

Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report 2023/24

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1. Purpose of the Annual Report

- 1.1 This 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 Cared for children and young people, and young people leaving care.
- 1.2 In Middlesbrough, the IROs have a dual role and therefore this report includes consideration of those children and young people subject to Child Protection Planning as well as Cared for children and young people.

2. Reporting period

- 2.1 This report covers the period from the 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024. It provides an overview of the work undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs).
- 2.2 Due to no annual report being available for the period 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023 some data for the 22/23 period is included to allow for trend analysis and comparison.
- 2.3 It should be noted that some of the data sets may vary slightly from those published by Children's Social Care due to minor variations in the timeframe for data capture.

3. Legal Context and Statutory Function of the Independent Reviewing Officer

- 3.1 The appointment 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.
- 3.2 There are two clear and separate aspects of the function of an IRO:
- Chairing the child's review; and
 - Monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 In summary the IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including: -
- Promoting the voice of the child.
 - Ensuring that plans for Cared for 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 Cared for 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.

Source: IRO Handbook paragraph 2.4

4. Local context

- 4.1 As a Corporate Parent, Middlesbrough Council is committed to ensuring that children and young people achieve their best possible outcomes whilst in our care. It is acknowledged that wherever possible children should be Cared for either within their own family or networks and that it is their own family and networks that are best placed to provide and sustain safety planning to mitigate risk. However, when it is felt that this is not a safe or suitable option for a child or young person they are helped to find a long-term permanent home.
- 4.2 All IROs within Middlesbrough are employed in a dual role. In addition to being Independent Reviewing Officers for Cared for children and young people, they also have responsibility for the role of Independent Chair at Child Protection Conferences.
- 4.3 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 Cared for children. 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.

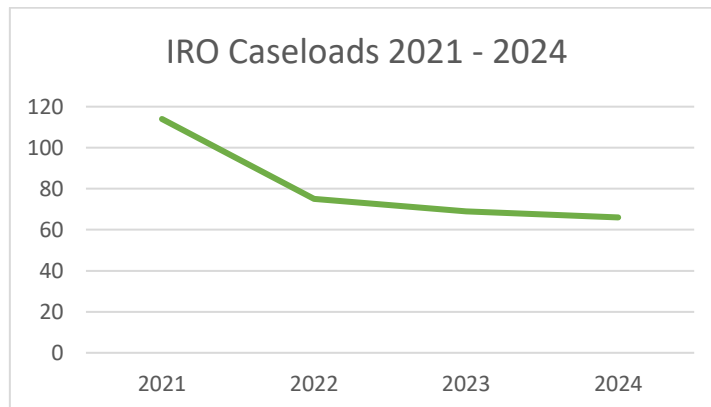
5. Independent Reviewing Officers

- 5.1 The IROs are co-located in the Review and Development Team (RAD Unit). 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 and Care Planning, Cared for children, Early Help, substance misuse, exploitation, and Children with Disabilities. The range of skills within the team are complementary and foster a culture of learning and development. The team also has a dedicated IRO who undertakes Foster Care Reviews.
- 5.2 The team has remained stable, with most of the IROs having been in post for over 5 years. All IROs are permanent members of staff.
- 5.3 The position of the team in the Children's Directorate structure has remained the same throughout 2021/22 to currently.

- 5.4 The team has direct access to the Director of Children’s Social Care and are able to meet on a regular basis to share their insight into the challenges and improvements in practice and plans for our children and young people.
- 5.5 To provide assurance, the IRO team report progress to the Director of Children’s Social Care Monthly Performance meeting.
- 5.6 The team also contributes to a range of panels which provide senior management oversight of planning for our children and young people. These include: -
 - Legal Gateway Panel
 - Permanency Monitoring Group
 - Child Protection Review panel

6. IRO Caseloads

- 6.1 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 and young people. Over 2021/22, to promote good practice, additional resources were temporarily provided to the team through the recruitment of an additional 3 agency IROs. This resulted in IRO caseloads reducing over the year to an average of approximately 75 children per IRO.
- 6.2 In April 2023 the IRO caseloads were at an average of 69 reducing to an average of 66 in April 2024. This is a decrease overall of 42% between 2021 and 2024.



7. Key Messages about Cared for Children and Young People

Number of Cared for Children and Young People

- 7.1 As of the 31st of March 2024 there were 513 Cared for children and young people in Middlesbrough, this is the same as the reported figure at year end 2022/23. The calculated rate per 10,000 is 147.5 (based on 2023 population estimates), this is a decrease on the 2022-

23 figures (149.4). It remains higher, however, than all other external 2023/24 benchmarks. (National rate for 23/24 was 70)

- 7.2 The monthly rate for the number of children and young people in our care has fluctuated but by end of year is higher. The table below demonstrates the monthly number & rate of children and young people becoming cared for throughout the year 23/24.

	Mar-23	Apr-23	May-23	Jun-23	Jul-23	Aug-23	Sep-23	Oct-23	Nov-23	Dec-23	Jan-24	Feb-24	Mar-24
Middlesbrough's No. of CLA	510	510	513	506	507	507	508	516	526	529	530	527	525
Middlesbrough's Rate of CLA	149.4	149.4	150.3	148.2	148.5	148.5	148.8	151.1	154.1	155	155.2	154.4	153.8

- 7.3 In 2024, the number of Cared for children and young people by local authorities in England was 83,630, similar to last year, following a steady rise since 2008. This is a rate of 70 Cared for children and young people per 10,000.

Year	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of children looked after	80,000	80,780	82,090	83,760	83,630
Annual change		+780	+1,310	+1,680	-130
Annual percentage change		+1%	+2%	+2%	< -0.5%

Source: SSDA903

- 7.5 Numbers and rates per 10,000 children and young people vary widely across local authorities, for example Stoke-on-Trent has the highest rate at 191 Cared for children and young people per 10,000 children and Richmond-upon-Thames has the lowest at 25 per 10,000 children and young people.
- 7.6 At the rate of 153.8 Middlesbrough's rate is much higher than the 70 average, however it is of note that Middlesbrough continues to work with children and young people within a context of significant deprivation and poverty. As part of its improvement journey work taking place, Middlesbrough is to explore reunification options alongside developing and improving practice that better supports children and young people to remain with their family networks.
- 7.7 In addition to this it is also of note that Middlesbrough has a higher resident population of children and young people aged 0 -15 years than both the England and Northeast rates.

Children and Young Peoples' Cared for Reviews

- 7.8 Performance in terms of Cared for children and young peoples' reviews being held within timescales has decreased from an average of 93% in timescale in 2022/23 to 85% in 2023/24.

2022-23			2023-24		
	In Timescale	Out of Timescale		In Timescale	Out of Timescale
Apr-22	100%	0%	Apr-23	100%	0%
May-22	91%	9%	May-23	91%	9%
Jun-22	97%	3%	Jun-23	84%	16%
Jul-22	96%	4%	Jul-23	93%	7%
Aug-22	98%	2%	Aug-23	76%	24%
Sep-22	83%	17%	Sep-23	94%	6%
Oct-22	82%	18%	Oct-23	73%	27%
Nov-22	95%	5%	Nov-23	85%	15%
Dec-22	96%	4%	Dec-23	87%	13%
Jan-23	96%	4%	Jan-24	74%	26%
Feb-23	91%	9%	Feb-24	62%	38%
Mar-23	90%	10%	Mar-24	85%	15%
Average :	93%	7%	Average :	85%	15%

- 7.9 Our target for holding reviews in timescales is 95%. As a result, this is a high priority in the RAD units' team plan.

- 7.10 One of the factors which has influenced the timeliness of reviews has been Middlesbrough's workforce instability, which has included high numbers of agency staff. This has resulted in some children and young people experiencing changes in allocated social workers, which in turn has impacted on the timeliness and preparation of social work reports for reviews.

- 7.11 The RAD team has sought to mitigate this where possible, however this has not sufficiently improved overall timeliness for our children and young people. Moving forward the RAD team have set out clear timescales and expectations for reports to be available to IROs. Alongside this Cared for reviews are now timetabled a minimum of two weeks in advance of their due dates. This is to allow for any unforeseen circumstances that may prevent the review going ahead, such as staff sickness or unavailability of any key professional.

- 7.12 In addition to this the RAD unit Team Managers now provide a weekly schedule to the service, setting out the review dates scheduled for the week they are in, as well as the following week.

Children and Young People's participation in Reviews

- 7.13 The most recent ILACS for Middlesbrough made an overall judgement of 'Requires Improvement' in March 2023. Within this, Ofsted judged that the experiences and progress of children in care was an area Requiring Improvement and reported that: -

"Most child in care reviews are well attended by key professionals involved in children's lives. Children are involved in discussions prior to their reviews with social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) but meetings are not well attended by parents and very few children attend. This means that parents and children are not fully involved in discussions about their progress and plans for their future".

- 7.14 There were 1252 Cared for reviews held in 2023/24, this is a decrease on 2022/23 when there were 1295 Cared for reviews held. 228 (18.2%) related to children under the age of 4 years old.

- 7.15 Our Cared for children and young people are more likely to share their views through another person or in writing (38.5%) than to attend their reviews in person (32%).

	Review participation	2022 -23 (count)	2023- 24 (count)	2022 -23 (percentage)	2023- 24 (percentage)
PN0	Child aged under 4 at the time of the review	252	228	19.5%	18.2%
PN1	Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself	319	395	24.6%	31.5%
PN2	Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf	1	11	0.1%	0.9%
PN3	Child attends and conveys his or her view symbolically (non-verbal)	1	2	0.1%	0.2%
PN4	Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her views symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her	10	4	0.8%	0.3%
PN5	Child does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her	2	15	0.2%	1.2%
PN6	Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium	584	482	45.1%	38.5%
PN7	Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed not the review	126	115	9.7%	9.2%
	TOTAL	1295	1252	100%	100%

- 7.16 We can see that in 2022/23 70.8% of children and young people’s views were gathered via methods PN1 to PN6 and 72.6% in 2023/24, demonstrating an increase of 2.6%.

- 7.17 As part of the RAD Unit’s improvement plan there is a focus on increasing this improvement further, to ensure that as many of our children and young people as possible have a voice in their Cared for reviews.

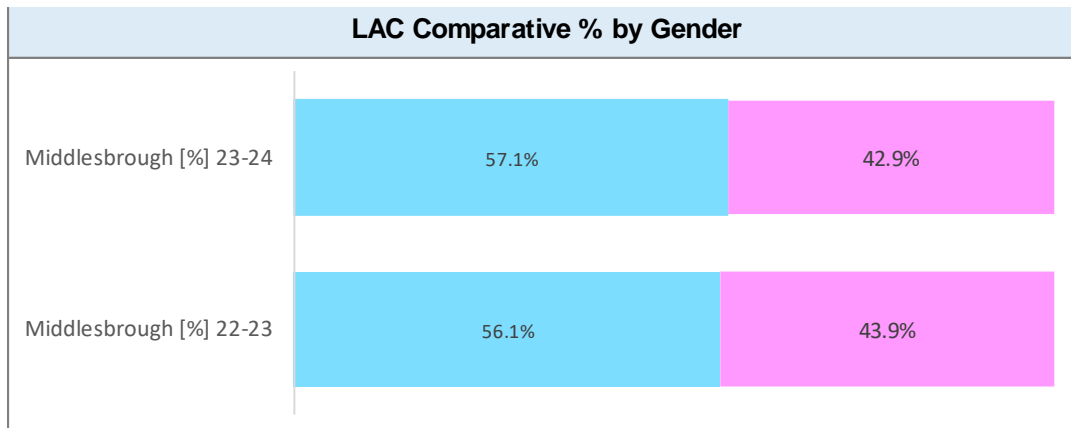
- 7.18 To achieve this, we are exploring a variety of feedback mechanisms, such as the Mind of My Own app, to diversify the way children and young people can contribute to their Cared for reviews, before, during and after the actual meetings themselves.

- 7.19 In addition to this the RAD Team Managers are working with our IROs, Quality Assurance Practice Lead Auditors (PLAs), our Participation co-ordinator, and our Care Ambassadors to explore and encourage opportunities for our children and young people to (where appropriate to do so) chair their own reviews.

- 7.20 Alongside this our PLAs are also working with our data and analytics team to create feedback forms which our children, young people, parents and carers will be able to access using a QR code.

Gender of Cared for Children and Young People

- 7.21 At the end of March 2024, 57% of our Cared for children and young people were male and 43% were female, compared to the 2022/23 figures which showed 56% male and 44% female. This reflects a 1% gender difference across the two periods, despite the same number of children and young people being in our care (513).



7.22 Nationally 57% of Cared for children are male and 43% are female, meaning that Middlesbrough's gender ratio is in line with the national trend.

Ethnicity of Cared for Children and Young People

7.23 Middlesbrough is the most ethnically diverse local authority area in the Tees Valley, with a British Minority Ethnic population of 17.6% identified at census 2021. This is an increase of 51% since 2011 and was projected to grow further.

7.24 82.36% of Middlesbrough's resident population was classified as White (with various sub-groups). This was lower than the Northeast rate of 90.04% but higher than the England rate of 81.05%.

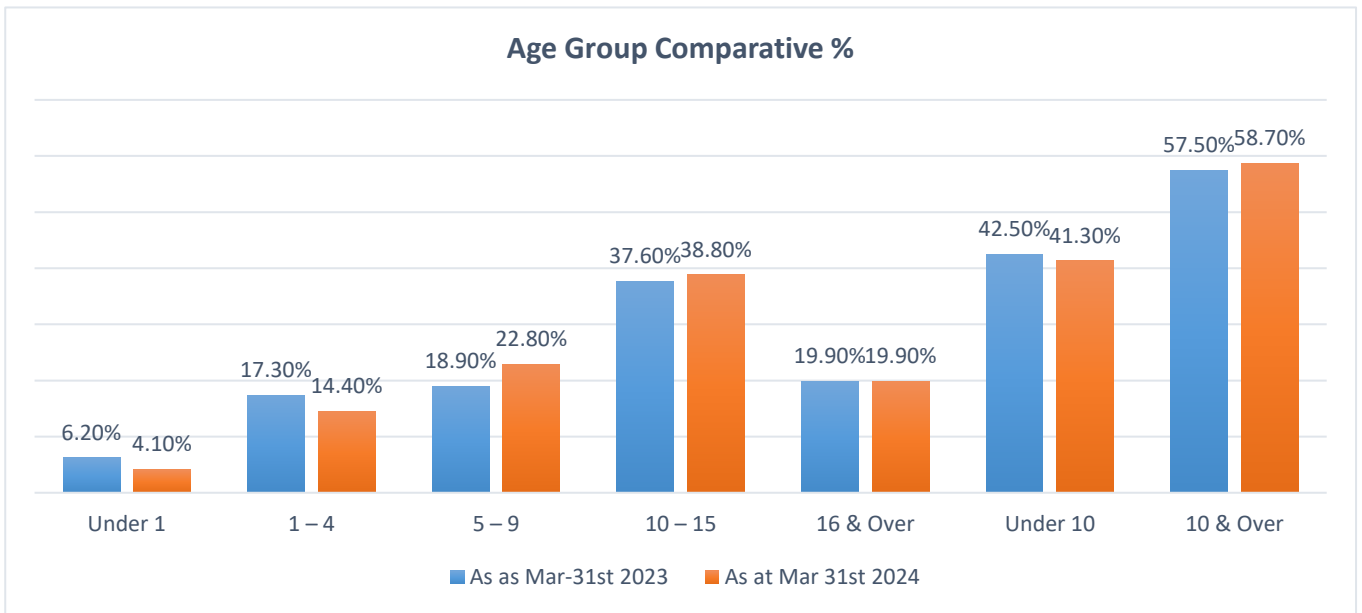
7.25 Middlesbrough is the second most ethnically diverse local authority in the Northeast, behind Newcastle upon Tyne (with 79.9% classed as white). Nationally 66% of the population is of White British ethnicity.

LAC Comparative % by Ethnicity				
Ethnicity	2022-23 [Count]	2023-24 [Count]	2022-23 [%]	2023-24 [%]
African	21	14	4.1%	2.7%
Any other Asian background	5	6	1.0%	1.2%
Any other Black background	2	3	0.4%	0.6%
Any other ethnic group	8	23	1.6%	4.5%
Any other Mixed background	13	13	2.6%	2.5%
Any other White background	18	18	3.5%	3.5%
Bangladeshi	2	2	0.4%	0.4%
Caribbean	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
Gypsy/Roma	11	10	2.2%	1.9%
Indian	1	1	0.2%	0.2%
Information not yet obtained	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
Pakistani	3	4	0.6%	0.8%
Traveller of Irish Heritage	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
White and Asian	13	14	2.6%	2.7%
White and Black African	12	14	2.4%	2.7%
White and Black Caribbean	6	5	1.2%	1.0%
White British	392	382	77.0%	74.5%
White Irish	2	1	0.4%	0.2%
Chinese	0	3	0.0%	0.6%
TOTAL	509	513	100.0%	100.0%

- 7.26 74.5% of Cared for children and young people on 31 March 2024 were White British, down from 77% in 2023. The next largest group of children and young people for 2024 pertains to 4.5% coming from 'Any other ethnic group' background.
- 7.27 Given the above the ethnicity of our Cared for children and young people, this is in line with our overall resident population.

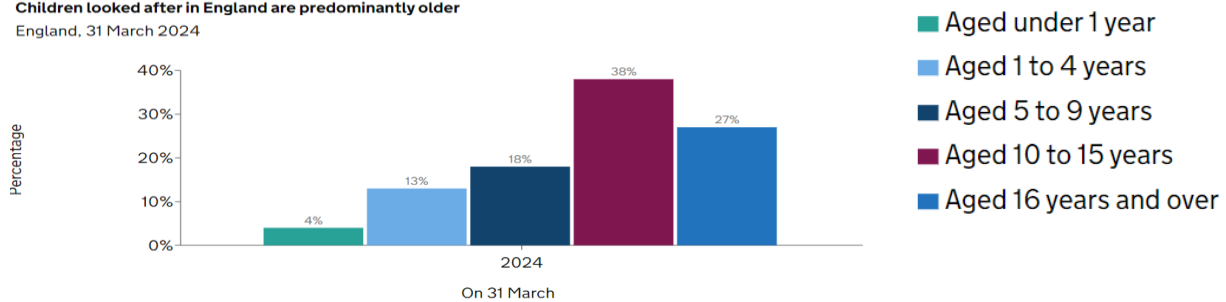
Ages of Cared for Children and Young People

- 7.28 In 2023/24 the age distribution of Cared for children and young people has remained the same as in 2022/23 with under 1s representing the lowest percentage and 10- to 15-year-olds representing the highest percentage.



- 7.29 Middlesbrough has a younger population than both the national and regional averages. 20.8% of Middlesbrough’s resident population are children and young people aged 0 to 15 years. This is higher than the England rate of 18.6% and the Northeast rate of 17.7%.
- 7.30 This is aligned to the national figures for the age distribution of Cared for children and young people as illustrated below.

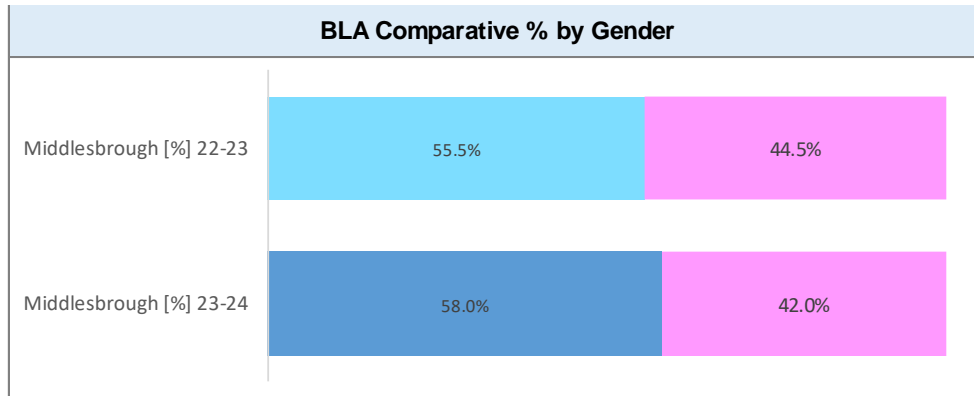
Children looked after in England are predominantly older
England, 31 March 2024



[Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

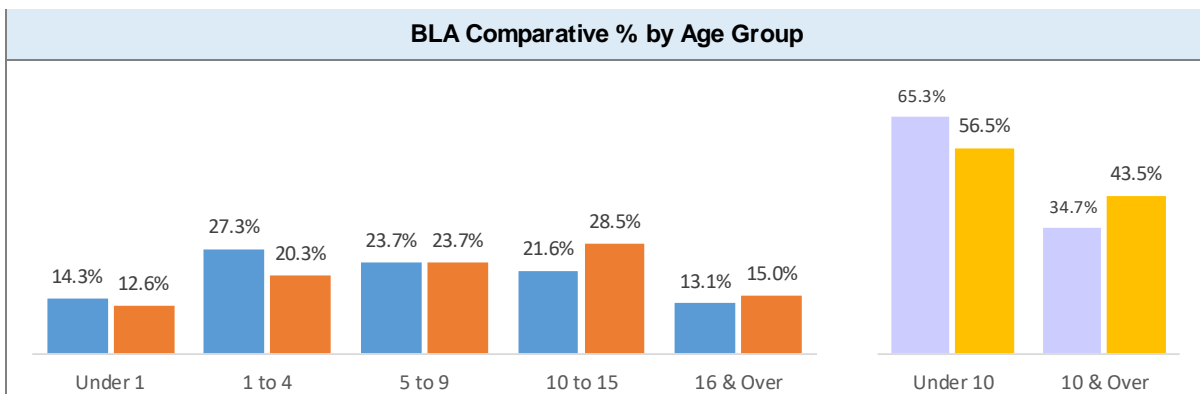
Children Becoming Cared for:

7.31 207 children became Cared for in 2023/24, a decrease on 2022/23 when the number was 245. 58% of children becoming Cared for in 2023/24 were male (120), an increase on 2022/23 when 55.5% were male. 42% becoming Cared for in 2023/24 were female (87), a decrease from the 2022/23 figure of 44.5% female.



7.32 Nationally for 2023/24 this figure sits at 61% male and 39% female, reflecting that whilst nationally more males than females become Cared for, the ratio gap in Middlesbrough is 12% smaller at 32% than the national gap of 44%. Middlesbrough demographics reflect that as a population Middlesbrough’s male population is 3% lower than its female population.

7.33 The most common age groups becoming Cared for in 2023/24 were:
 [A] Children aged 10-15 at 59 children (28.5%). Up from the 2022/23 figure of 53.
 [B] Children aged 5-9 at 49 children (23.7%). Down from the 2022/23 figure of 58.



7.34 Nationally the most common age group to become Cared for in 2023/24 is children and young people aged 16+ years (29%). Nationally the next highest age range is 10–15-year-olds (26%). however, as noted earlier, Middlesbrough has a higher resident population of children and young people aged 0 -15 years than both the England and Northeast rates.

7.35 The most common Category of Need recorded for 2023/24 was that of ‘Abuse or Neglect’, accounting for 98.6% of cases. This is a decrease from 98.8% in 2022/23.

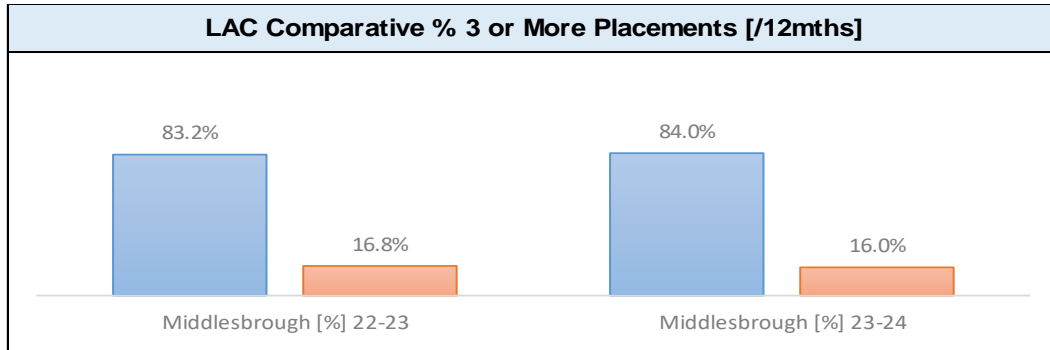
Category of Need	2022-23 [Count]	2023-24 [Count]	2022-23 [%]	2023-24 [%]
Absent parenting	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
Abuse or neglect	242	204	98.8%	98.6%
Child’s disability	0	2	0.0%	1.0%
Family dysfunction	1	1	0.4%	0.5%
Family in acute stress	2	0	0.8%	0.0%
Parental illness or disability	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
Socially unacceptable behaviour	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
TOTAL	245	207	100.0%	100.0%

7.36 Whilst we can see this decrease of 0.2% in the category of need being recorded as ‘abuse or neglect’ from 2022/23 to 2023/24, this figure remains significantly higher than the national figure of 56% for 2023/24. Similarly, some of the other categories of need are higher within the national figures, highlighting a need for further exploration of Middlesbrough’s process for identifying and recording category of need.

8 Time Children and Young People spend in our care

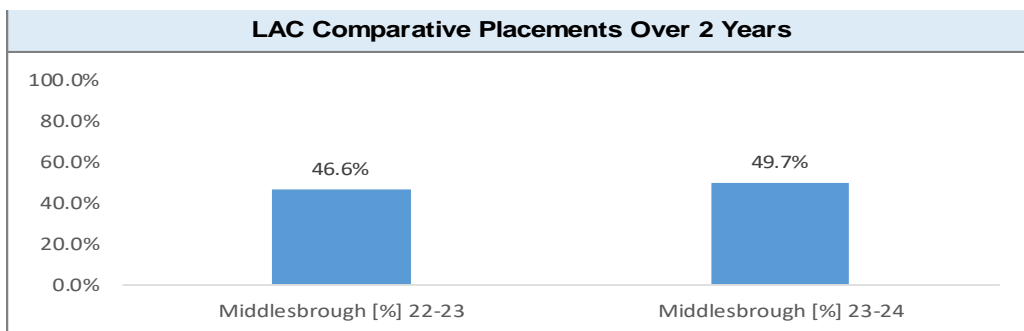
Placement stability

8.5 In terms of short-term placement instability (those Cared for as at 31st March with 3 or more placements within 12 months) performance at the end of March 2024 was 16.0%. This is a decrease from 2023 when the percentage was 16.8%.



8.6 This is a 0.8% decrease which would suggest some improvement in short-term placement stability, however, more needs to be done to reduce this figure further.

8.7 Long term placement stability (Under 16s looked after for 2.5 years and whose placement on 31st March was 2 years or more) was 49.7%. This is an increase on 46.6% for 2022/23.



- 8.8 This is an increase of 6.4%, demonstrating a move in the right direction for our children and young people, however we are ambitious and want this to improve further given the significant benefits stability has on improving overall outcomes for all children and young people.
- 8.9 Middlesbrough is working to increase its number of foster carers, reviewing its support and training offer to carers and commencing fostering modernisation as it moves into 2025.

Legal Framework for our Cared for Children and Young people

- 8.10 65% of Cared for children and young people in Middlesbrough are subject to a Full Care Order. This is an increase of 1% on 2023. The national percentage sits at 57%, however Middlesbrough is only 2% higher than the North East figure of 63%.
- 8.11 19% of Middlesbrough’s Cared for children and young people are subject to Interim Care Orders in 2024, which is a 3% increase on 2023. Within the Northeast this percentage remained at 16% in both 2023 and 2024, whilst nationally this figure was at 18% in 2023 and 17% in 2024. Supporting that overall Middlesbrough demonstrates little variance from the Northeast and national picture.

		Middlesbrough		Northeast		National	
		2023	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024
Total	Number	509	513	5970	6110	83760	83630
	Percentage	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Full Care Order	Number	318	334	3750	3830	48440	48080
	Percentage	62%	65%	63%	63%	58%	57%
Interim Care Order	Number	81	95	970	970	15000	14380
	Percentage	16%	19%	16%	16%	18%	17%
Placement Order Granted	Number	28	26	360	330	4530	4690
	Percentage	6%	5%	6%	5%	5%	6%
Voluntary agreements under S20 CA 1989	Number	81	57	890	960	15500	16240
	Percentage	16%	11%	15%	16%	19%	19%
Detained for Child Protection or Youth Justice legal statuses	Number	1	1	10	10	300	250
	Percentage	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

- 8.12 In 2023 16% of Cared for children and young people in Middlesbrough were subject to a S20 voluntary agreement, however this figure decreased by 5% in 2024, to 11%. The Northeast figure for 2024 is higher at 16% and the national figure is higher still at 19%. This evidences that children and young people in Middlesbrough are more likely to become subject to Care Orders than remain within S20 voluntary arrangements. Middlesbrough ensures that all children and young people who are subject to S20 arrangements are heard and reviewed as part of its Legal Gateway Panel process supporting timely permanence progression.

- 8.13 Placement Orders granted has remained consistently low at 5% and 6% Nationally as well as across Middlesbrough and the Northeast as a whole.

Placement location for our Cared for Children and Young people

- 8.14 Middlesbrough children living out of area as of 31st March 2024 is at 53%, this is a 2% decrease on the 2023 figure of 55% and is in line with the increase of children and young people residing in the area, which equally increased by 2% from 45% in 2023 to 47% in 2024.

- 8.15 Of those children and young people living out of area, 24% lived more than 20 miles away in 2023. This figure reduced to 23% in 2024. Middlesbrough remain committed to our Cared for children and young people residing within their own locality wherever it is possible and safe for them to do so.

	2023		2024	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
In area	230	45%	240	47%
Out of area	279	55%	273	53%
Out of area over 20 miles from home	66	24%	64	23%

	2023	2024
Proportion of Out of area children placed over 20 miles from home	24%	23%
Proportion of all cared for children placed over 20 miles from home	13%	12%

- 8.16 The most common Placement Type for 2024 is 'U6 Placement with other Foster Carer – long term fostering' at 24.4%, up from 23.4% in 2023.

Cared for comparative % by placement type					
Code	Placement type	2022-23 (count)	2023-24 (count)	2022-23 (%)	2023-24 (%)
A3	Placed for Adoption with consent with current foster carer	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
A4	Placed for Adoption with consent not with current foster carer	0	2	0.0%	0.4%
A5	Placed for Adoption with placement order with current foster carer	6	2	1.2%	0.4%
A6	Placed for Adoption with placement order not with current foster carer	14	3	2.7%	0.6%
H5	Semi-independent living accommodation not subject to Children's homes regulations	25	11	4.9%	2.1%
K1	Secure Children's Home	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
K2	Children's homes subject to Children's homes regulations	55	63	10.7%	12.3%
P1	Placed with own parents or other person with parental responsibility	34	49	6.6%	9.6%
P2	Independent living like a flat, lodgings, bedsit, B & B or with friends, with or without formal support	6	0	1.2%	0.0%
R1	Residential care home	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
R2	NHS/Health Trust	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
R3	Family centre or mother and baby unit	1	1	0.2%	0.2%

R5	Young Offenders institute or Secure training centre	2	3	0.4%	0.6%
U1	Foster placement with relative or friend long-term fostering	38	43	7.4%	8.4%
U2	Foster placement with relative or friend who is also an approved adopter or FFA	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
U3	Foster Placement with relative or friend - not long term or FFA	80	69	15.6%	13.5%
U4	Placement with other foster carer long-term fostering	130	119	25.3%	23.2%
U5	Placement with other foster carer who is also an approved adopter or FFA	1	1	0.2%	0.2%
U6	Placement with other foster carer - not long-term of FFA	120	125	23.4%	24.4%
Z1	Other placements	1	22	0.2%	4.3%
	Total	513	513	100.0%	100%

Children looked after at preferred placements as at 31st March 2024

- 8.17 Middlesbrough is equally committed to promoting arrangements that meet our children and young people's preferred residence. Sadly, this is not always possible due to preferences not always being appropriately safe or available. However, our IROs consistently ask our children and young people and seek to advocate where changes could be considered or made.

	2023		2024	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
At preferred placement	172	34%	171	33%
Not at preferred placement	337	66%	342	67%
Total	509	100%	513	100%

- 8.18 As part of this commitment Middlesbrough has been reviewing and continues to continually review its fostering offer as well as its own residential provision.

Children subject to DOLs

- 8.19 1 child was subject to a DOLs between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024, at that juncture the young person was 17 years of age, had been subject to a DOLS since 2019 and experienced significant learning needs. Sadly, due to those learning needs and the young person's understanding and coping mechanisms he required high levels of support to ensure both his own safety and that of those around him.

Use of Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders

- 8.20 A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is an order appointing one or more individuals to be a child's 'Special Guardian'. It is a private law order made under the Children's Act 1989 and is intended for those children who cannot live with their birth parents and who would benefit from a legally secure placement.

- 8.21 It is a more secure order than a Child Arrangement Order (CAO) because a parent cannot apply to discharge it, unless they have the permission of the court to do so, however it is less secure than an Adoption Order because it does not end the legal relationship between the

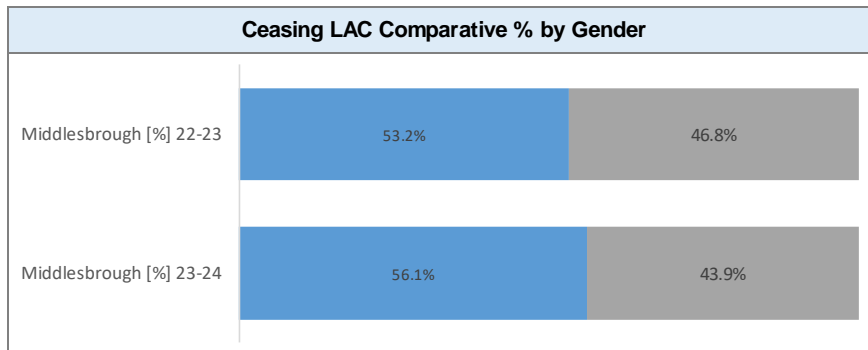
child and his/her birth parents. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced Special Guardianship Orders. Both an SGO and CAO are routes to permanence for Children Looked After.

CLA End Reason Description	CLA Cease
Child Arrangement Order	37
Special guardianship order made to carer(s), other than former foster carer(s), who was/are a relative(s) or friend(s)	22
Special guardianship order made to former foster carer(s), who was/are a relative(s) or friend(s)	22
Special guardianship order made to carer(s), other than former foster carer(s), other than relative(s) or friend(s)	1
Special guardianship order made to former foster carer(s), other than relative(s) or friend(s)	2
Total	84

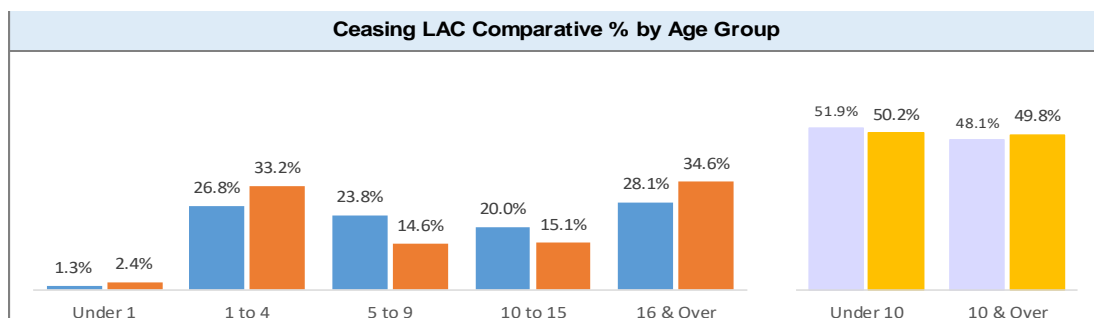
8.22 47 children and young people ceased being Cared for by Middlesbrough as a result of progression of Special Guardianship Orders securing their care, and a further 37 children and young people left our care as a result of a Child Arrangement order being secured.

9 Children and Young People leaving our Care

205 children ceased to be cared for between 1st April 2023 and March 31st 2024. This is a decrease on the 2022/23 figure which was 235. Of this number 115 (56.1%) were Male and 90 (43.9%) Female.



9.5 The most common age groups ceasing being looked after in 2023/24 were:
 [A] Children aged 16 and over at 34.6%. Up from the 2022/23 figure of 28.1%.
 [B] Children aged 1-4 at 33.2%. Up from the 2022/23 figure of 26.8%.
 [C] Children aged 10-15 at 15.1%. Down from the 2022/23 figure of 20.0%.



Children ceasing to be Cared for Reason [Statistical]:

- 9.6 Discounting the reason 'E8 Period of being looked after ceased for any other reason', 'E41 Residence order (or, from 22 April 2014, a child arrangement order which sets out with whom the child is to live) granted' is the main reason for children ending their period of care.

Code	Period of care end reason	2022-23 (count)	2023-24 (count)	2022-23(%)	2023-24(%)
E2	Died	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
E5	Moved into independent living arrangement and no longer Cared for: supportive accommodation providing formalised advice/support arrangements (such as most hostels, YMCA and care leavers projects)	0	2	0.0%	1.0%
E7	Transferred to residential care funded by Adult Social Services	1	0	0.4%	0.0%
E8	Period of being cared for ceased for any other reason	97	58	41.3%	28.3%
E9	Sentenced to custody	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
E11	Adopted - application for an adoption order unopposed	19	14	8.1%	6.8%
E12	Adopted - consent dispensed with by court	6	8	2.6%	3.9%
E13	Left care to live with parents, relatives, or other person with no parental responsibility	9	3	3.8%	1.5%
E14	Accommodation on remand ended	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
E17	Aged 18 (or over) and remained with current carers (inc under staying put arrangements)	2	20	0.9%	9.8%
E41	Residence order (or, from 22 April 2014, a child arrangements order which sets out with whom the child is to live) granted	34	37	14.5%	18.0%
E43	Special guardianship made to former foster carers	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
E44	Special guardianship made to carers other than former foster carers	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
E45	Special guardianship order made to former foster carer(s) who was/are a relative(s) or friend(s)	35	22	14.9%	10.7%
E46	Special guardianship order made to former foster carer(s) other than relative(s) or friend(s)	2	1	0.9%	0.5%
E47	Special guardianship order made to carer(s), other than former carer(s), who was / are a relative(s) or friend(s)	6	22	2.6%	10.7%
E48	Special guardianship order made to carer(S), other than former foster carer(S), other relative(s) or friend(s)	3	2	1.3%	1.0%
E4A	Return home to live with parents, relatives, or other person with parental responsibility as part of the care planning process (not under a special guardianship order or residence order or (from 22 April 2014) a child arrangements order)	20	12	8.5%	5.9%
E4B	Return home to live with parents, relatives, or other person with parental responsibility which was not part of the care planning process (not under a special guardianship order or residence order or (from 22 April 2014) a child arrangements order)	0	4	0.0%	2.0%
E3	Care taken over by another LA in the UK	1	0	0.4%	0.0%
E6	Independent living arrangement (no formalised support)	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
E15	Age disputed, age assessment determined child is aged 18 or over	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
E16	Moved abroad	0	0	0.0%	0.0%
	TOTAL	235	205	100%	100%

The use of Feedback and Consultation forms

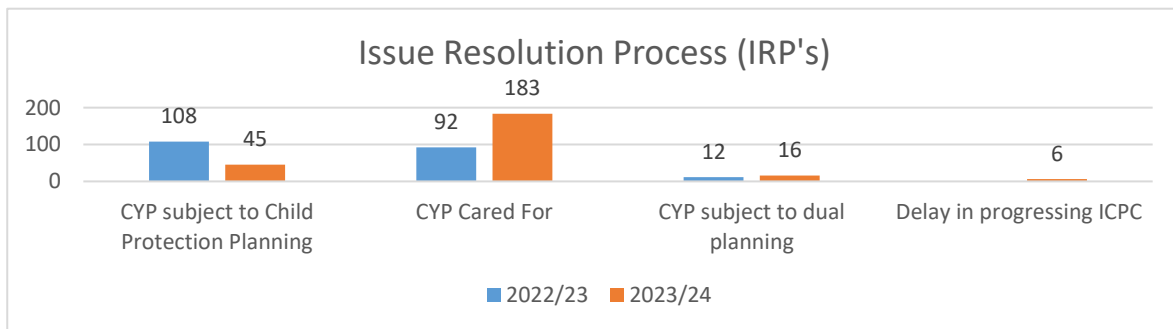
- 9.7 As we move into 2025 work is being completed to improve our ability to seek and respond to feedback from our children, young people and families. It is anticipated that by April 2025 we will have in place an automated system which allows us to provide a feedback QR code through which children, young people and their families will be able to share their views and experiences of working with us. This will be tailored to capture feedback from across service

areas, including both our children and young people subject to Child Protection planning, and our Cared for children and young people.

10 IRO service impact on Outcomes for Cared for Children and Young People

Dispute Resolutions, IRO Concerns and Escalations raised

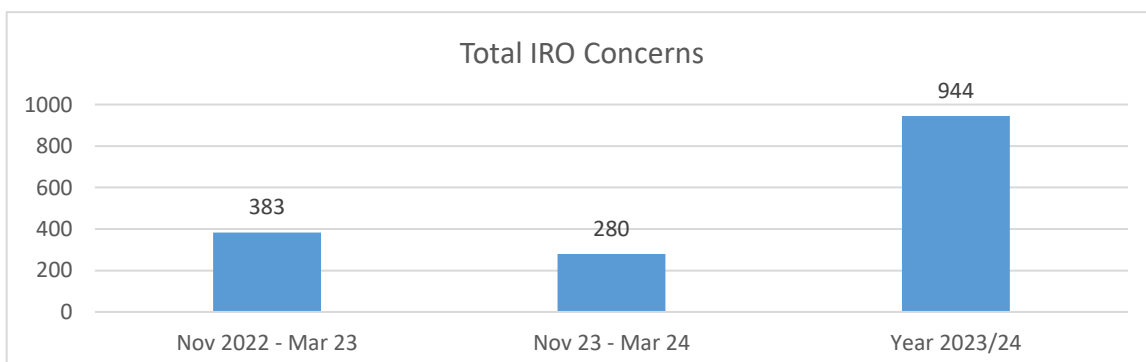
10.5 Our IRO's challenge worries such as poor-quality plans or drift and delay through the IRP process. In 2022/23 IROs completed 108 IRPs (Issue Resolution Process) for children and young people subject to Child Protection planning, 92 for Cared for children and young people, and a further 12 for children subject to dual planning totalling 212 IRPs in 2022/23.



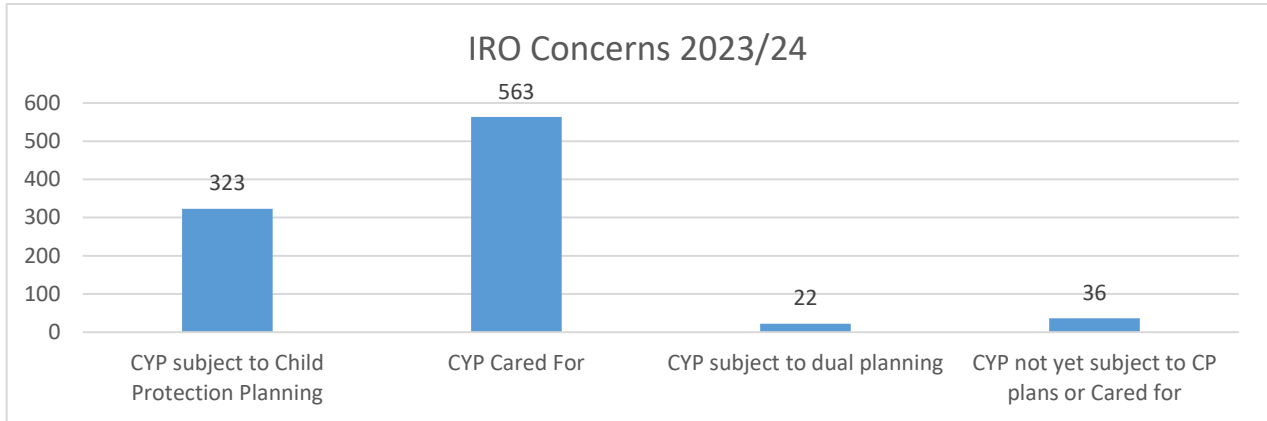
10.6 In 2023/24, 250 IRPs were raised, of which 183 related to Cared for children and young people, 45 related to children subject to Child Protection planning and 16 related to children subject to dual planning. A further 6 were not subject to either Child Protection or Cared for plans due to the IRP being raised regarding delay being able to progress an ICPC (sibling group of 6 children). This is an increase of 18% from the numbers above from 2022/23.

10.7 In 2022/23 IROs were also recording concerns, worries, and challenges that fell outside of the formal IRP process via case note recordings, however it was identified that this was difficult to report on as there was a variety of different case note headings which could be utilised. As a result, a specific case note heading of 'IRO concern' was created and as of November 2022 this information became reportable with greater accuracy.

10.8 Between 30th November 2022 and 31st March 2023 there were 383 IRO concerns recorded. For the equivalent period of 2023/24 (30/11/2023 to 31/03/2024) 280 IRO concerns were raised, with a further 664 subsequently being raised across the remainder of 2023/24 (Totalling 944 IRO concerns raised 2023/24).



10.9 Of those 944 IRO concerns raised in 2023/24, 563 related to Cared for children and young people, 323 related to children subject to Child Protection planning, 22 related to children subject to dual planning and a further 36 related to children who were not yet subject to Child Protection plans or Cared for.



10.10 Ofsted noted that:

“There is appropriate partner attendance and contribution to planning at child protection meetings. Not all core group meetings take place at the required frequency and partner agencies and child protection chairs are not challenging drift effectively. The lack of progress and improvements in some children’s situations means that they remain subject to child protection plans for too long without their outcomes improving”.

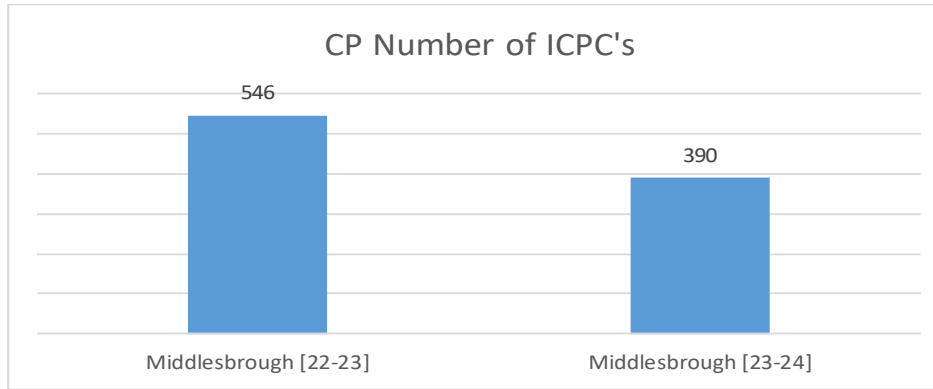
10.11 In May 2024 a panel is to be set up to review all children who have been subject to Child Protection planning for 15 months or more. The purpose of this panel is to explore the circumstances for each of these children and young people with a view to ensuring where appropriate, plans to exist Child Protection are agreed and progressed.

10.12 This panel will take place monthly, reviewing the actions agreed at the previous panel and ensuring exit planning progresses. Any children who subsequently hit the criteria of being subject to Child Protection planning for 15 months will be considered at this panel.

11 Key Messages about our Children and Young People with a Child Protection Plan

Initial Child Protection Conferences

11.1 The number of children and young people who were subject to an ICPC in the period 1st April 2022 to 31st March 23 was 546. This figure decreased to 390 in 2023/24. A decrease of 28.5% which equates to 156 less children becoming subject to Initial Child Protection Plans.



- 11.2 This reflects an improvement in the identification and mitigation of risk for our children and young people. In June 2024 Middlesbrough's Threshold criteria were updated. Running alongside this the MACH service delivered training internally and worked with partners and the STSCP to strengthen the wider professional understanding and application of the threshold criteria. It is anticipated that this will impact threshold application and in turn professional's perspectives when contributing to S47 enquiries as well as when considering whether a Child Protection Plan is the appropriate support and / or safeguard required to positively impact and improve outcomes for specific children and young people.

Number of Initial Child Protection Conferences that did not lead to a plan

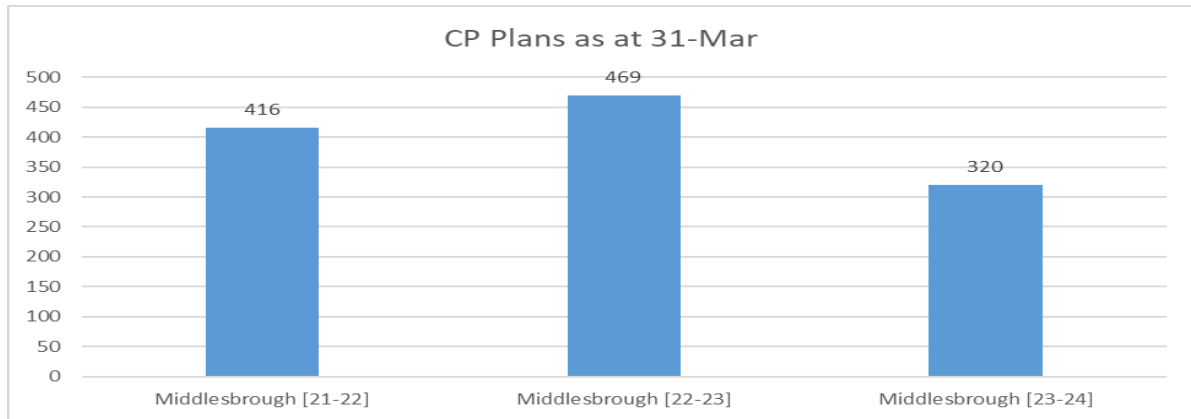
- 11.3 In 2023/24 40 (10%) ICPC's did not lead to a Child Protection Plan, this is an increase from 31 (5.7%) in 2022/23.

	Count	%
ICPC's leading to a Child Protection Plan	350	90%
ICPC's not leading to a Child Protection Plan	41	10.5%
Total number of ICPC's 2023-24	390	100%

- 11.4 Of those ICPCs held that did not lead to a Child Protection Plan in 2023/24, 31 (8%) children and young people were provided with services via Child In Need planning and 10 (2%) resulted in No Further Action.
- 11.5 This supports the hypothesis that an increased awareness of threshold application is positively influencing not only our own practice, but the perspectives of our partners given this is a total of 10% of ICPCs that lead to alternative outcomes for our children and young people, alongside the 28.5% decrease in children and young people's circumstances' being considered at an ICPC.

Number of Children and Young People subject to a Child Protection Plan

- 11.6 As at the 31st March 2024, there were 320 children and young people subject to an active Child Protection Plan in Middlesbrough. In the same period of 2023, this figure was significantly higher at 469, reflecting a 32% decrease. (In 2021/22 this figure was 416)

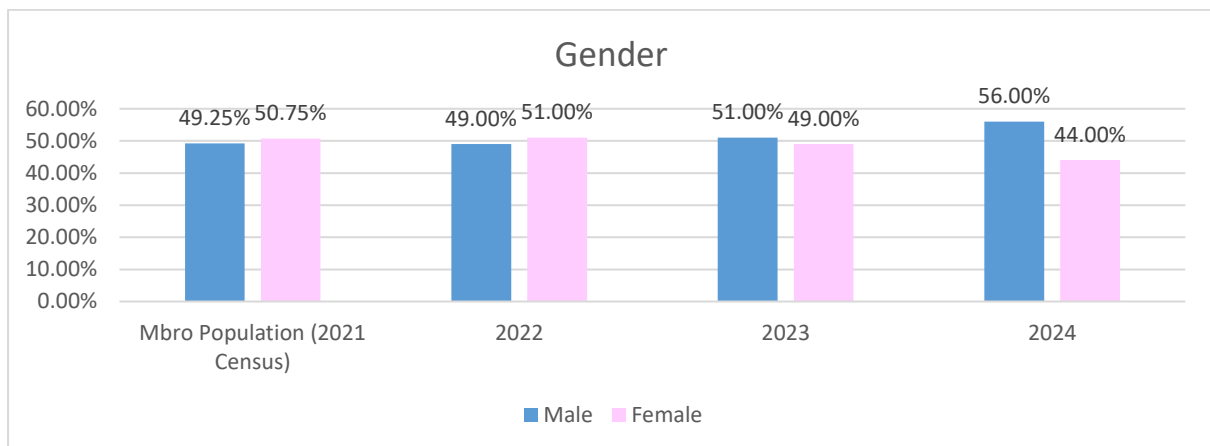


11.7 The rate of CPPs per 10,000 for March 31st 2024, was 92.0, for March 31st 2023 was 140.2 and for March 31st 2022 it was 125.6.

Gender of Children and Young people subject to a Child Protection Plan

11.8 20.8% of Middlesbrough’s resident population are children and young people aged 0-15years. This is higher than the England rate of 18.6%.

11.9 Out of the 320 children and young people who were subject to an active Child Protection Plan as of the 31st March 2024, 56% were male and 44% were female. In 2023, 51% were males and 49% were females reflecting that whilst there were more males than females subject to Child Protection Plans in both periods



11.10 According to the most recent CIN census, 50.75% of Middlesbrough’s population was estimated to be female and 49.25% were estimated to be male. In line with the England rates of 51.04% female and 48.96% male.

Ethnicity of Children and Young people subject to a Child Protection Plan

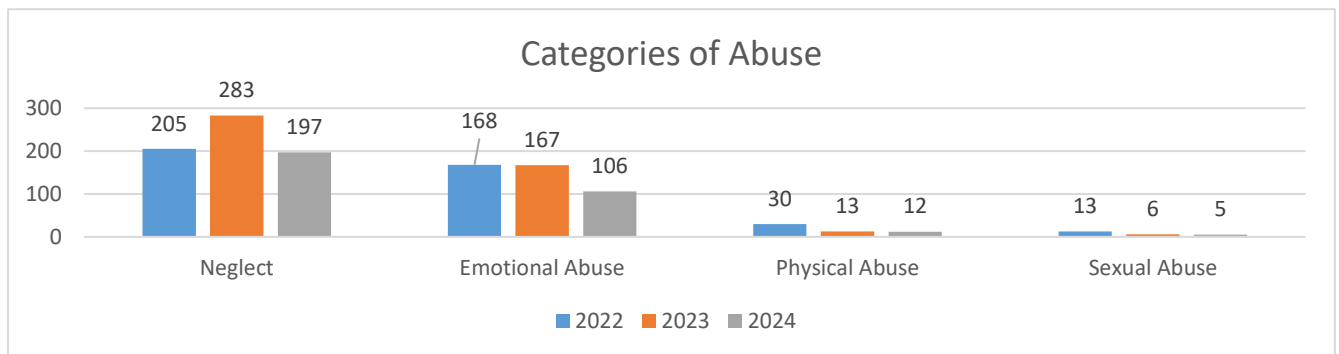
11.11 Children and young people in Middlesbrough who are subject to Child Protection Plans are more likely to be of White British ethnicity (84%), in line with the overall local demographic.

11.12 As illustrated below, whilst the individual percentages have varied the breakdown remains largely consistent across different ethnic backgrounds year on year, suggesting that the ethnicity of our children and young people who are subject to Child Protection planning mirrors that of our overall local population.

Ethnicity	Number 2024	Percentage 2024	Number 2023	Percentage 2023	Number 2022	Percentage 2022
a) WBRI	292	83.91%	401	77.12%	351	72.52%
b) WIRI	0	0.00%	1	0.19%	1	0.21%
d) WOTH	13	3.74%	31	5.96%	42	8.68%
f) MWBC	2	0.57%	5	0.96%	7	1.45%
g) MWBA	1	0.29%	3	0.58%	4	0.83%
h) MWAS	3	0.86%	11	2.12%	13	2.69%
i) MOTH	6	1.72%	15	2.88%	13	2.69%
j) AIND	1	0.29%	1	0.19%	2	0.41%
k) APKN	11	3.16%	17	3.27%	14	2.89%
m) AOTH	3	0.86%	8	1.54%	10	2.07%
o) BAFR	3	0.86%	7	1.35%	8	1.65%
p) BOTH	1	0.29%	1	0.19%	1	0.21%
r) OOTH	12	3.45%	19	3.65%	18	3.72%
Grand Total	348	100.00%	520	100.00%	484	100.00%

Reasons for Child Protection Plan

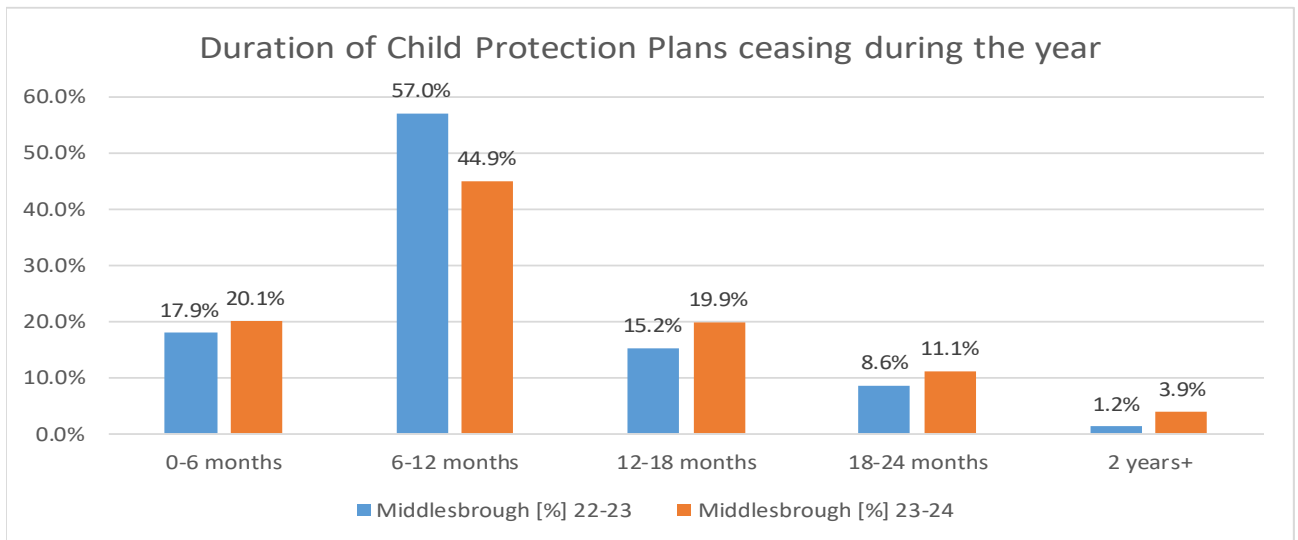
11.13 Children and young people in Middlesbrough who are subject to Child Protection Planning are more likely to be at risk of or suffering neglect (61%) or emotional abuse (33%) and less likely to be at risk of physical (4%) or sexual abuse (2%).



11.14 Whilst the most likely category of abuse has remained that of neglect across the last 3 years, 2023 and 2024 saw the percentage of neglect increase significantly compared to the other categories of abuse. This is likely to reflect the legacy of previous practice, whereby children and young people have experienced drift and delay in their plans progressing resulting in prolonged periods of Child Protection planning.

Duration of Child Protection Plans

11.15 The legacy of previous practice, whereby children and young people have experienced drift and delay in their plans progressing resulting in prolonged periods of Child Protection planning is equally illustrated when considering the duration of Child Protection Plans in Middlesbrough.



11.16 Within this we can see that most children and young people will be subject to Child Protection Planning for a period of between 6 and 12 months. However, some children and young people experience this for much longer, with the 2024 figures illustrating an increased number of children and young people who have been subject to Child Protection Planning across all periods in the range.

11.17 There are a number of possible reasons for this which relate to Middlesbrough’s improvement journey:

- Workforce instability
- Professional lack of confidence resultant from negative Ofsted rating in December 2019.
- Changes in senior leadership

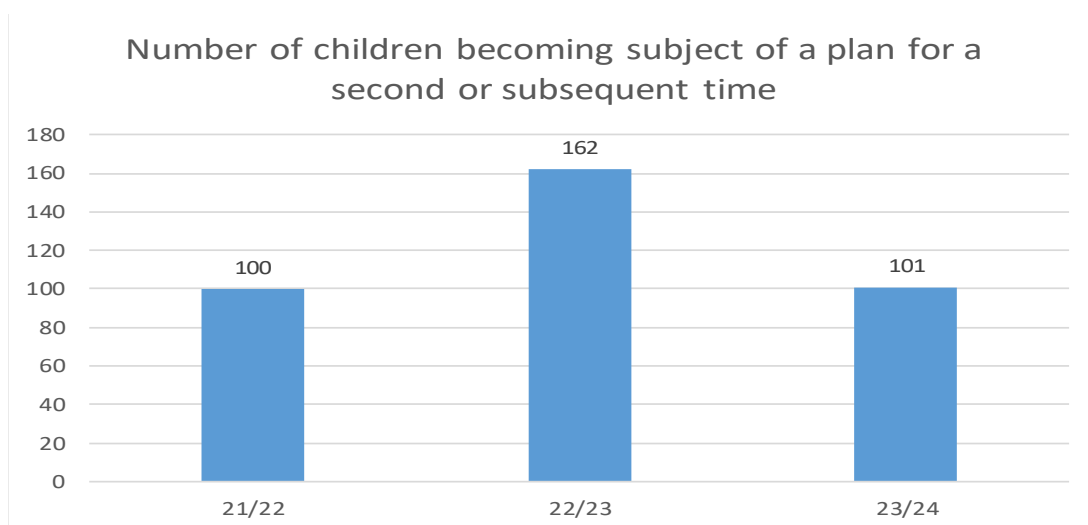
11.18 In addition to this it is feasible that the COVID pandemic negatively impacted on the reach of a variety of professional disciplines, meaning that services to support children, young people and their families was reduced at the same time as many children and young people ceased physically attending education.

11.19 Alongside this we also know that the pandemic meant that as services began to resume referrals increased for many local authorities as professionals were once again seeing children, young people and families, they had had reduced contact with.

- 11.20 Middlesbrough has not however simply accepted this. We have and continue to work hard to improve our workforce stability. We now have a permanent leadership team alongside increasing numbers of permanent frontline practitioners.
- 11.21 In addition to this, and in recognition of the trend towards a number of children and young people experiencing Child Protection Planning for prolonged periods, Middlesbrough introduced a Child Protection Review Panel in May 2024. During May and June, a number of review panels were held to discuss all 62 children who were at that juncture subject to Child Protection plans that had been in place for 16+ months. Step up and step-down plans were agreed and progressed for all of these children and young people. Some children and young people were stepped down prior to discussions but were discussed to understand themes and issues.
- 11.22 As at week beginning 24th June 2024 there were 53 children subject to Child Protection Plans that had been in place for 15+ months, out of which 17 children had been subject to a Child Protection Plan for 24+ months. All 17 children were reviewed and step up/ step down plans put in place.
- 11.23 The panel currently reviews all plans that have been in place for 15+ months on a monthly basis using the same panel methodology. This panel will remain in place to continue to provide senior management oversight and address any drift and delay for our children and young people.

Second or Subsequent Child Protection Plans

- 11.24 In 2022/2023 we saw 162 children become subject to a second or subsequent Child Protection Plan. In 23/2024 this has reduced with 101 children becoming subject to further Child Protection planning. This is a decrease of 37.6% from 2022 to 2023.

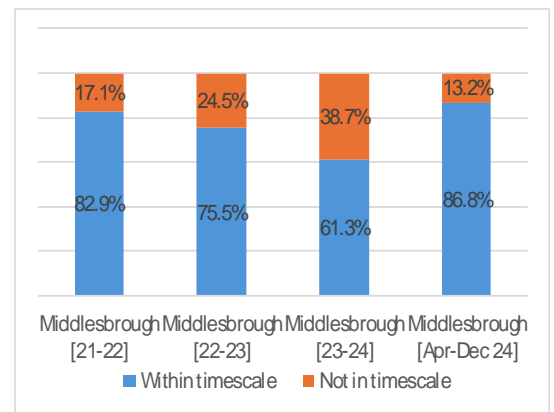
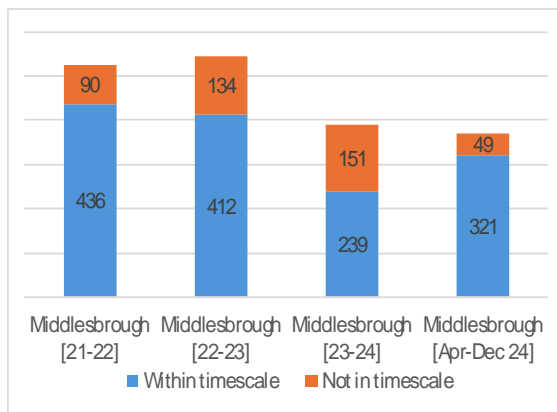


11.25 This would support that there has been an improvement in the effectiveness of work completed to support children and young people once Child Protection Plans have ceased. Equally this would support that the right services have been put in place during and/or after plans have ceased, to allow children, young people and their families to sustain positive changes and improvements.

Timeliness of Child Protection Plans

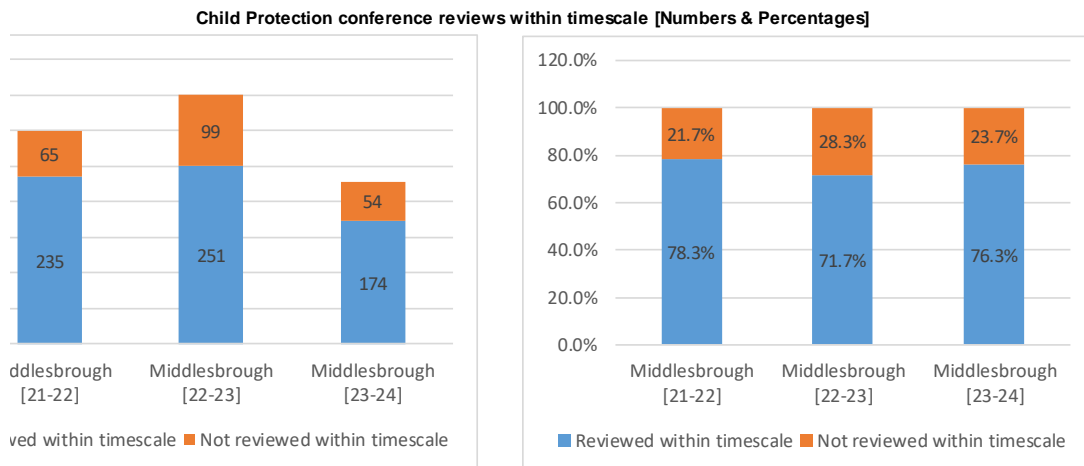
11.26 The decision as to whether a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, should take place within 15-days of the decision being made to investigate harm. This has significantly decreased over 2023/24 with only 61.3%% of Initial Child Protection conferences happening in timescales. This was 75.5% in 2022/23 and 82.9% in 2021/22.

ICPC's within timescale [Numbers & Percentages]



11.27 However, when we consider the data between April and December 2024, we can see the impact of work completed by the IRO service and across the wider service areas, which has resulted in an increase to 86.8% of ICPCs being held in timescales, supporting that improvements are being made for our children and young people subject to Child Protection, but that earlier lower percentages have brought down the overall percentage for the reporting period.

11.28 The timeliness of Review Child Protection conferences has improved from 71.7% in 2022/23 to 76.3% in 2023/24, however this is still a decrease on figures for 2021/22 which were at 78.3%.



11.29 The IRO service is continuing to work alongside colleagues to improve performance in this area. As part of this work, IRO’s book in review conferences 2 weeks in advance of when they are due to provide additional flexibility should challenges such as staff sickness or parental unavailability require review dates to be re-scheduled.

12 How the IROs provide Quality Assurance

12.1 As part of an Independent Reviewing Officers’ quality assurance responsibility, IRO’s check that our Cared for children and young people have had a say in their care planning, making sure our children and young people receive the right support that meets their individual needs, and that there is an accurate record of everything that happens.

12.2 IRO’s do this by reviewing records and visiting and speaking to children and young people, and their parents or carers. They also speak to the child or young person’s Social Worker between reviews to make sure their plan is right for them (mid-way reviews). The cumulative evidence of IRO oversight including visits and midway reviews, on children and young people’s records has increased from 810 in 2022/23 to 1097 in 2023/24. This is an improvement of 35% since last year.

12.3 When there is a delay or the outcomes, we are hoping for are not being progressed for our children and young people, the IROs challenge this through the ‘Issues Resolution Process’. (see also section 10: IRO concerns).

12.4 In 2022/23 the IROs raised 212 IRPs on behalf of Cared for children. In 2023/24 this increased by 18%, with 250 IRPs being raised. Most of these were about drift and delay (47%). The IROs monitor the responses to their challenges to make sure it is resolved in a timely way.

12.5 Following recent changes in senior management and the implementation of the new Quality Assurance Framework, the RAD unit will also be completing audit activities, through which they will utilise their IRO skills to evaluate key areas of practice quality within the RAD unit.

13 What we want to Improve

- 13.1 A central function of the RAD unit and the IRO's therein is to ensure that our Cared for children and young people and those subject to Child Protection planning receive the best service possible, with clear plans which meet their needs both in the short and long term.
- 13.2 The IROs are in the unique position of being independent from the day-to-day case management responsibilities, affording them the ability to provide objectivity, insight and advocacy for our children and young people. With this comes the responsibility of providing professional challenge when needed.
- 13.3 It is evidenced that our IROs are already increasing their footprint via IRPs and IRO concern mechanisms, however, to achieve improvements for our children and young people the RAD unit needs to also recognise its own areas for practice improvement.
- 13.4 With this in mind, the RAD unit has a service plan which captures the below key areas for improvement:
- Increasing the voice of children and young people in their reviews.
 - To do this, IROs will be ensuring that all children 4 years and over are provided with an opportunity to share their views, either in person or via an advocate.
 - Exploration is also taking place around the use of modern technological mechanisms such as the Mind of My Own app
 - Improve the quality of Care Plans and Child Protection Plans, including contingency planning, so that children, young people and their families are clear what progress looks like and what will happen if progress is not made.
 - Attend relevant training.
 - Work with and support colleagues across the service to implement that learning.
 - Increase the timeliness of Cared for Reviews to consistently meet the service target of 95% held in timescales.
 - Increase the timeliness of ICPC and RCPCs
 - Working with the wider service to ensure notification and convening information is shared in sufficient time.
 - Working with the service to ensure that social work reports are completed and shared with families in line with Practice Standards.
 - Progress IRO quality assurance activities in line with the QA Framework

14 Conclusion

- 14.1 The Independent Reviewing Officers maintain their focus on the children and families of Middlesbrough and are committed to making a difference for them. As Middlesbrough's improvement journey has seen improvements in planning for children and young people, we have in turn seen IRO caseloads fall by 42% between 2021/22 and 2023/24.
- 14.2 The IRO service is stable and fully staffed with most IROs having been in service with Middlesbrough for 5 years or more. As a result, children subject to Child Protection planning,

who subsequently become Cared for, are increasingly likely to have the same IRO allocated to them, assisting with providing consistency and reducing the need for them to retell their story.

- 14.3 In 2023/24 we have also seen improvements in the timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences; however, we are an ambitious service and want the best for our children and young people, meaning that we are committed to building on this improvement to reach our target goal of 95%, so that we can demonstrate consistency and timely intervention for our children and young people.
- 14.4 We have also seen a decrease (37.6%) in children becoming subject to a second or subject periods of Child Protection planning, suggesting that previous assessments and plans are increasingly effective in supporting sustainable improvements for our children and young people.
- 14.5 There is significantly increased evidence of IRO oversight of children's plans through midway reviews and IRO visits to children. IRO challenge has increased to improve arrangements for individual children and young people.
- 14.6 Children and young people in our care, are more likely to be male (57%), than female and more likely to be of White British ethnicity than any other ethnicity. They are also more likely to be cared for by foster carers and to have had less than 3 home moves (84%).
- 14.7 When children and young people leave our care, they are more likely to return to live with parents or to be cared for by extended family (23% Special Guardianship Order, 18% Child Arrangements Order, 9% home with parents or another person with/without PR). Increasing numbers of children, 11% were adopted over the year.

15 Next Steps

Goal	Actions to achieve	Timescales/Review Mechanism	Desired Outcome
Sustain optimum IRO caseloads	Monitor, review, and analyse Monthly IRO performance caseload data to inform staffing requirements	Monthly performance data	Children, young people, and their families continue to experience minimal changes in IRO allocation.
Increase the number of children and young people's views being gathered for their reviews	IROs to encourage children and young people to attend their reviews where appropriate.	Prior to all reviews	Children and young people's views will be evidenced and influence their care planning.
	Alternative feedback mechanisms to be secured and offered to children and young people who do not wish to attend in person.	April 2025	
Improve the quality of plans for our children and young people	IRO's will provide challenge where children and young people's plans require improvement	Training and workshops are to be delivered across the service in 2025. Attendance will be reviewed, and any IRO non-attendance addressed	Children and young people's plans will be evidenced as being of good quality, driving progress.
Increase understanding of the IRO role including the use of IRO concerns and IRPs, alongside the QA functions of the IRO.	RAD Unit Team Managers will deliver training across service areas	Training to be delivered in May 2025	Practitioners will have a clear understanding of the role of the IRO, their QA functions and how and when an IRO concern or an IRP will be completed
Increase the number of Cared for reviews held in timescale from 82% to 95%	RAD Unit Team Managers will work with IROs and the wider service to ensure all paperwork is prepared and available for Cared for reviews 3 full working days prior to the review meeting date	Monthly Performance data	Children and young people will have their Cared for reviews held in timescales.
Increase the number of Review Child Protection conferences held in timescales from 76.3% to 95%	RAD Unit Team Managers will work with IROs and the wider service to ensure all paperwork is prepared and available for Review Child Protection Conferences 3 full working days prior to the conference meeting date.	Monthly Performance data	Children and young people's review conferences will be held in timescales

<p>Increase the number of Initial Child protection Conferences held in timescales from 61.3% to 95%</p>	<p>RAD Unit Team Managers will work with IROs and the wider service to ensure all paperwork is prepared and available for Initial Child Protection Conferences 2 full working days prior to the conference meeting date.</p>	<p>Monthly Performance data</p>	<p>Children and young people's Initial conferences will be held in timescales</p>
<p>Reduce the number of children subject to Child Protection Planning for 15 months or more</p>	<p>All children and young people's plans that have been in place for 15 months or more will be reviewed at the monthly Child Protection Panel</p>	<p>Monthly Panels</p>	<p>Children and young people will not be subject to pro-longed periods of Child Protection Planning. Barriers to progressing children's plans will be identified and addressed.</p>