

# Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Annual Report

## April 2018-March 2019

*The contribution of the Independent Reviewing Service to Quality Assurance and Improving Services for Child Protection and for Looked After Children*

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## Introduction and Purpose of the Annual Report

This report provides information on the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and their contribution to improving outcomes for children in care and children subject to a Protection Plan care leavers during the reporting year April 2018 to March 2019. The report is in line with the statutory requirements. It was completed by the Review and Development unit Manager and based on comprehensive input from all IROs and business support. The purpose of this report is to provide a context to the work of the IROs and summarise the key issues emerging that are relevant both to Children and Family Services and to the lead members with designated responsibility for People and Corporate Parenting as underpinned by Middlesbrough Corporate Parenting Strategy.

## Legal Context & Statutory Function of the IRO

The previous year's annual IRO reports have already set out in detail information about the statutory function of the IRO and the purpose of the IRO annual report and responsibilities have remained the same throughout 2018/19.

In summary the IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including;

- Promoting the voice of the child;
- Ensuring that plans for looked after children are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs;
- Making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one;
- Offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for looked after children and the delivery of services to them;
- Monitoring the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands

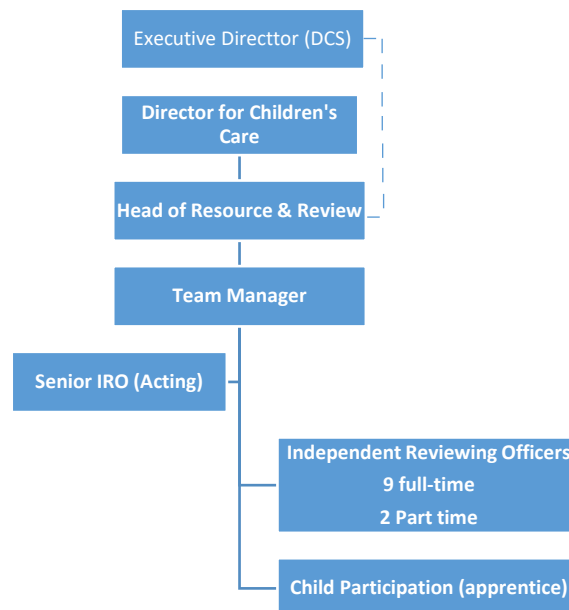
IRO Handbook paragraph 2.4

All of the IROs in Middlesbrough are employed in a dual role, as well as independent reviewing officers for children and young people in care they provide independent Chairing of Child Protection Conferences, which is a separate statutory function under Working Together 2018 for which they are accountable to the Executive Director of Children's Services. The benefit of combining the two roles means that there is a greater level of consistency and oversight for children and young people throughout their transition from Child Protection to Looked After. The children and young people can then benefit from continued relationships to support improved outcomes irrespective of a child's status.

The IRO Management Team are integral to a number of panels and forums and planning groups, in which the IRO perspective is valued as part of the decision making process alongside that of Children's Care. These include the strategic MALAP and each MALAP sub-group, LSCB sub-groups, VEMT, Permanency Monitoring Group. This has provided a useful forum for IRO managers and staff to strengthen links across agencies and to share the perspectives of the IRO service with regard to multi-agency planning for looked after children. In addition to this the IROs play a key role in quality assurance working which is key in monitoring service deliver to children and young people.

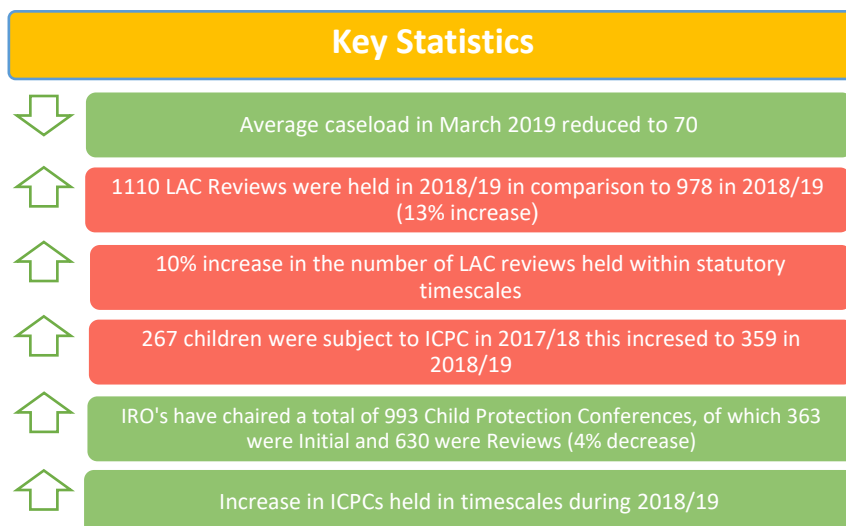
The IRO service is represented at the North East 12 Authorities Regional Managers Forum and had the opportunity to attend the regional event hosted by Sunderland in 2018.

## Team Structure



The team has remained fully staffed throughout 2018/19 which is an improvement on previous years.

## IRO Caseloads & Performance



The team has increased

over the past 2 years, however this has been met with an increase in demand as a result of rising numbers of children who are looked after, as a result the average IRO caseload has remained at the high end of the national guidance. The average caseload in March 2019 was 70 per full-time IRO. As well as an increase in demand audits tells us that there has been an increase in complexity of issues that we are working with in families. Despite the increase in demand, performance compliance and audit has demonstrated an improvement in the quality of IRO practice.

Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>There has been an Increase in the overall number of Looked After Children</i></li> <li>• <i>51% of children in our care are in placements outside of Middlesbrough, 20% are over 20 miles from Middlesbrough</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>19% of children in care are subject to Interim Care Orders</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• <i>The number of children who have 3 or more placements has reduced from 9.7% to 5.8%, there has been an improvement year on year</i></li> </ul>
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	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Number of Children who came into our care	242	158	203
Children who ceased to be looked after	186	163	151
Children LAC at year end	442	445	515
% reviews held in timescales	89%	80%	90%

The most significant increase in placement types of children coming into care is Foster Placement with relative or friend (Connected Carers).

**Child Protection Performance**

	2016-7	2017-18	2018-19
Number of ICPCs	373	267	363
% of ICPCs in timescales	90.6%	69.3%	81%

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>There has been an increase in the number of children who are subject to a Protection Plan for over 2-years</i></li> <li>• <i>There has also been an increase in the number of children who are subject to 2<sup>nd</sup> and Subsequent plans.</i></li> <li>• <i>There has been an increase in the number of Initial child protection conferences held within timescales</i></li> </ul>
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Throughout 2018/19 there was 19 children who were subject to a Protection Plan for over 2-years. As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019 there was 6 children. There is evidence of formal IRO Challenge due to drift and delay in 1 case (3 children) and the challenge was upheld by the Director of Children’s Care. A Challenge Clinic took place on 19th February 2019, chaired by Head of Service for Assessment and Care Planning with representation from the Quality Assurance, Independent Reviewing Officer. All of the children/young people were discussed at this clinic. All of the children were either already being monitored by Senior Managers at Legal Gateway Panel or we referred to Legal Gateway Panel immediately following the Challenge Clinic demonstrating that there is additional scrutiny in place.

[Review of 2018-19 priorities](#)

Strengthen the Partnerships commitment to the ownership of risk

**Embed signs of safety**

During 2018/19 the Independent Reviewing Officers have been fully trained in Signs of Safety with an additional session held to complement their role as Independent Child Protection Conference Chairs. The training was delivered on a regional basis, this enabled shared learning about what a good conference looks like not just in Middleborough but across 4 neighboring authorities. The Signs of Safety model continues to be developed, the RAD unit tested the quality of practice through an audit in November 2018 and found;

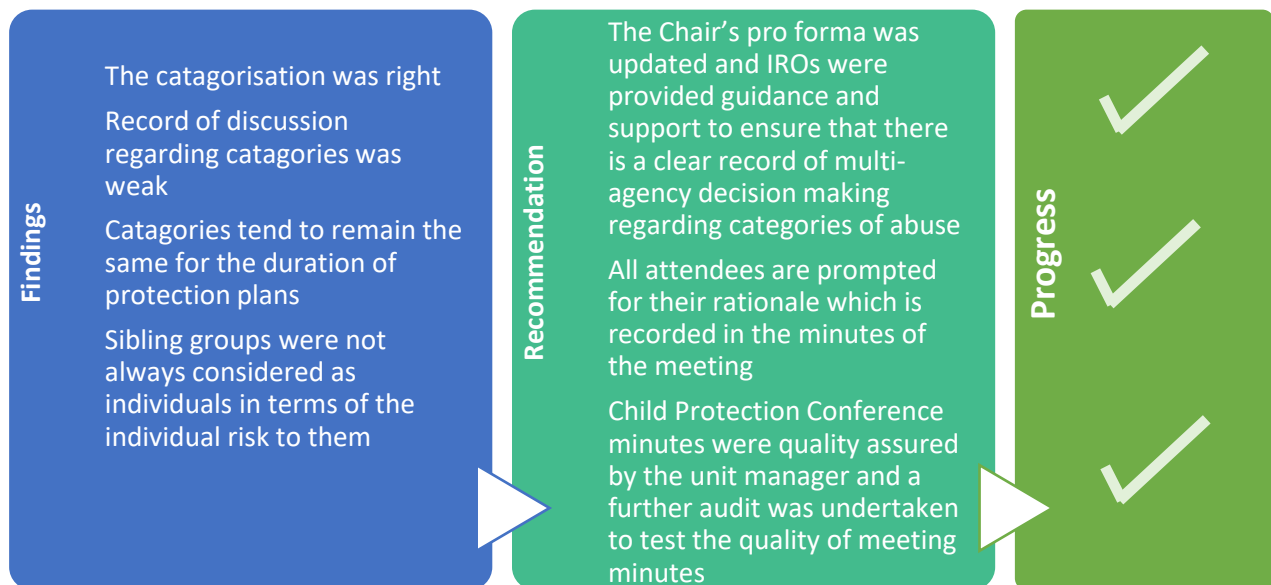


These actions have since been embedded and as Practice Leads in Signs of Safety the Independent Reviewing Officers monitor the quality of Danger Statements and Safety Goals being presented at Initial and Review Conferences and ensure that the family fully understand what professionals are worried about and what needs to change.

Direct observations of practice at the year end demonstrated improvement in Signs of Safety Practice within child protection. A majority of conference reports now include a Danger Statement and Safety goal, some reports differentiate between risks and complicating factors, strengths and safety. In all conferences is it clear what professionals are worried about. However, to further develop signs of safety within conference this will remain a priority in 2019-20.

**Ensure the appropriate categories of abuse are used in Child Protection Conferences**

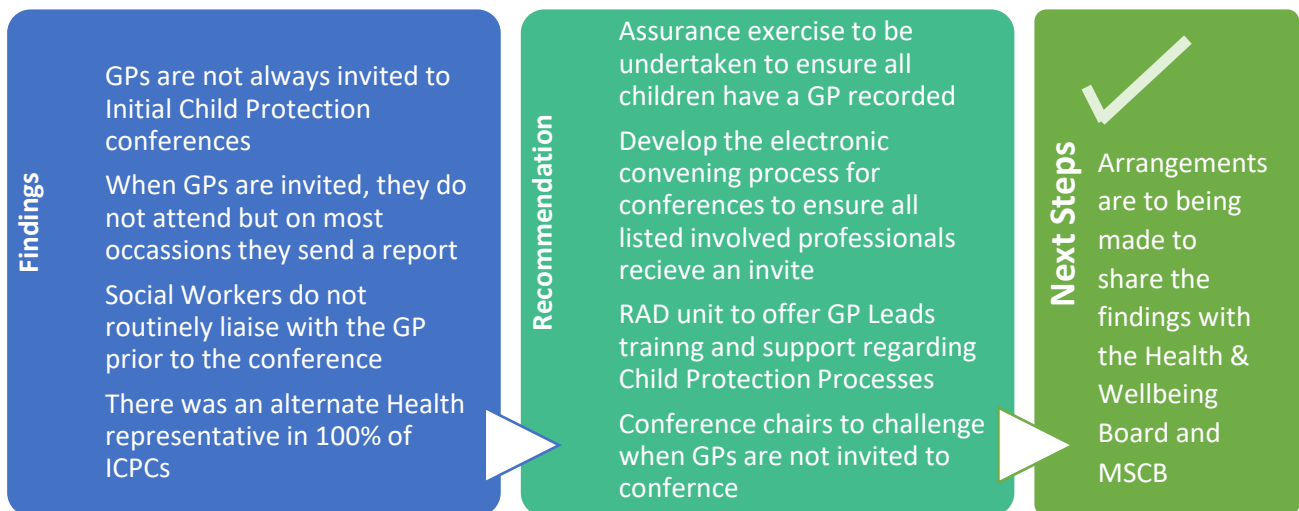
In September 2018 96% of the children subject to a protection plan were under the category of Emotional Abuse and Neglect. The purpose of the audit was to test out multi-agency categorisation in conference and provide information and assurance to the members of Middlesbrough's Local Safeguarding Children's Board about the use of categories in Child Protection Planning.



A further audit and direct observations of practice demonstrate that improvements are being made with 7/7 conferences observed demonstrated that the decision making was clear. However in 1 of these conferences the parent was not clear and this had to be explained again by the chair. Minutes now reflect a better of quality information from all agencies being recorded. However, practice remains variable and there is a Child Protection Minutes improvement plan arising from the audits undertaken, which will continue throughout 2019/20.

### Quality assure Partners contribution to Child Protection Processes

More recently a group has been established to audit the quality of GP contributions at Initial Child Protection Conferences, this is in response to some national learning in Derbyshire, a decision was made to replicate the audit regionally and agree some joint actions to improve practice in this area. Middlesbrough's local audit has been undertaken and findings are being shared with the Health and Wellbeing Executive Board and Local Safeguarding Children's Board, in addition to this with further regional learning will be drawn together analysed and shared with partners to improve practice as a region. This is a multi-agency audit across 4 regional neighbours, it is led by a Designated Safeguarding Paediatrician at James Cook University Hospital in partnership with the RAD unit manager for each authority.



There has been a number of **multi-agency audits** coordinated by Middlesbrough's Safeguarding Children's Board that IROs have contributed to throughout the year including Child sexual abuse within the Family (CSAFE) and Missing children. The finding from these includes learning for the Independent Reviewing Service and is monitored via the Performance, Monitoring and Evaluation Group which is attended by the RAD unit Team Manager.

Parental substance misuse has been a significant issue in recent Serious Case Reviews in Middlesbrough, in order to improve the quality of multi-agency work with parents who misuse substances the RAD unit continues to meet regularly with Foundations (prescribing GP) to break down any barriers that prevent information sharing at conference. Since this work commenced in 2017/8 the quality of information sharing and attendance at conference has improved significantly, Foundations are often present and able to share their expertise to explain the content of the report and potential impact of changes to treatment plans on parents and their children. Foundations have also attended Signs of Safety Trainings which has supported this work.

In line with IROs in Middlesbrough improving their contribution to Care Proceedings, RAD unit has now implemented regular network meetings with CAFCASS so that CAFCASS and IROs can work more collaboratively and challenge any plans accordingly. During 2018/19 a joint networking session took place between IROs and Family Court Advisors to encourage relationship building, networking and learning from practice themes. This session is now being arranged for the coming year to continue to build on the work during 2018/19.



## Working together with North East 12 Authorities

- North East
- North West
- Yorkshire and Humber
- East Midlands
- West Midlands
- Eastern
- Greater London
- South East
- South West

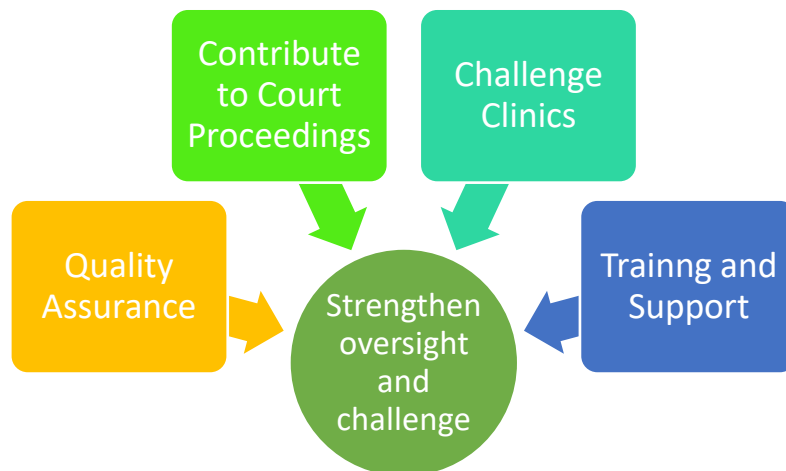


During 2018/19 The RAD unit has forged links with the wider regional IRO group and is now part of the North East 12 IRO Regional Group. The group itself has been a forum for networking, sharing good practice, in 2018/19 Middlesbrough were invited to attend their **Regional Conference** and during this year Middlesbrough has also been involved in planning the next Regional conference which will take place in October 2019. There is a shared training and Work programme which has recently involved developing the **audit** process to develop a shared

understanding of **what good looks** like across the region.

Overall 2018/19 has been positive year for joint working with regional neighbours and partners to begin to understand practice in relation to IROs as well as the Local Authority as corporate parents, there are action plans now developed to improve practice so that Social Workers, partner agencies and IROs demonstrate consistently good practice that promotes better outcomes for children and young people.

Safely reduce the numbers of children becoming looked after and improving the quality of the LAC practice



## Ensure Quality Assurance drives good practice

IRO's have further embedded the use of the **IRO and Conference Chair Monitoring Tool** before Looked After Reviews and Child Protection Conferences. While capacity issues have prevented the team completing 100% of audits, there has been consistent themes arising from audit which have been fed back as suggested ways to improve service delivery;

## Recommendation for service improvements in Children’s Social Care arising from Compliance Audits

<b>Looked After Reviews – What needs to improve?</b>		<b>Child Protection – What needs to improve?</b>	
<p>Meetings need to be arranged in a more timely way so that they can be held in statutory timescales and allow the child and family sufficient time to prepare</p> <p>The quality of reports submitted to Looked After Reviews need to be of a consistently good quality, some do not meet the required standard</p> <p>Children must be consulted prior to their review</p> <p>Advocacy and independent visitors need to be better promoted to increase the uptake</p> <p>Visiting frequency to Looked After Children must always meet the practice standard, i.e. children must be seen weekly after a placement move</p> <p>Family and significant others must be consulted and where possible involved in</p>		<p>Reports submitted to conference must be sent with enough time to allow the child/family and professionals to prepare for the meeting</p> <p>The quality of reports submitted to conference needs to improve so that all reports meet the required standard</p> <p>Children/young people should be consulted prior to conference (where appropriate)</p> <p>Professionals need to consistently consider life through the eyes of the child</p> <p>Multi-agency contribution to conferences and Core Group Meetings is variable (although they were all quorate)</p> <p>The Child Protection Plan must be finalised at the 10 day Core Group and reviewed in every subsequent Core Group Meetings</p>	

The themes arising from quarterly reports remains consistent, this demonstrates that the audits are not yet leading to improvement practice and therefore this remains a priority for 2019-20.

### **Strengthen the role of the IRO in Care Proceedings**

A paper published by NAIRO ‘A Measure to Improvement Effectiveness of the IRO Service’ in November 2018, the report is based on a review of Ofsted reports with as specific focus on the IRO service. One recommendation made as a measure to enhance the effectiveness of the IRO service is to “*Strengthen guidance on IRO involvement in care proceedings, placing a duty on IROs to make their views directly known about the LA’s care plan to the court, and a duty on LAs to facilitate that information flow*”. As part of the North East 12 (NE12) arrangement this has been implemented in Middlesbrough during 2018/19 and there is an expectation that IROs share their views directly with Court during all Care Proceedings. In the past the IRO has provided comments on the Local Authority’s Evidence Template, however this was not always successful as it was occasionally filed without IRO comments, this is now rarely an issue. During 2018/19 IROs have received positive feedback from Court in Middlesbrough in relation to their contribution to Care Proceedings. There have been case examples whereby IROs have been asked to remain involved post-proceedings to oversee a rehabilitation plan and report directly to the Judge on matters. In other occasions the IRO has been asked to continue to review the children for a set period to ensure that there continues to be a high level of scrutiny in relation to the child’s plan.

## Use Challenge Clinics to provide additional scrutiny and prevent drift and delay

Challenge clinics have taken place throughout the year, they are now embedded as part of the quality assurance and challenge processes. The themes that have been identified throughout 2018/19 are;

- Children who are subject to second and subsequent protection plans
- Child Protection Plans 15 months +
- Placement Orders 6 months +
- Children Placed with Parents
- Children who have had 3 or more placements in 12-months
- Children who are receiving short-breaks under S20
- Children looked after by family or friends with a focus on revoking the Care Order

## Provide Training and support to the workforce to improve the quality of practice

IROs are experienced practitioners with a wealth of knowledge and experience of a wide range of Social Work practice issues, IROs in the team have between 5 and 25 years post qualifying Social Worker experience and therefore IROs often support the rollout of training in a variety of settings, during 2018/19 this has included Foster Care prep-group, Looked After Service Team Meetings, Virtual School and within the ASYE training programme. The focus tends to be on the role of the IRO, drawing from legislation and guidance but has also included training on direct work with children, 'what good looks like' and a re-launch of the Care Planning Regulations. In the past year the IROs have become Practice Leads in Signs of Safety which is designed to build on strengths within the child and families own support network in a way that supports family to manage risk themselves and without the Local Authorities intervening and removing children to a place of safety.

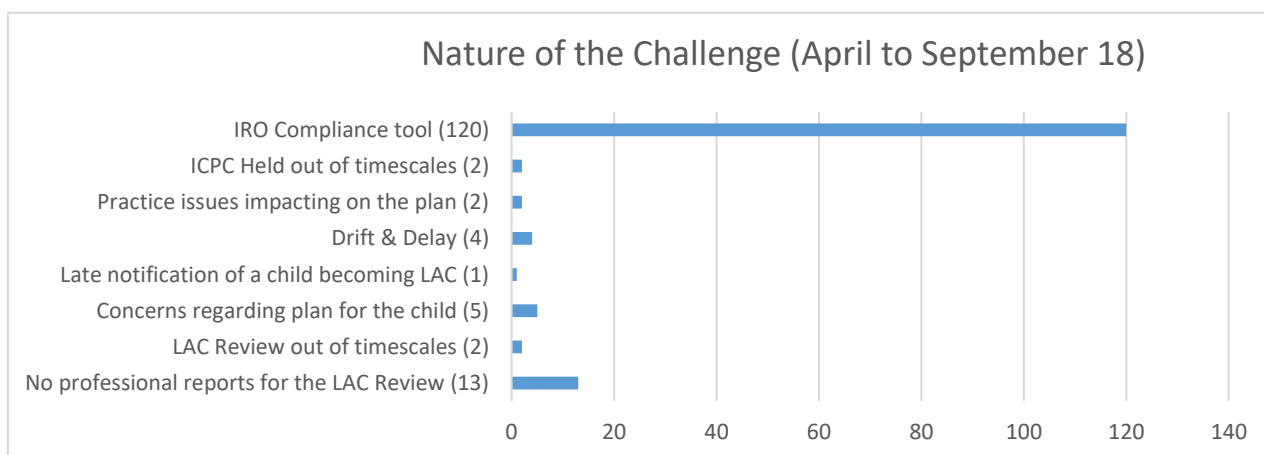
### Strengthen the IRO service

## Scrutiny & Challenge from the Independent Reviewing Officers

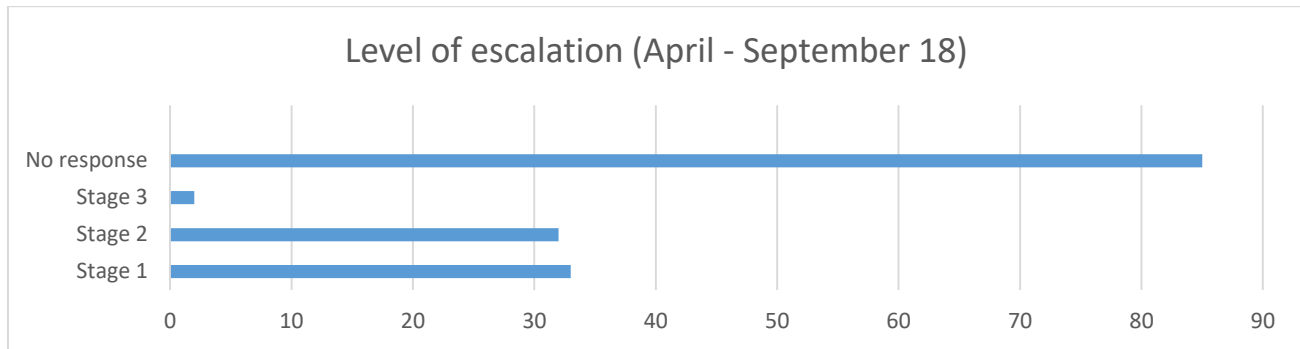
There has been a significant increase in the use of the Issues Resolution Process during 2018-19, in order to learn from themes and test the quality of challenge there has been 2 reviews undertaken. The first being April to September 2018 and then repeated in the last quarter, January – April 2019.

From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018 there were 152 IRO Alerts raised by the Independent Reviewing Officers;

## Reason for the Challenge



## Level of escalation



Breakdown of issues raised via the IRO compliance tool are

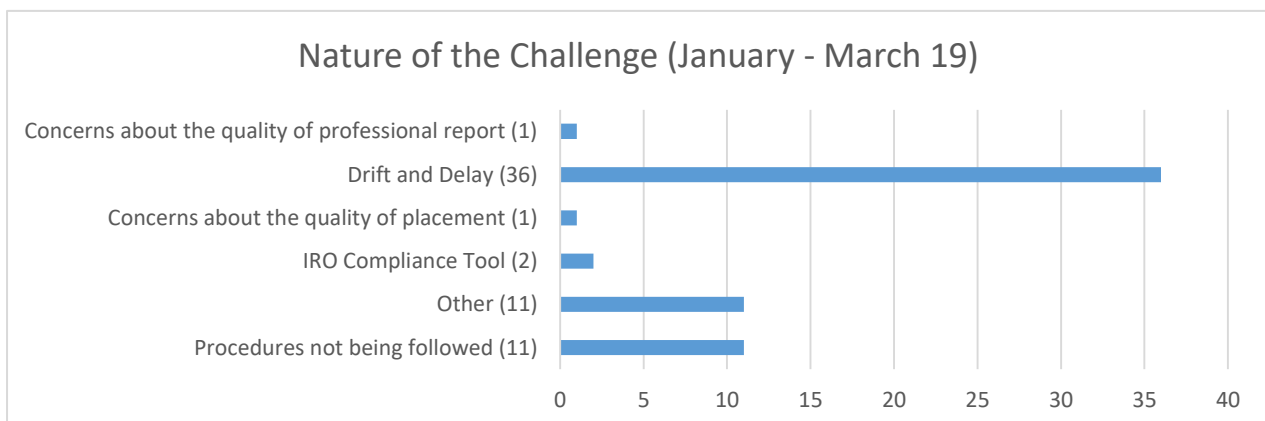
- The paperwork was not completed prior to the Looked After Review
- Decisions were not actioned from the previous Looked After review
- No up to date Single Assessment to inform the plan
- The views and wishes of young people did not inform are planning
- Children/Young people are not always consulted prior to their review
- The children's basic demographics on LCS are not always up to date
- The quality of the LAC Review report being produced did not meet the required standard
- The Child Protection Plan is not always reviewed in Core Group Meetings
- Professionals do not always see life through the child's eyes.

The spread of a range of issues at that stage suggested there was not a particular area of systematic concern, but rather issues arising on a case by case basis. Internal audit reports were undertaken to break down the issues arising from IRO Compliance Audits, these are reported to the Heads of Service on a quarterly basis to address the range of issues both positive and otherwise.

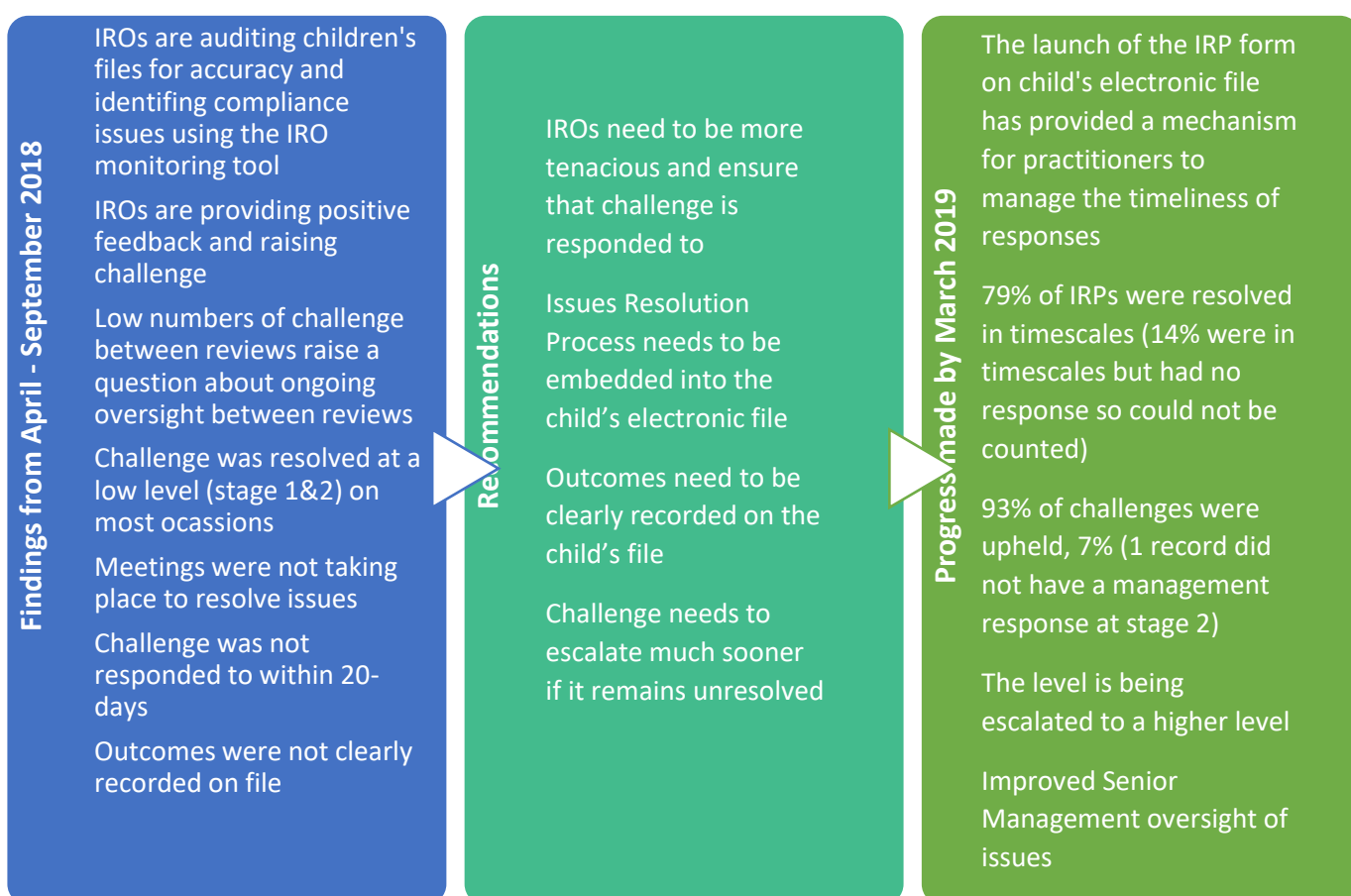
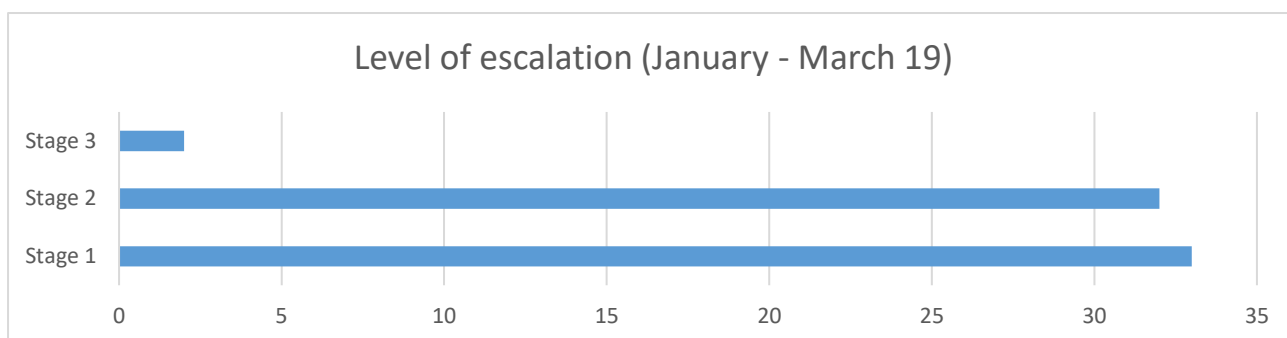
## Review of findings March 2019

A further review of IRO Challenges raised during January and March 2019 identified that there had been a further 62 formal challenges raised by IROs in that period. The nature and level of escalation has changed demonstrating a shift in practice by both Children's Social Care and the Independent Reviewing Officers.

## Reason for the Challenge



For those recorded as 'other' the issues include changes in contact that were not ratified in a review, concerns about a placement for a Looked After parent, visiting frequency following a placement move, Social Work visits and oversight does not meet the practice standards.



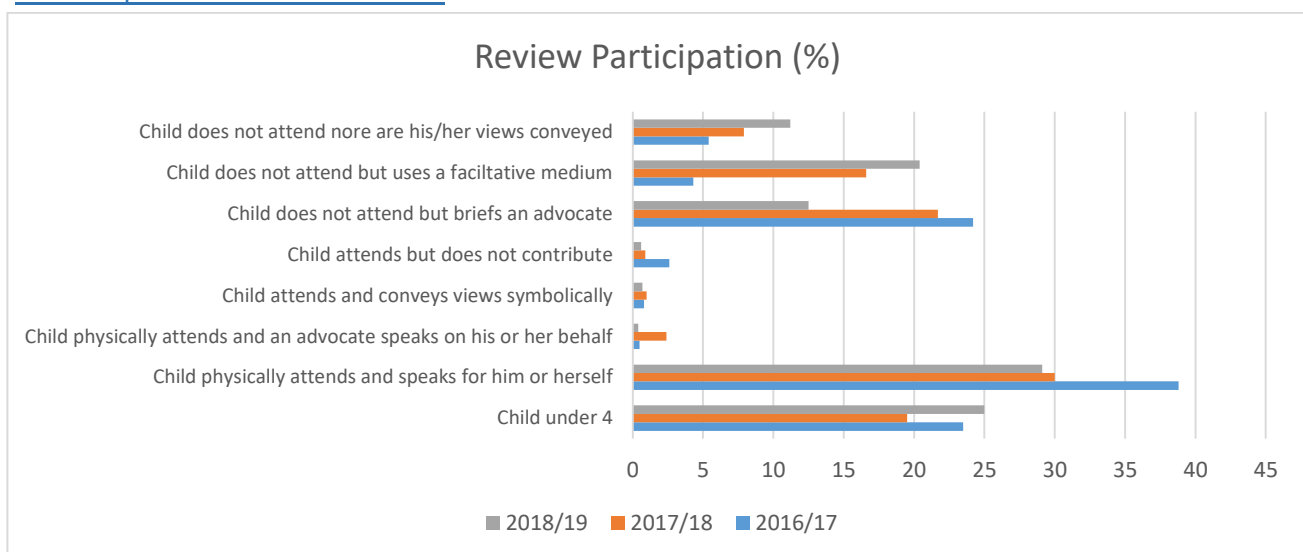
There have been a number of challenges upheld by the Director of Children's Services during 2018/19 and action plans implemented. Two challenges in particular were in relation to children in connected carers placements whereby the Fostering Standards are not met but the Local Authority believe that the placement is the right one, this led to a change of process and review of children in these circumstances. At that time it was felt that the National Guidance on Family and Friends Care was not being fully considered and more could be done to support children in Connected Carers placements. Another significant challenge upheld was in relation to the use of Family Arrangements to care for children, again this resulted in a review of children in these arrangements to ensure that those children's rights to being a Looked After child were fully considered.

## Smarter use of customer feedback

### How we engage Children and Young People?

- Visit children before their review and encourage them to participate in their review
- Ask for feedback from children/young people and their parents/carers on the quality of the service they receive.
- RAD unit has a lead for communication with children with a disability, the nominated IRO is Makaton Trained and has a background in working with children with a disability.
- Nominated IRO links to Children's Homes, including the specialist provision for children with disabilities
- Refreshed consultation forms for children/young people with the support of the Children in Care Council
- IROs routinely check that children are aware of their rights to an advocate and independent visitor
- The RAD unit has been a key part in establishing and running a 'Mini CICC' group for children aged 7-14, this group has been established alongside the Child Participation Officer for the Local Authority and it provides a forum for younger children to share their views about being a Looked After Child and to consult in service improvements.

## Participation & Feedback



- There was an increase in Looked After Reviews held during 2018/19, 25% of these were in relation to children under the age of 4
- 11.2% of children/young people did not attend their review and did not convey their views through another means. It will be a priority in 2019/20 to reduce this cohort of children
- More children used a facilitative medium, i.e. a family member to express their reviews in their review which may coincide with an increase in family and friend placements.
- Less children used an advocate to express their views during their LAC review, which was also identified during IRO compliance audits. IROs will continue to promote advocacy for children in care.

# What you told us we need to do differently and our promise to **you**

## WHAT PARENTS/CARERS SAID

The meeting was too early  
Lack of communication with invites  
I want to know who is coming and who is not in advance  
The room was boring  
They should have listened more  
For them to be honest

## WHAT PARENTS/CARERS SAID

We would have all liked time to prepare for the meeting and to have read and processed the reports before it went ahead  
More time to read the reports  
More structure, for things to progress as promised  
No table, very intimidating  
Feel more positives should be acknowledged

## WHAT WE WILL DO

We will provide training to Social Workers about how to convene a Looked After Review in a child focussed way  
We will keep checking how soon before Reviews the reports are sent to parents and we will share this with Senior Managers who can improve performance  
We will better use signs of safety to talk about what is working well in your family



# Children and Young People's Comments : LAC



## What has helped the most?

Updated throughout, I know what is happening, keeping the same IRO from the start

I get a boost of confidence from my IRO, social workers and foster carers.

Explaining plans to me, happy about the plan to go home.

My IRO being friendly and helpful in meetings.

Friendly environment, happy all round.

I got to share my opinion and say what I liked and didn't like.

## What did you like about the review?

People have listened to me by progressing contact and they have noticed and appreciated how well I am doing.

All my wishes and feelings were listened to and I got my answers.





## Summary

The Review and Development unit has faced a number of challenges throughout 2018-19 in relation to capacity and demand but despite this the performance overall has improved both in terms of timeliness of reviews but the quality and strength of challenge. The issues resolution process is embedded within practice and challenge is now listened to and responded to at an operational and senior level, this has meant that the work of the IRO service has brought about change and improved ways of working. The RAD unit has been significant part of audit activity on a single and multi-agency level, despite rich learning from audit there is further progress to be made in supporting improved practice as audit themes have been the same throughout the year.

This report sets out how the RAD unit has met the service objectives set out for 2018-19, there has been significant developments met against the objectives, however work undertaken throughout the year has brought about further learning and the team again remains ambitious in terms of ensuring that year on year we evidence of having a positive impact on the performance of the Local Authority as corporate parents. The RAD unit will continue to work closely with colleagues in Children's Care to bring about appropriate challenge to tackle emerging themes and embed learning from 2018/19 in the work that is being undertaken in 2019/20 to ensure that plans for children and families meet individual needs and give full consideration to their wishes and feelings, that children and young people are safeguarded, and treated with respect. The RAD unit will continue to hold partners accountable for the service they provide, minimise delay, and promote positive outcomes for children and families.

The RAD unit will continue to drive a child focussed approach to everything that we do. This will ensure that children are listened to and that their wishes are given sufficient weight, both in relation to their own plan and improvements to overall service delivery.

## Priorities for 2019/20

1. To ensure that children and young people are given the opportunity to share their views and ensure that they are respected, listened to and involved, in line with the Corporate Parenting Strategy. For the RAD Unit this means increasing the number of children seen before the review with a target of 95%. Ensure that children are central to decision making and their views are recorded in the Looked After Reviews and Child Protection Conferences which will be monitored through audit and direct observations of staff. A robust feedback mechanism needs to be established to ensure that children and young people are always given the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the service they receive.
2. The RAD unit will ensure that children and young people are aware of their rights and that this is discussed in each looked after review.
3. The RAD unit will ensure that the child/young person's family are involved either through attendance at statutory reviews and conferences or by consultation as part of a series of meetings.
4. Improve on the multi-agency contribution to the Looked After and Child Protection Processes. To do this the RAD unit must ensure that the right people attend conferences and looked after reviews. Ensure that Care Plans for children pull together a holistic view of the child into a SMART Care Plan and that outcomes and minutes are shared with children, families and partners in a timely way.
5. To improve on the timeliness of child protection conferences and reviews taking place (with a target of 98%) and subsequently the outcomes and minutes being shared within

statutory timescales so that the child, family and professionals are all clear about the plan

6. The RAD unit needs to continue to raise challenge on an individual and service level in relation to practice issues and ensure that there is a robust mechanism in place that promotes learning across the wider service to enable change. Challenge needs to be timely and escalated without delay to ensure that it is resolved within the timescales for the child.
7. The RAD unit will strengthen working relationships with CAFCASS by facilitating regular networking and training sessions for Family Court Advisors and the IROs. The IROs will also ensure they have early and regular contact with the children's guardian during care proceedings to ensure that the plan progresses in a timely way and without delay for children and young people
8. The RAD unit needs to improve on the quality assurance of children and young people's files to ensure practice is compliant and of a consistently good quality. The IRO Compliance tool for Looked After children and Child Protection remains in place with a target of 95% completion prior to review. The information gathered through audit needs to be analysed and shared with the relevant service areas to support improved practice.