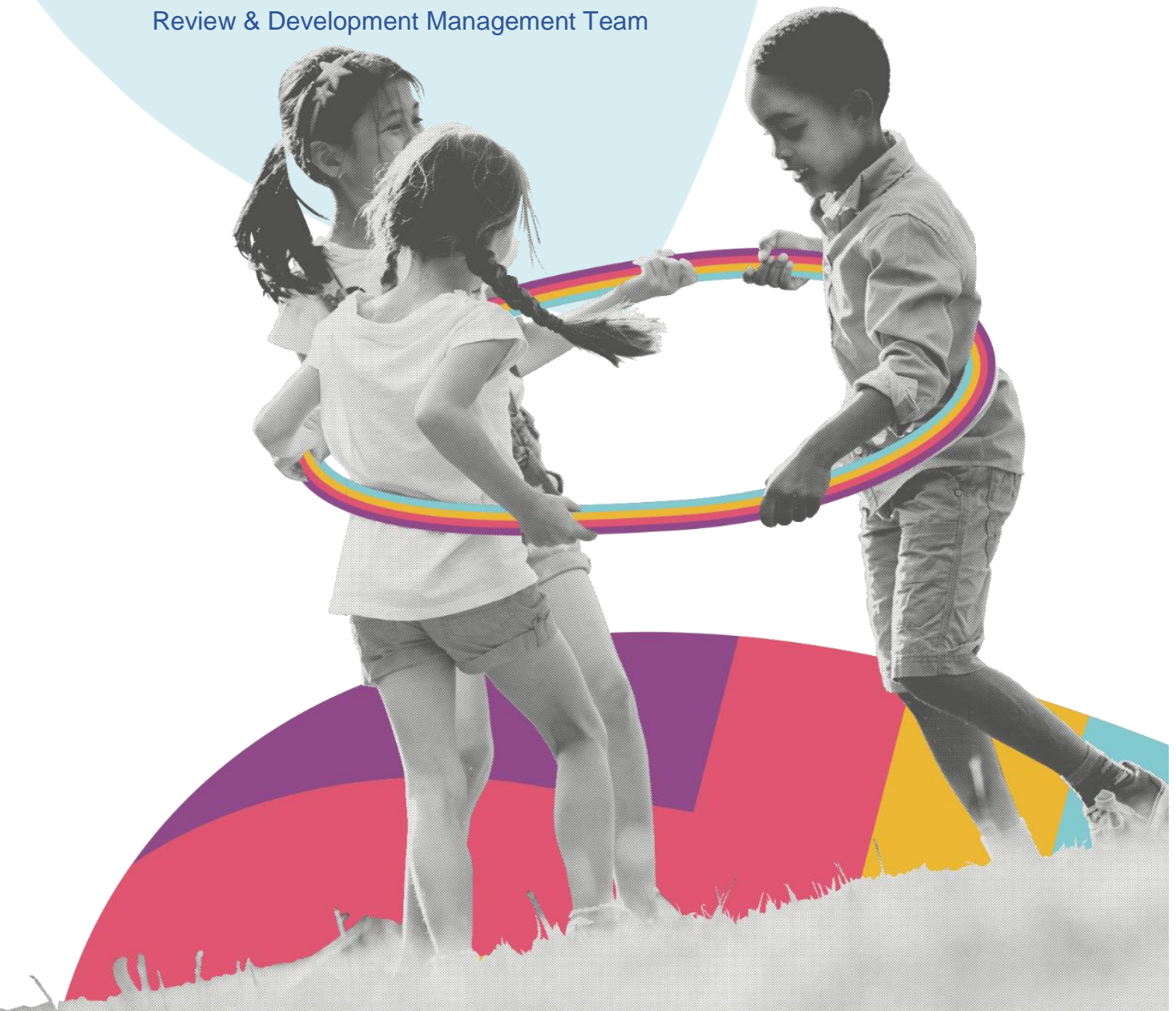


Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report 2021/22

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Purpose of the Annual Report

This report covers the period from the 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022. It provides an overview of the work undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs).

The report is a statutory requirement under *Section 7, paragraph 11 of the IRO Handbook*, which sets out that the manager of the IRO Service must provide an annual report on the delivery of the IRO Service, which can then be scrutinised by members of the Corporate Parenting Board. It provides information on the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and their contribution to improving outcomes for children in care and young people leaving care.

In Middlesbrough, the IROs have a dual role and therefore this report includes consideration of those children subject to a Child Protection Plan.

Legal Context and Statutory Function of the Independent Reviewing Officer

The appointment by the Local Authority of an IRO is a statutory requirement of the Local Authority. The statutory duties of the IRO are set out in Section 25B (1) Children Act 1989 which are to:-

- Monitor the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to the child's case;
- Participate in any review of the child's case;
- Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority; and
- Perform any other function which is prescribed in Care Planning Regulations.

There are two clear and separate aspects of the function of an IRO:

1. Chairing the child's review; and
2. Monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.

The IRO handbook sets out the statutory roles and duties as well as the strategic and managerial responsibilities of Local Authorities in establishing an effective IRO service.

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 IROs within Middlesbrough are employed in a dual role. In addition to being Independent Reviewing Officers for children and young people in care, they also have responsibility for the role of Independent Chair at Child Protection Conferences. The benefit of combining the two roles means that there is a greater level of consistency and oversight for those children and young people who transition from Child Protection and become children in our care. These children and young people can then benefit from continued relationships with Independent Reviewing Officers who know them to support improved outcomes for them irrespective of a child's status.

Independent Reviewing Officers

The IROs are co-located in the Review and Development Team (RAD Team). The Team comprises of 14 FTE Independent Reviewing Officers, overseen by 2 Team Managers. The Team has a wealth of skills and expertise from experience within Safeguarding Care Planning, Children in Care, Early Help, substance misuse, exploitation and children with disabilities. The range of skills within the Team are complementary and fosters a culture of learning and development.

The Team has developed specialisms including IROs for children in care who are 16 plus and also to undertake reviews of foster carers.

From 2019 to 2021, caseloads for the IROs increased from 70 to 114 children each. Statutory guidance recommends caseloads for Independent Reviewing Officers of approximately 70 children. Over 2021/22 to promote good practice, additional resources have been temporarily provided to the Team through an additional 3 agency IROs. This has resulted in caseloads reducing over the year to an average of approximately 75 children per IRO.

The Team has remained stable, with most of the IROs having been in post for over 5 years and they are well established in their roles.

The position of the Team in the Children's Directorate structure has remained the same throughout 2021/22. The Team have direct access to the Director of Children's Services (DCS), Sue Butcher, and meet with her on a regular basis to share their insight into the challenges and improvements in practice and plans for children.

To provide assurance, the IRO Team report progress to the monthly Quality and Performance Clinic chaired by the Director of Children's Care.

The Team also contribute to a range of Panels which provide senior management oversight of planning for children. These include:-

- Legal Gateway Panel
- Permanency Monitoring Group
- Pre-birth Panel

What OFSTED have told us about the role of the IROs

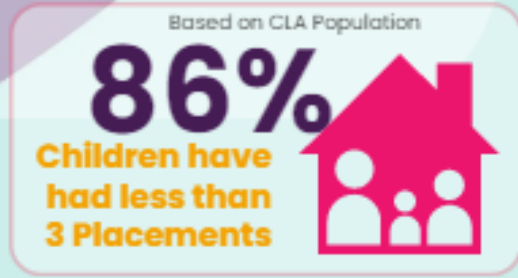
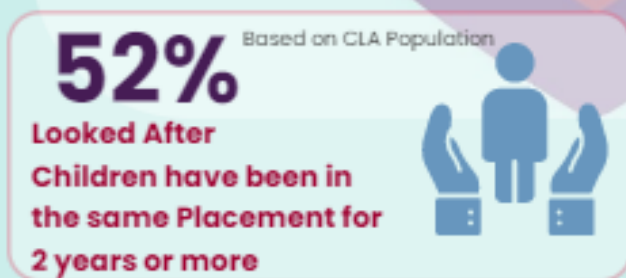
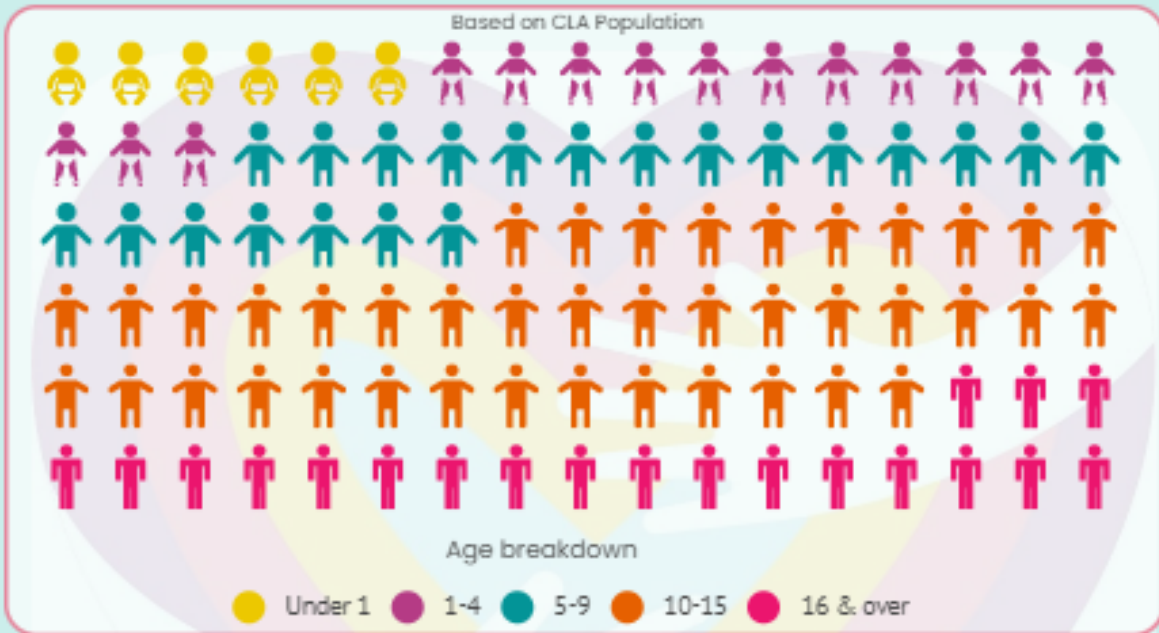
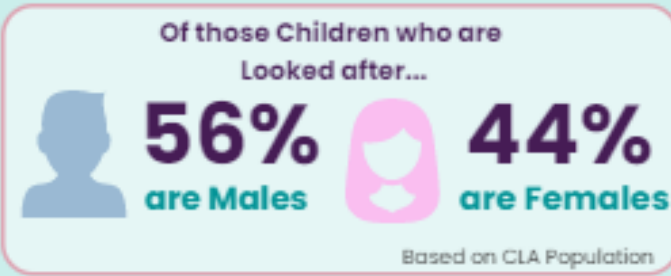
OFSTED's Monitoring Visit of March 2022 regarding planning and decision making for children in care reported that:-

'There is an improved oversight of independent reviewing officers. Mid-point reviews between the IRO and the social worker keep plans on track. Children know their IRO and are visited by them before their review. This is ensuring that children's views are known and are informing care planning.'

This view is confirmed by our own oversight of IRO practice through performance and quality assurance activity which indicates improvements in practice over 2021/22.

MEET CHILDREN IN OUR CARE

If Middlesbrough was a village of 100, 2 children would be in our care...





24 Children were adopted



Based on year 2021/22



18 Children have a Placement Order waiting for Adoption



Based on CLA Population

199 Children entered Care
 This is a 12% decrease from the previous year 2021



Based on CLA Population

276

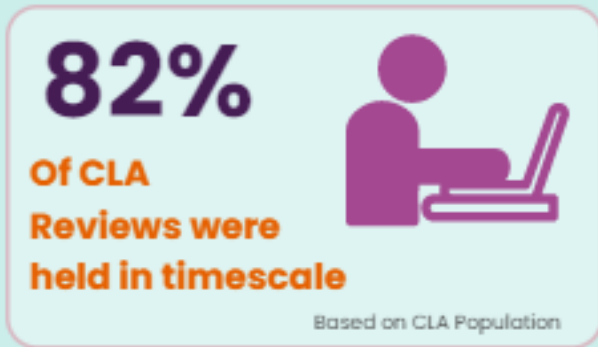
Children left Care
 This is a 3% decrease from the previous year 2021



Based on CLA Population

Of the children who left care
14% Have a Child Arrangement Order
 Have a Special Guardianship Order **24%**
6% Return home to live with parents, relatives or other person with parental responsibility





Key Messages about Children in our Care

If you are a child in our care, you are more likely to be male (56%), than female and White British, although there are more children from minority ethnic communities entering our care in the past year (+2.1%).

It is more likely you will be cared for by foster carers and have had less than 3 home moves (87%), and you are likely to have lived in your home for over 2 years (52%). There's a likelihood that you will continue to live in Middlesbrough (almost 50%), but for some (21%) you will live over 20 miles from home.

273 children left our care in 2021/22. When you leave care, it is likely you now live with parents or extended family (24% Special Guardianship Order, 14% Child Arrangements Order, 6% home with parents or another person with/without PR). Increasing numbers of children, 9% were adopted over the year and 3.4% of children have a Placement Order and are waiting to be matched.

When your care plan is being reviewed you are more likely to send your views through another person or in writing (44%) than you are to attend in person. If you don't feel able to share your views yourself, you might have an advocate to help you (5%). To help you prepare for your review your IRO may visit or call you (68% of reviews, a 25% increase on 2020/21) to encourage you to be part of the process and capture your views.

Your reviews should be either 3 or 6-monthly and most are on time (82%, and increase if 7% on 2020/21), our target is 95%.

How the IROs provide quality assurance

If you are a child in our care, your IRO is responsible for quality assurance, which means checking that you have had a say in your plan, making sure you get the right support that meets your needs, and that there is an accurate record of everything that happens.

Independent Reviewing Officers will look at your records, visit you and speak to your parents and carers. They also speak to your social worker between Reviews to make

sure your plan is right for you. The cumulative evidence of IRO oversight including visits and midway reviews, on your case records has improved by 52% since last year.

IROs also complete a 'Monitoring Tool'. These are saved on your record and if your IRO has any worries they will use this tool to share with your Social Worker and their Manager so that things can be resolved for you. The Monitoring Tool is being used more often but not yet 100% of the time. The areas IROs have raised are about reports to reviews being late or about visits to you.

When there is a delay or the outcomes we are hoping for are not always achieved for you, the IROs role is to challenge when this happens, In Middlesbrough this is called 'Issues Resolution Process'.

IROs raised 88 challenges last year on behalf of children in our care, most of these were about drift and delay (42%), Some were raised because the plan was not appropriate (26%) and the rest were due to things like; concerns they found when completing the IRO Monitoring Tool, or life story work was not completed. The IRO will monitor the response to their challenge to make sure it is resolved and in a timely way.

Learning from Disruption Meetings

Where there are concerns for the stability of a long term home of a child who is looked after, this should be identified and addressed at an early stage by the relevant professionals with a Stability Meeting which will put in place some actions to help to maintain the child in their home where it is the right thing for the child. These Stability Meetings are chaired by the Team Manager for the child.

A Disruption Meeting must be held for a child whose long-term home ends abruptly or in an unplanned way. These meeting is chaired by an IRO. The meeting focuses on the needs of the child and help the child and carers to move on while also informing future planning, particularly with a view to securing permanency for the child by preventing any future breakdowns. 13 Disruption Meetings were held throughout 2021/22. The children concerned spanned a range of ages from 4 years to 16 years

- For 10 of the children they were not suitably matched to their carer given their needs.

- The necessary therapeutic support was not put in place for 23% (3) children.
- An Advocate was not offered for 23% (3) children
- For a further 23% (3) children their wishes and feelings were not evident or captured through direct work tools and their life story work had not yet been completed.
- Training was not available to support foster carers meet the specific needs of 31% of (4) children
- For some children, 31% (4), family time plans were not clear and Family Group Conferencing did not progress.
- A consistent theme was that the majority of children would have benefitted from monthly care team meetings where the plan was robustly reviewed and progress explored.

During 2021/22 work has been undertaken to strengthen the arrangements of matching of children to their foster carers in a timely way and to increase the support to children and their carers through use of care team meetings and stability meetings.

What We Want to Improve for Children in Care

We want children to be safe and secure and happy where they are living. This means that children have plans of permanence as early as possible, and are part of developing their own plan. IROs must make sure that children's views are always meaningfully considered and that where children are willing/able to, they attend their review and co-chair.

We want all children to be seen before their review by their IRO, as well as keeping in touch between reviews to make sure that children and young people benefit from having a relationship with their IRO. For children who are not living in their forever home, this should be more often so that the IRO knows that the plan for the child is progressing, and if it's not, then this can be addressed as soon as possible.

We want IROs to raise issues (using the Issues Resolution Process) when there are concerns about the timeliness and quality of all plans for children, this includes care plans for permanence, EHCPs, PEPs and Health plans. In order to do this we want IROs to always carry out IRO Monitoring Tools as part of each review process. We

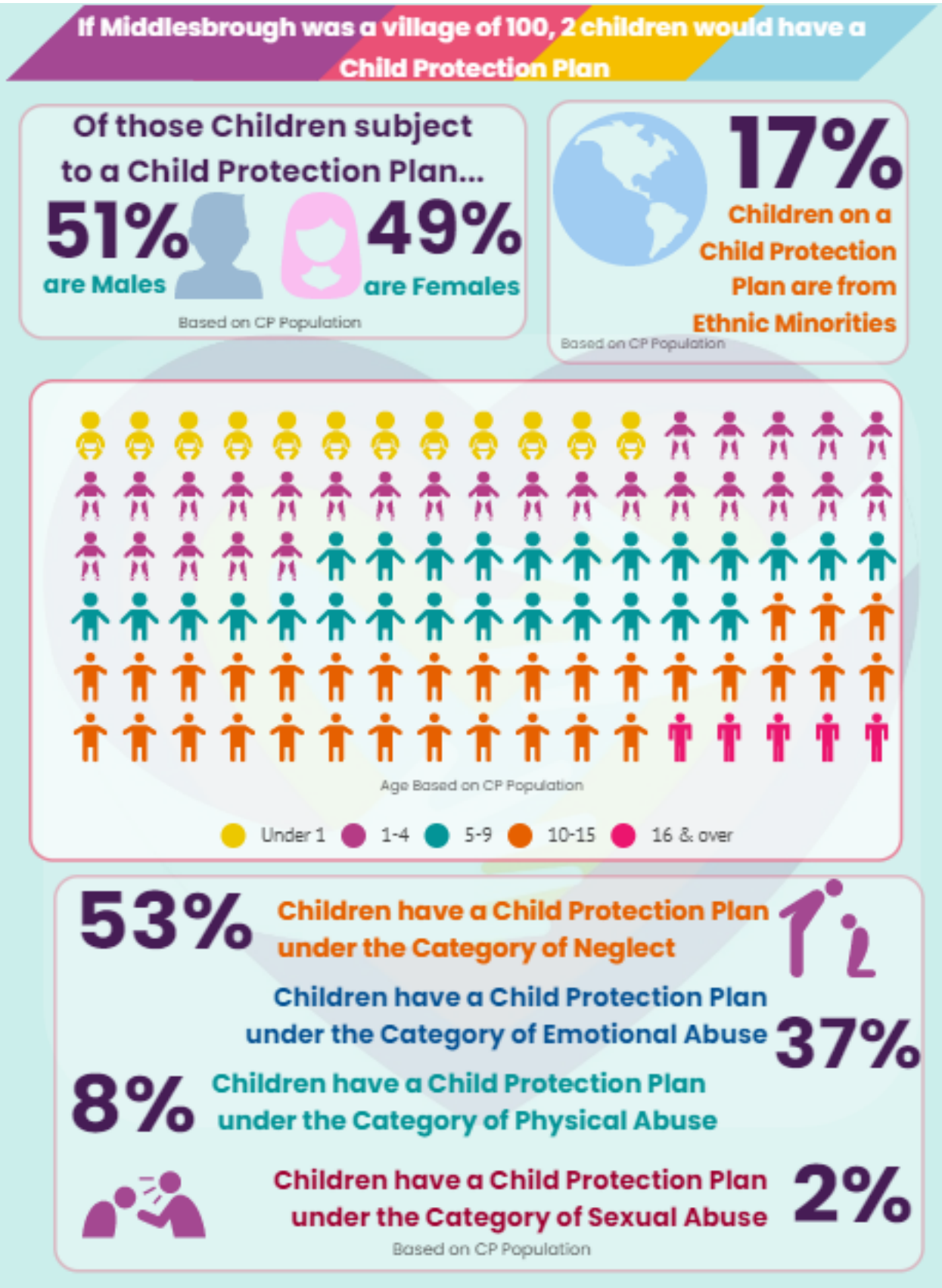
want these tools to make a difference for each child individually, and collectively be used to raise areas of good practice, or areas of improvement.

IROs will be working on making sure everyone who cares for you and works with you has high aspirations for you. This means that they will recommend plans for you that are specific to your needs with clear timescales about when things should happen.


What have children and young people told us about the IRO service?

‘You came across as a good and thorough professional who cares about children and gave full answers’ - *CHILD*


MEET CHILDREN WITH A CHILD PROTECTION PLAN




20% Children have had more than 1 Child Protection Plan Based on CP Population





83% Children had their ICPC in timescale






78% Children had their RCPC in timescale Based on CP Population



2% Children have been on a Child Protection Plan for over 2 years Based on CP Population

528 ICPCs & 300 RCPCs were held between **2021 - 2022**

Based on CP Population

Key Messages about our Children with a Child Protection Plan over 2021/22

From 1st April 2021, the number of children with a child protection plan in Middlesbrough has reduced from 567 to 416 children as at 31st March 2022. If you are a child in Middlesbrough with a child protection plan, you are more likely to be male than female (51%). You are likely to be White British, however 17% of children are from ethnic minorities.

You are most likely to be at risk of or suffering neglect (53%) or emotional abuse (37%). You are less likely to have a child protection plan because of physical (8%) or sexual abuse (2%). If you are 1 of 100 children who have had a child protection plan, it is possible that you have experienced 1 or more child protection plans (20%). Your child protection plan should not last more than 2 years (2% have).

Your Child Protection conference, where the decision is made whether you are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, should take place within 15-days of the decision being made to investigate harm. This has improved over 2021/22 with 83% of initial child protection conference happening in time. Once you have a child protection plan, it needs to be reviewed regularly. This has also improved with 78% of child protection plans being reviewed in time.

We know that we need to make child protection conferences accessible for children and young people who would benefit from being there and promote use of advocacy to support children's participation.

Quality Assurance for Child Protection

If you are a child living in Middlesbrough and you have a child protection plan, your Child Protection Chair (CP Chair/IRO) is also responsible for quality assurance. Independent Reviewing Officers review your records, and speak to your parents and carers before conferences. They also speak to your social worker between conferences to make sure your plan is right for you. The evidence of IRO oversight including use of midway reviews, on your case records has improved by 20% since last year.

IROs also complete a 'Monitoring Tool'. These are saved on your record and if your conference chair has any worries they will use this tool to share with your Social Worker and their Manager so that things can be resolved for you.

The Monitoring Tool has told us when your initial child protection conferences were held out of timescales, this was often because of 'staffing' issues, such as IRO, Social Worker or minute taker absence. To make sure that no child's conference is held late, if it can be avoided, all decisions to re-arrange conferences are made by Heads of Service. We found that the contribution of multi-agency partners through written reports was evident for most conferences. The IROs also found that your views were not always clear in all conferences and you are not always being asked if you would like an advocate (NYAS).

When IROs are worried about children with a child protection plan they can raise the issue through the same Issues Resolution Process that we use for children in our care. Over 2021/22 there were 70 issues raised by IROs. On most occasions this was due to their concern about plans for children, on some this is due to procedures not being followed or that reports had not been presented to conference in a timely way.

What we want to improve for our Children with a Child Protection Plan

We want all children to have a child protection conference in timescales, unless there is exceptional circumstances (so 95% of the time). When the conference takes place, we want everyone to feel properly prepared, particularly parents and the child. We want children to feel able to attend and speak at their conference, but if this isn't possible we want to make sure that children's views are gathered by professionals or an advocate and meaningfully contribute to the conference.

We want to make sure that between conferences your conference chair continues to check on the progress of plans, and if there is any worries about the plan not achieving the agreed outcomes, then the IRO will swiftly raise an issue. It's important this is done in a constructive way as a critical friend, working with the Social Worker and other professionals to address issues as early as possible for children. This will include making sure that Core Group Meetings happen regularly.

We want children to have child protection plans that make a positive difference with pace. This means we will have less children with plans that last over 15-months. We want less children to have more than 1 child protection plan. Middlesbrough aims to have children on a protection plan for as short a time as possible as targeted interventions should be effective in reducing the risk of significant harm and protecting the child.

We want to capture the voice of the child and support children to contribute to child protection conferences where appropriate.

Challenge Clinics

To monitor progress for children with a protection plan we have continued to hold regular Challenge Clinics with oversight from Senior Managers. There has been some success in this approach as it has allowed a clear focus on certain cohorts of children to address their needs and help us to understand any patterns in practice that we might need to change. We have particularly focused on;

- Child protection plans for children which have lasted over 12 months and also those over 2 years
- Children who have experienced more than 1 child protection plan.

What are the current trends?

- There was a decrease in number of children subject to a child protection plan
- As of 31st March 2022, the majority of plans (83%) had been in place for less than 12 months
- 9% had been in place for over 18 months
- 2% had been in place for over 2-years

Findings

- Strategy meetings are well attended by partners in the vast majority of cases.
- There is a tendency to enter Section 47 for some children more nuanced decision making around assessment may have been appropriate

- There are still some older children being made subject to a CP plan (aged 16 plus)
- There was some evidence of reluctance by partners to end the plan
- Direction from the Challenge Clinic in a number of cases for the Single Assessment to be updated to reflect current risk and determine if a child protection plan is still required.

Actions for individual children are overseen by the Head Service and wider learning to support practice improvement is disseminated through the Principal Social Worker's 'Learning Meeting'.

Feedback from Parents and Carers

"I am so grateful that E has yourself in her corner, hopefully things might finally change."

"Thank you, I really do appreciate your support, it just proves my point that I feel like everything is a battle and with you been back a week and having your emails things actually happen."

"Thank you for listening"

"You are the only person who has allowed me to be vocal in meetings. Thank you for that"

What is Audit telling us about the Role of the IRO?

Through the Audit to Excellence programme, 111 audits were completed over 2021/22 where the role of the IRO in planning for children was considered. Of these 111 audits, the contribution of the IRO was evaluated as Good in 35% of audits Requires Improvement in 56% of audits and Inadequate in 9% of audits.

Where IRO practice was seen to be strong there was clear evidence of the IRO knowing the child well, with robust IRO oversight on the child's record through with timely reviews, child focused plans, IRO visits to the child and midway meetings taking place to monitor arrangements for children.

For those audits where the IRO's practice was not assessed to be Good, there were examples where there was limited evidence of the IRO's footprint on the child's record, some instances of children not being visited prior to their Review or a lack of evidence of proactive IRO challenge to delays for children on the child's record .

In response to these findings, and to embed consistency of practice across the Team, we have implemented Practice Standards for IROs to work to and are working to a Team Plan to support IRO development. The outcome of audits regarding IRO practice is regularly monitored by the monthly Quality and Performance Clinic chaired by the Director of Children's Care.

What IRO Challenge tells us about the Experience of Children?

Over 2021/22, 158 IRO challenges were raised compared 198 in 2021/22. The majority, 86% were resolved within the 20 day timescale and at lower level, with only 10% requiring escalation to a Head of Service. No challenges were required to be raised at Director level or to CAFCASS.

The most common reason for IRO challenge is to address delay for children. This encompasses a range of issues from delay in providing a service to a child that is outlined on their Child Protection Plan or delay in achieving a plan of permanence for children in our care. Concerns about drift and delay resulted in 43% all IRO challenges.

IROs have also raised challenges where they consider that the plan for a child is not meeting their needs. This accounted for 26% of IRO challenges.

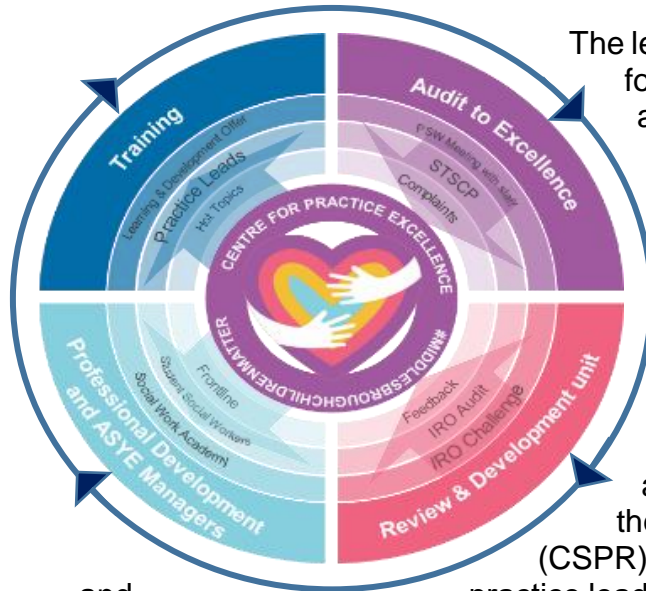
IRO challenge have been raised when procedures are not followed, such as the regularity of multi-agency meetings. Other, less common reasons for raising challenge are concerns about a child's placement (home) or where reports have not been available for Reviews or Conferences.

The Learning Loop

Following an IRO Audit or issue being raised through the Issues Resolution Process, the agreed actions/issues are recorded on the child's file and where appropriate a plan

of action is agreed with the child's social worker and Team Manager to address the issues. When this is not achieved, the issue is escalated to a senior level.

Whole Service Learning



The learning from all of the audits and issues raised formally through the Issues Resolution Process are analysed on a monthly basis by the IRO Team Managers. This allows us to understand themes arising from practice that need to be addressed with the whole service rather than on an individual level. The monthly analysis is shared at Director's Quality and Performance Clinics and the Principal Social Worker's 'Learning Meeting'. The purpose of the Learning Meeting is to bring together learning from all areas of service including audit, complaints, the South Tees Safeguarding Partnership (CSPR) and ensure that we have targeted training practice lead support in for our staff in Children's Services.

An Example where the impact of an IRO challenge made a difference

The IRO raised a challenge because she felt that an issue of potential Honour Based Violence had been overlooked. Following the challenge, mother and baby were supported to move initially to a refuge and are now living in a safe place. The court made a Finding of Fact that mother had been subject to Honour Based Violence by baby's father and his wider family and as a result the court directed that they were not to have contact with mother and the baby.

In response to the learning from this case, we have revised our procedures and practice standards and provided briefings to staff regarding Honour Based Violence.

Partnership Working

Partnership working is critical to the function of the Review and Development Unit. In order to strengthen relationships across the Partnership the Service Manager for the Review and Development Unit chairs a Safeguarding Networking Forum. The aim of

this group is to bring partners together at an operational level, to share information, discuss service updates, identify any barriers to good practice and address these together.

As well as working with local Partners, the Review and Development Unit has strong links with the 12 authorities in the North East. There is a shared work plan to promote the development of IRO practice with joint training.

Feedback from Partners

“IROs are welcoming and encourage appropriate professional challenge to ensure the best interests of the child and families are met.” - Police

“The IRO was gentle, calm, kind and measured with the family. She was reassuring whilst being completely direct, to the point, and honest about concerns when parents challenged them”. - Health professional

“I would also extend my gratitude to the Independent Reviewing Officer who has been integral to the children`s care plans and has been very responsive throughout proceedings. “ - Children`s Guardian within proceedings

Conclusion

The Independent Reviewing Officers maintain their focus on the children and families of Middlesbrough and are committed to making a difference for them. 2021/22 has seen improvements in the timeliness of child protection conferences and reviews for children in our care to progress planning for children. There is increased evidence of IRO oversight of children`s plans through midway reviews and IRO visits to children. IRO challenge has been sustained to improve arrangements for individual children and young people.

These areas remain priorities moving forward to 2022/23 so that practice across the Team is consistently of a high standard.

The IRO improvement journey will remain closely linked to the Children's Services' Improvement Plan and our priorities for 2022/23 are to;

- Improve compliance with key performance indicators (ICPC, RCPC, CLA Review timeliness)
- Increase child participation in meetings about them, including use of advocacy
- Strengthen the IRO engagement with children through visits and regular contact between reviews
- Gather the views of parents and carers regarding their experience of conferences and reviews
- Mid-way reviews are embedded and drive planning for children
- increased continuous oversight for those without stability and permanence
- Increased scrutiny and challenge from when permanence is not achieved in a timely way
- Strengthen the impact of IRO Challenge and demonstrate IROs have high aspirations for Middlesbrough children
- IROs contribute to the overall practice priorities of Children's Services by monitoring quality of performance and informing learning and development.