



Independent Review Unit Annual Report 2020/2021

Contents

Purpose of report	3
Background.....	3
The IRO Review Unit in Stockton-on-Tees	4
Response to Covid.....	4
Profile of children in care.....	5
Local Statistics regarding Children in our care	7
Current number of Children in Care in Stockton-on-Tees	8
Children in care and their legal status.....	9
How are we doing?.....	11
Personal Education Plans (PEPs).....	11
Adoption	11
Stability in placements.....	13
Looked After Children Reviews.....	13
Timeliness of reviews	13

Purpose of report

The purpose of the report is to provide information regarding the effectiveness of the Independent Review Unit in Stockton-on-Tees in its contribution towards the quality assurance and improvement of services for Children in Our Care.

This report will give an overview of the work undertaken by the IRO service and its outcomes. It will also provide quantitative and qualitative information and an opportunity to highlight areas of good practice, as well as areas which require improvement. It will describe areas of work which the service has prioritised during the year and will identify priorities in the coming year.

Background

The provision of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) is a statutory requirement, and the Council is required to have a formal process for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to carry out the two separate aspects to the function of an IRO, these being:

- To chair a child's review
- To monitor the appropriateness of the care plan on an ongoing basis, ensuring care plans fully reflect the child's current needs, including whether any safeguarding issues arise, its implementation and to establish whether milestones set out in the plan are achieved in a timely manner. Within this IROs have a duty to inform the child of their rights and assist in obtaining an advocate and/or legal representation.

The responsibility of the IRO is to offer overview, scrutiny and challenge regarding case management. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Looked After Children (LAC) with emphasis upon challenging drift and delay. Advocacy and key attention to the child's legal rights should also be primary considerations. The roles and responsibilities of the IRO are defined by:

- Children Act 1989 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (June 2015)

The IRO Handbook; Statutory guidance for independent reviewing officers and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked after children (2010).

In Stockton the IRO's are also responsible for Chairing Child Protection Case conferences. The statutory requirements for individual services to safeguard and promote the welfare of children; are set out in Working Together, A guide to inter agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (March 2015). The chair of a Child protection Conference needs to be accountable to the Director of Children's Services, and should be a professional, independent of operational and/or line management responsibilities for the case.

Additional responsibilities of IRO's include undertaking foster care reviews. Local Authorities are required by Regulation 29 (The Fostering Services Regulations 2011) to review the approval of foster carers at least once a year.

The IRO Review Unit in Stockton-on-Tees

The Stockton-on-Tees Independent Review Unit sits within the Children's Service directorate within the Systems, Information and Improvement service area. Being within this service area provides the IRO service with independence from operational teams whilst enabling close working relationships with Workforce Development and Improvement teams which are supporting the development of quality of practice across the Directorate.

The unit is managed by a full time Team Manager who has been in post since March 2021 and is supervised by the Service Lead for Improvement. The IRO function is carried out by an independent team who also chair child protection conferences. The team currently consists of six full time IROs and two part time IROs. One IRO will be moving to focus on completion of the Foster Care reviews and have two new IROs commencing in October 2021. Also, as part of the team there is a Pathway Review Officer who is currently part time.

Stockton on Tees has seen some changes to the Review Unit and the management of this in the last year due to a number of team members leaving/retiring and the previous Team Manager and Service Manager retiring. There have been additional challenges over this past year including the combination of the impact of the pandemic, service review for senior management within the Children's Services directorate, experienced staff leaving and the use of agency workers. This has meant that there has been additional pressure on current team members to pick up additional work meaning caseloads have been high and capacity has been stretched. This has also meant the team have, in a sense, had to rebuild themselves and this has been a challenge particularly given IROs have continued to mainly work from home. The team will be a fully staffed Review Unit in October 2021 and we are currently transitioning to the hybrid model of working.

Response to Covid

The COVID 19 pandemic has been a challenging time for Children's Services with new working practices being adopted rapidly to ensure children and young people are safe and supported, and that service disruption was kept to an absolute minimum. As part of this, the IRO service adapted its working arrangements rapidly to ensure it remained a responsive and effective service.

The IRO Review Unit were the first in Stockton-on-Tees to fully embed the use of Microsoft Teams and virtual meetings. The team adapted to working virtually overnight as this was necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of team members. All IROs ensured that meetings took place virtually (Child In Our Care reviews) and all emphasised the importance of participation of our Children and Young People. The Unit have ensured that where possible 'participation' was encouraged and have developed creative ways of including children and young people in reviews by use of video calls, what's app and Microsoft teams. Face to face visits following appropriate government guidance also took place with those cases where there was a need.

The unit has now set up a Hybrid model of working and conference rooms can facilitate a mixture of face to face and virtual meetings to allow for all to participate fully. These conference rooms can also be used to facilitate CiOC review meetings where it is appropriate to meet face to face with the family/child/young person. Currently the IRO team complete a mixture of face to face and virtual meetings and visits with our Children and Young People. A number of strengths have been identified by the IROs in terms of the differing ways of working and the some of the following comments shared:

- *I'm having lots of telephone calls, FaceTime's, WhatsApp and texts with young people, parents, carers and professionals, and have certainly adapted my working style and yet here we are, forced into a situation from the pandemic and utilising new and creative ways of working. It's taken some adjustment, but I can see so many positives. The young people are quite accustomed to our new ways of working and I have found on more than one occasion they provide excellent 'tech' advice on the latest apps!*
- *Just wanted to highlight how positive I have found using technology with my children and young people and spread some positive light and on our current working arrangements. I have used teams, video calls and WhatsApp type calls with the majority of my young people and was lovely to see them in their homes and also showing me some dance moves from the living room!! It has been beneficial for siblings to be able to see each other who are residing in separate placements over Microsoft teams in their respective foster placements.*
- *I held a CIOC review this morning for a young man who is subject to a Secure Order at Aycliffe secure unit. The meeting was held via teams and included 8 other professionals and the young man. Throughout the course of children's services involvement, the concerns have been around this young man's violent and aggressive behaviours towards professionals and members of the community which led to the secure order application. Reading the paperwork prior to the review I did not expect the meeting to be straight forward due to his aggressive behaviours. However, he was supported by his key worker in Aycliffe participated throughout the meeting, he was extremely articulate, presented as relaxed, he spoke about the support he is getting and was able to reflect on his anger issues. He was keen to let professionals know that he had been cooking, he asked if he could have unsupervised phone contact with his mother and what he wants to change when he is back in the community.*
- *I personally feel that as he was not sat in a room full of adults, which is often intimidating for adults never mind children, he was able to speak freely about his circumstances. At previous reviews when professionals have all been sat round a table he has stormed out and not been able to hear the good and the bad or contribute to decisions.*
- *He sat and listened to the positive feedback, but also the concerns about his lifestyle without losing his temper. I feel that as the review was a more relaxed environment for him, he felt less intimidated and was able to relax and contribute fully about his care plan.*
- *The flexibility of gathering information has been a huge success. If professionals can't attend a meeting time, they are now taking more responsibility and sharing information in a number of different ways (proforma's, separate t/c's, separate conference calls etc).*
- *I have used what's app more with kids and text messages with some who don't really like the face-to-face contact as much. I feel like video type conferences would be good to continue in particular with placements well out of area. We had a secure review which was supposed to be in Exeter, and it worked well and saved a lot of time and money on professionals physically attending. I also felt like the young person was more central to the process as they were set up on video link and this can sometimes be missed in a room full of professionals.*

There are clearly challenges with working only virtually hence why, as a unit, it is felt using a combination of different approaches to working need to be adapted and specific to each child/young person's circumstances.

Profile of children in care

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is committed to ensuring that children and young people are securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care for the duration of their childhood, and as far as is consistent with their welfare, to promote the upbringing of these children and young people by their families

The responsibility for the upbringing of children and young people is inherent in the parental role and that of extended family members. The outcomes for children who live within the care of family and friends are positive when compared to similar children living with unrelated foster carers; so, the Local Authority should only consider intervening when there is no other satisfactory way of promoting the welfare of children and young people, or of protecting them from harm.

When the Local Authority must intervene, proactive planning is key and must start before a child is brought into our care as emphasized within the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010.

Proactive planning should always be multi agency and inclusive of the child and family. This will ensure that the child's holistic needs are considered and that prior to any decision to bring a child into the care of the Local Authority and reduce the instances of decisions and placements having to be made in an emergency.

Edge of Care Services and or Family Group Conferencing must have been considered to enable families to stay together where it is safe to do so, source their own solutions to difficulties and make alternative care arrangements where necessary. It is the role of the IRO to scrutinize the care plans for CiOC and challenge where necessary to prevent any drift and delay in the progress of their situations. IRO's check the legal status of children in reviews, and they liaise with children's guardians once cases are in proceedings.

The recognition of children living with family members and these being regulated as connected carers has increased and it has been a challenge for the local authority in terms of the amount of these arrangements. There have been also additional challenges given the unregulated placements which have been identified including those for Young People 16 + and those children/Young People living in placements whereby connected carers have failed to meet Fostering Standards.

Further information and statistical information regarding the numbers of CiOC including a breakdown of legal status, placement information and review timeliness is included below.

Local Statistics regarding Children in our care

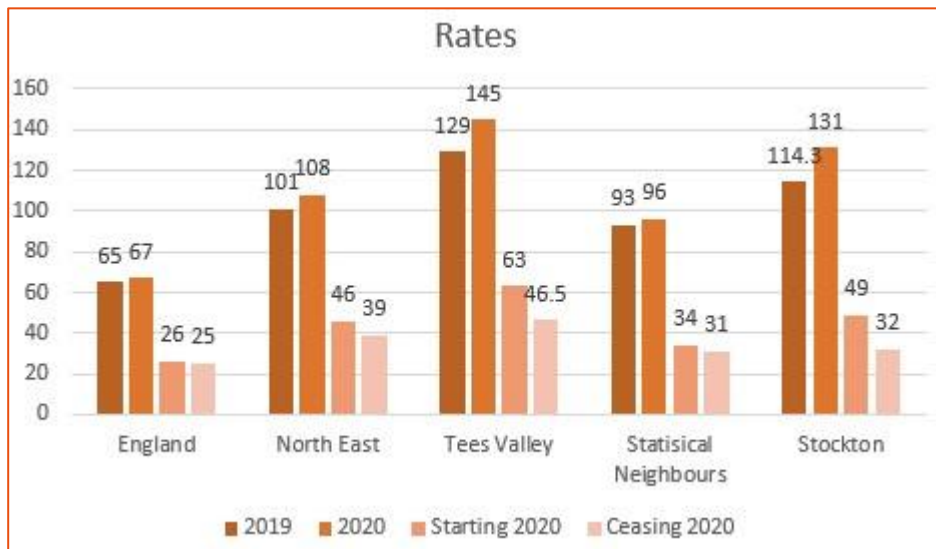
The chart below shows Children in our care rate per 10,000 as of 31st March 2020* and those new children who started and ceased to be looked after throughout the year.

The number of children who are looked after can vary from month to month as children move in and out of the system.

The number of new children entering care during the period of 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020 was 214 children, a rate of 49 per 10,000.

This is higher than for the previous year of 141 children, a rate of 33 and higher than the other comparators, except for the Tees Valley.

(*current comparable data nationally and regionally unavailable until December 2021)

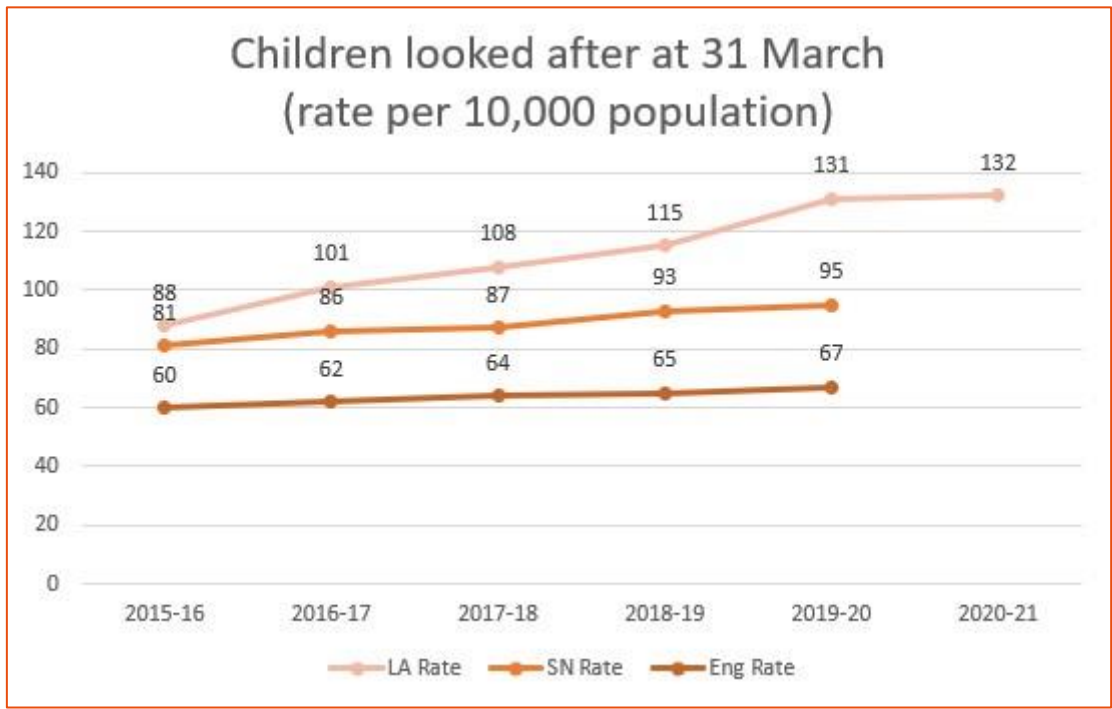


Further comparison will be able to be made following full data collection for 2021.

Current number of Children in Care in Stockton-on-Tees

At the time of writing this report there are 563 Children in Care in the borough (excluding respite care), there have been a total of 9 admissions to care over the past 4 weeks and 2 children have been discharged from care during this period. The following charts show a breakdown of Children in Care and show a clear increase in the numbers of Children in Care and a significantly higher rate than the national average.

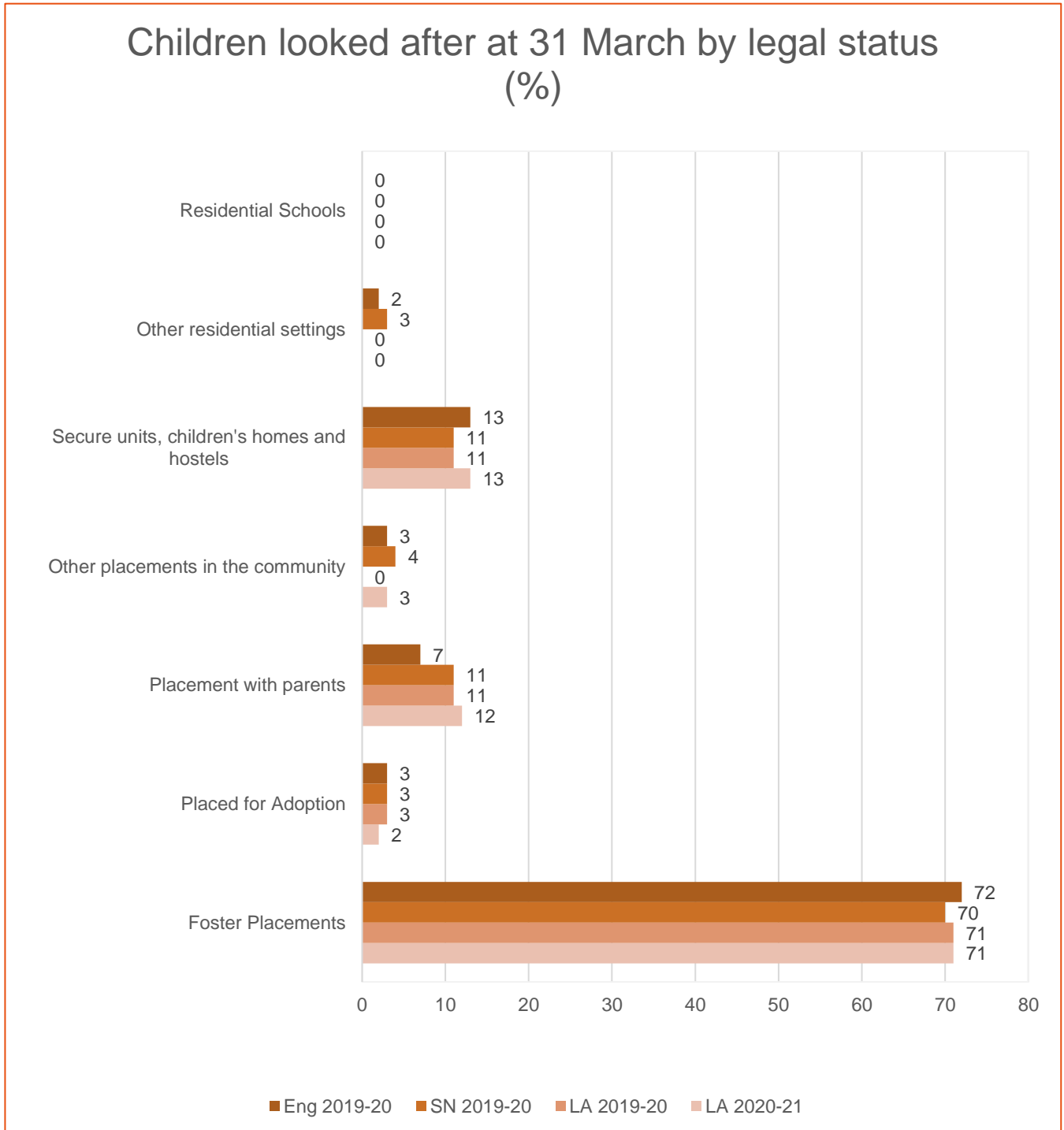
(all comparative data is correct as of 31st March 2021)



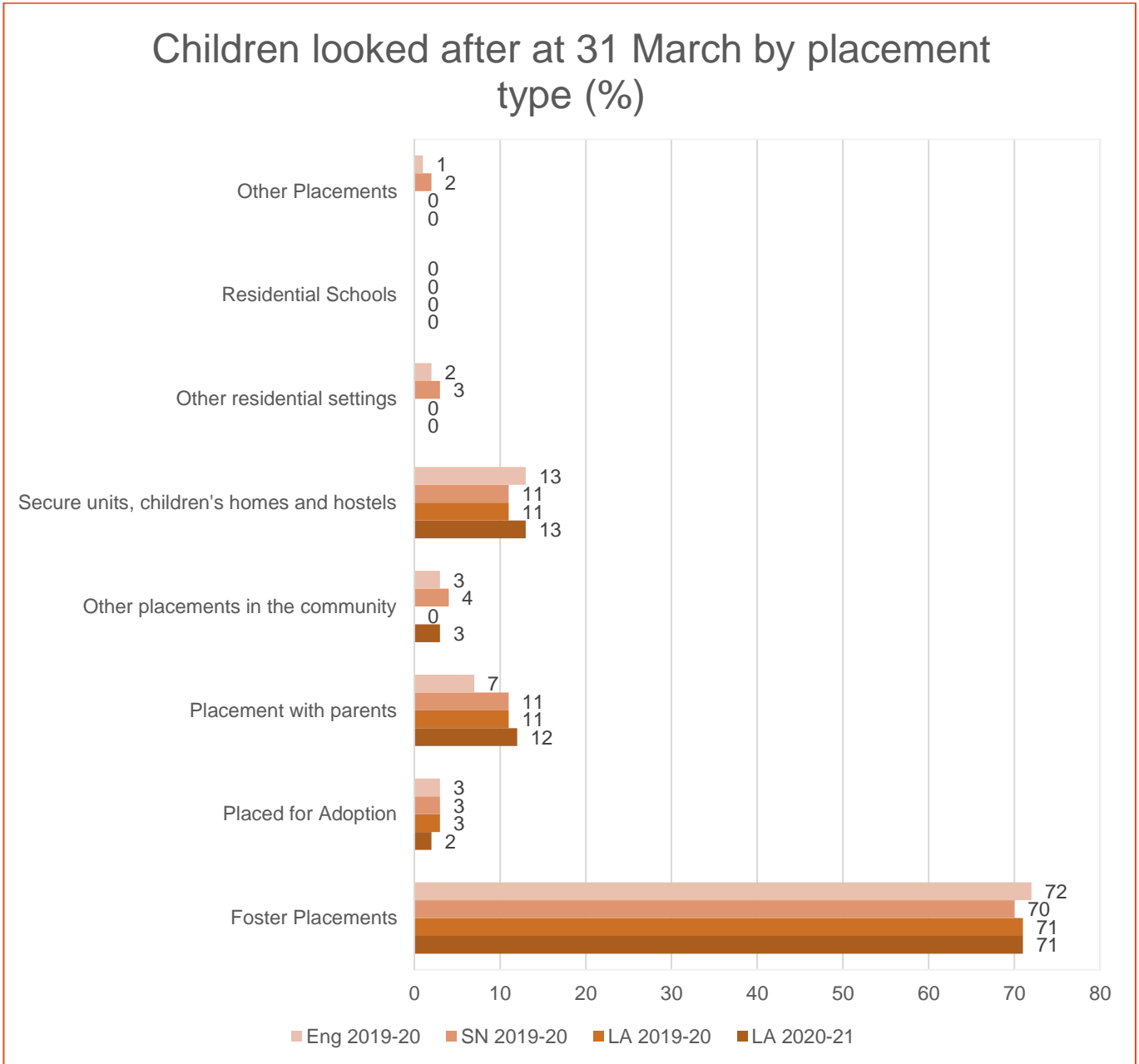
Children in care and their legal status

The chart below shows the legal status of Children in Our Care with the majority being subject to full Care Orders. In comparison to our statistical neighbours and the England average Stockton on tees have a higher number of children subject to Care Orders.

(comparison data for 2021 will be available December 2021 for the year)



In addition to above, below is the breakdown in terms of 'placement type'. This reflects the majority of CiOC are residing in a foster placement (combination of connected foster carers and Local Authority foster carers). The number of children and young people 'placed with parent' is higher than the England average however similar to our statistical neighbours. The review unit are aware that the new Public Law working groups are exploring how to reduce Care Orders at home and IROs have had insight into this work via our independent legal advice.



Overall, CiOC numbers do remain high in the borough and therefore the caseloads of IROs remain high. Work will continue to take place within the review unit to support Children in Care but also to support future plans which are ultimately to attempt to reduce the number of children in care and support children and young people to live within their family unit where it is safe to do so.

How are we doing?

The IROs in the Review unit work alongside the social care teams and family placement service to ensure Children in Our Care receive a good service and that their care plans are being effectively implemented to meet their needs. As such, the IROs contribute to a number of performance indicators as discussed below.

Personal Education Plans (PEPs)

Local authorities have a duty to promote the educational achievements of Children in our Care. This includes giving particular attention to the educational implications of any decision we make about a child. We have a duty to make sure that every child in our care has an effective and high-quality personal education plan (PEP).

IROs play a vital role in reviewing and challenging where Children in Care do not have PEPs in place. At each CiOC review IROs confirm the date of the last PEP held and also request updated information as to how Pupil Premium funds are spent. IROs should ensure that the PEP's effectiveness is scrutinised in sufficient detail in order to feed into the statutory review and at other times if necessary. If a child also has an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP), where possible, the IRO should ensure review of the Care Plan, including the PEP, is appropriately linked with the statutory review of the EHCP.

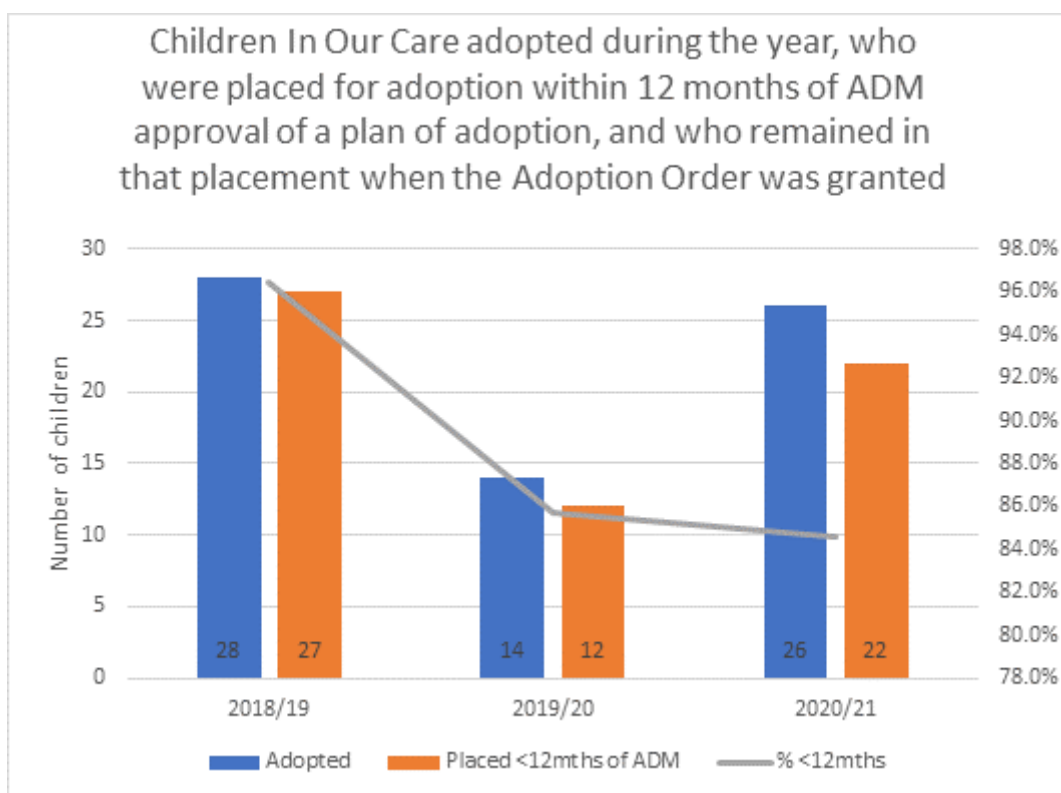
Data available on 1st September 2021 from virtual schools indicates that 87.5% of school aged CiOC had PEPs in place. 10.1% of which are overdue however, this is currently a better average picture and with ongoing work via virtual schools it is hoped over the next year this will be improved further. The review unit plans to re-establish a closer working relationship with virtual schools to support in ensuring all CiOC have PEPs in place from birth up to 18 years of age. Moving forward virtual schools will attend IRO team meetings and will update accordingly.

Adoption

Since 1 May 2018, a regionalised adoption authority has existed in Teesside. Adoption Tees Valley (ATV) is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, matching and support of adopters and Stockton Borough Council is responsible for any children with a plan of adoption approved by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

A child's journey to permanence, achieved through adoption, is measured against specific indicators. In August 2020, the Department for Education published 'Adoption Scorecards for 2019' to allow local authorities and regional adoption agencies to monitor and compare their performance.

The chart below shows data regarding children in our Care who were placed for adoption within 12 months of the Agency Decision Maker approval in Stockton. This chart shows there was a decline in adoption orders granted in 2019/20 and then an increase last year. There is also a percentage drop in 2020/21, one of these children was a disabled child who went on to be adopted by the foster carer, another child's care proceedings were protracted and there was delay due to the foster carer insisting siblings should be separated due to behavioural issues.



ATV, as the Regional Adoption Authority, continues to have a positive impact on achieving permanence for children with a plan of adoption. Placement Orders were granted for 17 children between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, and at 31 March 2021, 7 of those children had moved to an adoptive placement, four of whom have since been adopted. With regard to the remaining 10 children, at the time of writing, two have had a match approved and their FFA placements have converted to adoptive placements; one has had a match approved and has moved to live with prospective adopters; one has had a match approved and is due to commence introductions; four have an ATV Panel date for match approval; and family finding is ongoing for the remaining two children.

Clear procedures are in place to support the joint working between social workers and ATV and to ensure that early permanence is achieved. This includes a recommendation to seek legal advice at the earliest opportunity for an unborn baby, where it is clear within the referral that adoption will be included in the planning. In such cases, the recommendation from the Legal Gateway Panel is for an Early Notification to be sent to ATV; a Fostering for Adoption placement to be explored with ATV; and early pre-birth planning within Public Law Outline to commence.

IROs work alongside Social Workers when discussing potential matches and will challenge where required any drift or delay in terms of care planning. Whilst measures are in place to prevent drift, the overall targets at the end of the reporting year 1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021 have inevitably been affected due to the lockdown restrictions that were put in place as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is anticipated that this will be the national picture, as all local authorities and adoption agencies will have been affected. Once data is available over the next year this will allow for further comparison.

Stability in placements

In situations where a long-term permanent placement has broken down (either long term foster care or adoption) the IROs will facilitate a disruption meeting to identify any learning points for practice and to contribute to the future planning for the child in question. The purpose of a disruption meeting is not to apportion blame but to learn from the experience so that the planning for the child's future is informed and the child's needs can be better met.

Those involved in the care team can reflect and recover from the experience and consider their own developmental and training needs.

The collection and evaluation of information from disruption meetings will inform and improve practice and help develop services to better meet the needs of children and those who care for them with the aim of improving placement stability.

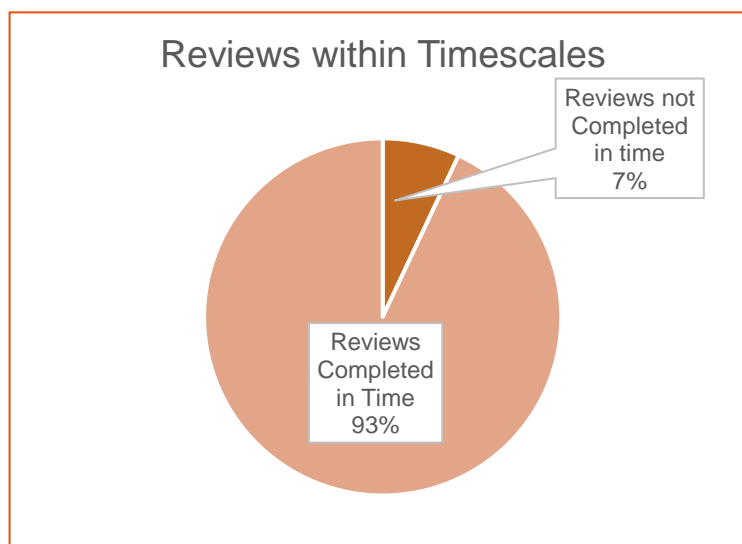
We recognise, as a unit, that there continues to be the need for future learning in terms of placement breakdowns. There is a clear procedure now in place for IROs and Social Workers in terms of the format of disruption meetings. Moving forward over the next 2 years it would be useful to audit the cases where placement breakdowns have occurred to explore any specific themes.

Looked After Children Reviews

Timeliness of reviews

Child in Our Care reviews should be held and chaired by an IRO following that child or young person being accommodated the first review should be held within 20 days, the second within 3 months and thereafter at a minimum of 6 monthly. The purpose of the review is to ensure that appropriate plans are in place to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child/young person in the most effective way and achieve permanence within the appropriate timescales.

Over the period of 2020/21 there have been a total of 1469 CiOC reviews held and chaired by IROs. During the last period there have been a number of reviews which were not completed within specified timescales. Over the next annual review it is hoped this this can be improved and further comparison will be given in terms of the reasoning as to why reviews are held outside of timescales. The care below shows that 106 reviews have been held outside of the 6-month timescale this amounts to 7% of all Child in Our Care reviews.



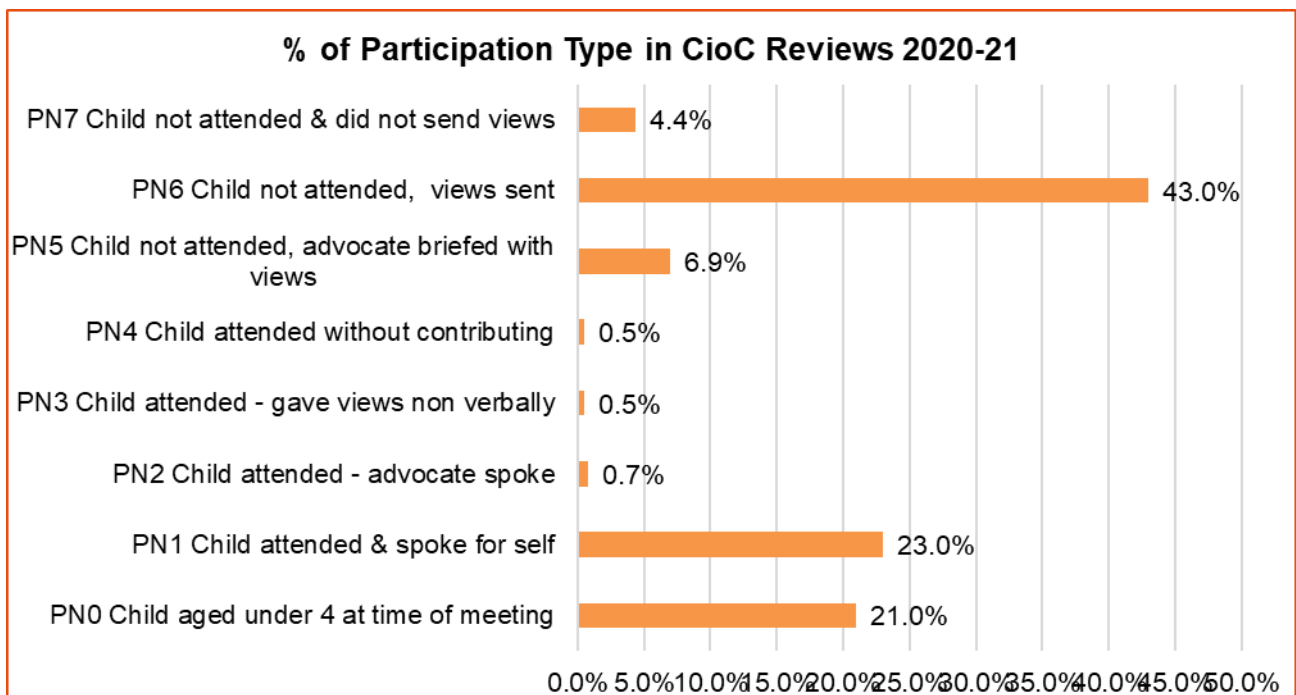
Children making a meaningful contribution

A key role of the IRO is to ensure that the voice of the child is central to the review process. Feedback and the views of children and young people is gathered through direct work and the use of different consultation tools.

Performance is measured on one of the following methods of participation;

- Child not in attendance and did not send views
- Child not attended, views sent
- Child not attended, advocate briefed with views
- Child attended without contributing
- Child attended, gave views non verbally
- Child attended, advocate spoke
- Child attended and spoke for self
- Child aged under 4 at time of meeting

As you can see from the chart below 43% of children and young people are not attending their review meetings however, they are sending views. Whilst attendance at review meetings is not great 'participation' is good and IROs are liaising with children and young people and using more creative ways of ensuring they are participating.



Over the next year as a unit we want to continue to improve the 'voice of the child' and evidence further participation in care planning.

Foster Care Reviews

Local Authorities are required by Regulation 29 (The Fostering Services Regulations 2001) to review the approval of foster carers at least once a year and the Independent Review Unit is responsible for undertaking the annual reviews. The number of approved fostering households as on 31st March 2021 was 177, 103 of which are mainstream carers and 74 who are connected carers.

Due to several outstanding Foster Care Reviews, a pilot was undertaken to reconfigure IRO resource to prioritise completion of these. This has also enabled consistency and supported in raising the quality of reviews. Any significant changes to circumstances, or concerns raised at the Annual Review, are referred to the Child Placement Panel. The Panel complies with The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011, and The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations (2010), The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments (England) Regulations 2015 as well as with other legislation and guidance as noted within procedures.

The role of the Panel is to consider suitability to foster in connection with the full approval, variation of approval, and termination of approval of anyone either seeking to be approved as, or currently approved as, a foster carer. The Panel will consider applicants who have applied to foster children unknown to them, as well as connected carers who wish to have a connected child placed with them on a planned basis or those who have been temporarily approved as a connected foster carer for a connected child who has been placed with them, in an emergency, under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (2010).

The IRO is responsible for ensuring foster carers meet all of the above criteria during the review and to make a recommendation as to whether the case needs to be presented to Panel. All first reviews are currently presented to panel and cases whereby there are changes to the carer's approval status (please refer to specific procedures for further reasons for Panel being held). The panel meets and makes relevant recommendations and then this is presented to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) who has the overall say in terms of whether the carer/carers continue to be suitable to foster.

The IRO Foster Care review role is to be further developed in liaison with the Child Placement team in terms of improving the support/training offered to carers and ultimately with the overall objectives of improving outcomes for our Children and Young People.

Pathway Plan Reviews

In November 2020 the review unit appointed a Pathway Plan review officer. This post had been vacant for some time and this presented challenges with regards to outstanding Pathway Plans for our Care Leavers. The role of the Pathway Review Officer is to chair reviews with the Personal Advisor and Care Leavers and to review their Pathway Plan.

A pathway plan must be prepared for all eligible young people from the age of 16, which must be in place within three months of their 16th birthday and continued for all relevant and former relevant young people. The pathway plan must be based on an up-to-date assessment of the young person's needs including an evidence-based analysis of their continuing need for care, accommodation and support.

The pathway plan should set out the different services necessary to meet the full range of the young person's needs. The pathway plan will also set out the actions that must be taken by the young person and any agencies involved in order to enable the young person to achieve their aspirations and make a successful transition to adulthood.

Since the Pathway Plan review officer has been in post there has been a significant improvement and as of September 2021 there only remains 4 outstanding pathway reviews in comparison to approximately 190 when commencing in post. This role has been further strengthened by the development of relationships within the leaving care team and also by involvement in reflective training sessions presented to all workers. It is planned that this role will further develop and the following plan is proposed for the next year;

- All pre meeting reports will be completed in a timely manner.
- Quarterly reports will be devised to analyse information shared within reviews and quality of documentation.
- A QA tool will be developed.
- Awareness workshops and training for staff will continue and will be developed jointly with the review officer and leaving care service.
- Further networking with neighbouring authorities to identify best practice and share learning.

IRO Plan progress and successes

The Review Unit aimed to develop the following over 2020/21;

- Continue to support Social Workers to strengthen the quality and consistency of care plans.
- Develop Liquid Logic performance reports in collaboration with performance team IRO unit to improve reporting systems that will highlight why conferences and CiOC reviews are stood down but subsequently rearranged within timescales.
- IRO's to improve recording of reasons of why children have not attended CiOC reviews and promote the use of available tools for Social Workers to capture views and wishes of children.
- CiOC invites to children to be refreshed to include overview of the IRO role and encourage importance of children's participation and attendance.
- Share learning from disruption meetings, audits and practice themes into the new Learning and Practice Forum.
- Relaunch and promote the use of the (My Experience in Your Care) and other surveys to gather feedback and evaluation to inform and improve service development.
- Monitor and explore reasons for second and subsequent plans.

Successes/Progress over this last year;

The Review Unit commits to ensuring the children's voice to be central to planning and reviews to ensure that plans are effective and children/young people feel listened to.

- The voice of the child remains central to the unit and IROs continue to be creative in exploring alternative ways for children/YP to make a meaningful contribution to their reviews.
- There has been improvement in recording reasons as to why children/Young people do not attend reviews and continued challenge by IROs and Conference chairs.

The Review Unit commits to ensuring that all children and young people across the borough have a clear understanding regarding the role of their IRO and can develop positive relationships.

- Individual invites for CiOC were created ensuring children/young people are clear regarding the IRO role and to encourage participation.
- IROs are to become more involved in the overall training package provided to newly qualified workers joining the department.

The Review Unit commits to continuing to improve the footprint of the IROs and show how the IRO role impacts on care planning.

- The QA tool is embedded and being used effectively by IROs to challenge where required- this is also now available on LCS system.
- The IRO footprint has been significantly improved over the past year by use of the QA tool and specific elements allowing for IROs to record case notes where required.

The Review Unit commits to further develop IROs and to ensure IROs to feel supported in their role and their knowledge to be used across children's services in supporting other staff members.

- Regular supervision is now in place for all IROs and there is access to good quality training and development specific to the role.
- IROs have contributed to training and have provided a mentoring and practice educator role to students and apprentices.
- IROs continue to support Social Workers in strengthening the quality of care plans and are establishing positive working relationships where challenge is welcomed.
- The IRO team has changed significantly over the past year, however, will be a fully staffed team by October 2021.

The Review Unit commits to continuing to develop networks with CAFCASS in cases during proceedings to ensure high quality planning within care proceedings.

- IROs have developed a stronger relationship with CAFCASS and continue to use independent legal advice where needed.

The Review Unit commits to being more effective in use of current systems to evidence the work carried out and the challenge made with regards to practice/care planning.

- LCS performance reports are now more effective in collating data and the Review Unit now record reviews which are stood down but arranged within timescales.
- Audits to be undertaken annually with regards the completed QA tools to analyse the impact this has on care planning for children/young people.

IRO challenge and impact

It is a statutory requirement for local escalation and resolution procedures to be in place for IROs to raise concerns about care planning and support for children in care. IROs must take all reasonable steps to resolve the issues at the earliest stage informally but can escalate the issue formally in order to address it.

The Review Unit introduced the QA tool in 2017 following the Children's Services Inspection in 2016 which identified that the IRO/Conference chair 'footprint' wasn't visible and challenge needed to be further evidenced alongside the impact of this challenge on improving outcomes for children and young people.

The QA tool provides the IRO with the opportunity to review the case file and creates the opportunity for constructive dialogue with the Social Worker and often Team Manager. This allows for an open discussion with regards to tasks that may need to be completed however, also notes areas of positive practice.

Initially the QA tool was in paper form and wasn't as effectively used however, since January 2021 the QA tool has been embedded into the Liquid Logic system. Since this time there have been a total of 128 QA tools completed by IROs for Children in Our Care (an additional 50 QA tools are in draft on the system. IROs make good use of these tools in an attempt to work with Social Workers and Team Managers to avoid formal dispute processes where possible and QA tools can remain in draft whilst further discussions take place with Social Workers. This has evidently improved the 'footprint' of the IRO as there is clear evidence of challenge and there are also separate case recording facilities specific for IROs to record where challenges have been made.

A brief review of cases where QA tools have been used evidences clear responses from Social Workers and actions taken to rectify any issues highlighted by the IRO and Conference Chair. However, this does need to further improve and there needs to be a consistent response across the Service from Social Workers with regards to responding to QA tools shared.

The Quality Assurance tool (QA tool) is now fully incorporated into the LCS system and IROs use this to identify any themes including also highlighting areas of positive practice. Moving forward this needs to be further developed to understand the key themes and contribute to making improvements where required.

There is encouragement for the IROs to resolve issues at the earliest possible opportunity before they become disputes and, when required, to informally challenge (using QA) and use formal mechanisms only when other avenues have been explored (e.g., dispute resolution process). The quality assurance aspect of the IRO role is crucial and the good relationships between the social work teams and the IRO's support this. All Service Leads see these relationships as important to driving continuous improvements to practice.

It is important to have a strong culture of challenge and support, not only focusing on where practice can improve but recognising where workers are already doing well. IROs have contributed to supporting professional development across children's services by facilitating lunch and learn sessions and providing mentoring and practice educator roles to students and apprentices. They have also supported in delivering HSSCP training and Stockton's single agency training to Social Workers. The dispute resolution process was refreshed and updated to include the use of the quality assurance tool as part of the informal stage. This process has supported in strengthening and evidencing IRO challenge to ensure timely change and intervention for a child or young person. Firmer relationships have also been established with CAFCASS and independent consistent legal advice remains in place; this has included the provision of bespoke training for IROs to support their development

Throughout the year the IROs have been a critical friend to both Social Workers and other professionals to support effective practice. Scrutiny of care planning and the impact of this on a child has been an IRO focus during this period, however, this continues to be a challenging area and although some improvements have been seen this is not consistent.

IROs have contributed to improving practice and knowledge in several ways, including providing training to practitioners and by continuing to gather views from children and young people to influence and shape service provision.

Of major concern is the IROs continued increase of caseloads, this does impact on the efficiency of service and must be reduced to ensure effective oversight and quality of practice. A caseload for a full time IRO is currently around 92 children which comprises of Children in Our Care and Children subject to Child Protection Plans. At present, the majority of IROs in team have significantly more CiOC on their caseload. Given the dual roles and additional responsibilities of an IRO in comparison to a conference chair this also brings additional pressure. Pure numbers of children are however not a true indicator of workload as this varies depending on the geographical location of a child, number of siblings and complexity of issues for children or young people.

Team Priorities/Plan/Future development

Over this past year the IRO Service has changed significantly with some longstanding IROs and managers leaving the Service. This has had an impact on the service as a whole and all team members have had to adapt to a revised management structure alongside implementation of new ways of working due to Covid. New members are joining the team and a key priority is supporting them to settle into their role, learning from others and sharing experience and expertise from other team members.

Over this next year the IRO Service will hopefully remain a fully staffed team and the team will continue to develop within their IRO to ultimately impact on improving outcomes for Children in Our Care.

- Specific team priorities for the next 2 years are as follows;
- Further team development given changes within the team and management structure.
- Re-introduce peer audits and group supervision sessions to support the development of the team.
- Develop further networks regionally with other IRO Services to share learning and development.
- IROs to work more closely alongside workforce development in delivering training specific to the role of an IRO and contribution to an increased understanding across the workforce.
- Continuing to improve the IRO footprint and evidence of scrutiny of children's plans by ensuring QA tools are fit for purpose and themes are identified through annual audits.
- Embedding a consistent approach across IRO's to enhance the overall profile of the IRO role and Review Unit.
- Improving timescales for completion of IRO recommendations by use of split forms on LCS.
- Embedding a culture of practice and performance, support and challenge and improved reporting on the effectiveness of the IRO role
- Ensuring the team are continuing to meet the responsibilities as outlined in the IRO handbook.

Jo Wren, Review Unit Team Manager