

Safeguarding Children Unit (SCU)

Annual Report 2020/2021

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



Children & Families

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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 to produce 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.

This 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.

The report covers the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

National Context

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 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.
(Mr. Justice Peter Jackson 2014)

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 social work model used in Gateshead is Gateshead CAN (CONTEXT, ACTION, NARRATIVE); a relationship based systemic practice model adopted across Children's Services. This is an overall approach which draws on all the tools, techniques, methods and models from all strengths-based, person-centered and system-centered 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 quality assurance 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 Children In our Care
- 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 Children subject to child protection plans and Children in our care between reviews and conferences
- The convening and chairing of reviews of Foster Carers
- The Monitoring and reviewing of 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.
- Contributing to the MAPPA process

In addition the SCU now chair care planning reviews for children detained under mental health legislation, children with disabilities who have short break care and where there are additional social care needs, 18+ care experienced young adults transitioning to supported living/independence and children in care proceedings where Interim Supervision Orders or time limited Child Arrangements Orders have been made.

The SCU has additional responsibilities to Gateshead's Safeguarding Children's Partnership in terms of contributing to practice 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. 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. Many of our IROs have been working for Gateshead for several years and are 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

Responsibility for the activity and development of the Unit lies with the Service Manager, Safeguarding

Children Unit, who reports directly to the Service Director The Gateshead System. 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 children’s services. The structure was identified as a key strength in the Peer Review undertaken in 2019.

Two Practice Supervisor posts support the role of the Service Manager and oversee the clinical supervision of the IRO’s as well as carrying half a caseload. These 2 posts drive forward practice improvement and performance in the key areas of plans, planning, quality assurance and challenge.

There are 10.1 FTE Independent Reviewing Officers. Within this, one FTE post covers the LADO role and responsibilities and one FTE covers the reviews of foster carers for Gateshead. The team comprises 4 males and 8 females.

The staff team have backgrounds in working with children who have suffered significant harm from abuse and neglect and children with attachment difficulties, as children in care, children subject to child protection plans and child in need plans living in the community. This includes working with disabled children, care experienced young adults 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, 6 FTE senior clerks and 1 FTE clerk.

4. Review of the 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	<p>Challenge thresholds will be consistently discussed at regular team Meetings in order that a uniform approach is applied.</p> <p>Performance data is routinely shared with the team and discussed within supervision and in team forums.</p> <p>An SCU dashboard will be created and shared on a weekly basis.</p> <p>Regular meetings with Team managers and Service Managers will be held to provide feedback re IRO challenge and consistency.</p>	Fortnightly	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>IRO staff</p> <p>Performance staff</p>	<p>Achieved.</p> <p>Development days and team meetings regularly discuss challenges made and escalation.</p> <p>The SCU dashboard will be improved once the new Children’s Social care system is in place.</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, the Practice Supervisors and the service manager	<p>Challenge audits will be produced and discussed with Children and Families Service Managers on a 3 monthly basis.</p> <p>Drift and delay challenge will be escalated to senior managers without delay.</p>	3 monthly.	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>Service Manager SCU</p>	Achieved.
1.3 To ensure that IRO challenge, advice and support to operational Social Work teams is appropriately recorded and captured	<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>Three monthly basis</p>	<p>Practice Supervisors</p> <p>Practice Supervisors</p>	Achieved.
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>Themes will be drawn from audits and performance data and discussed with Senior Managers 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>	Monthly basis	Service Manager SCU and Practice Supervisors	Achieved
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>Development day to be held for all IRO's to agree the strengths based methodology for conferences and CLA reviews</p> <p>The two Practice Supervisors will '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>October 2020</p> <p>October 2020</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>Practice Supervisors</p>	Achieved but consistency still needs to be improved and will be taken forward into the coming year.
1.6 To ensure all plans developed by the service are of consistently good quality	Audit of plans will identify any learning needs in terms of the formulation of robust plans and planning.	September 2020	Service Manager SCU Practice Supervisors IROs	Not achieved – to be priority moving forward

	<p>Regular supervision will identify training needs.</p> <p>Designated review process to be relaunched which will identify any plans not considered robust or dynamic enough to ensure progression and good safeguarding outcomes.</p>	July 2020		Achieved. This process is well embedded now within the SCU.
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>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>6- weekly</p> <p>October 2020</p> <p>September 2020</p>	<p>Practice Supervisors</p> <p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>IROs</p>	<p>Achieved.</p> <p>Achieved</p> <p>Not achieved due to the pandemic.</p>
1.8 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>	On a monthly basis	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>IROs</p>	Achieved but consistency of challenge needs to be improved along with timely escalation.

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 SCU staff	All IROs will complete the systemic	As necessary	IROs	

continuously improve and develop, and use the Gateshead CAN strengths based systemic model in their work	training available. Refresher courses will be available on an annual basis. A regional programme of training is to be arranged by the NE12 IRO Managers.	Delayed by Covid-19	Regional Managers Group	Achieved Achieved
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. Practice Supervisors will attend operational groups and processes e.g. MSET, MAPPA on a regular basis.	As necessary	Service Manager SCU PSIROs	Achieved Achieved

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

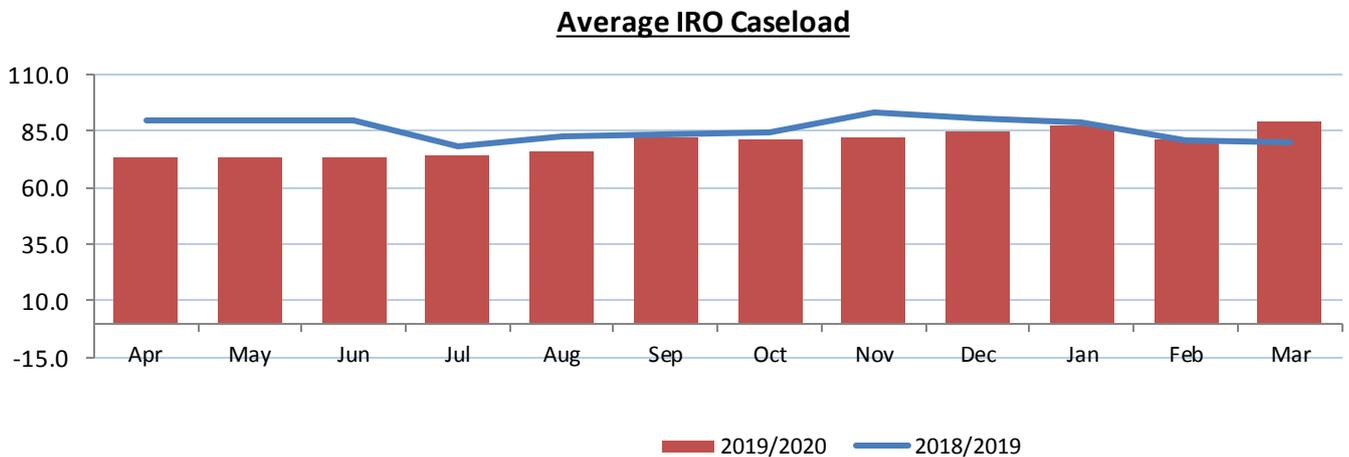
Objective	Action	Timescale	Lead	Update
3.1 Ensure every child receives a visit from their IRO, where they want one. And this is recorded clearly within the child's electronic record.	To ensure the successful appointment of IROs to any vacant posts in order that caseloads remain within government guidelines. 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.	July 2020	SM SCU Practice Supervisors and Service Manager SCU	Achieved Achieved although consistency across the service should be improved
3.2 Ensure every child knows and understands their care or child protection plan	All children, of appropriate age and understanding, will receive a copy of their review minutes addressed and written to them which will be explained to them by their preferred person. Development of a children's care plan written to the child will be further explored with Children's Services and the Children's Rights Officer.	January 2021 January 2021	IROs Service Manager SCU, Practice Supervisors and Children's Rights Officer	Achieved although consistency across the service should be improved. Achieved.
3.3 To ensure that every child is	IROs will advise children of this right	As necessary	IROs	Achieved.

aware of their right to an advocate and to ensure that this process is followed.	on each visit and will discuss with the social worker.			
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>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>An repeat 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>September 2020</p> <p>August 2020</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>CRO, PSIRO, SM SCU</p>	<p>Not achieved due to implementation of new social care IT system.</p> <p>Achieved.</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>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>	As necessary.	Children's Rights Officer and Service Manager SCU	<p>Achieved.</p> <p>Not achieved due to the pandemic</p>

5. Core business activity of the Safeguarding Children Unit

IRO caseloads 2019/20

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. Taking into account sickness, there were 7.5



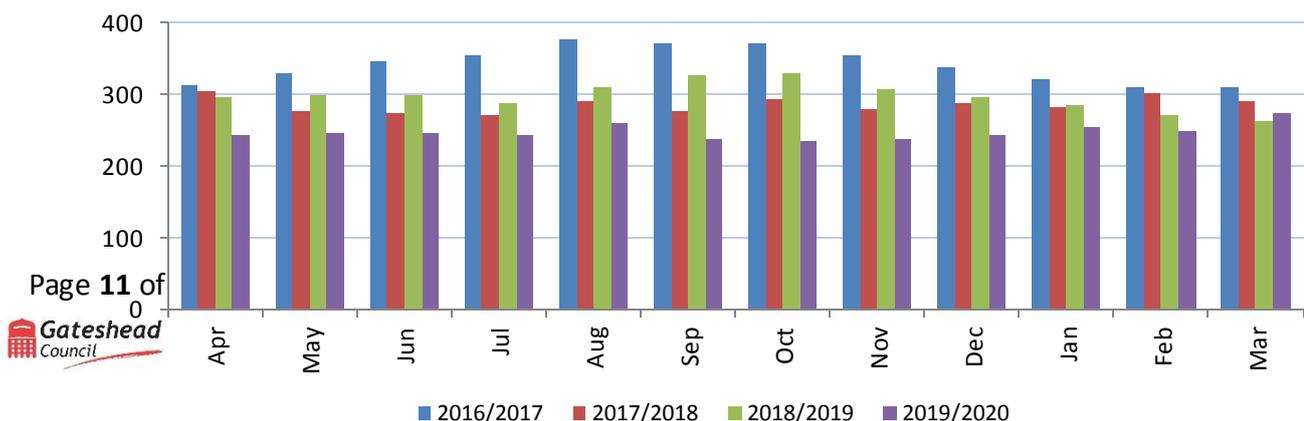
FTE IROs in the unit at the end of March 2021 who have responsibility for Children In our Care and children subject to Child Protection plans.

Based on the number of children in our care at the end of March 2021 (414), the average number of children in care per IRO stood at 55.2. Based on the number of children subject to child protection plans at the end of March 2020 (274), the average number of children on child protection plans per IRO stood at 36.5. This equates to 89.5 cases per IRO. This is 12.4% higher than last year, when the average caseload stood at 79.6.

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. Whilst there has been a reduction in plans in 2019/2020 compared to the previous years, the figure for the end of March 2020 was slightly increased to 274. The March 2020 figure represents an 4.58% increase compared to the March 2019 figure. However, the 12 month rolling average for April-March 2018/2019 was 297.25, compared to a 12 month average of 246.91 for 2019/2020. This is a 16.94% reduction overall.

CP Numbers

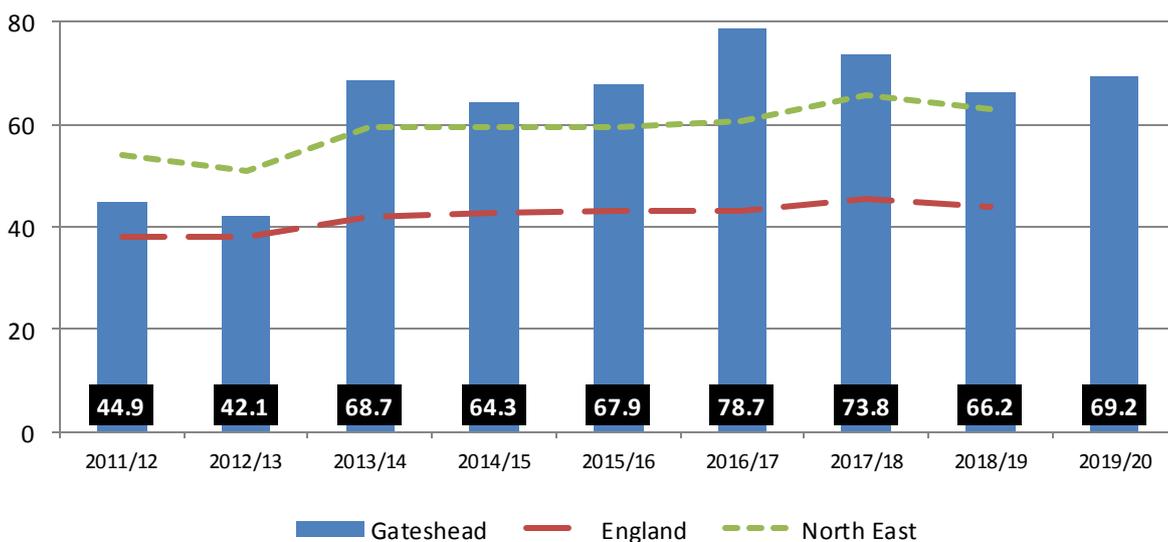


During the period, 399 children were subject to an initial child protection conference and 316 children became subject to a child protection plan. These figures are higher than in 2018-19, when there were 368 initial child protection conferences and 307 children became subject to a child protection plan.

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 Child Protection Plan and rates per 10,000 of children in care, against average rates for comparator groups of North East authorities and England as a whole.

Child Protection Plan numbers per 10,000



The chart above shows that Gateshead's child protection rate has increased since 2018/19 but has decreased significantly in 2020/21. This aligns Gateshead more with our regional statistical neighbours and with the national 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. This year our meetings have moved to Teams on a virtual basis. This has facilitated increased attendance from professionals including GPs.

Moving forward, it is proposed that performance information relating to the quality of work provided

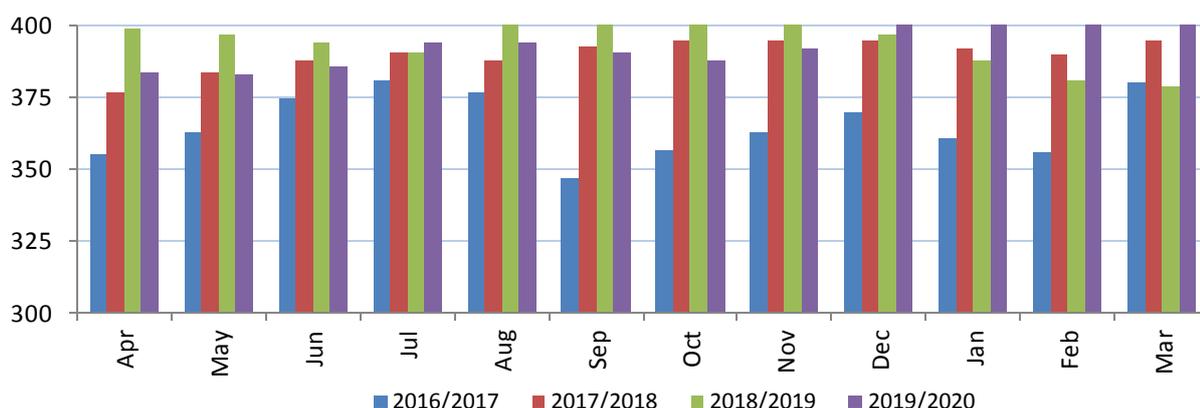
will also be captured and shared with the Safeguarding Board in terms of multi agency contributions, attendance, advocacy and decision making.

Children in Our Care – numbers and review activity

At the end of March 2021 there were 439 children cared for by Gateshead.

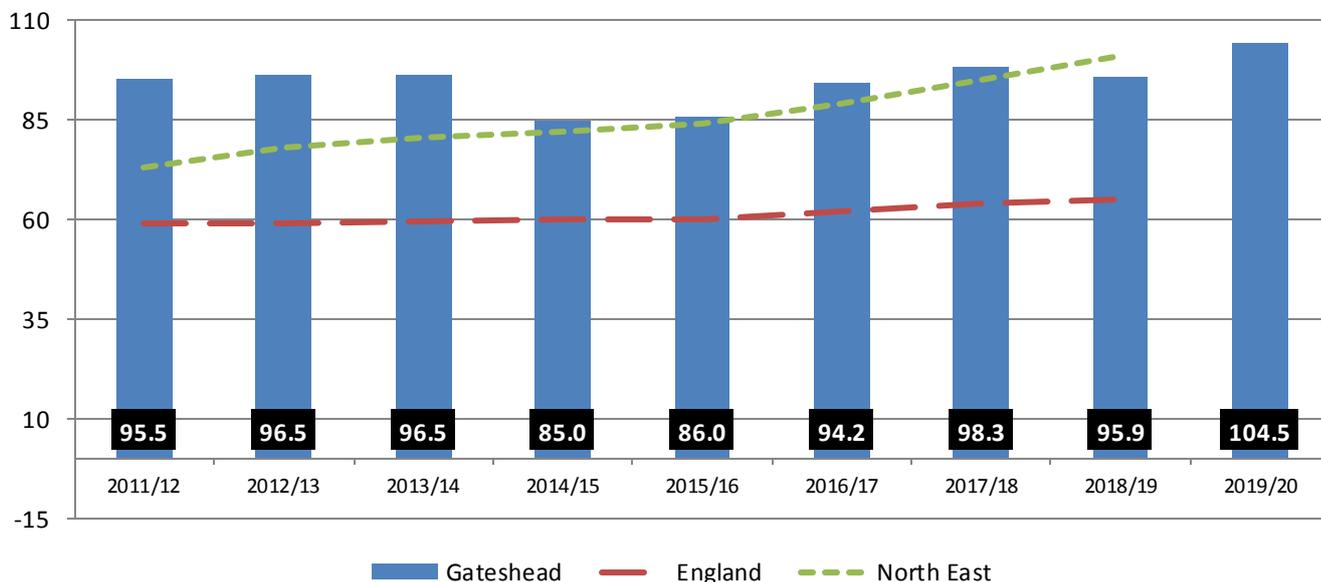
During 2020/21 the number of children becoming looked after has steadily increased from 384 in April 2019 to 414 in March 2020. This number has remained over 400 since December 2019.

LAC Numbers



Gateshead’s rate of Children in Care is higher than the regional rate of 101 per 10,000 and is significantly higher than the national rate of 65 per 10,000 (SSDA903 2018-2019).

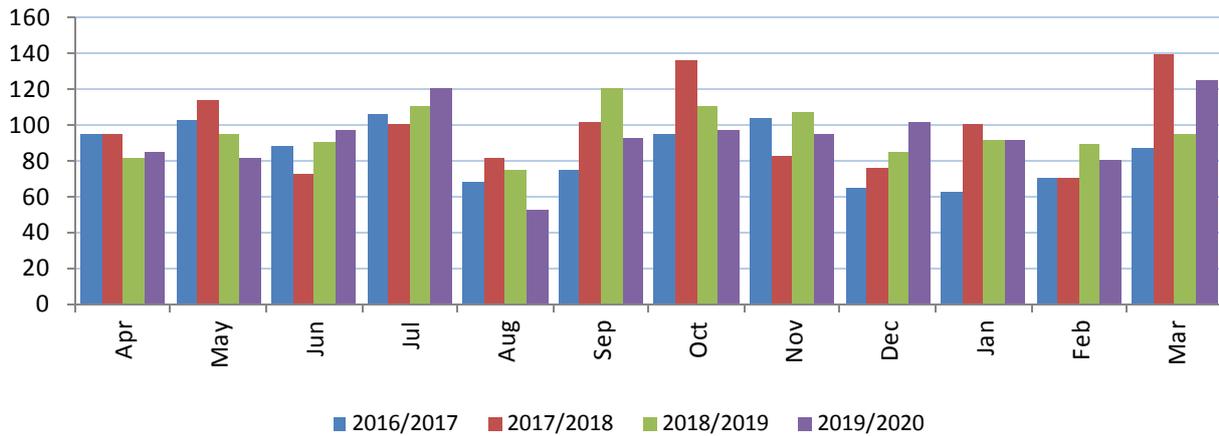
Looked After Children numbers per 10,000



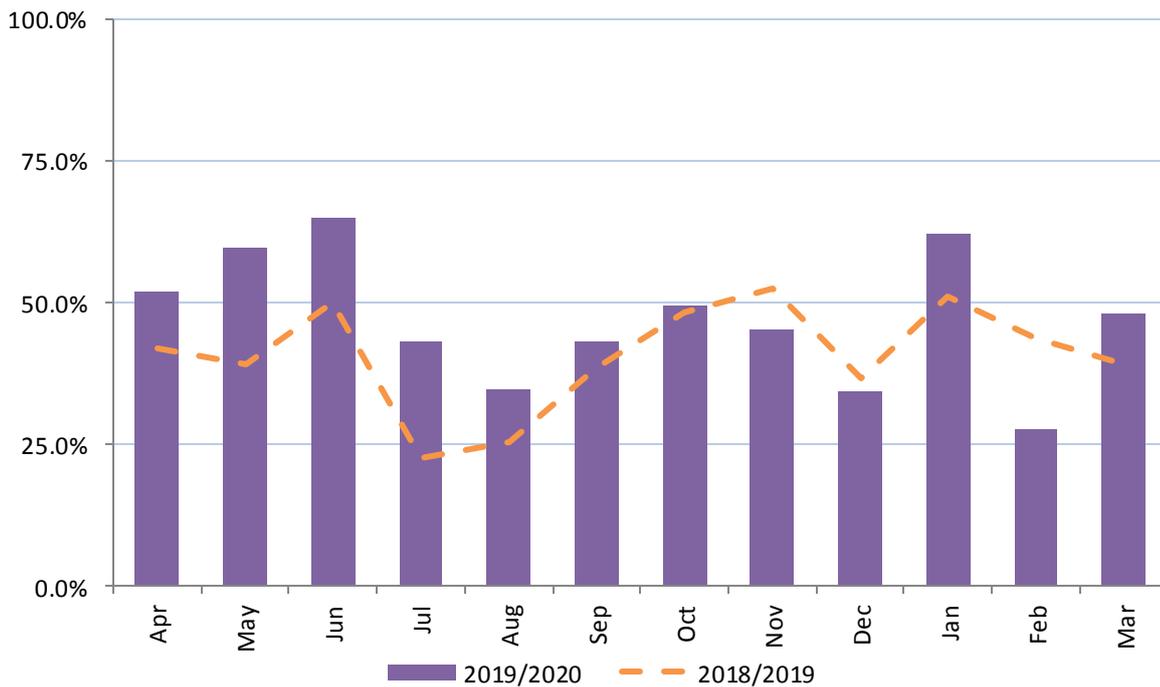
Care Plan Reviews held within timescale

99.3% of Looked after children had their reviews held within timescale. Of the 403 eligible Looked After children at the end of March 2019, there were 3 children that had a review out of date.

LAC Review Meetings



From April 2020 to March 2021, 89.9 % of LAC minutes were completed within the 20-working day timescale by the IROs. This represents an increase in performance compared to last year's figure of 44.4% (531/1121 meetings whose target completion date was within the period).



The Impact of Covid.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on our lives for an extended period. The effects for individual children and young people, families and the wider community are likely to be with us for some time. Like all public services, agencies working in child safeguarding had to adapt

quickly to continue to meet statutory requirements, maintain support for vulnerable children and families, and do so in ways that ensured COVID-safe practice.

The SCU quickly moved from face to face conferences and reviews in person to teleconferencing and subsequently to video conferencing on the Teams platform. IRO visits to children took place also via Teams as we explored how technology could support our work and safeguard our children.

Early research indicates that with many children, parents and carers, particularly where there were already established relationships, the greater use of technology worked well and enhanced our ability to seek views and encourage participation. For younger children and those families with whom we did not have already established relationships, this was harder to accomplish. Moving forward it is important that we use a blended approach to our work, using technology where appropriate and where it meets the needs of our children and families. It is important to note that greater use of technology will not replace the importance of seeing children in person in their home environments, rather this will enhance and complement our practice.

For many professionals the use of virtual conferencing has meant a greater ability to attend and provide valuable information. Again, moving forward it is felt this is an efficient means to ensure multi-disciplinary sharing of information and liaison where appropriate with children and families.

Whilst amendments were made to legal frameworks nationally in order to support Children's Social Care and statutory obligations, Gateshead Children's Social Care maintained face to face home visits wherever possible, ensuring children's links, relationships and safeguarding.

Evidence nationally is that the COVID-19 outbreak continues to present a situational risk for vulnerable children and families, with the potential to exacerbate pre-existing safeguarding risks and bring about new ones. (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Annual Report 2020)

Increasing domestic violence, substance use and mental health concerns were key features across our work with families. The lack of contact with extended family members during lockdown meant the loss of a key protective factor in some cases. In others, family dynamics changed where a new partner joined the household to avoid lockdown contact restrictions.

Parental mental health issues and the mental health of children and young people were key features in our work this year. Being away from the support of schools, peer groups and other trusted adults had a particular impact. Many parents and children struggled to engage with mental health services as these were provided on a virtual basis. Both groups struggled with lack of a space to talk through issues whilst being in their homes.

Children's social care-maintained family time on a face-to-face basis wherever it was safe to do so and liaised with other authorities regionally to ensure a consistent response. Many of our Gateshead schools went over and above the call of duty, delivering lunches and resources to keep children in touch with teaching and pastoral staff, particularly our most vulnerable children.

Placement stability

During the period of April 2020 to March 2021, the total number of children in our care at the end of the

period was 439, of which there 32 children who had 3 or more placements (7.3%). At the same time last year there were 38 out of 414 Children In our Care who had 3 or more placements (9.2%).

During the period of April 2020 to March 2021, 115 children had been in their placement for at least 2 years out of the 164 children who have in our care for 2 and a half years or more (70.1%). At the same time last year there were 108 out of 150 (72%). Despite this reduction however, placement stability remains in line with regional (70%) and England averages (73%).

Recommendations from audits completed in 2019 included 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. There are plans to develop in house therapeutic foster carers who will be supported by psychological clinical input.

As the population of children in our care has increased this has 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. Placement stability meetings are increasingly used with attendance across the service and from partner agencies in order to proactively provide support to carers and children. Feedback from foster carers from their annual reviews consistently tells us they value the training and support provided by the Local Authority.

Gateshead continue to strive to place our children with our own in-house foster carers rather than use a high number of independent foster placements

There is a commitment from the council to place children within a 20-mile radius of Gateshead to enable them to retain links with their friends, families and community. In order to meet this, it was recognised that additional provision was required within Gateshead. This has included the opening of Longside House- a 6 bedded children's home and Kites Rise – a 3 bedded children's home.

There has also been an invest to save bid accepted for a 3-bed specialist provision for children with autism, a 4 bed short term/emergency assessment residential home as well as specialist therapeutic support for all the children's homes. It is envisaged that these will be operational by the summer of 2021.

Care Experienced Young Adults

At the end of March 2021, all 117 of our children (100%) who had recently left our care were in suitable accommodation..

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.

As at the end of March 2021, 68 were (58.1%) in some form of Education, Employment or Training (EET) which is in line with the England average of 60.2% and higher than the North East average of 58.1%. This compares to last year's data of 71 of our 115 young adults leaving our care (61.7%). Even with the challenge posed by covid in relation to EET opportunities, our performance has remained fairly stable. The trajectory in Gateshead is upwards and it is anticipated that this will continue.

Timely distribution of IRO reports

During April 2020 to March 2021, 89.9% of LAC minutes were completed within the 20 working day timescale by the IROs (531/1121 meetings whose target completion date was within the period). This represents an increase in performance compared to last year's figure of 47.4% but remains an area for improvement. It is anticipated that the change in social care computer system will encourage the timely completion of reports with a more user-friendly system.

In addition, the SCU is exploring the use of technology to support staff in completing reports. The increased use of Microsoft Teams as a platform on which to hold meetings has created possible opportunities to record and transcribe these meetings which can be stored digitally. This has not yet been taken advantage of in Gateshead, but discussions are taking place about how this can be used safely and to the benefit of children and families.

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. 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 160 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. The IRO challenge process has been expanded to include the foster carer review process. This gives an opportunity to clearly evidence challenge, patterns and themes and for these to be collated and fed back to Senior Managers.

Demand for placements remains very high. The fostering service has completed a restructure and is now fully staffed. There have been initiatives in terms of recruitment and a video created which current carers were involved in making.

Reports during Covid-19 and the periods of lockdown indicate our foster carers have been resilient, child centered and have reported high levels of satisfaction with the available support. They have positively adapted where required to provide home schooling. For some children, particularly teenage children, the restrictions of lockdown were difficult to adhere to and this creates some anxiety within placements. Many of our carers are of an older age and have their own vulnerabilities. The vast majority of foster carers have adapted to doing reviews via teams and have started to undertake more online training with now much more availability of online courses. Although for some carers this transition is more challenging, and account is being taken in respect of the increased caring responsibilities over the past year.

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. Foster carers have also highlighted the wait for children's mental health services where children have complex needs and are not yet in long term matched placements.

Local Authority Designated Officer: LADO

This year the LADO reported a decrease in enquiries (97 from 123). In addition, there were 61 referrals and increase of 13 from the previous year which required greater intervention and investigation. Enquiries constituted advice, assistance and guidance for partner agencies and did not result in actual referrals to the service.

Gateshead has one identified LADO to ensure stability and consistency in the role. 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.

The LADO also holds a small caseload of child protection and Children In Care, 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.

A performance framework is in place which identifies and tracks all enquiries and referrals received and this works well to track and collect all information.

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 Issues 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. IROs also have access to independent legal advice if it is required. This is a reciprocal arrangement with South Tyneside legal department.

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. 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 look at the quality of social work planning and the impact that this has on the child and the child's lived experience.

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.

Engagement with Services

This year we have moved all our meetings onto Teams to ensure continued effective multi agency working. This has been positive and will be a strategy to take forward in line with the needs of the children and families. It is thought likely that future conferences and reviews will be a hybrid of some professional attendance virtually and some in person support for parents, children and carers. It is important to note that the arrangement of any meeting must meet the anticipated needs of the parents and children first rather than accommodating professionals.

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. It is expected and now embedded in all processes that IRO's will visit children before meetings. During Covid lockdowns the service has met with children via Teams, made telephone calls or visited in open air spaces to ensure the safety of all concerned whilst retaining our responsibilities in this respect.

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

The 403 open eligible looked after children at the end of March 2020 accounted for 979 LAC reviews undertaken during the year. At 151 reviews, the child was under 4 years old. At 223 reviews, the child attended and was able to express their views directly. This is an increase from the 2018/2019 figure of 174/872 children attending and expressing 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'. This advocate can be informal ie their foster carer or social worker, or a formal commissioned advocate from NYAS.

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.

Efforts are always made to engage children in a meaningful way 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 well-being.

An audit of children's consultation documents was undertaken with the Children's Rights Officer to look at the areas identified by the child for discussion in his/her review and establish if, how and where this was recorded within the Chair's report. In most cases the views of the child were clearly identified and amplified within the Chair's report however a lack of consistency was seen in terms of where and how the child's views were recorded. This audit is in the process of being repeated, this time with a greater cohort of identified children and also to establish not only if the child's voice is heard, but how they are then influencing the care plan. This is an important area of

work and will drive forward best practice with the IROs.

The IROs write their reports to the most important person at the meeting – the child. In many cases this has inspired the social workers to also write the care plan to the child. This encourages a simpler use of language and lends the document to being shared easily and more readily with the child.

The IROs write their visits on the child's record to the child. When reading these, the impact of the child's lived experience is truly evident, and the child comes alive to the reader. If this child comes back to read their files and make sense of their journey in care, it is hoped this will provide life story work and provide a greater understanding for them of the relationships they had with the carers, IROs and social workers in their life and the context for decision making.

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.

Advocacy

Between 1st April 2019 and 18th April 2020 63 children and young people have been supported to share their views and be heard in a variety of formats by the Children's Rights Officer or a formal advocate. In the same time period, there were also 129 Mind Of My Own statements.

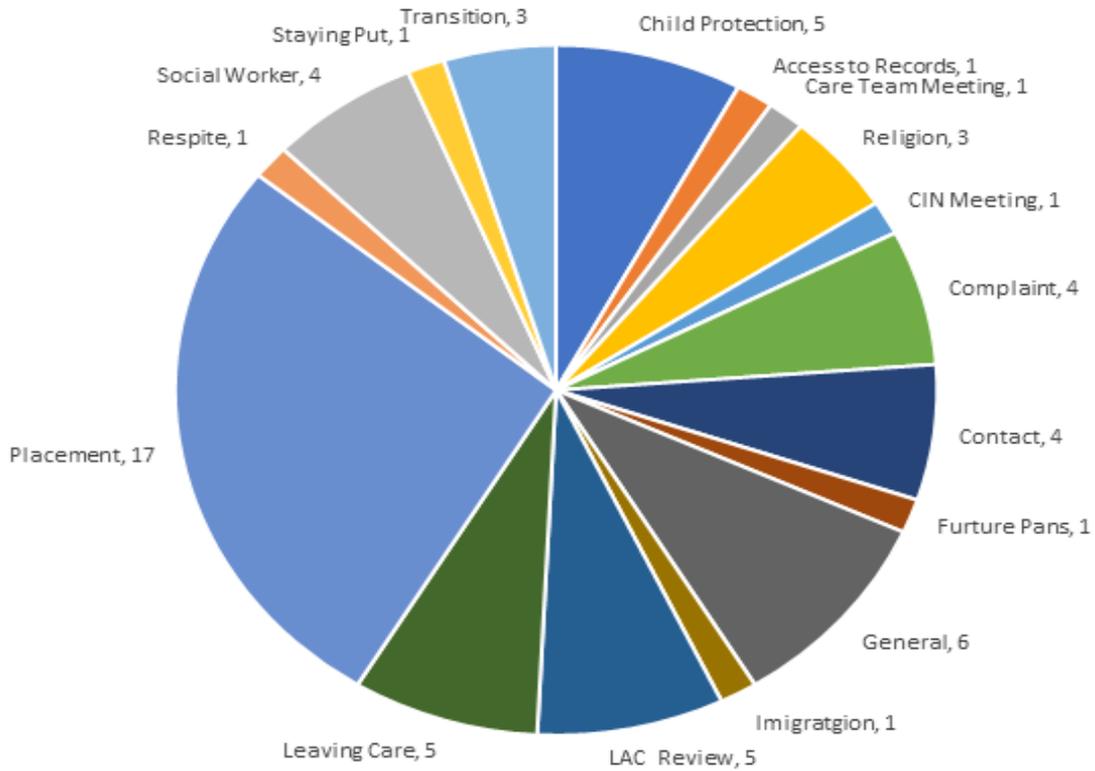
In Gateshead children and young people can opt to receive support from an advocate from an internal service or commissioned provider.

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.

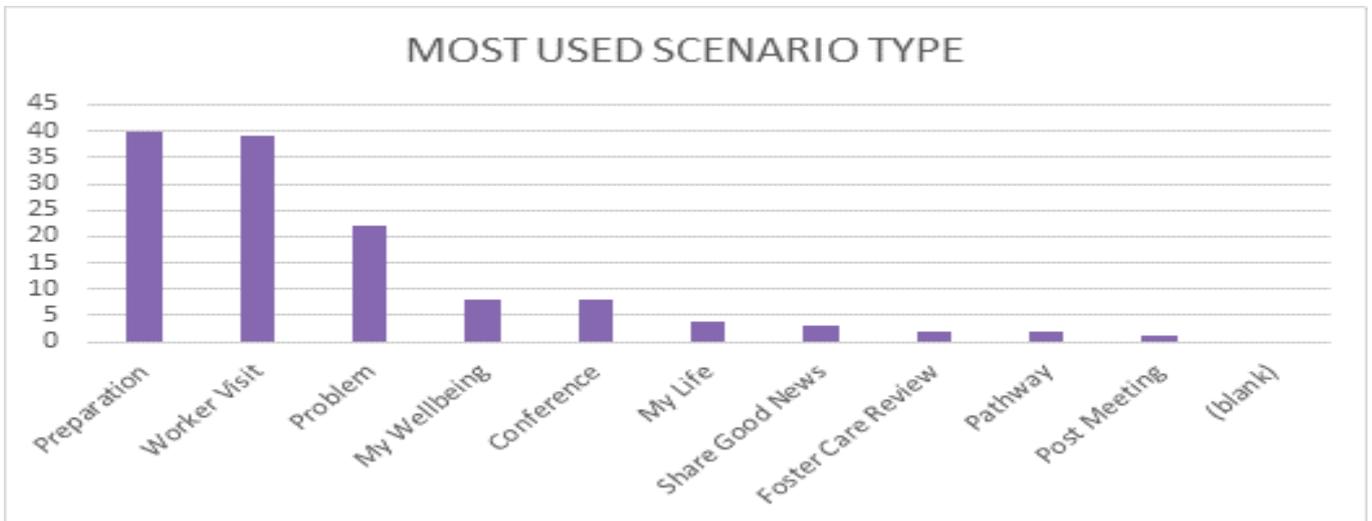
Information about advocacy can be found on the council's website, by searching for "children's advocacy". This information includes a short animation, created by children and young people.

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.

Theme of support



MOST USED SCENARIO TYPE



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.

Children's Rights and Engagement Team

There are plans for the Children's Rights and Engagement Team; Children's Rights Officer (CRO) and Engagement Officer (EO) to be line managed by the Service Manager for the SCU. It is anticipated that this move will happen in May 2021. This will ensure the independence of this role from Children's Services and align participation and engagement firmly with the SCU reinforcing the voice of the child within our service.

Our CRO has worked in Gateshead in this role for 18 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.

Participation and engagement with children, young people, parents and carers is a key component of ensuring the quality and effectiveness of our work. How do we know if we are doing a good job? We need to ask the recipients of our services what works well and what we can do to improve.

The CRO facilitates the Gateshead Children in Care group – One Voice. There are strong links between the IROs and One Voice which will be further strengthened by the integration of the CRO and EO alongside the SCU, which provides the opportunity for children's views to inform the development of services for children in our care. One Voice representatives have been key in interview selection offering a children's perspective. The Covid pandemic this year meant that the group were not able to meet in person and it has been a challenge to recruit new members under these circumstances.

Families Rights and Advocacy Gateshead (FRAG) are a group of parents and family members who have experience of Children's services in Gateshead. They are keen to see what peer support they can offer to other families and want to work with the authority to improve services. However Covid had an unfortunate impact on the attendance of the members for FRAG as meetings moved to being held virtually on Teams and lockdown affected school attendance. A relaunch of the group is needed once Covid restrictions allow for face to face meetings to resume and the group have childcare supports back in place.

7. Key priorities for 2021/2022 – 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	Challenge thresholds will be consistently discussed at regular team Meetings in order that a uniform approach is applied.	Fortnightly	Service Manager SCU IRO staff	

	<p>Performance data is routinely shared with the team and discussed within supervision and in team forums.</p> <p>An SCU dashboard will be created and shared on a weekly basis.</p> <p>Regular meetings with Team managers and Service Managers will be held to provide feedback re IRO challenge and consistency.</p>		Performance 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, the Practice Supervisors and the service manager	<p>Challenge audits will be produced and discussed with Children and Families Service Managers on a 3 monthly basis.</p> <p>Drift and delay challenge will be escalated to senior managers without delay.</p>	3 monthly.	Service Manager SCU Service Manager SCU	
1.3 To ensure that IRO challenge, advice and support to operational Social Work teams is appropriately recorded and captured	<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>Three monthly basis</p>	Practice Supervisors Practice Supervisors	
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>Themes will be drawn from audits and performance data and discussed with Senior Managers 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>	Monthly basis	Service Manager SCU and Practice Supervisors	

<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>Group supervision to consider systemic strengths based approaches.</p> <p>The two Practice Supervisors will '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>January 2022</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>Joint training by PSIRO and TM to be rolled out to social workers and IROs to consider what makes a 'good plan' to include use of language, strengths based approaches and co-production.</p> <p>Work stream with service leads to consider the suitability of the current templates. Audits.</p>	<p>January 2022</p> <p>J</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>Practice Supervisors</p> <p>IROs</p>	
<p>1.8 To ensure that drift or delay in cases is consistently highlighted by the IRO and escalated immediately to Senior Managers</p>	<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>	<p>On a monthly basis</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>IROs</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
<p>2.1 Ensuring SCU staff continuously improve and develop, and use the</p>	<p>All IROs will complete the systemic training available. Refresher courses will be available on an annual basis.</p>	<p>As necessary</p>	<p>IROs</p>	

Gateshead CAN strengths based systemic model in their work	<p>A regional programme in the form of a virtual conference is to be arranged by the NE12 IRO Managers.</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>March 2022</p> <p>January 2022</p>	<p>Regional Managers Group</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>The Service Manager SCU will attend relevant strategic planning forums.</p> <p>Practice Supervisors will attend operational groups and processes e.g. MSET, MAPPA on a regular basis.</p>	As necessary	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>PSIROs</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>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>	October 2022	<p>SM SCU</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 review minutes addressed and written to them which will be explained to them by their preferred person.</p> <p>The writing of all reports - Chair's reports, CIN assessments, care plans etc - to the child will be further explored and expanded within Children's</p>	<p>January 2022</p> <p>January 2022</p>	<p>IROs</p> <p>Service Manager SCU, Practice Supervisors and Children's Rights Officer</p>	

	Services .			
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.	As necessary	IROs	
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>Performance data will be used effectively to produce an IRO dashboard and 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>An audit of the Voice of the child within Child Protection processes will be completed with the Children's Rights Officer to ensure that children's views are reflected within the minutes of their meeting and subsequent child protection plan.</p> <p>Liaise with Fostering Service to co-produce a Trans Racial Fostering policy and associated training to ensure we support children of black and ethnic minority groups to have positive identities and life opportunities.</p> <p>Ensure our policies and procedures for trafficked children are robust and ensure appropriate safeguarding. Co-producing and disseminating training across children and families social work teams.</p>	<p>September 2020</p> <p>October 2022</p>	<p>Service Manager SCU</p> <p>CRO, PSIRO, SM SCU</p>	
Quality assure our work by engaging with children, young people, parents and carers, ensuring we listen to constructive feedback to improve our service	<p>Re launch the Families Rights and Advocacy Group encouraging new membership, terms of reference and direction. Holding regular meetings and providing advice support and guidance to the group.</p> <p>Liaise with One Voice and strengthen the links with our children in care council by providing support to the CRO.</p>	October 2021	Children's Rights Officer and Service Manager SCU	

	<p>Adopt the national research into the use of language to describe our children, their families and experiences. (TACT Language that Cares)</p> <p>CRO and Participation Officer to move into the service and work alongside the IRO service.</p>	<p>October 2021</p> <p>May 2021</p>		
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Appendix 1 - GATESHEAD IRO KEY PERFORMANCE MEASURES