

Independent Reviewing Officers' (IRO) Annual Report

April 2019-March 2020

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, care leavers and those children subject to a Protection Plan during the reporting year April 2019 to March 2020. The report is in line with the statutory requirements. It was completed by the Review and Development unit Service Manager and based on comprehensive input from all IROs, business support.

Legal Context & Statutory Function of the IRO

The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that the care plans for our children and young people fully reflect their needs, ensure that their wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the Local Authority's statutory responsibilities. As Corporate Parents each Local Authority should ensure that they act for the children and young people they look after as a responsible and conscientious parent.

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

- 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 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 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 Director of Children’s Care. 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 come into our care. The children and young people can then benefit from continued relationships to support improved outcomes irrespective of a child’s status.

Team Structure



Review of 2019/20 Priorities and Setting the scene

The IROs in Middlesbrough work within the Review and Development unit, throughout 2019/20 there has been a number of changes to the frontline and senior management arrangements. During early 2019/20 the Head of Service post was deleted, the Team Manager post was evaluated as a Service Manager. The Service Manager is now responsible for operational line management of IROs and strategic planning for the unit. To increase independence of the IRO’s the unit was moved under the management of Director of Prevention and Partnerships, Rob Brown. The Service Manager maintained links with the then Executive Director of Children’s Care so that the IROs could provide a line of sight to front line practice, acting as a critical friend to Children’s Care.

Due to an increase in demand on the service (more children in our care and subject to a protection plan) two additional IRO posts were created. 1 IRO was seconded to a ‘Senior IRO’ position to support with management oversight of the IRO team.

During November 2019 Middlesbrough Local Authority was inspected by Ofsted using the Inspecting Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACs) Framework, the outcome was ‘inadequate’ in all 4 areas

(Impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families; the experience and progress of children who need help and protection; the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers; and overall effectiveness). The report makes a number of specific references to the IRO Service and improvements that must be made to the quality and effectiveness of IRO oversight and challenge. IROs have a duty to resolve problems arising out of the Care Planning process using guidance from the IRO Handbook, which involves escalating any emerging dispute regarding a child's Care Plan through the existing management structure and, as a last resort, externally to Cafcass. It is the task of each local authority to put in place a formal process for the IRO to raise their concerns, in Middlesbrough this is known as the Issues Resolution Process. It was a priority in 2019/20 to review and develop the process with a view to evidencing that the IRO challenge is having an impact on outcomes for children, this remains a key priority for 2020/21. The Issues Resolution Process must be consistently used to challenge concerns regarding practice in key areas identified by Ofsted, such as delay in permanence planning for children, delays in responding to neglect and children who are not receiving the right support at the right time. We will know this is working when children are safer as a result of IRO challenge and this can be demonstrated through thorough analysis of IRO challenge. During 2020/21 there will be a series of panels known as 'Challenge Clinics' to monitor effectiveness of IRO challenges. The Panel will be made up of the Service Manager for the IROs and Head of Service for the Social Work teams. The child's IRO, Social Worker and their Manager will attend, by appointment, to talk about what impact IRO challenge has had for children and young people. The outcome of clinics will feedback to senior managers in quality and performance workshops and to the workforce via the Principal Social Worker.

Children's Social Care has seen an increase in demand at all levels from Early Help to Children in our care. During 2019/20 the performance in some areas has declined meaning priorities set for last year, such as improving the timeliness of initial child protection conferences, have not been achieved and will continue to be a priority throughout 2020/21.

It is a positive that the % of children subject of a protection plan over 2-years has reduced from 8.6% to 4.5%. in 2019/20, however the focus has now shifted to those children who have been subject to a child protection plan over 15-months as we know from audit and from Ofsted that some children do not receive the right service at the right time. During 2019/20 a challenge clinic took place so that learning could be identified for individual children as well as themes that can be identified, understood and used to inform practice improvements. A report was produced by the RAD unit and shared with the senior management team (see page 16 & 17).

In order to improve outcomes for children, ensure timely progress of their plans the quality of child protection conferences and multi-agency decision making needs to improve. This was a priority in 2019/20 and remains a priority for 2020/21. We know from performance data that the timeliness of child protection conferences have declined, what we need to see is not only an improvement in compliance with statutory timescales but evidence that all agencies clearly identify risk, that risks are analysed within the conference to support professional judgements and decision making which lead to SMART plans and increase safety for our children. Work has been undertaken within the unit to re-launch practice standards for Child Protection Conference and this will be launched in 2020/21.

Children and young people continue to provide some feedback to the unit about their experience of being a child in our care or a child who is subject to a protection plan, however the feedback is not consistent and not yet used to inform service delivery. However, Middlesbrough’s young people are a key part of the recruitment process for Independent Reviewing Officers and any key changes to review and feedback documents is always done in consultation with the Children in Care Council (CICC).

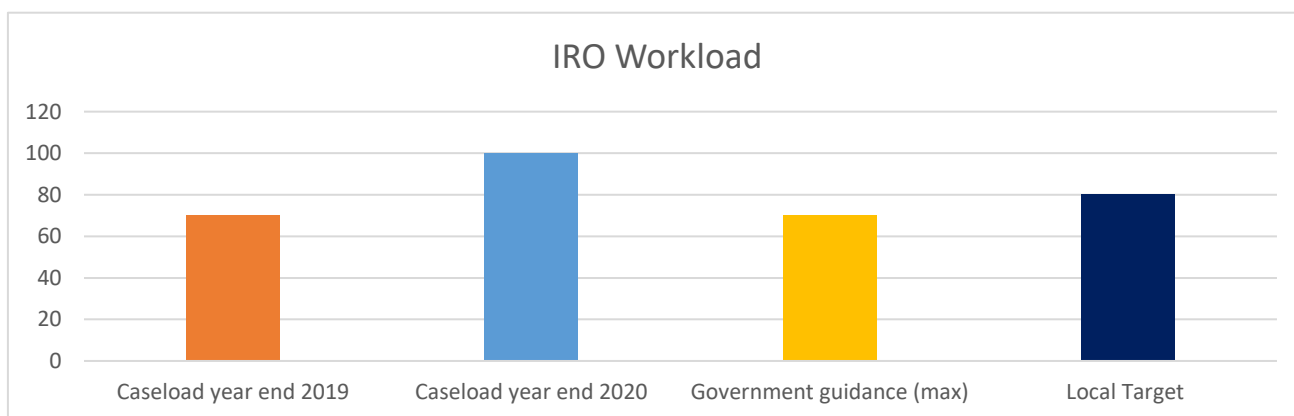
A Participation Officer (Apprentice) for the Review and Development Unit created a ‘Guide to being in our Care’ in consultation with our Mini CICC and Care Leavers Forum. The guide tells children and young people what they can expect from us as corporate parents, what their rights and entitlements are. The guide also includes jargon busters, key contact numbers for professionals who they are involved with. This was launched at a Youth Voice conference in 2019.

The RAD unit needs to continue to encourage more children to participate in their review, and if they want to, they should co-chair the meeting. It is an ongoing priority for 2020/21 to create a child friendly review process that enables children to fully participate in their review

The IRO workload and what it means for Middlesbrough children

The team is growing to meet the needs of Middlesbrough children, as more children come into care more IROs are needed to meet with children, young people and independently review their care plans.

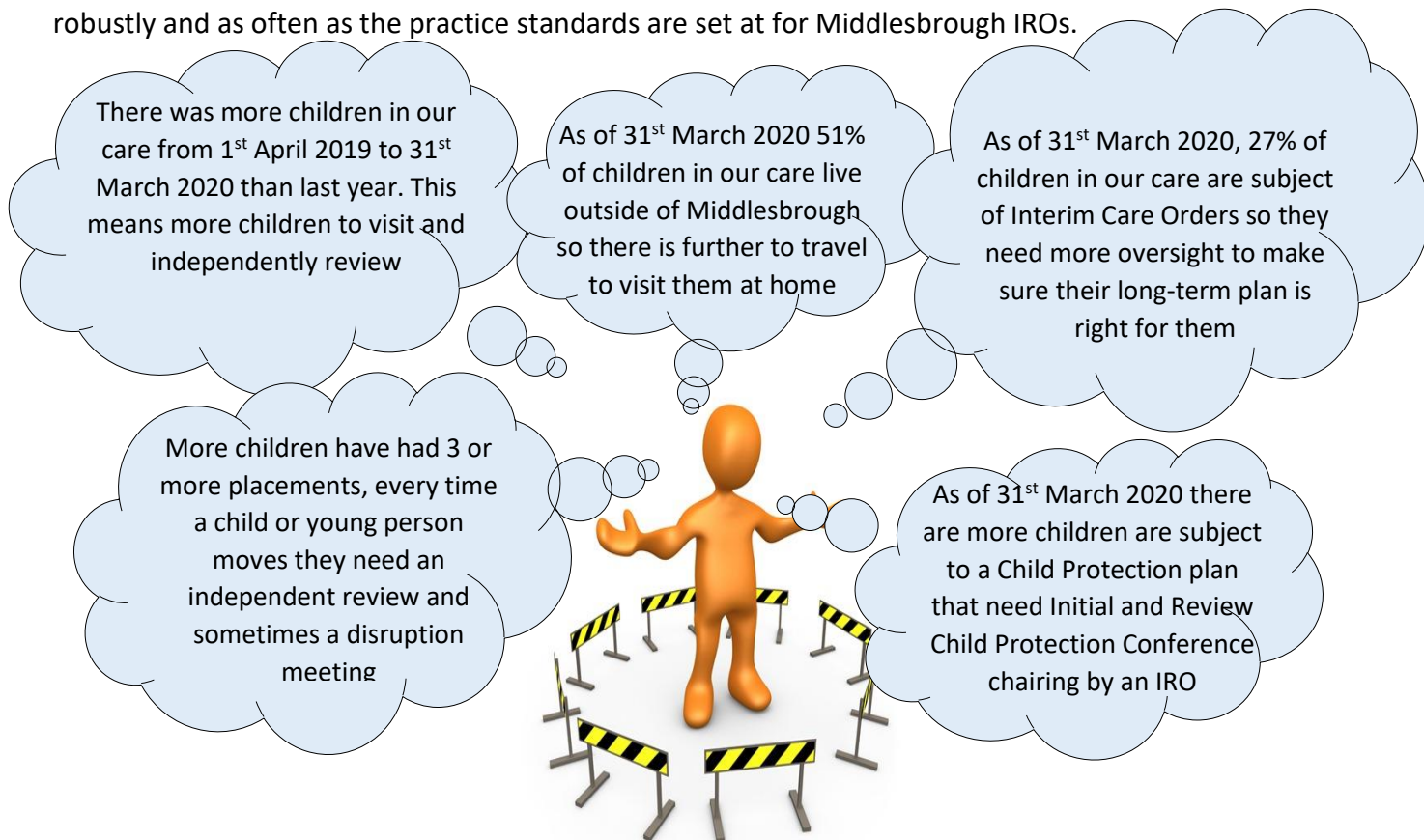
The caseloads for IROs in Middlesbrough has been above the government guidance set out in the IRO handbook as 50-70, and above the local target of 80. IRO caseloads at times have exceeded 100, which was the mean caseload average at the end of March 2020. For children in Middlesbrough this means that their IRO has less time to dedicate to the continuous oversight of their plan or to raise concerns that they have about care planning, drift and delay. In response to the increasing caseloads and the outcome of the Ofsted inspection in 2019 it was agreed that additional IROs were needed and those posts have since been approved and advertised but the impact is not yet seen.



The caseload numbers in isolation are not a clear indicator of the work undertaken by the IRO’s, as children and young people’s circumstance and situations vary in complexity, and in distance which

needs to be travelled. Children who are recently accommodated, placed at distance, involved in care proceedings or are in placement disruption require a higher level of scrutiny and oversight than children who are in long term settled foster placements. As Middlesbrough are on an improvement journey the oversight of an IRO must be robust and effective, high caseloads can be a barrier to that.

The IRO service needs to be a resilient and flexible service that can to respond to peaks in demand, whilst still maintaining high levels of continuous oversight and challenge practice issues when they impact on outcomes for children and young people of Middlesbrough. Since November 2019 the increase in demand has prevented IROs from being able to continuously review children's files as robustly and as often as the practice standards are set at for Middlesbrough IROs.



What did Ofsted say about IRO's in Middlesbrough?

1. The effectiveness of oversight from independent reviewing officers needs to improve
2. Independent reviewing officers provide inadequate scrutiny to ensure that children's planning is proportionate and that they are not subject to social work involvement unnecessarily. Some children, particularly those affected by long-term neglect, have waited too long for protective action.
3. Children benefit from opportunities to meet with their independent reviewing officers, with whom they develop good relationships over time. Their care planning and review meetings are well attended by professionals, but delays in achieving permanence are not sufficiently challenged by these professionals
- 4.

What does performance data for IROs indicate for 2019-20?



-  The number of children in our care has increased by 100 to 619, a rate of 188.75 per 10,000. This is higher than regional, statistical neighbours and national picture
-  The average caseload for IROs has been higher than the recommended national guidance and the local target throughout the year
-  There has been a slight decrease in Children in Care Reviews taking place in timescales from 90 to 89%
-  Less children attended their Children in Care Review and spoke for themselves
-  IROs maintain independent child protection Chair responsibilities and the number of ICPCs, CP and CP plans at year end has increased significantly during 2019-20
-  The number of children who have had 3 or more placements increased from 8.5% to 13.8% meaning more reviews are taking place
-  The number of ICPCs held in timescales has declined from 81.1% in 2018/19 to 75.4% in 2019/20
-  The number of RCPCs held in timescales has declined by 16.6% in 2018/19 to 80% in 2019/20
-  Despite 166 IRO challenges being raised throughout the year audit has identified that there are children experiencing drift and delay without sufficient IRO challenge and oversight
-  Drift and delay is the primary reason for 64.5% of IRO challenge raised throughout the year
-  The number of children subject of a protection plan and coming into our care increased following the Ofsted inspection in 2019, audit tells us that this is a response to our threshold realigning and risk for those children being managed at the right level
-  The number of children leaving our care increased meaning more children are being moved on to their plan of permanence. More children aged 5-15 left our care this year than last year
-  The main reason for children leaving our care throughout the year was for “Residence or Child Arrangements Order” meaning permanence was achieved within the family network
-  The number of children in care reviews increased from 1254 to 1434 and 89% remained in timescales
-  The likelihood of being subject to a repeat child protection plan reduced from 25.2 to 18.6% in 2019/20
-  The length of time that a child is likely to be subject to a protection plan decreased during 2019/20 with fewer children having a plan in place over 18 months
-  When IRO challenge is being raised it is being responded to and ‘recovery plans’ are being agreed to resolve the issues raised

What are we doing about it

Increase the workforce so each child has more time dedicated to them by their IRO

Increase management capacity to improve management oversight of IROs

Review and re-launch policies, procedures and practice standards for IROs

Provide more training and safe reflective space for IROs to learn and develop their practice

Strengthen audit and ensure learning is used to improve practice

Actively engage young people to support us to improve service delivery



Positivity Poster, created by a young man in our Care, Age 10

The IRO Service is on an improvement journey, along with colleagues in Children's Social Care. We know from Ofsted findings that children benefit from having opportunities to meet with their IRO, we know from formal feedback from some of our children and young people that they value the input from their IRO. The RAD unit needs to build on the strengths within the unit to ensure that each child has a consistently good service.

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

"What helps me is that I am updated throughout, I know what is happening, keeping the same IRO from the start"

Overview of Children who are in our care



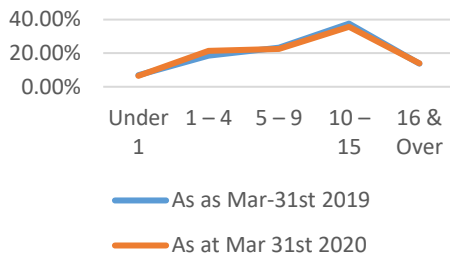
619 children are in our care which is 100 more than last year

◊ 342 are male

◊ 277 are female

This means that 189 out of every 10,000 children are looked after in Middlesbrough

Age Groups of Children in our Care



Most of the children in our care are White British (79.6%)
 3.5% are African
 3.3% are Any other White background
 1.3% are Gyps/Roma
 There are less than 10 children from each other ethnicities; Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Traveller of Irish Heritage, White and Black African, White and Black Caribbean, White Irish, Asian, Any other Asian Background, mixed black and mixed white background



293 children came into care, an increase from 203 last year



198 children left our care in 2019/20, an increase from 151 last year



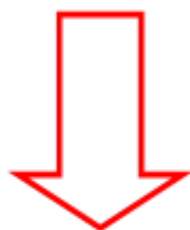
Most of our children are living with Foster Carers (48.2%) or with Family and Friends who are Connected Carers (21.2%). Some children are placed with their own parents or someone who has parental responsibility for them (14.5%). Some children live in children's homes (9.7%). Some care leavers, over 16 live in semi (2.3%) or independent accommodation (1.5%). Much fewer (less than 1%) are also living in secure children's homes, NHS/Health Trust or placed for adoption.



Children who have 3 or more placements indicate some instability. This was the case for 13.8% of children in our care in 2019/20



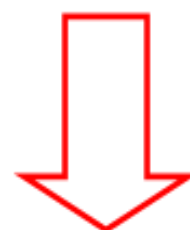
Children in placement for more than 2.5 years indicates placement stability, this has improved slightly and is the case for 51.7% of our children



89% of Children in Care Reviews took place in time scales. This is down from 95% last year



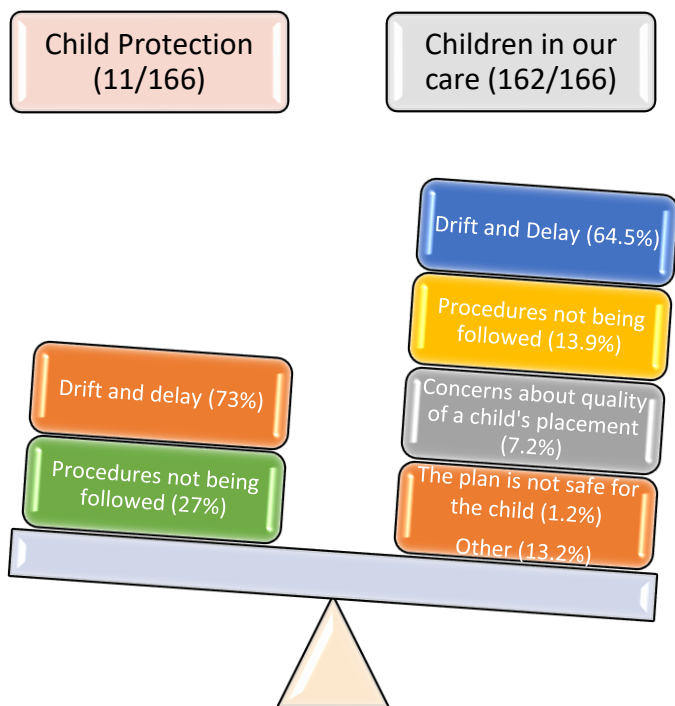
More children participated in their reviews, only 9.4% had no child present and did not convey their views in other ways



59% of children were visited by their IRO before their review (this includes children under 4)

What is the Issues Resolution Process telling us about Children’s experience in our Care

During 2019 the Issues Resolution Process was embedded within the child’s liquid logic electronic file, this has enabled better oversight of the number of IRO challenges raised, the nature of the challenge, the timescale in which they were resolved. During 2019/20 we know that there was 166 IRO challenges raised through the Issues Resolution Process. This is a slight reduction on 2018/19 and

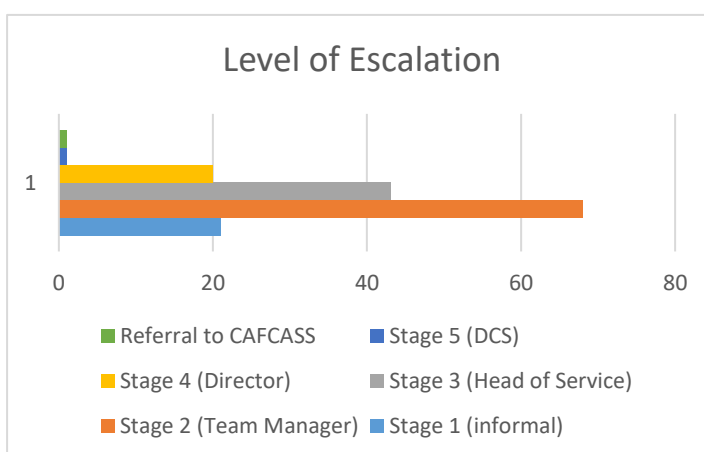


reflects higher caseloads meaning IROs have less time to continuously oversee children’s plans and raise challenge when delay has occurred. Nevertheless, there are clear themes emerging from the Issues Resolution Process that give a sense of what life is like for children in our care in Middlesbrough. It is evident that IRO challenge for children in care far outweighs the challenge for children who have been subject to a protection plan. There has been a disproportionate focus on children in care as we know from audit and the Ofsted inspection that many children subject to protection plans are waiting too long for protective action to be taken.

An overview of the IRO challenge highlights that children in our care experience drift and delay, this makes up 64.5% of all IRO

challenges, we know from audit and from the Ofsted report that there are other children who have experienced drift and delay without sufficient IRO oversight, meaning more challenge could and should have been raised for those children.

A principle of the Issues Resolution Process is to resolve challenge at the lowest possible level, any issues that can be, should be resolved informally between the IRO and Social Worker and/or their manager (stage 1). However, during 2019/20 more IRO challenge was escalated to stage 3 (Head of Service) than any other level. There was also an increase in the number of IRO challenges escalated to Stage 4 (Director) and one referral to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS). CAFCASS are responsible for independently advising the family Courts about what is safe for children and what is in their best interest. When CAFCASS receive a referral from an IRO they will enter into a final dispute resolution with the local authority before proceedings



are issued. If matters are not resolved CAFCASS can initiate legal action on behalf of the child including proceedings under Section 7 (1) of the Human Rights Act 1998; Claim for judicial review; and other proceedings (for example under the Children Act 1989).

Service Level Challenges

During 2019/20 the RAD unit has raised a number of service level challenges regarding quality of practice and drift and delay for children and young people. Firstly, in May 2019 IROs identified a cohort of children who were unnecessarily subject of Care Orders, they were either placed with parents or living with connected carers, and their plan was to revoke the Care Order but that had not happened within a timescale appropriate for the child. It was the view of the IRO that they were receiving unnecessary Social Work intervention and therefore a report was written and submitted to senior managers for consideration. Although this piece of work identified specific children who required review the work was not impactful and as identified by Ofsted, many of these children continued to receive unnecessary Social Work intervention at the end of 2019. There was learning from this challenge for the RAD unit, what was missing was individual IRO challenge for each child so that their unique circumstances could be investigated, individual resolution meetings did not take place to identify a SMART plan for each child. As a result this meant that action was not taken for these children as individuals which must happen in future, this will then demonstrate effective IRO challenge by ensuring that IRO challenge has a positive outcome for children.

A second service level challenge was raised in June 2019 due to concerns that children in our care, in a particular service area, were not receiving good quality intervention, the statutory compliance around visits, seeing children and reviews was not being met and their plans were drifting. The Issues Resolution Process had been used repeatedly but was not having a positive impact on children and young people. As a result a letter was sent to the Director of Children's Care with a summary of concerns for all of the children whereby formal challenge had been ineffective. The outcome of this was that all of the children in our care who were affected were allocated to permanent members of staff within Middlesbrough so that their plans could be progressed.

A third service level challenge was raised in September 2019 about the use of family and friends placements and whether the child is considered a looked after child (S20, Children Act 1989) or not. During 2018/19 there had been a number of children who were living with family under what was described as a 'family arrangement' and arrangement which was brought about by the family and not by the Local Authority or police. Some of these children had restrictions in place preventing the parents collecting the child or having unsupervised time together, what was apparent for some of these children is that they should have been children in our care. The challenge raised in 2018/19 was upheld and a targeted piece of work was undertaken to ensure that all children living in 'family arrangements' had been reviewed and legal advice sought. In September 2019 there was some concern that these placements were continuing, this was escalated to the Director of Children's Care to review the arrangements and ensure that there were no other children in similar circumstances as these children would not have come to the attention of the IRO unit. This led to a review of children living with family in each service area to ensure that children were not placed with family, without considering their rights as looked after children.

Quality Assurance for children in our care

Quality assurance is a crucial part of the IRO role, it is important that IROs monitor the Local Authority's compliance with statutory requirements as well as the quality of interventions and the impact that they have on outcomes for our children. During 2019/20 the IRO audit process was strengthened by creating an electronic compliance (audit) tool which is embedded into the child's electronic file (LCS). The benefits for the child mean that their unique circumstances are assessed, any good practice is identified or any failures are highlighted and addressed by the Social Worker under the supervision of their Team Manager. In addition to this, the use of an electronic recording system allows large quantities of data to be analysed and any systemic or widespread concerns can be raised at a senior level.

The IRO compliance (audit) tool is designed to be used before every review. However, the audit process commenced late (in August 2019) since then 10% of audits have been completed for children in care. The audit process has not yet been well embedded, this is in part due to the increase in demand and capacity issues within the Review and Development unit.



Findings from IRO audit of Looked After Reviews

- **88%** of reviews were held in timescales, the most common reason for the CLA review being held late was due to no Social Worker or no Social Work report available for the meeting to take place.
- **90%** of audits found that the right people were participating in children's reviews, which is also reflected in Ofsted findings
- **53%** of Health Assessments had been undertaken and only 65% of those were fully considered at the review.
- Only **32%** of audits found that other agencies were sharing reports for a child's review
- **34%** of the reviews had a PEP available, which is a statutory requirement
- Only **47%** of children were properly prepared for their review by their Social Worker, even less were consulted about where they wanted their review, when, and asked who they wanted to participate.
- In **75%** of reviews children's views and wishes were clearly presented
- **28%** of children who participated sent consultation documents
- **30%** of audits found that children's details were not accurately recorded or up to date, the most common issues identified were that the school and placement address need to be updated.
- **50%** of audits found that children were not being visited frequently enough
- Only **28%** of children have an advocate
- Only **2%** of those audited had an independent visitor
- When the review was decision making review, only **51%** had a plan of permanence
- **75%** of children were in a placement that had been assessed in accordance with the statutory requirements, such as approved connected carer, placement with parents regulations assessed and approved.

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

In October 2019 Tell us More Survey of children in our care taught us;

89% felt that their IRO does what they say they will

91% said that their IRO helps them to understand what is happening

93% said that their worker explained why they were working with them and their family

80% said that they had been involved in making plans about what needs to happen to make things better

93% said that their IRO spent time with them and listened to what they have to say

83% said they felt their IRO had helped them to feel safe

93% felt able to talk to their IRO

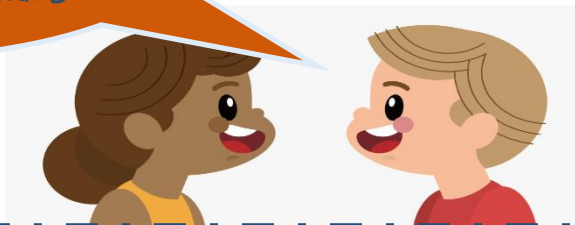
Anything else about how the IRO has worked with them and their family which they would like to comment on?

"I like seeing her, I am going back home"

"I can always share how things are, my IRO does what she says she will"

"IRO has been the one constant person, she helps us understand what needs to change"

"I have a good relationship with my Social Worker but I can really talk to my IRO. She has given me good advice"



If you could change one thing about how your IRO is working with you, what would it be?

"To be told when my IRO is coming"

"I wish my IRO wasn't going on maternity leave"

"If she gave us sweets"

"She could tell me to stop talking because I always interrupt"

"To make sure she carries on to take up matters we aren't please with regarding social worker"

My life in care

Pretty much the majority of my life has been spent stuck in the system, I have lived in numerous placements allowing me to see the different lifestyles and behaviour of other people trapped in the same boat. Allowing me to witness the lives of others and their actions, fair to say I was appalled at how immature some individuals were behaving towards the lovely staff who are just trying to help us all and support us. I've been places where kids would kick off, shout, swear, run away and break things just for little petty reasons like not having a cigarette or an energy drink. It was this that made me realise 'why the f*** are you acting childish, the more you behave like that the less they're going to give you what you want.'

Now I'm not saying I was no angel, I've been down that path myself associating with the wrong people acting kiddish just to get a few people off my back but I never understood how it fully came across until I get evicted out of my 1st opportunity in life and was left boiling in the police station. My mind spoke to me and pointed out that if I kept going the way I was going I would just be one of them other Kids stuck in a cell with all the excuses in the world to why life wasn't fair to me. That's what made me change it around I said to myself life IS unfair but it's up to me to create my own luck. The following week I was given a beautiful house in *Middlesbrough* with everything I could of wished for. This was the point in my life where it was make or break, I knew that if I fucked this up for myself I would have nowhere and wouldn't be trusted in a nice valuable home.

I'd moved in and tried my best to be as polite and helpful with the *Placement* staff as I could be. Turns out that I had actually created a very good bond between me and my support workers just through engaging in normal conversation and showing them that I was different. Couple months went by and I started working which showed the staff that I wasn't a bum living off my £52 a week but the fact that I was earning my own wage, showing determination of showing up to work early everyday putting long hours in after walking there and back most days of the week.

During the local lockdown this gave me time to reflect the future of my life and the next step after leaving supported living so I started reading books giving me the knowledge I needed on how to grow myself as a person, learning how to manage money and using the law of attraction to manifest my life into a good one and keeping myself calm and composed in pressured situations. Which then lead to the place I wanted to be moving into my new very own flat.

The time I spent with *Placement* really changed my life and the perspective of it. One of the reasons being the staff there, normally in most places staff act like a social worker or a needy parent which I think cause the kids to start acting like a d*** just to cope with some of the in your face staff but I didn't have this problem here, the support workers I had were not only staff but they were your friend in the placement. There were many times we'd laugh hysterically or talk about common interests which is what I think made the whole situation bearable.

If I were to give any advice to the companies like [*supported accommodation*] I would strongly advise to employ young people who are down to earth and who understand the everyday life of a teenager. People who can take a joke and have a laugh with the kids and people who are able to go out and do things with them like going to the gym every morning or walks up *the hills*.

As well as staff if I were to give some advice to the young persons in the same position as me I would tell them to play the game, follow the rules, respect the house and staff and give back to what they give you because it all goes a long way in your favour being trusted.

Because of all this I am now sat writing this on my new sofa sat in my new flat with a big smile on my face. This was the experience I needed to kickstart my life and the lessons I have learned have put me on the track to succeeding in life and making this world mine!

528

Children were subject of a Protection Plan, that is 169 more than last year.

379

children were subject of a protection plan on 31.3.2020

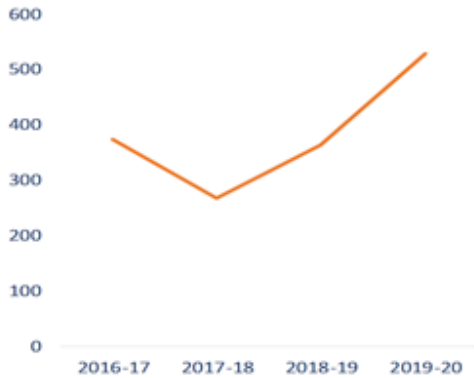
Child Protection

51% are male

47% are female

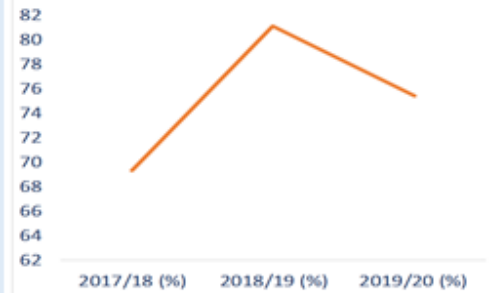
2% are unborn

Number of ICPCs

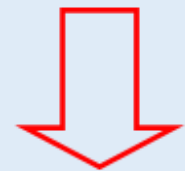


151 out of every 10,000 children are subject of a protection plan in Middlesbrough, this rate has increased year on year since 2017

% of ICPCs held in Timescales



The number of Initial Child Protection Conferences held has increase year on year since 2017



75.5% of children had an Initial Child Protection Conference in timescales, this is below the target of 95%

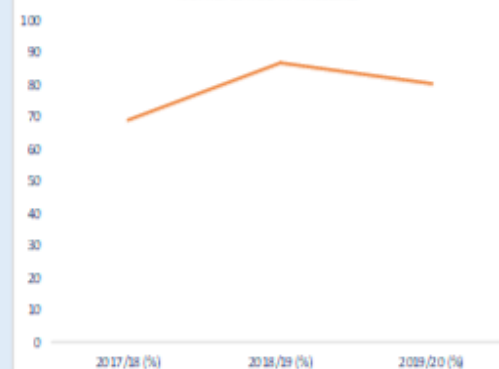
Number of Children with 2nd or Subsequent CP Plans



Categories of Abuse;

- Neglect 61.3%
- Emotional Abuse 30%
- Physical Abuse 7%
- Sexual Abuse 1.6%

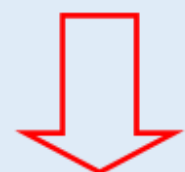
% of RCPCs held in Timescales



The number of children subject to a protection plan over 2-years has reduced from 8.6% to 4.5% in 2019/20

When we get Child Protection Conferences right young people tell us

"I like that I was able to express my feelings and I was involved"



80% of children had a Review Child Protection Conference in timescales, this is below the target of 95%

Quality assurance for Child Protection

The IRO compliance (audit) tool is designed to be used before every child protection conference. However, the audit process commenced late (in August 2019) since then 11% of audits have been completed for children subject to a protection plan. The audit process has not yet been well embedded, this is in part due to the increase in demand and capacity issues within the Review and Development unit.

The performance on formal IRO Challenge through the local Issues Resolution Process tells us that the focus within the RAD unit has been largely on children in our care, there is a disproportionately low number of formal IRO challenges raised in relation to children who are subject to a protection plan.



Findings from IRO audit of Child Protection Conferences

- **79%** of the audits reflect that the child protection conferences were held in timescales, the most common reason for the 21% being out of timescales was due to staffing and capacity within the RAD unit. The unit experienced increase in demand and high levels of staff sickness in early 2020 which had a significant impact on performance.
- Only **32%** of children were seen by their Social Worker often enough
- **93%** of children's information was accurately recorded on the child's file
- All relevant people were invited to **81%** of conferences, for the 19% of audits this was 2 sibling groups but in both cases it referred to absent fathers.
- Around **40%** of reports required for conference are sent late to the RAD unit, this means that the child, parents and professionals do not have sufficient time to prepare for the meeting.
- Auditors found that voice of the child was evident in only 66% of audits
- Multi-agency working was deemed to be effective in **91%** of cases, however only 34% of Core Group meetings are reviewing the plan in timescales
- Overall when RAG rating the audits, 69% were **RED**, 5% were **AMBER** and 26% were **GREEN**

Each child will receive individual recommendations following the completion of an IRO audit, the learning from all of the audits is analysed with a view to understanding themes that can be reported to Heads of Service and the Principle Social Worker to improve service delivery. There are findings from both the Child Protection and Looked After audits that will be used to inform the priorities and planning for 2020/2021.

In addition to IRO audit there has continued to be some themed ‘Challenge Clinics’ facilitated by the RAD unit and co-chaired by the Head of Service for Safeguarding and Care Planning. Challenge clinics are focussed look at children that data suggests may be of concern. During 2019/20 some of those themes were the duration of child protection plans and the amount of children who had more or one child protection plan. The panel aims to review individual children’s circumstances to ensure that risk is being managed at the right level and that they are not experiencing drift and delay.

2nd and Subsequent Child Protection Plans

The facts?

- ◇ 17 children from 9 families have had 2 or more protection plans in the past 2 years
- ◇ 10 of these children, from 6 families have had 2 protection plans ever
- ◇ 7 of these children, from 4 families have had 3 protection plans in their lives
- ◇ 5 children have had 3 plans under the category of neglect
- ◇ 3 children had multiple categories of emotional abuse and neglect but on both occasions the concerns were around how domestic abuse affected the children’s safety and wellbeing
- ◇ Legal advice had been sought for all of the children who needed it, where appropriate a Public Law Outline letter had been issued
- ◇ 1 child was identified as needing an earlier review as there was no progress being made for the child

The Themes

There are some children whereby fluctuating care is evident, for these children it has fallen above and below the threshold of significant harm up to 3 times

Not all children had an up to date assessment on which their plan was based, this makes it difficult to understand impact on the child and what protective action needed to be taken. Social Workers were tasked with updating assessments these assessments.

The category of Neglect is a common theme, and for these children the reoccurring risks remained the same

Legal Advice is being taken when children have a 2nd or subsequent plan

The outcome?

A second or subsequent child protection plan is not necessarily a concern in itself because it may reflect a new risk of significant harm to a child that had not existed previously. However, the majority of children subject to a protection plan in Middlesbrough are under the categories of neglect (55%) then emotional abuse (35%). When children experience neglect patterns can emerge showing that care fluctuates and at times falls above and below the threshold of significant harm, for these children protection plans may end and re-start. What is important is ensuring that children are not experiencing prolonged cumulative neglect that is harmful to their welfare and development in the long-term. This challenge clinic identified that some children, but not all, have repeat protection plans. The learning from this challenge clinic will be used to support learning and development of Social Workers, their managers and independent Conference Chairs to identify much sooner signs of cumulative harm.

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Summary

The Review and Development unit continues to work hard to serve the children of Middlesbrough, throughout the past year this has come with a number of challenges. There has been a significant increase in demand for the number of children who have been presented to Initial Child Protection Conferences as well as an increase in children who are in our care, we have unfortunately seen that there has been a decline in timeliness of statutory meetings taking place as a result of the increase in demand and staff being at capacity. However, it is a priority that for the next year that work is undertaken to review the team size and structure so that the demand can be met in future, so that children can experience timely reviews.

IROs in Middlesbrough have demonstrated more challenge than any previous year, that said there is still more to do. IROs play a key role in supporting the improvement journey in Middlesbrough. We know from feedback from our young people, and Ofsted findings, that children in our care benefit from having a relationship with their IRO and this is a strength that will be built upon in the coming year.

In order to strengthen challenge and oversight, the quality assurance role of IROs also needs to improve, more focussed audit needs to be undertaken and more robust scrutiny of children's Care Plans needs to happen within reviews. IROs will be given a clear focus on priority areas that will have most impact on children and young people.

The IRO improvement journey will be closely linked to the Children's Services Improvement Plan. There are specific responsibilities outlined within the improvement plan for the IRO unit which is to undertake focussed development work with operational managers to ensure IRO challenges are actioned in ongoing practice, and aggregate IRO challenge themes via Quality Assurance process to inform future practice developments. However, the IRO have a key role in the overall delivery of the improvement plan by monitoring the Local Authority's performance as corporate parents and providing robust scrutiny of children's care plans to ensure that children are receiving a good service that promotes good outcomes.

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 2020/2021](#)

1. Review the capacity and structure of the RAD unit to ensure that it can meet the current demand and enable IROs to have increased, effective oversight of children and young people's plans. This will lead to better oversight and improvement in the timeliness of statutory meetings (both child protection and looked after reviews)
2. Improve the quality and effectiveness of IRO challenge. This will include a review and re-launch of the current Issues Resolution Procedure. Resolving challenge at a lower level, which will demonstrate management grip of plans for children and young people.
3. Strengthen the quality assurance of children who are subject of a child protection plan. This will include strengthening the child protection conference through re-launching a good practice guide for Social Workers and partner agencies. Increasing the level of oversight from the Independent Chairs between reviews. More targeted challenge of children who have multiple CP plans, or those that exceed 15-months
4. Engage with young people at all levels. This includes increasing visits to children before their review, more children attending their meetings (both child protection conferences and looked after reviews) and enabling children to provide feedback that will be used to improve service delivery.
5. Provide Training to IROs to build on the skills, knowledge and experience that exists within the Service. Ensure that IROs are best equipped to provide strong independent challenge to the Local Authority and ensure that plans are driven forward without delay. We will know this has worked when IRO's effectively challenge if children are not receiving the right support at the right time, they are experience delay and subject to cumulative neglect so that children do reach their plan of permanence in a timely way.

6. Develop Team profile and plans based on focussed auditing of the IRO service as part of audit to excellence programme