	September 2019	Systems management and Service Manager SCU	
	Regional Challenge framework to be fully embedded to provide consistent approach and will be enhanced to provide a multi-agency challenge approach.	January 2020	Service Manager SCU	
	Peer review to take place in July 2019	July 2020	Service Manager SCU	
	The Policy and Procedure for the IRO dispute Resolution process to be reviewed and re-launched and to include challenge and escalation to partner agencies.	January 2020	Service Manager SCU	
	Outcomes and impact of the challenge process to be captured.			

<p>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</p>	<p>The Policy and Procedure for the IRO dispute Resolution process to be reviewed and re-launched with Service Mangers across Children’s services and to include challenge to partner agencies.</p> <p>Accurate performance data regarding IRO challenge will be captured on a weekly basis and discussed with Senior Managers at regular monthly meetings.</p> <p>Challenge audits will be produced and discussed with Children and Families Service Mangers on a 3-monthly basis.</p> <p>Drift and delay challenge will be escalated to senior managers without delay.</p> <p>Any disagreement in relation to proposed plans for Court will be immediately escalated to the Director</p>	<p>January 2020</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>Service Manger SCU</p> <p>IROs</p> <p>IROs supported by Practice Supervisors</p>	
<p>1.3 To ensure that IRO challenge, advice and support to operational Social Work teams is appropriately recorded and captured</p>	<p>Accurate Performance data regarding IRO challenge will be captured on a weekly basis and shared with the IRO staff team.</p> <p>Regular audits to take place to evaluate the IRO footprint on a child’s file.</p> <p>Sharing of file audit outcomes to take place within supervision and team meetings.</p>	<p>Reviewed on a 3-monthly basis</p> <p>3-monthly basis</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>Practice Supervisors</p>	
<p>1.4 Ensure themes from challenge, advice and support are reported regularly to staff across the group and partnerships to identify areas for development thereby driving good practice and improvements</p>	<p>Themes will be drawn from audits and performance data and discussed with Senior Mangers on a monthly basis to feed into training, policy and procedures.</p> <p>Service Manager will attend the Learning and Improvement LSCB subgroup and cascade learning to the team via team meetings and the Practice Supervisors.</p>	<p>Monthly basis</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU and Practice Supervisors</p>	

<p>1.5 To ensure consistency of approach across the service in terms of the use of systemic, strengths-based practice when chairing Conferences and Looked After Children's meetings.</p>	<p>A further Development day is planned for all IRO's to agree challenge thresholds and apply a uniform approach.</p> <p>The two Practice Supervisors will be expected to 'lead by example' and drive forward innovative practice in chairing multi agency meetings with a systemic strengths-based methodology.</p> <p>Observations of practice will be undertaken by peers, by Practice Supervisors and by the Service Manager.</p> <p>Methodology to be shared in development days and team meetings.</p>	<p>September 2019</p> <p>From August 2019</p> <p>To begin once Practice Supervisors are in post.</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>Practice Supervisors</p>	
<p>1.6 To ensure all plans developed by the service are of consistently good quality</p>	<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.</p> <p>Designated review process will identify any plans which have not been considered robust or dynamic enough to ensure progression and good safeguarding outcomes.</p>	<p>January 2020</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU Practice Supervisors IROs</p>	
<p>1.7 Ensure IROs provide rigor in their role and are effective in ensuring plans progress, avoid drift and delay, and meet children's needs</p>	<p>Regular supervision by Practice Supervisors 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. Regional audit tool to be trialed.</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>August 2019</p> <p>October 2019</p> <p>September 2020</p>	<p>Practice Supervisors</p> <p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>IROs</p>	

1.8 To ensure that drift or delay in cases is highlighted by the IRO and escalated immediately to Senior Managers	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. IRO's are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities and that drift should be escalated to the Director appropriately.	On a monthly basis	Service Manager SCU IROs	
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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 SCU is completed to improve performance, drive standards and ensure consistency and quality of practice	Two Practice Supervisors will be appointed within the unit. They will be responsible for the clinical supervision of the IROs and for driving forward practice improvement and challenge.	August 2019	Service Manager SCU	
2.2 Ensuring SCU staff continuously improve and develop, and use the Gateshead CAN strengths based systemic model in their work	All IROs will complete the systemic training available. Refresher courses will be available on an annual basis. A Regional NE12 IRO conference will be held with a theme of Permanence Planning in October 2019 and which will enable good practice to be shared on a regional level. A regional programme of training is to be arranged by the NE12 IRO Managers.	September 2019 October 2019 January 2020	IROs Regional Managers Group Regional IRO Managers	
2.3 Ensuring the SCUs work informs and is informed by strategic plans and relevant operational groups and processes – enabling staff to contribute and respond to the wider agenda	The Service Manager SCU will attend relevant strategic planning forums. IRO's will attend operational groups and processes e.g. MSET on a regular basis.	January 2020	Service Manager SCU IROs	

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>To ensure the successful appointment of IROs to any vacant posts in order that caseloads remain within government guidelines.</p> <p>Performance data will be scrutinized to ensure all 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>	<p>August 2019</p> <p>August 2019</p>	<p>IROs</p> <p>Practice Supervisors and Service Manager SCU</p>	
3.2 Ensure every child knows and understands their care or child protection plan	<p>All children, of appropriate age and understanding, will receive a copy of their care plan which will be explained to them by their preferred person.</p> <p>Development of a children's care plan/child protection plan will be explored with Children's Services and the Children's Rights Officer.</p>	<p>August 2019</p> <p>January 2020</p>	<p>IROs</p> <p>Service Manager SCU, Practice Supervisors and Children's Rights Officer</p>	
3.3 To ensure that every child is aware of their right to an advocate and to ensure that this process is followed.	IROs will advise children of this right on each visit and will discuss with the social worker.	August 2019	IROs	

<p>3.4 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 and reflected in their care plan.</p>	<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>An audit of the Voice of the child to take place with the Children’s Rights Officer to ensure that children’s views in their consultation documents are reflected within the minutes of their meeting and subsequent care plan.</p> <p>Children’s participation within the Child Protection process will be recorded within the minutes of conferences. Discussion will take place with IRO staff regarding the alteration of the Chair’s report to accurately capture the views of the child/ren and their lived experience.</p>	<p>September 2019</p> <p>August 2019</p> <p>July 2019</p> <p>September 2019</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>IROs</p> <p>Children’s Rights officer and Service Manager SCU</p> <p>Service Manager SCU</p>	
<p>3.5 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>	<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>IRO’s will work closely with the Children’s Rights Officers at events where looked after children participate</p> <p>One Voice will be invited to attend the IRO regional conference to showcase some of their work.</p>	<p>As necessary.</p> <p>October 2019</p>	<p>Children’s Rights Officer and Service Manager SCU IROs</p> <p>Service Manager and Children’s Rights Officer</p>	

Appendix 1 - GATESHEAD IRO KEY PERFORMANCE MEASURES

No.	Performance measure	April-March 2017-2018	% April-March 2017-2018	April-March 2018-2019	% April-March 2018-2019	Progress since last year	RAG rating	Commentary
1	Percentage of child protection cases which were reviewed within required timescales	210/210	100.0%	202/202	100.0%		RAG	Of the 202 children who have required reviews in between April and March 2019, 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	374/376	99.5%				RAG	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)	131/177	74%	132/177	74.6%		RAG	Of the 177 children who have become LAC in the last 12 months, 132 were assigned an IRO within 5 working days (74.6%).
4	% of LAC review minutes completed within 20 days	844/1115	75.6%	434/1062	40.8		RAG	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	206/242	85.1%	157/215	73%		RAG	157 out of 215 LAC who have been looked after for three years or less have had the same IRO as a meeting chair in 73% of their reviews.

No.	Performance measure	April - March 2017-2018	% April - March 2017-2018	April - March 2018-2019	% April - March 2018-2019	Progress since last year	RAG rating	Commentary
6	Proportion of ICPCs held within 15 days of S47 starting	402/417	96.4%	355/368	96.5%			13 ICPCs were held out of timescale between April 2018 and March 2019. Performance in this measure still remains high when compared with national figure (76.9%).
7	Proportion of outline CP plans distributed within 1 day of review (conferences)	499/499	100%	503/506	99.4%			All but 3 plans were distributed within timescale during 2018-2019.
8	Proportion of CP minutes distributed within 20 working days of conference (conferences)	689/698	98.7%	332/676	49.1%			During April 2018 to March 2019, 676 child protection minutes were distributed within the 20 working day timescale (49.1%).
9	LAC/CP cases with an assigned IRO	LAC 393/393	100%	LAC 380/380	100%			All cases had an IRO allocated on 31/03/2019.
	CP 295/295	100%	CP 262/262	100%				
	LAC/CP 14/14	100%	LAC/CP 5/5	100%				

