

Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report 2020/21

Date: October 2021

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Contents

Introduction and Purpose of the Annual Report	3
Legal Context & Statutory Function of the IRO.....	3
The Team	4
Meet our Children in Care.....	5
Performance of IROs for Children in our Care	7
Key Messages about Children in our Care	8
What Quality Assurance tells us about the experience of children in our care	8
What we want to improve for Children in Care.....	10
What have children and young people told us about the IRO service?	11
Meet Children who have a Child Protection Plan	12
Performance of IROs for Child Protection Chairs	13
Key Messages about our Children with a Child Protection Plan.....	14
What does Audit tell us about Child Protection Practice?.....	14
Quality assurance for Child Protection	14
What we want to improve for our Children with a Child Protection Plan.....	15
Child Protection Plans over 15 Months	16
2 nd or Subsequent Child Protection	16
What is the Issues Resolution Process telling us?	18
The Learning Loop.....	19
Individual Learning.....	19
Whole Service Learning	19
Example of the difference an IRO challenge made for a child.....	19
Example of the difference IRO challenge made to the whole service	20
Feedback from our Partners	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Summary	21
Priorities for 2021/2022.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.



Introduction and Purpose of the Annual Report

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 children in care, care leavers. In Middlesbrough the IROs have a dual role and therefore this report includes those children subject to a Protection Plan. This report focuses on the reporting year April 2020 to March 2021. It was completed by the Review and Development unit Service Manager Siobhan Davies and two Team Managers, Gail Johnson and Gemma Maile. It is based upon comprehensive input from all IRO's, Business Support and the Performance Data Team.

Legal Context & Statutory Function of the IRO

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 Care Planning Regulations.

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

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

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

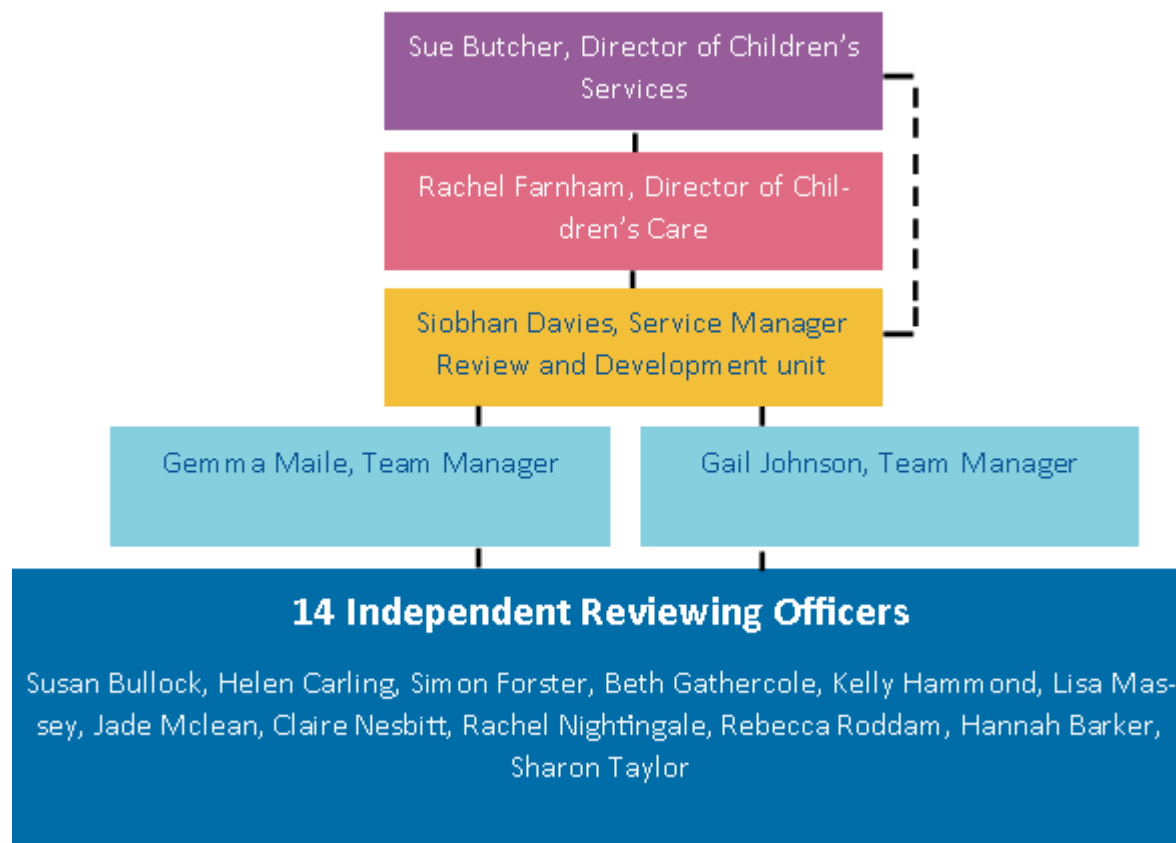
In summary the IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including;

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

IRO Handbook paragraph 2.4

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

The Team



The Team is made up of 14 IROs, overseen by 2 Team Managers, Gemma Maile & Gail Johnson. The team has a wealth of skills and experience, from expertise within Safeguarding Care Planning, Children in Care, Early Help, substance misuse, exploitation and children with disabilities. The range of skills within the team complement each other well and helps to create a strong culture of learning and development.

Over the past 3-years caseloads in the team have increased from 70 (2019) to 100 (2020) and high of 114 in 2021.

The team is stable, at least half of the IROs have been in post for over 5-years and are very experienced in their roles. Over the past year we have welcomed some new members of the team; Kelly Hammond & Jade McLean.

The position of the Team has remained the same throughout 2020/21. The team have direct access to the Director of Children's Services (DCS), Sue Butcher and meet with her on a regular basis to share their knowledge and insight into practice, as well as challenges and strengths across the service.

During 2020/21 the IRO service received 1 complaint, which was not upheld.

Meet our Children in Care

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

Of those Children who are
Looked after...



54

are Males



46

are Females

Based on CLA Population

Based on CLA Population



23

Children are
from
Ethnic Minorities

Based on CLA Population



Age and gender breakdown

● Under 1 ● 1-4 ● 5-9 ● 10-15 ● 16 & over



49

Children are
placed in
Middlesbrough



21

Children are
placed over 20 miles
of Home

Based on CLA Population

52

Based on CLA Population

Looked After
Children have been in
the same Placement for
2 years or more



Based on CLA Population

86

Children have
had less than
3 Placements



Based on CLA Population

1 Child is leaving Care



1 Child is adopted



Based on CLA Population

5 Children have a Placement Order waiting for Adoption



Based on CLA Population

67 Children are subject to a full Care Order

19 Children are subject to an Interim Care Order

7 Children are subject to a Section 20

Based on CLA Population

40 Children entered Care


This is a 23% decrease from the previous year 2020



Based on CLA Population

49 Children left Care

This is a 40% increase from the previous year 2020



Based on CLA Population

Of the children who left care

- 16%** Have a Child Arrangement Order
- 22%** Have a Special Guardianship Order
- 11%** Return home to live with parents, relatives or other person with parental responsibility
- 1%** Return home to live with parents, relatives or other person with no parental responsibility



Performance of IROs for Children in our Care

Based on CLA Population

21

Children attend their Looked After review



33

Children did not attend their Looked After review, but conveyed their feelings which were shared on their behalf



10

Children are represented by an Advocate in their Looked After review

Based on CLA Population

75%

Of CLA Reviews were held in timescale



Based on CLA Population

43%

Of Children were seen before their review



Based on CLA Population

The total number of CLA reviews that took place between 2020-2021 is

1495



Based on CLA Population

58%

of children had their Initial Health Assessment before the first CLA review



31%

of children had a PEP before the first CLA review



Key Messages about Children in our Care

If you are a child in our care you are more likely to be male than female (55%) and probably white British, although there are more children from minority ethnic communities entering our care in the past year (+2.5%).

If you are a child in our care it's likely you have had less than 3 home moves (86%), and you are likely to have lived in your home for over 2 years (52%). There's less chance that you are waiting for your long-term plan to be agreed in Court (19% reduced from 27% last year) which means you are on your way to a plan of permanence. There's likelihood that you will continue to live in Middlesbrough (almost 50%), but for some (21%) you will live over 20 miles from home.

It was more likely in 20/21 that you would leave our care (40% more children did than last year), when you leave care it's likely you now live with parents or extended family (22% Special Guardianship Order, 16% Child Arrangements Order, 12% home with parents or another person with/without PR). You are less likely to be adopted (1%). 5% of children have a Placement order and are waiting to be matched.

When your care plan is being reviewed you might come along (21%) or you could send your views through another person or in writing (33%). If you don't feel able to share your views yourself you might have an advocate to help you (10%). To help you prepare for your review your IRO may visit or call you (43%) to encourage you to be part of the process. Your reviews should be either 3 or 6-monthly and most are on time (75%). We have more IROs in the team now to make sure more reviews happen on time, our target is 95%. At your review we will have potentially reviewed your Health Assessment (58%) and your Personal Education Plan (31%) to make sure everyone is working to shared goals for your health, education and wellbeing.

What Quality Assurance tells us about the experience of children in our care

If you are a child in our care your IRO is responsible for quality assurance, which means checking that you have had a say in your plan, making sure you get the right support that meets your needs, and that there is an accurate record of everything that happens. To do this IROs complete a 'Monitoring Tool'. These are saved on your record and if your IRO has any worries they will use this tool to share with your Social Worker and their Manager so that things can be resolved for you.

The Monitoring Tool is being used more often but not yet 100% of the time. When IROs have completed these tools they tell us that;

You are likely to have an up to date plan (75%) which is discussed at your review, but some (25%) need to be updated. We know that sometimes plans need to be better for you, we call this SMART (Specific, measurable, achievable, Realistic & Timely). SMART plans help to make sure that you and everyone working with you knows what needs to happen, when and what the outcome will be.

When plans are not SMART it can mean that there is delay (or things take too long to happen) and the outcomes we're hoping for are not always achieved. IROs role is to challenge when this happens, in Middlesbrough this is called 'Issues Resolution Process'. IROs raised 150 challenges last year, most of these were about drift and delay (65%). Some were raised because procedures were not being followed (15%) and the rest were due to things like; concerns they found when completing the IRO Monitoring Tool, or life story work was not completed.

To make sure plans are right your Social Worker would need to carry out an assessment, IROs found that not all children have an assessment, which is something that needs to improve.



The Audit to Excellence Team (who quality assure the work of the IRO) told us that most of the looked after reviews require improvement to be good (65%), some are good (15%) and some are inadequate (20%). To be better we would make sure that your views are clear in the review and that you feel able to attend and be part of your review. The IROs also need to make sure that all of the right people attend your review (this is parents/carers other family members and professionals) which we do most of the time.

Your IRO will write to the court (provide a statement) to let the Judge and everyone else know what they think your plan should be.

Learning from Disruption Meetings

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

A disruption meeting must be held for a child whose long term home ends abruptly or in an unplanned way. The meeting will focus on the needs of the child and help the child and carers to move on while also informing future planning, particularly with a view to securing permanency for the child by preventing any future breakdowns.

Within the Disruption Meeting there is a focus on identifying significant factors leading to the disruption, enable everyone to share feelings and information about what happened. Gather information about future planning for the child and how to make sure they are prepared for their move.

- During 2020/21 the Review and Development Unit carried out a review of a sample of Disruption Meetings and found some key themes;
- All 10 children reviewed were 11+
- COVID-19 and lockdown had an impact on the stability for 50% of those reviewed
- Some of our children were affected when another child was moved into their home, the disruption meetings found that the impact on the child was not always fully considered (40%)
- Some found that changes in allocated Social Worker for the child had an impact (40%)
- Some of our children would have benefited from therapeutic support, which had not been in place (30%)
- Some carers felt that they were not fully prepared with all available information when the child moved in with them to understand their story (30%)
- Some carers had outlined support that they had asked for but not received (30%)
- There are less instances, but some disruptions meetings found; an advocate would have been beneficial, pre-disruption or stability meetings would have helped to support the placement, respite care could have been explored. In 10% (1 review in the same) it was found that the Foster Carer required additional training, the child did not feel listened to, and the child's plan was not clear.

Throughout 2020/21 there has been work undertaken to strengthen the support for children who are at risk of an unplanned home move, this is supported by updated procedure and guidance for staff to ensure that where support is needed and stability meetings are required, they take place in a timely way.



What we want to improve for Children in Care

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

We want all children (at least 95%) to be seen before their review by their IRO, as well as keeping in touch between reviews to make sure that children and young people benefit from having a relationship with their IRO. For children who are not living in their forever home, this should be more often so that the IRO knows that the plan for the child is progressing, and if it's not, then this can be addressed as soon as possible.

We want IROs to raise issues (using the Issues Resolution Process) when there are concerns about the timeliness and quality of all plans for children, this includes care plans for permanence, EHCPs, PEPs and Health plans. In order to do this we want IROs to always carry out IRO Monitoring Tools as part of each review process. We want these tools to make a difference for each child individually, and collectively be used to raise areas of good practice, or areas of improvement.

IROs will be working on making sure everyone who cares for you and works with you has high aspirations for you, which means have high hope, dreams and goals for you and help you to reach them. If IROs make recommendations about what should happen for you, they need to make sure they are SMART too.



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

My IRO is great I have had her for a while now and she always makes sure I'm heard and my wishes are pushed forward. I think the IRO system is very useful - CHILD

I felt as if it was good I liked the service given I felt as if I could talk about my issues or needs fine. And any issues I had were dealt with fairly quickly in my opinion it was good and I appreciate it a lot - CHILD

My IRO is great because she listens to my ideas and takes them in. She is very friendly so we can have good conversations. She talks to me about my family and how I am coping with my family in my house. About my family, she talks about them in a way that I don't get upset. And my family at home, she doesn't just ask about me she asks about how the other boys are and how we are coping. We also have random conversations about life instead of just family and care things. I think Claire is a really good IRO CHILD

Our IRO, she is a good IRO because she is friendly and we can feel comfortable with asking her anything we want to. When we ask questions she doesn't always answer, but then goes on to find out the answer. I have asked her questions about my brothers and sisters, which she answered but others she had to find out.

Altogether, I think she is a good IRO, she usually answers our questions and helps us get a new Social Worker if we need one. CHILD

Our IRO she is absolutely amazing she listens to you but also she will tell you when you're doing something wrong etc. we have been lucky enough to have Beth for years now I honestly can't thank her enough not just for doing the reviews but she is always there for (US – Brothers & Sisters) too she makes them feel at ease with her she always makes sure things are done & checks up on the progress of things that haven't been completed yet she deserves some recognition for the hard work she does. I don't think she realises how much she helps people especially from the child's side she is the best IRO. If I could give her a medal I would because things haven't always been easy Beth is a credit to your team can you tell her from us we will be always thankful for everything she's done for our children & our family we will be eternally grateful to her kind regards BIRTH MOTHER

Meet Children who have a Child Protection Plan

If Middlesbrough was a village of 100, 2 children would have a Child Protection Plan

Of those Children subject to a Child Protection Plan...

55
are Males



45
are Females

Based on CP Population



29

Children on a Child Protection Plan are from Ethnic Minorities

Based on CP Population



Based on CP Population

● Under 1 ● 1-4 ● 5-9 ● 10-15 ● 16 & over

48

Children have a Child Protection Plan under the Category of Neglect

Children have a Child Protection Plan under the Category of Emotional Abuse

46



4

Children have a Child Protection Plan under the Category of Physical Abuse

Children have a Child Protection Plan under the Category of Sexual Abuse

2



Based on CP Population

Performance of IROs for Child Protection Chairs

17

**Children have had
more than 1
Child Protection Plan**



65

**Children had
their ICPC in
timescale**

69
**Children had
their RCPC in
timescale**



Based on CP Population



3

**Children have
been on a Child
Protection Plan
for over 2 years**



Based on CP Population

Based on CP Population

811 ICPC's & 432 RCPC's were held between 2020-2021



Key Messages about our Children with a Child Protection Plan

There are 17 out of every 100 children in Middlesbrough who have a child protection plan. If you are a child in Middlesbrough with a child protection plan you are more likely to be male than female (55%) and you are most likely aged between 10-15 years old. You are likely to be white British, however 29% are from ethnic minorities.

You are most likely to be at risk of or suffering neglect (48%) or emotional abuse (46%). You are less likely to have a child protection plan because of physical (4%) or sexual abuse (2%). If you are 1 of 100 children who have had a child protection plan, it's possible that you would have 1 or more child protection plans (17%). Your child protection plan should not last more than 2 years (3% have).

Your child protection conference, where the decision is made whether you are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm should take place within 15-days of the decision being made to investigate harm. Your initial child protection conference had 65% chance of happening in time. Once you have a child protection plan it needs to be regularly reviewed, it will have been reviewed on time 69% of the time.

You are not likely to attend your child protection conference, this is something we want to work towards, to make child protection conferences accessible for children and young people who would benefit from being there.

What does Audit tell us about Child Protection Practice?

Audit to Excellence have checked the quality of Child Protection conferences in Middlesbrough. In December 2020. Overall they found that 90% require improvement to be good or better. There isn't an outline plan before the meeting, this is developed in the conference. There is good attendance from parents but sometimes parents are not given the reports to read in advance, almost all of the conferences included fathers and other relevant males. Children's voice is heard but not always about the child protection plan or conference. All of the Initial Child Protection conferences were well attended by professionals. Safety plans were discussed. The minutes were well written and very detailed. Everyone present, including parents were involved in analysing risk and use a 'scale' to measure this, however we could be better if everyone shared what they think needs to happen to move up the scale.

Quality assurance for Child Protection

If you are a child living in Middlesbrough and you have a child protection plan, your Child Protection Chair (CP Chair/IRO) is also responsible for quality assurance. To do this they complete a 'Monitoring Tool'. These are saved on your record and if your conference chair has any worries they will use this tool to share with your Social Worker and their Manager so that things can be resolved for you.

The Monitoring Tool is being used more often but not yet 100% of the time, there are more monitoring tools being completed for children with a protection plan than children who are in our care. When IROs have completed these tools they tell us that;

When your initial child protection conferences were held out of timescales, this was often because of 'staffing' issues, such as IRO, Social Worker or minute taker absence. At one point in December 2020 this was a significant worry so we dealt with this quickly by bringing in more IROs and Minute Takers to help out. We aim for 95% of all conferences taking place in timescales, 65% were in timescales this year.



To make sure that no child's conference is held late, if it can be avoided, all decisions to re-arrange conferences are made by Heads of Service.

We found that when information was shared about you at your conference it was good on most occasions (86%) but that sometimes it is not shared soon enough for everyone to feel fully prepared. IROs also found that your views were clear in most conferences (74%) but not all. When your views are not heard you are not always being asked if you would like an advocate (NYAS).

It is the responsibility of everyone involved in your plan to meet every month and have a 'Core Group Meeting'. The Monitoring Tool found that these are not always happening and of those checks completed by the IRO only 27% had regular meetings. These meetings are important to make sure your plan is on track, it's also a chance to make any slight changes if for some reason the plan is not yet working.

When IROs are worried about children with a child protection plan they can raise the issue through the same Issues Resolution Process that we use for children in our care. Last year there was 52 issues raised by IROs. On most occasions this was due to their worry about the quality of practice, on some but less occasions this is due to procedures not being followed or worries about whether a plan was keeping children safe.

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

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

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

We want children to have child protection plans that quickly make a positive difference, this means we will have less children with plans that last over 15-months. We also want less children to have more than 1 child protection plan.

To achieve our goals for children with a protection plan we will hold regular challenge clinics to increase oversight from Managers and Senior Managers. These clinics help us to understand any patterns in practice that we might need to change. During 2020/21 there has been challenge clinics on;

- Children with a protection plan over 15-months
- Children who have had more than 1 protection plan.



Child Protection Plans over 15 Months

What are current trends telling us?

- There was an increase in number of children subject to a Protection Plans
- The majority of plans (72%) had started in the past 6-months
- 6% had been in place for over 18 months
- <1% had been in place for over 2-years

What are we doing about this?

When children are identified as being at risk of continuing significant harm, they are made subject to a child protection plan, this significant harm might be physical, sexual, emotional harm or neglect. A child will no longer remain subject to a protection plan once they are no longer at risk of significant harm. Middlesbrough aims to have children on a protection plan for as short a time as possible as targeted interventions should be effective in reducing the risk of significant harm and protecting the child. The Challenge Clinic was put in place additional scrutiny for those 7% of children over 18 months to ensure that they are not experiencing drift and delay.

A summary of the findings;

- 85% of those children were also subject to Pre-Proceedings (PLO). Those who were not, the decision was the right one for the children.
- 38% of children have had more than one period of child protection, their most recent now exceeding 18-months. Neglect is a common theme amongst these children. All of these children are subject to pre-proceedings (PLO).
- Neglect is the most common category of abuse, emotional abuse was 2nd. This reflects the wider population of all children subject to a protection plan.
- There was no particular theme in relation to risk factors identified, although parental substance misuse was identified in 40%. Domestic abuse, Parental Mental Health and CSE were evident in 20%
- What was evident in the challenge clinic was the absence of a Single Assessment giving clear direction for a plan to be built upon. The outcome of panel for 60% of families was for an updated assessment to be complete that fully explores risk, life for the child and is presented either to the review conference or gateway panel for a multi-agency decision regarding risk and/or legal action.

2nd or Subsequent Child Protection

Why is it important?

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 (then 55%) then emotional abuse (then 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.

In Middlesbrough there is a contributing factors for the increase in social care activity and neglect which is the impact of recent OFSTED inspection in November 2019 on thresholds for child protection.

What are the trends telling us and what are we doing about it?

A challenge clinic took place on 2nd July 2020 with a focus on children who have been subject to more than one protection plan with an initial focus on those whose previous plan was in the past 2-years. There is some evidence that this cohort of children are experiencing fluctuating care with similar re-emerging concerns.

- 17 children were identified, this is 9 sibling groups.
- Some children have had 3 child protection plans (41%) but most (59%) had 2 children protection plans ever.
- The category of neglect is a common theme amongst these children (52%). Where children have had 3 protection plans under the category of neglect, the clinic found that risks were re-occurring and not new risks.
- 12% of children had multiple categories of emotional abuse and neglect but on both occasions the risks were relating to domestic abuse between parents.
- 6% had 2 plans both under the category of emotional abuse, both related to risk posed by a parent and demonstrate reoccurring issues.
- All but one of the children reviewed were deemed to be supported at the right level. Most, but not all children, were also subject to Pre-proceedings work through Public Law Outline (PLO). Following the review the Head of Service gave direction for 1 family to be discussed at Legal Gateway Panel.
- Actions arising from Panel, for most children, was to update assessments.



What is the Issues Resolution Process telling us?



The process we follow to resolve care planning issues (known as the **Issues Resolution Process**) was updated in September 2020 to;

- Ensure roles and responsibilities of everyone are clear
- Increase Management oversight at all levels
- Seek to resolve matters earlier for our children

Impact on Children and young people

Challenge has increased by
70%

84%

were resolved within timescale
(up from 77% last year)

More challenge is resolved at
a lower level

**IRO Monitoring &
Quality Assurance**



25% increase in IRO audits for children in

306% increase for children subject to a

Quality of IRO Challenge;

- ⇒ Some IROs demonstrate persistence in posing difficult questions and seeking answers to unresolved care planning matters
- ⇒ Some individual IROs display persistence, can exhibit strong challenge and veracity in the face of errant standards of practice by the corporate parent.
- ⇒ IRO escalations need to be more effective at achieving meaningful substantive change to care planning decisions. IROs are effective at highlighting an issue, however the issue is closed down when a superficial or basic level of compliance is shown with the demand.
- ⇒ IROs need to show in their independent review, audit and challenge that they have high aspirations for our children

What IRO Challenge tells us about the experience of children in care

The most common reason for IRO challenge is drift and delay, this can mean a range of things from delay in providing a service to a child that is outlined on their Child Protection Plan or delay in achieving a plan of permanence for children in our care. Concerns about drift and delay make up over 51% of all IRO challenges.

Secondly, IRO challenge tells us that procedures are not always followed. Examples of this include; mean the way a child or their placement has been assessed and supported is not in line with our procedures, or that multi-agency meetings are not taking place to review the child's plans.

Other, less common reasons for raising challenge are concerns about a child's placement (home) or issues around quality of the recording on the child's file.

The Learning Loop

Individual Learning



Following an IRO Audit or issue being raised through the Issues Resolution Process, the agreed actions/issues are recorded on the child's file and where appropriate a plan of action is agreed to address the issues. This is then monitored by the IRO, IRO Team Managers on a weekly basis to ensure those actions are completed. When this is not achieved the issue will be escalated to a higher level. In 2019/20 challenge was more often than not resolved with Heads of Service as it was unsuccessful at stage 1 (Social Worker) and Stage 2 (Team Manager). However, during 2020/21 challenge is more often resolved at Stage 2.

Whole Service Learning



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

An Example of the impact an IRO challenge made for a child

As a Child Protection Chair for one of our young people I became worried that professionals felt the plan should end because the young person didn't want to work with professionals (wasn't engaging with their plan).

After the conference I completed a CP Monitoring Tool which highlighted that this young person had not been seen recently, I raised my worries straight away with the Social Worker and Team Manager.

I went to see the young person who did not look well and was sofa surfing, smoking cannabis and had no food in the home.

I followed the IRO Issues Resolution Process and action was taken straight away to improve things for the young person. This young person became looked after. Housing issues were addressed and now this young person is in full-time education. This young person is working really well with his Social Worker, has a professional support network around them until they are 25.

An example of where IRO challenge made to the whole service

Concerns were raised by IROs about Unborn babies being presented to ICPC late which limits the effectiveness of any assessment and intervention undertaken pre-birth to support the baby, and their family. This was shared with the Heads of Service in Children's Services and discussed at the Learning Meeting for further analysis and understanding of the issue. Following that, an audit team was set up to carry out a thematic audit on safeguarding unborn babies. The outcome identified that learning which is now being addressed through a Partnership training "Safeguarding Vulnerable Babies" coordinated by the Principal Social Worker with learning from audit, Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, IRO feedback and national Born into Care Review.

Partnership Working

Partnership working is critical to the function of the Review and Development Unit. In order to strengthen relationships across the Partnership the Service Manager for the Review and Development Unit chairs a Safeguarding Networking Forum. The aim of this group is to bring partners together at an operational level, to share information, discuss service updates, identify any barriers to good practice and address these together. Examples of where this has worked well is a multi-agency approach to developing a practice standard for allocation, handover and ending involvements with children and young people to minimise impact on the child and how agencies work together. The group is also in the process of developing some multi-agency guidance for Schools on how to respond to Operation Encompass.

As well as working with local Partners, the Review and Development unit has strong links with the 12 authorities in the North East. There is a shared work plan, training and a Regional Conference is being planned for 2021/22.

Feedback from Partners

"All IRO's I have dealt with have all been professional and welcoming to the families that have been involved in ICPC's. All ICPC's have been well structured from the beginning until the end of ICPC, with a very clear understanding of what the ICPC will entail of, which is important for parents/ carers to understand. When I have attended joint ICPC's one thing I would recommend is to try and shorten these in regards to what information is shared as these can be a very long process. Overall a positive experience".

"The voice of the child and parents have always been considered throughout all meetings that I have attended. IROs have been confident to challenge professionals and parents when needed, I have found that a number of Middlesbrough IRO's are able to pull back on conversations which are escalating which may result in the focus of the child being lost and not being made central to the discussion".

"I have found that IROs within the Middlesbrough district are knowledgeable which I feel reflects well on their experience within the social care field. All meetings that I have attended for Middlesbrough, IRO's are clearly well prepared for the meeting all appear to gain an insight into the background of the family, what's happening and what needs to happen to help families move forward. In addition, I have found that the IRO's are adaptive in the way they work which has helped overcome barriers of communication for parent/carers and children if they have been present".

“The IRO service are a very supportive one of what we are trying to achieve, if they know a young person is struggling they will ring to see if they have been referred and if a referral hasn’t been picked up they want to see it so they can understand the context as to why this hasn’t happened. They have the young people at the heart of everything they do and challenge where challenge is needed.”

At futures for families we have completed over 40 Deep Dives and whilst there are many challenges and areas we can improve the consistent lesson that is learnt from the Deep Dives is that the turnover of IROs is low and that young people’s constant person seems to be the IRO, they know that young person journey in great detail”.

Summary & Priorities for 2021/22

The Review and Development unit continues to work hard to serve the children of Middlesbrough, throughout 2020/21 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. We have also had to dramatically change the way we work through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the ongoing challenges throughout 2021 the Review and Development unit has worked hard on practice improvement. The team has a strong commitment to a learning culture. Since April 2021 we have seen improvements in the quality of practice across children’s Social Care and IRO Service. We have seen improvements key areas of performance, timeliness of all statutory meetings (initial and review child protection conferences and looked after reviews). IROs are visiting children face to face. We have increased the use of the monitoring tool to quality assure the child’s care plan. IRO challenge remains high and there is a new monitoring process in place to ensure that these challenges have a positive impact for children and young people. Learning from IRO’s feeds directly into the Principal Social Workers monthly Learning Meeting so that support can be put in place to address practice issues arising from IRO monitoring and challenge.

The IRO improvement journey will remain closely linked to the Children’s Services Improvement Plan and our priorities for 2021/22 will be;

- Maintain compliance with KPI’s (ICPC, RCPC, CLA Review timeliness)
- Increase child participation, including visits before reviews
- Mid-way reviews for all children is a minimum standard, with increased continuous oversight for those without stability and permanence
- Increased scrutiny and challenge when permanence is not achieved in a timely way
- Strengthen the impact of IRO Challenge and demonstrate IROs have high aspirations for Middlesbrough children
- Create specialisms within the IRO Service, to better support particular groups of children i.e. care leavers, unaccompanied asylum seeking children
- Increase support and feedback mechanisms for parents
- IROs contribute to overall practice priorities by monitoring quality of performance