



## **INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE**

### **ANNUAL REPORT**

### **APRIL 2013 – MARCH 2014**

**The Contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Children in Care**

## **Purpose of service and legal context**

The Independent Review Officers' (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook and linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the Review process to a wider overview of looked after children's cases including regular monitoring and follow-up between Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Children Looked After (CLA) and for challenging drift and delay.

The Children and Young People's Act 2008 came into force April 1st 2011, strengthening the role of the IRO, with related guidance contained within the IRO Handbook, (the Handbook). The intention for these changes was to enable the IRO to have effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process. The guidance within the handbook aims, *'to give all looked after children the support and services that each one requires to enable them to reach their potential,'* (DCSF 2010, p.4).

The Handbook sets out the requirement for the IRO service to produce an annual report. There is an expectation that the report contains an analysis of key data collated by the Safeguarding Unit reflecting performance in relation to Looked after Children and Young People, against the specific handbook requirements. From this progress is monitored and specific areas for development identified. This report covers the period 1 April 2013 – 31 March 2014.

### **The Legal context and the purpose of service;**

The roles and responsibilities of the IRO are defined in the main by;

- The Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 (ref section 7)
- The Children Act 1989
- The Human Rights Act 1998
- The Adoption and Children Act 2002
- The Children Act 2004
- The Children and Young Peoples Act 2008 (extending the responsibilities and powers of the IRO)
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010
- IRO Handbook 2010 (implemented 1 April 2011)

The functions and requirements of the IRO and the service can be summarised as follows:

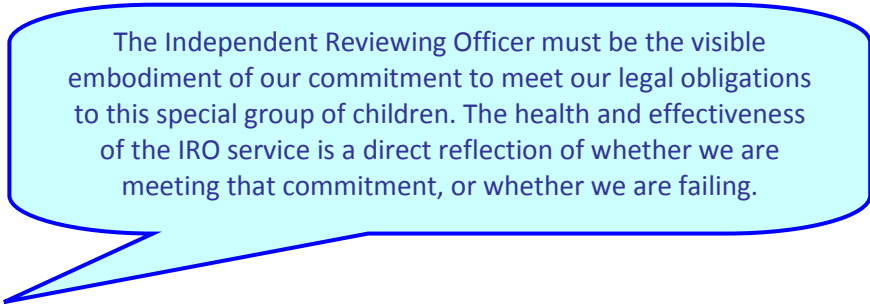
- All Looked After Children should have an allocated IRO that remains a consistent figure
- There should be the same IRO for children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan and subsequently become Looked After.
- There should be a consistent IRO for sibling groups.
- The IRO should chair Looked After Reviews (within 28 days, 3 and 6 months)
- Undertake reviews of short break services provided to children with disabilities and complex needs where the child receives a service of over 75 nights, or where there are a specific set of circumstances, (initially within 3 months and then within 6 months)
- Promote the voice of the Looked After Child
- Ensure 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
- Meet with the child and consult with him or her, making sure that the child understands what is happening to them, can make a genuine contribution to plans, fully understands the implications of any changes and understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to this and legal advice.

- Offer a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for looked after children and the delivery of services to them
- Monitor 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
- Challenge Children's Services, where appropriate, to ensure the best life chances for children and young people.
- To have an effective means of challenging a Local Authority including access to independent Legal Advice, a Dispute Resolution Procedure and the ability to convey concerns to CAFCASS.

During the period covered by this report, the undertaking of Foster Care Reviews in Northumberland has continued to be undertaken by an individual worker working within the Family Placement Service. There is the potential for conflict where IRO's are overseeing the plans for Looked after children and Young People, promoting their views and also reviewing foster carers, we have found that the process referred to above has addressed this issue and reinforced independency for the service.

During late 2012 and early 2013 Ofsted undertook a thematic inspection, 'taking up the challenge' regarding IRO services. Although Northumberland were not one of the Local Authorities chosen to participate in this inspection the final report was published in June 2013 and provided a helpful baseline upon which to evaluate the IRO service in Northumberland. The service undertook a self-assessment against the recommendations of the report and the results helped shape the current service improvement plan for the unit. Progressing towards full compliance with the recommendations will form the major part of the forth coming years' service development plan.

The recently published National Children's Bureau research entitled 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings in regards to the efficacy of IRO services. The foreword was written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson; in it he makes the following comment

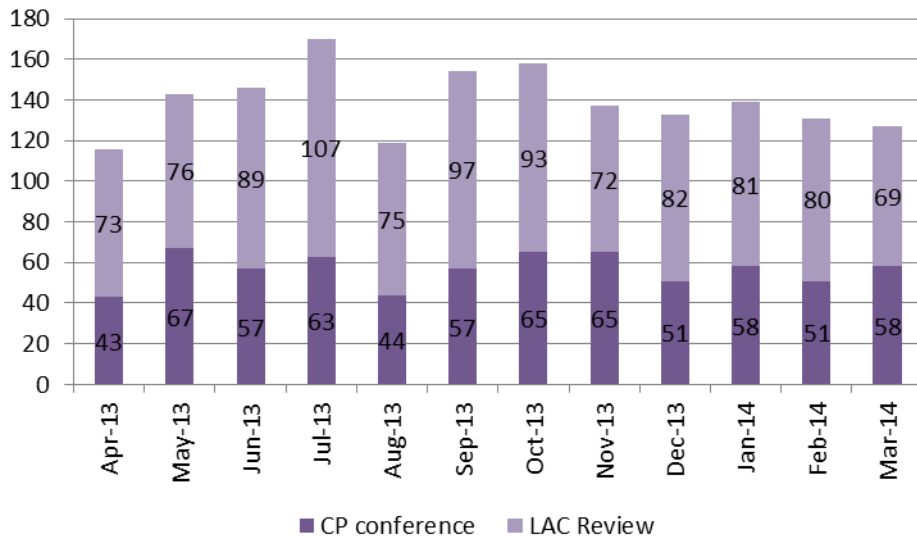


The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or whether we are failing.

## **Professional Profile and caseload of the IRO Service**

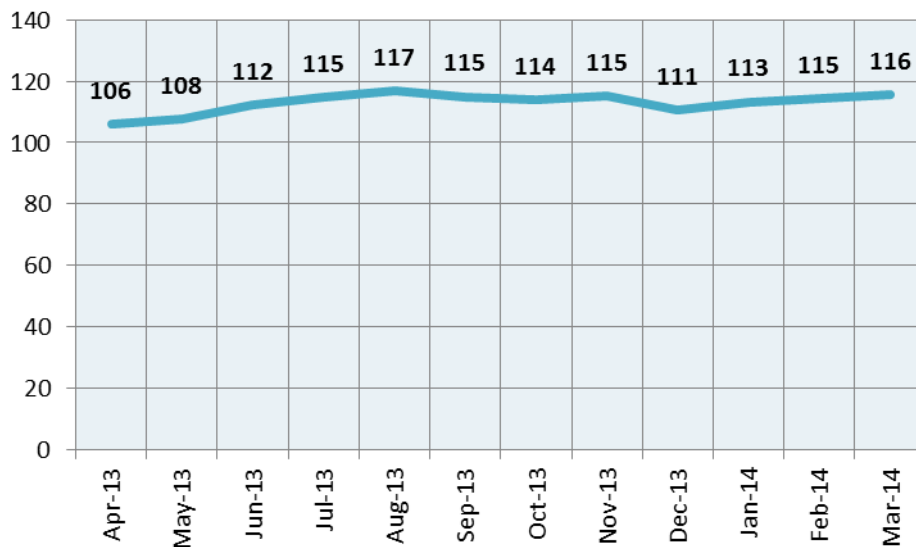
The Safeguarding Standards Manager and Principal Social Worker, who has over 29 years practitioner and management experience, manages the IRO service. The service is currently located within the Skills, Enterprise & Lifelong Learning service of Children's Services, which affords a degree of independence. The 6.0 FTE IRO's serving Northumberland's Looked After population also chair Child Protection conferences. The IRO's are supported by report writers who minute their Child Protection conferences but this does not extend to looked after reviews. As a guide, the Handbook states that 50 to 70 LAC cases per IRO is deemed to be good practice.

### Numbers of CP conferences & LAC reviews chaired across 2013-14



In Northumberland, the average caseload of the IRO service, at the end of March 2014, was 54 Child Protection cases per IRO and 60 Looked After Children (including short break cases) meaning an overall average caseload per IRO of 114. During the year IRO's chaired 679 conferences and 994 LAC reviews, which equates to 57 CP conferences and 83 LAC reviews per month (139 in total per month).

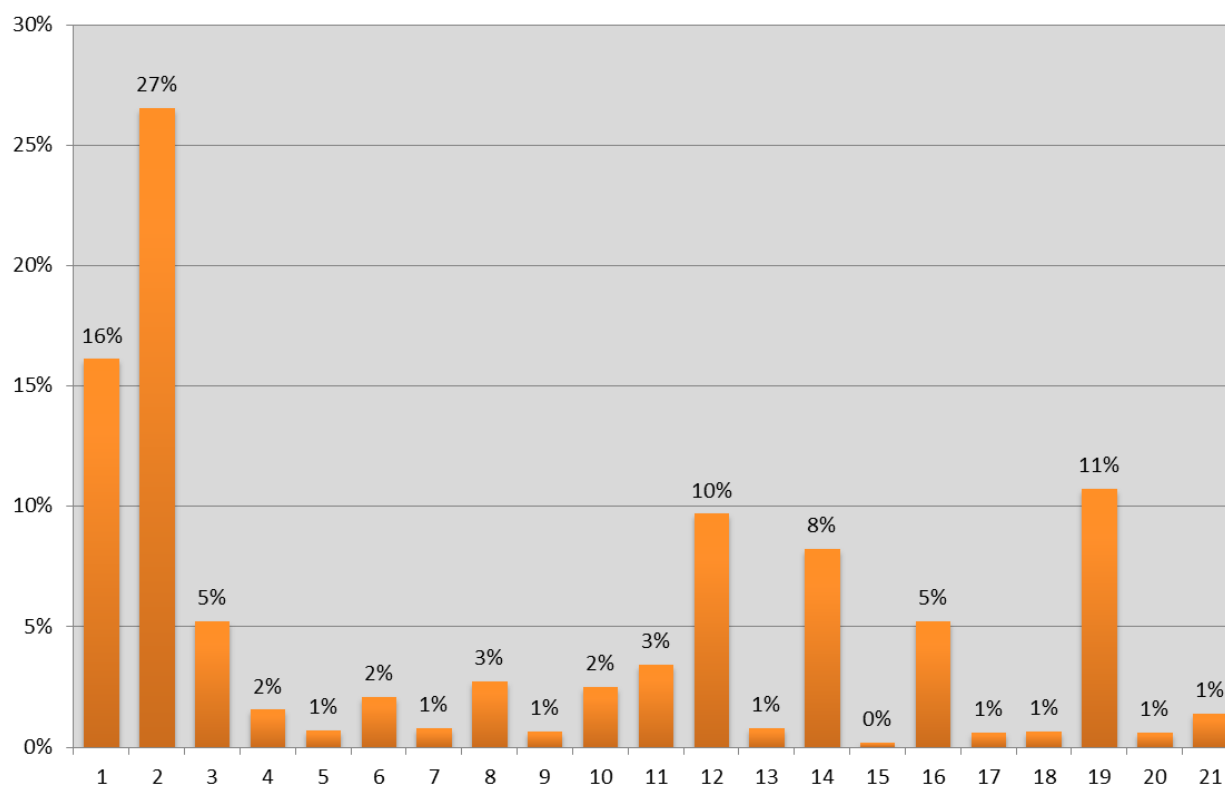
### CP & LAC caseload at month end across 2013-14



Nationally, the average caseload for a IROs ranges between 50 and 95 as identified in the national benchmarking survey (December 2013). The size of caseload alone does not indicate accurately activity as the capacity of the service is also affected by factors such as geography, large sibling groups and other work associated with the Quality Assurance function. With this in mind the service has a workload management tool that seeks to measure activity as well as quantity.

The analysis of this tool is presented below with the numbers on the horizontal axis representing a core task, and the bars representing the proportion of time spent on each across 2013/14.

## IRO workload – time spent on core tasks across 2013/14



### Key:

Core Task	
1	Child Protection Conferences including associated administration, meeting and reading time
2	LAC Reviews including associated administration, reading time, and writing up
3	Care Regulation commitments includes case discussions, mid-review discussions / meeting, file reading, meeting with child
4	IRO and manager team meetings
5	Supervision
6	Peer Review audits
7	FACT team audits
8	CP checklists
9	Child in Need meetings
10	LADO strategy meetings
11	Other meetings strategy meetings, decision-making meetings
12	LADO cases (dealing with, and admin associated with)
13	Training
14	Annual Leave
15	Sickness
16	Miscellaneous e.g. delivery of training, other report writing, reading of research
17	Work feeding in / out / from LSCB sub-groups
18	Time spent chairing / attending LSCB sub-groups
19	Mileage
20	Other Travel
21	Other significant time associated with any unforeseen or exceptional activities not anticipated or captured elsewhere

The workload analysis shows that more than one quarter of IROs time (27%) is taken up by LAC Reviews, followed by child protection conferences (16%). There is a significant travelling component which is due to the size of Northumberland but also includes out of County reviews (11%).

The capacity of the IRO service is directly linked to the numbers of LAC and children subject to Child Protection plans. Nevertheless, the service has continued to achieve excellent performance in

ensuring Child Protection conferences and LAC reviews take place when they need to. The appointment of a temporary dedicated IRO post to work specifically with cases relating to permanency through the adoption grant has undoubtedly assisted the capacity of the IRO's during the year, but it is possible that this post will have to end should the adoption grant be less favourable next year.

During the year the service saw two long-standing and experienced IROs retire. These vacancies were quickly filled with staff that have significant practitioner and management experience of working with children but as a result this has affected the continuity of IRO for some children. The IRO service is equally split in terms of gender. Sickness levels within the service are negligible.

## **Placement sufficiency**

Northumberland has experienced a significant increase in the use of IFA's as opposed to in-house provision. This trend is not uncommon amongst regional neighbours; and those reporting this trend are also experiencing an increase in numbers of LAC.

There are several reasons for the increase in IFAs which include the availability, approval age range and number of agreed placements of in house provision. With the introduction of the Fostering Standards of Care (2013), over the past 12 months there have been 20 'in house' foster carers de-registered.

Over the past 12 months there have been a significant number of children/young people with challenging behaviour that have required specialist placements and the current 'in-house' specialist provision – New Start carers – is currently full to capacity resulting in IFA placements being required for those young people with additional needs. There are also a number of much younger children with profound emotional difficulties requiring more specialist support, which is not readily available in-house.

Additionally there are a number of foster carers who offered short-term placements but are no longer available due to caring for children either via adoption or long term fostering arrangements being appropriately approved.

Notwithstanding the above, children who require foster care with independent providers are placed generally within the immediate area and do well in their placements.

Northumberland made a decision to restructure in-house residential provision by deleting 13 residential placements overall. This decision alongside the increasing number of older children requiring accommodation has resulted in an increased use of IFA foster placements and independent residential placements. There has been limited interest during the recruitment of 'in house' carers in caring for older children.

Northumberland's 'Staying Put' Policy has resulted in 14 young people remaining with their foster carer post 18 which, although entirely appropriate for the individual children has nevertheless resulted in a loss of 12 in-house foster placements. As part of the policy, young people in foster placements can remain in those placements until they are 21 years old. This also includes those young people who are in IFA placements at the age of 18.

Northumberland is part of the NE6 consortium (North East 6 local authorities), where accommodation in private residential homes is commissioned via the NE6 portal. Northumberland provides a Quality Assurance officer for a named group of private providers who are registered

successfully with the consortium and procurement requirements. The Service Manager for LAC robustly monitors external placements.

All Northumberland's residential homes are rated as Good or Outstanding, Community based Homes are being developed as part of the restructuring and improvement of in-house residential provision. Northumberland Children's Services policy is never to place children in Private Homes rated lower than GOOD by Ofsted.

Northumberland Children's Services Sufficiency Strategy's aim is aspirational and there is a strong commitment to the development of 'in-house' provision so as to accommodate children locally with Foster Carers matched to meeting their needs, and to further develop the building programme for 'in-house' low occupancy Residential Community Homes. Furthermore, there is a focused marketing strategy and review of foster carer payments to encourage quality carers to Northumberland's Family Placement Service including the offer of competitive terms and conditions. Targets set for the recruitment of both foster carers and adopters for 2014 have been achieved already. The looked after population is a fluctuating population both in number and demographic. However, Northumberland Children's services are working to accurately forecast demand based on the current data and trends to enable appropriate commissioning. Commissioning possibilities are being explored in order to purchase value for money adoptive placements, which will release the pressure on 'in-house' placements and use of IFAs for some children awaiting their adoptive placements. The IRO service acknowledges the efforts that are being made to ensure sufficiency and is of the view that the efforts are well directed and are likely to reap dividends. Significantly the IRO service takes the view that children are not unnecessarily accommodated and where an Independent provider is commissioned the child is matched appropriately.

### **Regulation 33 Process and key themes for 2013-14**

Regulation 33 visits are carried out on a monthly basis to each of Northumberland's six Children's Residential Care Homes. (Kyloe House Secure Unit – Alder and Willow; open units Coanwood (previously Kingfisher), Kestrel, Thornbrae as well as Barndale Short Break Care). These are undertaken with a view to being able to assure Ofsted and ourselves that the young people living in our care are receiving and continue to receive good levels of care designed to maximise their outcomes in life.

Until January 2014, Regulation 33 Visits were carried out and reported on by the Client Relations Service's Safeguarding and LAC Quality Assurance Officer and managed by the Children's Safeguarding Standards Manager. From January 2014, resulting from changes to The Children's Homes and Looked After Children (England) Regulations 2013, the National Youth Advisory Service (NYAS) have been commissioned to undertake these visits. This allowed for further independent oversight of the six group homes. NYAS reports are quality assured by the Client Relations Service so that any issues emerging can be remedied from a safeguarding and quality assurance perspective. NYAS report their findings directly to Ofsted. The Council is responsible for the running of six Children's Homes and during 2013-14 all monthly visits were carried out and reported on.

During this period, Regulation 33 Visitors began to seek the views of young people's families and wider care team members. The feedback from this was useful to the quality assurance process and often raised awareness of instances where families could benefit from further discussion with professionals to support their understanding of the work being done with their children. Oversight

via Regulation 33 visits also provided evidence of agencies working together to protect and care for children and young people in residential care.

This period was one of anticipation and change for many of the staff and children in the group homes. Plans were in place over 2013-14 for three of the homes to be relocated within the community at Cramlington, Bedlington and Alnwick Town Centre. Regulation 33 visitors spoke to young people, staff and care team members as well as examining recorded information in each home, to assess whether planning in place was effective in maintaining good standards of care and in reassuring the young people about the changes. Reporting provided assurance that each home was involving the young people in the process, offering choices and valuing their input in terms of views on décor, layout etc. Careful consideration was being given to ensuring that the stability of the young people was continually monitored and maintained throughout the process of change. When spoken to, most young people viewed the prospect of relocation as being positive. In October 2013 Kingfisher House relocated successfully to Coanwood in Cramlington, with a smaller group of young people and staff. Subsequent reports were able to evidence the benefits the young people were experiencing from being closer to local facilities, social opportunities, public transport and that they reported feeling less 'institutionalised', living in a 'real house on a real estate'. Plans are continuing with respect to the two other homes' moves into the community and Regulation 33 reporting continues to monitor the effectiveness of the support provided to the young people in respect of this.

A review and reorganisation of residential care staff took place during 2013-14 and Regulation 33 Visits were able to monitor the impact of this on the children's care both during and after the reorganisation. Reports found that residential care teams, with strong support from their managers, had developed plans to ensure that the young people were supported with any concerns they had or were likely to have about the impact of these changes upon them. Generally this was well managed and in addition to Regulation 33 Reports evidencing this, feedback from other resources open to young people to express their concerns showed how well the children were being kept informed and reassured about this. Some concerns were raised by young people about how consistent the new staff were in enforcing boundaries and guidance and this was picked up in Regulation 33 reports with the necessary action taken to remedy this and reassure the young people.

As part of this process, the number of places on offer for young people in Coanwood, Kestrel and Thornbrae were reduced to four beds. Reports were able to reflect on whether this process was being managed with minimal impact on the young people and identify any concerns expressed by family members, young people and staff around how this would be achieved. Subsequent reporting has provided both the Council and Ofsted with evidence of the benefits young people are experiencing from this.

The IRO service was fully involved with decisions about children's placements during the change in location for the units. The process was well managed and children, their families and affected staff well supported.

During the period of this report, partly as a result of findings from regulation 33 visits, new ways of working were developed jointly between Kyloe House Secure Unit and Mental Health professionals. This supported staff to access a means of identifying where young people may have mental health needs and contributed to care planning to ensure that their specific needs were met effectively.



## **Links and Communication in relation to the welfare of Looked After Children – Client Relations**

Safeguarding & LAC Quality Assurance Officers from Client Relations are a familiar sight to Young people living in Northumberland County Council's children's homes. The team carry out regular drop-in sessions with young people and also meet with them regularly during the monthly Regulation 33 visits.

This ensures that young people are able to raise issues to staff outside of the environment they are living in. It has also allowed Client Relations to build up positive links with these groups of young people who as a result, are aware of and actively use the support offered to advise of any issues they have with the service or their care plans and to seek to have these resolved. Client Relations raise awareness of young people's comments and concerns with their IRO, Social Worker and relevant managers.

The links established with IROs have been mutually beneficial in terms of insight into issues raised by young people and their carers. Client Relations have been able to raise issues on behalf of young people in a more timely manner, due to having the same management oversight. IRO have also asked Client Relations to pick up issues raised in LAC Reviews.

Client Relations also maintain a working relationship with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), whose role is to advise and coordinate processes where allegations against professionals occur as sometimes such issues can be identified from complaints. Client Relations have been able to use the relationship established with young people to help gain the views of young people who have made allegations, as part of the LADO investigation.

Client Relations also visit children and young people who have indicated, via Reg 24 surveys, that they do not feel safe in the children's home.

### **Virtual School 2013-14**

Northumberland's Virtual School for Looked after Children continues to have a positive impact on achievement, with evidence of attainment improving and gaps with non-LAC children closing over time. Outcomes for children in care are improving at Key Stage 1, in maths at Key Stage 2 and at GCSE for those achieving 5A\*-C including English and maths. Overall performance in Northumberland is consistently above national figures for looked after children. Robust monitoring processes indicate that results at Key Stage 4 in 2014 will be the best yet.

Looked after children, and therefore the Virtual School, still face significant challenges with averages for offending, substance misuse, persistent absentees and fixed term exclusions being above non-LAC pupils and for Northumberland above national averages. However, the Virtual School works collaboratively with other services and agencies where appropriate to ensure that school placement stability is good and that our pupils all receive their entitlement to full time education. This is evidenced by the significant statistic that there have been no permanent exclusions of looked after children in Northumberland since 2008.

The Virtual School Improvement Plan 2013-14 has directed work this year and has succeeded in raising the level of challenge to schools and settings. For example, a robust mechanism is now in place to monitor schools who are judged less than good by Ofsted (i.e. Requires Improvement or Special Measures) and the Virtual School Head teacher is able to use new statutory powers introduced with the Children and Families Act 2014 to ensure that the Pupil Premium Plus is used for maximum impact on individual pupil achievement.

Delivery on our Promise to Looked After children and young people has been excellent this year. In response to a promise priority about supporting pupils to feel safe in school there has been a focus on improving the effectiveness of those with the role of Designated Teacher for Looked After Children in schools and academies. Voices Making Choices (VMC) were commissioned by the Virtual School to produce a train the trainer resource which was delivered as part of the workforce development programme throughout the year. The impact was instant and written evaluations have been outstanding. The resource is interactive, thought provoking and professionally compiled, and has already received well-deserved national recognition.

The Virtual School has worked collaboratively for two years now to improve engagement of looked after children in education Post-16. During the academic Year 2013-14 the percentage of young people in education, employment and training has consistently been 83% for the last three quarters compared to 47% in March 2012. The influence of the Virtual School is evident in the numbers progressing to Years 12 and 13, who now continue to be supported by PEPs and the ESLAC team in school settings. Five young people are studying for university degrees, and one care leaver is working for a PhD.

The profile of the Virtual School continues to improve and awareness raising of the Headteacher's role and the influence of the school is growing. A termly newsletter, Learn, Achieve, Celebrate, is now issued with contributions from professionals, children and young people, schools and the DfE. The new Ofsted framework (inspection of services for those in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers) similarly raises the profile of achievement and destination as a key measure of improved outcomes. Inspection of the school is therefore more robust and wide ranging, which has enabled the Headteacher to plan a strengthened model for the next academic year. The IRO service is of the view that the virtual school provides excellent support to our Looked After Children and provides considerable assistance in helping each looked after child in reaching their potential.

## The Looked After population in Northumberland

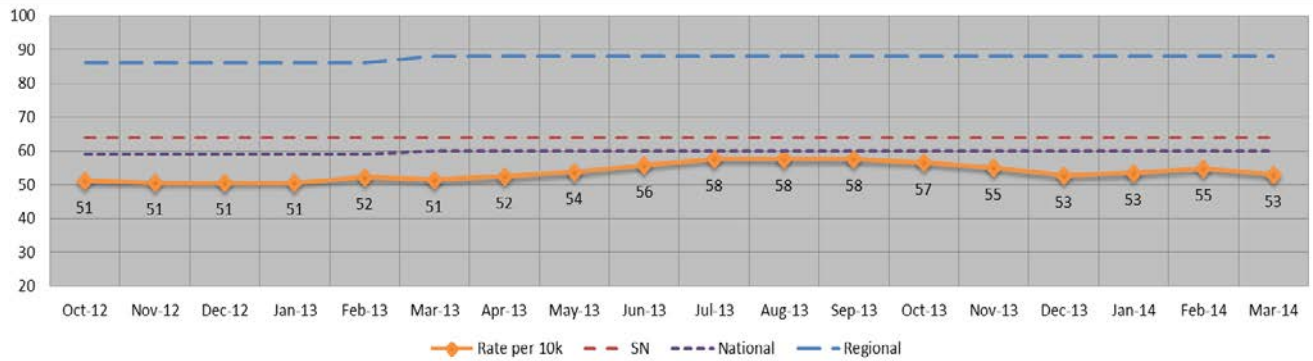
At the end of March 2014, there were 326 Looked after Children (LAC) in Northumberland (see Graph 1). The statistical year ends on the 31<sup>st</sup> March, with 326 representing a 3% increase in the number of children in care (compared to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013).

**Graph 1 – number of LAC at month end**



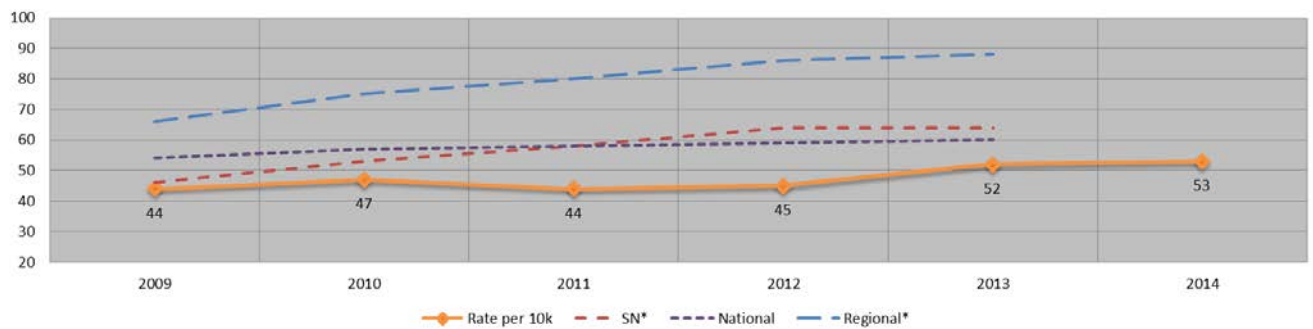
When comparing the number of children in care to the under 18 population, Northumberland had 53 LAC per 10,000 at the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014. This rate is below the national (60), statistical neighbour (SN) (64) and regional averages (88) [updated comparator rates for 2013/14 will not be available until October 2014]. The comparatively low LAC rate is the converse of the rate of children with a child protection plan (CPP), which equates to 58 per 10,000 at the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014; above the national (38), statistical neighbour (SN) (41) and regional averages (52).

**Graph 2 – rate of LAC per 10,000 at month end**



Looking over a longer period of time (see Graph 3), Northumberland’s LAC rate per 10,000 has increased in recent years. Using 2009 as the baseline, the 2014 figure equates to a 20% increase compared to an 11% increase nationally, and a 33% and 39% increase across the North East and statistical neighbours respectively. The largest increase in the Northumberland LAC rate was between 2012 and 2013, where there was a 16% increase compared to a regional and national increase of 2%.

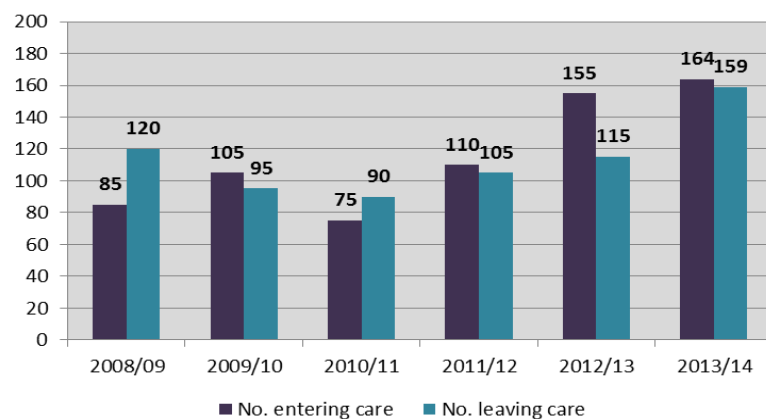
**Graph 3 – rate of LAC per 10,000 at end of March**



The comparatively low LAC rate in light of the higher CPP rate tends to suggest that Northumberland Children’s Services use recourse to the child protection framework before resorting to removing or placing the child away from their family. This is suggestive of an appropriate incremental approach to managing risk where families are identified as needing additional support in order to ensure the wellbeing of their children.

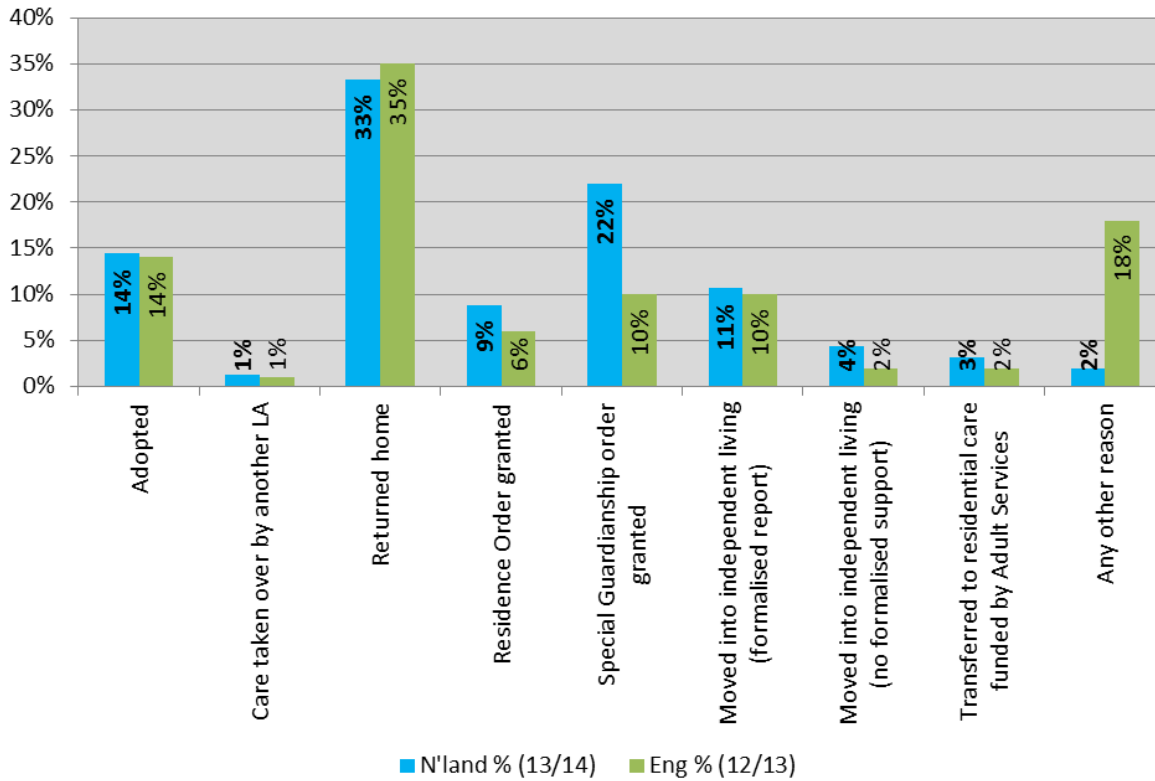
The IRO service is clear that children are not unnecessarily accommodated and Children’s Services Managers have robust gatekeeping arrangements in place to ensure that there are no inappropriate placements. Graph 4 shows the numbers of children entering and leaving care for each of the last six years. The high numbers entering and leaving care demonstrate a fluid LAC system where children are not kept in care for longer than is necessary

**Graph 4 – number of children entering and leaving care 2008/09 to 2013/14**



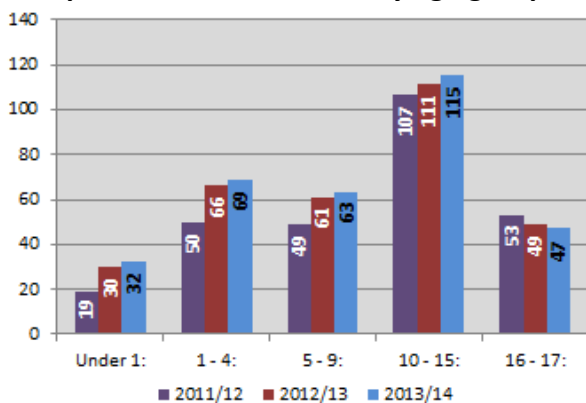
Of the 159 children who left care in the year, graph 5 shows the percentage leaving within each reason category alongside the national average. Northumberland has a healthy number of children who leave care into a permanent arrangement: 14% are adopted from care – in line with the national average, 22% are granted a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) – above the national average of 10%, and an additional 9% are granted a Residence Order (compared to 6% nationally). This means that almost half of the 159 children (45%) who left care went to live in a permanent arrangement, with an additional 15% moving into independent living. One third returned home after leaving care, which is line with the national picture (35%).

**Graph 5 – children leaving care during the year - % leaving by reason**

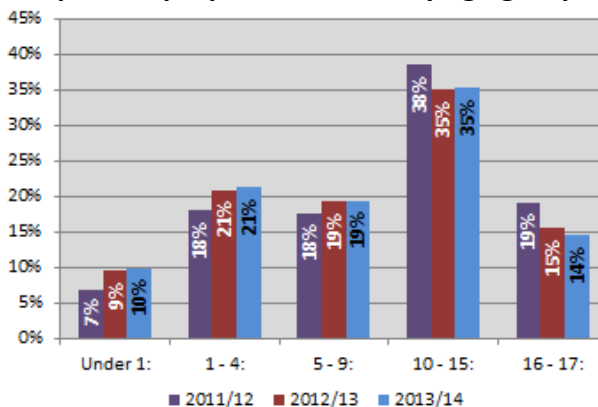


The age of the LAC population at the end of March and over the previous three years is shown in Graphs 6a and 6b. Alongside the increase in LAC, there has been an increase in LAC within each age group with the exception of 16 to 17 year olds (which have reduced from 53 LAC – 19% of the population to 47 LAC – 14% of the population). Although numbers of 10 to 15 year olds in care have increased slightly over the three years (107 to 115 LAC), the proportion of 10 to 15 year olds as part of the total LAC population has reduced slightly (from 38% of all LAC to 35% of all LAC) but remains the age group with the highest numbers of LAC. This is in line with the national picture (as at March 2013) where 36% of LAC were aged 10 to 15 years old.

**Graph 6a – number of LAC by age group**

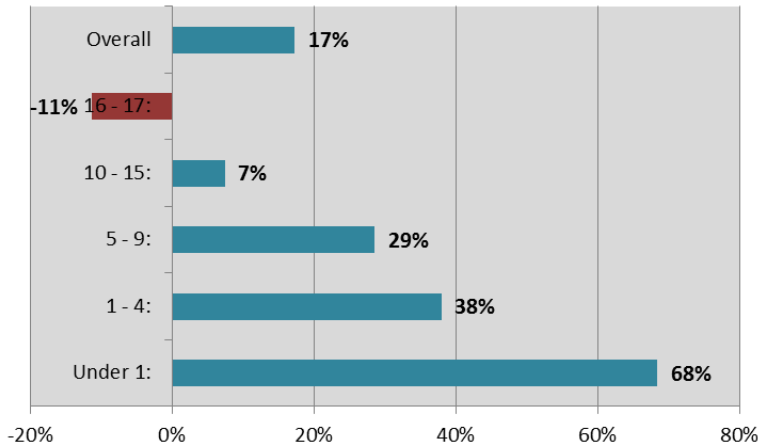


**Graph 6b – proportion of LAC by age group**



The largest relative increase by age group has been in the number of babies in care. Using 2011/12 as the baseline, there has been a 68% increase in babies in care compared to a 17% increase in the LAC numbers overall (see Graph 7) The next biggest increase is children aged 1 to 4 where there has been a 38% increase. For comparison, there was a national increase of babies in care between 2011/12 and 2012/13 (18%), whilst the increase in children aged between 1 and 4 years old was 3%.

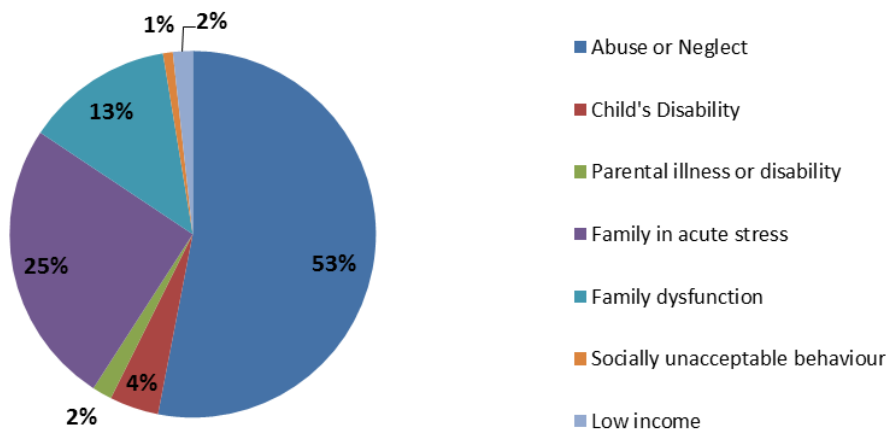
**Graph 7 – percentage increase / decrease in LAC by age group – 2011/12 to 2013/14**



63% of the babies in care in March 2014 were with a category of need of abuse or neglect, followed by family dysfunction (25%) and 6% due to the family being in acute stress. For those children aged between 1 and 4 years old, 70% were in care due to abuse or neglect, 16% due to the family being in acute stress and 10% due to family dysfunction. Although alarming this demonstrates a strong focus on early intervention in situations that present younger children and babies with the greatest danger and adversity.

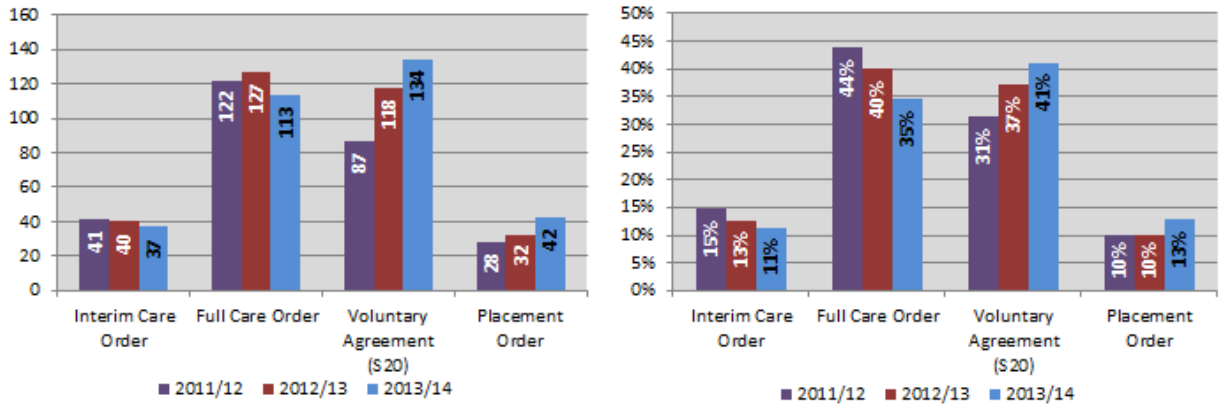
Looking at the category of need for the 10 to 15 year old LAC at March 2014 (see Graph 8), 53% are in care due to abuse or neglect, 25% due to the family being in acute stress, 13% due to family dysfunction and less than 10% in total due to the other categories. This distribution is broadly in line with the Northumberland proportions for all LAC.

**Graph 8 – LAC aged 10 to 15 – proportion by category of need**



Facilitating children to progress to permanence including adoption within a short timescale remains a priority for the IRO service and for Children’s Social Care. The figures in Graphs 9a and 9b suggest that there has been a steady increase in (adoption) placement orders being granted, with 42 children subject to placement orders at the end of March 2014.

**Graph 9a – number of LAC by legal status**    **Graph 9b – proportion of LAC by legal status**

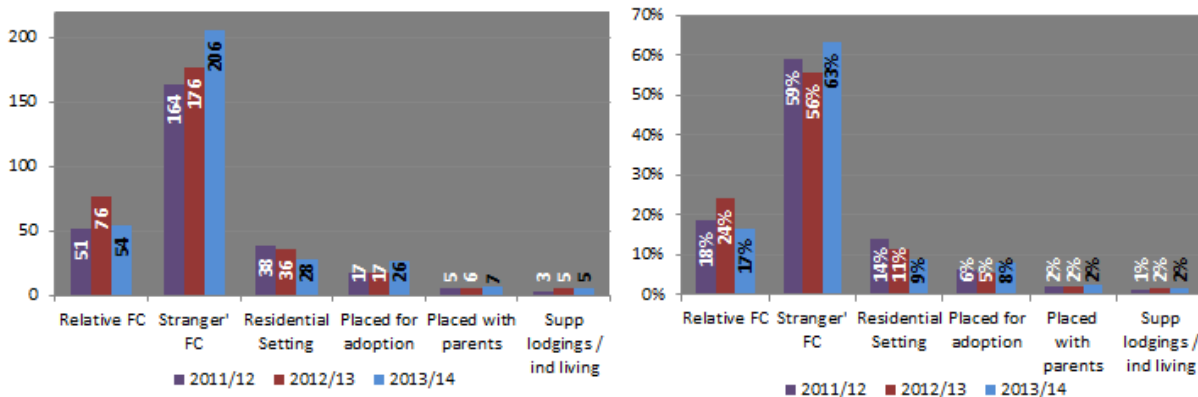


The latest adoption scorecard (published by the Department for Education in January each year) monitors activity and timeliness with regards to children adopted within the previous three statistical years. As well as the increased number of children being granted placement orders, Northumberland had 26 children who were placed with potential adopters at March 2014 (compared to 17 in March 2013).

Considering Looked after children’s placements 80% are in foster placements (see graph 10a and 10b), 54 of those fostered are with relatives or friends (17% in 2013/14) and 206 with registered foster carers -‘stranger’ foster carers- (63% in 2013/14). Of the 54 children placed with relatives at the end of March 2014, 16 were placed under Regulation 24 (placement of a child or children with a friend or relative which is endorsed or facilitated by Children’s Social Care). Of the 206 children placed with ‘stranger’ foster carers, 101 were placed through an independent fostering agency. 39 of these agency foster carers live within Northumberland’s borders, of the 62 remaining 61 live in other North East authorities and 1 lives in North Yorkshire. Significantly, despite being placed outside of Northumberland’s border, 51 (82%) of those 62 children live within 20 miles of their home address.

Numbers of children placed in residential settings has reduced (14% in 2011/12 down to 9% in 2013/14) – of the 28 LAC placed in residential settings, 12 are living within a Northumberland provision. Of the remaining 16 LAC, 3 (19%) are placed within Northumberland’s border, 12 are placed in other North East authorities with 1 placed in Scotland.

**Graph 10a – number of LAC by placement type**    **Graph 10b – proportion of LAC by placement type**



The IRO service and Children’s Services have responded to Regulation 24 and are working to meet the requirements of this legislation. These placements pose their own unique challenges and complications, and assessments must be subject to rigour and scrutiny, so that it can be evidenced that placements are in the best interests of children in the short and long term. These placements add positively to the local authority’s capabilities of achieving permanence for a child or young person, with relatives progressing to acquire Residence Orders or Special Guardianship Orders (as evidenced in the figures in Graph 5). The regulation 24 requirements have required some clarification in terms of interpretation and the IRO service continues to express their understanding of the

regulation to senior managers in order to help bring clarity to the legal status of a child placed within a family or friends context.

Facilitating children to progress to permanence including adoption within a short timescale remains a priority for the IRO Service and for Children's Social Care. Our own data reflects that in 86% of cases by the time of the child's first 6 month review there is a plan for permanence in place, this will include for example adoption, long term foster care and SGO. Children's services through the adoption support grant have increased capacity to the service by seconding a Team Manager as a part time IRO to focus specifically on permanence in order to further strengthen this aspect of work.

Of the LAC at the end of March 2014, 37 (11%) had been in three or more placements across the year (between April 2013 and March 2014) – in line with the national average (of 11%). Placements for long-term LAC are generally stable – of the 91 LAC in care for more than 2 and a half years, 62 (68%) had been in the same placement for the past 2 years - again, this figure is in line with the national average.

'Staying Put' a process which enables a young person to remain within their foster care placement post 18 is being promoted within Northumberland. This has resulted in 14 young people 'staying put' with an additional 1 identified as appropriate. The IRO's have been key advocates in this.

In addition to the 326 LAC there are 15 children who receive Short Breaks, 10 of these children's placements are reviewed by an IRO. On the whole these figures remain consistent as Short Break provision once established tends to be provided long term. Short Break Care tends to be provided to children who have disabilities some of who are amongst the most vulnerable of our Looked After population and it is therefore important that the plans for these children are thoroughly examined. The IRO service has been working with the Children with Disabilities Team on areas of practice such as the frequency of visiting these children.

## **Qualitative information about the IRO service**

Following each Looked after Review a LAC review checklist is completed by the IRO from which information and assessment of performance is gathered. This checklist is under revision to ensure that the data we collect corresponds with the specific requirements of the Handbook.

Over the year **98%** of LAC reviews have been held within the required timescales.

There is a requirement to share decisions from Looked After reviews with respective Team managers within 5 days. The principle being that if these are not responded to within 10 days these are taken as agreed. A case note tool within the ICS system provides the means of ensuring this occurs. The practice of using this tool has not been consistent and therefore does not provide an accurate measurement of whether this target is being met. This is a matter which the IRO service will continue to address over the coming year.

There is a requirement for the IRO to produce a comprehensive record of the review and to distribute this within 20 working days. During the year the service achieved this in 28% of cases, a slight improvement from 24% in 2012/13 but nevertheless not acceptable performance. Making improvements here will form part of our agreed development plan for the coming year.

Each Looked after Child within Northumberland has an allocated IRO and same IRO throughout their Looked after journey. 43% of the LAC population have had the same IRO over the past three years. This figure is lower than last year (80%) mostly due to two IROs retiring during the year. Each IRO has a profile and this is sent out to any newly looked after child or young person.



Voices Making Choices have developed a contact card which are to be provided to each child and young person, detailing telephone numbers for key professionals in their lives, this includes the IRO. It is intended that these can serve as a means of increasing direct communication with young people.

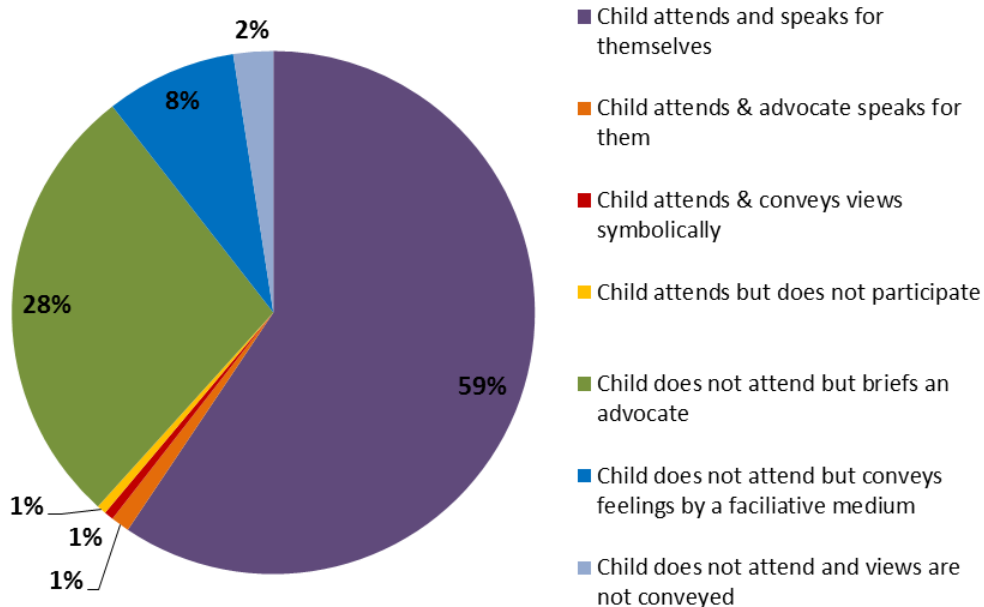
The IRO has an important role in ensuring that the voice of the young person is heard, in working to achieve this, the IRO and the child need to develop a relationship;

*“When they meet the child they should do this one to one so that the child can talk freely. They must check with both the child, and other people working with the child, on whether the child is OK and happy where they are living and with their care plans. They must regularly ask each child whether they are happy with how things are being done for them, and keep checking what is happening for each child against that child’s plans and the decisions made at their reviews.” (DSCF 2010)*

In 58% of cases IRO’s are spending time with the child either prior to or following their reviews (compared to 50% in 2012/13). IRO’s want to improve here but this is not always possible due to the increased demand on the service as the number of reviews increase.

Over the course of 2013/14, there were 994 reviews that took place, with 700 involving LAC deemed old enough to participate in the review. Overall 97% of these reviews had some sort of participation from the child, with Graph 12 (below) showing the breakdown of the types of participation method. 62% of LAC attended their reviews across 2013/14 (compared to 57% in 2012/13) with a further 36% who did not attend their review but conveyed their views in some other way (either by briefing someone to speak on their behalf or through a facilitative medium). Of the children who attended their review, 97% put across their views, wishes and feelings in a constructive and meaningful way (compared to 89% in 2012/13), and it was felt that 99% of LAC aged over 7 contributed to their review in a constructive and meaningful way. These are positive and encouraging figures.

**Graph 12 – participation methods of LAC within their reviews**



Across the year 2013/14, 31 (89%) of the 35 children who needed an advocate had one (compared to 66% in 2012/13). 94% of issues identified previously had been followed up; these included assessments not being completed (core, parenting, risk, emotional and behavioural), life story work needing to be completed, and decisions about permanence needing to be made.

Three important questions within the checklist ask whether issues pertaining to the child’s health and education have improved (where issues existed) whilst they have been looked after, plus



whether they feel safe in their placement. Of the 173 children where an education issue was identified, 140 (81%) had seen an improvement since the last review. Of the 154 children where a health issue was identified, 135 (88%) had seen an improvement since the last review. This is reassuring and again demonstrates a determination to ensure the lives of Looked after children in these significant areas of development are improved. 96% of children stated that they felt safe in their placement, with the remaining 4% stating that they felt ‘just about’ safe.

## Impact of IRO service

The Northumberland IRO service is in a unique position to judge and influence the quality of social work practice and draw out any emerging themes which need to be addressed. It has a key role to play in improving performance and outcomes for children in the looked after system by ensuring that care plans reflect the views and needs of the child or young person. The service has achieved this over the year as demonstrated by the following examples

### CASE STUDY 1 – Child A

Child A is a young man, now 16 years of age, who has a severe learning disability with extremely delayed communication abilities, ADHD and epilepsy. There is a care order and he is placed with a relative, who is totally committed to providing a high level of care. Child A has no contact with any other birth family members - although he does occasionally see his previous foster carers.

Child A has had the benefit of the same IRO for nine years, although this is very limited relationship due to Child A's additional needs. A transitions worker from the disabled children's team, was allocated to Child A. This followed a very long period of Child A being supported by another worker from the same team. This change was not easy for Child A's carer, who had concerns regarding the level of service being offered. She was worried that this new worker did not appreciate the level of input Child A requires, the impact this has on her personally, the amount of damage Child A causes at times and the difference of opinion regarding the need for medication.

These concerns were brought to the attention of the IRO by another professional working with the family as the carer did not want to cause any difficulties. The IRO spoke to the carer and then to the team manager. It was agreed that the new worker would attend the next looked after review with her supervisor, and the IRO would encourage open discussions regarding the concerns raised and how best to resolve them.

The looked after review took place a few days later and was facilitated by the IRO. Discussions were very open and honest. This helped all parties to have a clearer understanding about the issues and how this impacts on Child A and his carer. It was agreed that there would be on-going work around particular issues, specifically medication and possible entitlement to some additional benefits which may ease the burden of the costs incurred from damage to property caused by Child A. Relationships between adults have improved considerably as a result of open discussion, and this benefits Child A too who, because of his own additional needs, does not have a voice in this situation.

### CASE STUDY 2 – Child B

Child B was accommodated after her grandmother died and her grandfather could not manage her care. Child B was placed with more than 5 different foster carers within a 7 month period. The IRO believed that Child B was essentially saying that she could not cope with the intensity of a foster care family setting. She had no school placement and had been excluded from alternative education provision. Child B was moved into a local authority children's home. It was anticipated that this was going to be a challenge, given that her sibling, who she had never lived with, was already established within this home. With regular reviews and careful individual planning, Child B was started to settle into this home environment and was establishing a relationship with her sibling.

Children's Social Care wanted to explore a move to foster care. The social worker and unit manager felt uneasy about this, and the IRO challenged the proposal. A Signs of Safety Meeting was held where the implications of moving to foster care balanced against remaining in residential care were explored. The evidence was clear that Child B should remain in placement. In light of this the proposal was shelved.

Things continue to be stable for child B who is now a full participant in her reviews and developing strong relationships with staff and peers and with her sibling. Child B has also successfully gone into school full time and is reaching her

academic targets. She is very proud of herself and has aspirations to be an editor.

### Case Study 3 – Child C

Child C had been adopted when he was 6 but his adoption broke down quickly due to his adoptive mother being unable to form a bond with him. He then returned to his former foster carers. Adopters could not be identified for him despite extensive efforts at family finding. His behaviour became very extreme where he would physically attack his carers and their children and he caused damage to their home. The general feeling was that he knew he could not stay with his carers long term and he was rejecting them before they rejected him.

A decision was taken to identify long term foster carers for him as adopters had not come forward. There was unnecessary delay in identifying long term carers, the IRO escalated this to senior managers and a placement was found within 4 weeks. Child C has been in the new long term placement for several months now and he has settled extremely well and the carers want to commit to him long term. He is no longer displaying extreme behaviours and it is felt this is because he feels 'claimed'.

### CASE STUDY 4 – Child D

Care and Placement Orders were given to the local authority by the Family Court in respect of Child D, a nine year old child who had witnessed severe domestic violence at home.

The local authority plan was to look for adopters and long term foster carers simultaneously. No adopters came forward and the child experienced a breakdown of his foster placement because of difficulties within the foster family. He then had an emergency foster placement, following which he was placed with short term foster carers, where he quickly settled and began to improve at school. Child D's foster carers quickly claimed him and wished to be assessed as long term foster carers so they could care for him until adulthood. During the looked after review, the IRO asked for an assessment of the foster carers to care for Child D long-term and for Child D to be asked his views about his future care. Neither happened, yet the search for adopters went on.

The IRO brought the next looked after review forward and asked Child D what he wanted to happen. He replied that to stay with his current foster carers would make him very happy. The IRO called a planning meeting with all the social workers involved and ensured the carer's assessment began and that Child D's views were heard.

A recent matching meeting approved the foster carers to care for Child D on a long term basis, ensuring he has a stable family life and no further moves. Child D is currently very happy and is making great strides in his education.

## Practice challenges

The Handbook, identifies that The 2008 Act extends the IRO's responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's review to monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's case, as set out in sections 25A-25C of the 1989 Act (inserted by section 10 of the 2008 Act). The intention is that these changes empower the IRO to have an effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process (DCSF Publications, 2010).

Challenge and open discussion in respect of decision making and planning for children is essential to assuring them the best possible opportunities and life chances. It also contributes to practice development and knowledge, improving the quality and standards of the workforce.

It is generally recognised that defensive practice is a barrier to keeping children safe. Challenge can be uncomfortable at times and a potential shift in culture for some. There is the potential for the relationship between Children's Social Care and the IRO service to become adversarial. In Northumberland the IRO service and Children's Services Team Managers and senior managers have a *collaborative but not collusive* relationship and both services ensure good working relationships across the services working with children. The success of this relationship is perhaps demonstrated

by the fact that whilst there is a formal Dispute Resolution Procedure, to date it has not had to be resorted to.

In terms of the quality of planning for children our data reflects that in 82% of cases there are arrangements in place with monitorable milestones. Again in those instances where plans for children lack clarity IRO's are challenging Children's Services to address this and monitoring the progress of this through case discussions and looked after reviews.

A practice challenge log is held within the safeguarding unit where registered practice challenges are noted. Many practice discussions take place but only the more concerning ones are noted within the log. For these concerns the IROs use the log to track and monitor responses when issues are raised. These, although warranting a log reference, are nevertheless informal issues which fall below the threshold for formally being raised under the dispute resolution protocol. Below are the main themes where practice notes have been issued:

### PRACTICE Challenge LOG

<b>Care planning Issues</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>General issues around quality of practice</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Timeliness of reports</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Quality of report</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Contact with child/family by professional</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Safeguarding arrangements</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Lack of communication with IRO</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Corporate parenting issues</b>	<b>0</b>

**Care Planning Issues:** These related to concerns that planning for the child may be drifting, for example, delay in completing life story work, delay in organising contact, delay in filing court papers.

**General Issues around Quality of Practice:** These related concerns about statutory visits, sharing information with family members and the IRO, non-attendance of required staff at reviews, and incomplete LAC paperwork

**Timeliness of Reports:** These relate to reports not received at all or late.

**Quality of Report:** These relate to the quality of Social Work report to the review.

**Contact with Child/Family by Professional:** These relate to concerns about LA child not receiving adequate help/contact from Professionals

**Safeguarding Arrangements:** these relate to concerns about the child's behaviour in placement and possible risks associated with the behaviour.

**Lack of Communication with IRO:** This concerned the failure of the SW to inform the IRO about a significant development in the Childs situation.

**Other:** 3 challenges – (1) this related to confusion about the IRO visiting a child in a pre-adoptive placement (2) Concerns that supervision of the Social Worker was not evidenced on ICS (3) TM/SW not preparing adopters for IRO visits to child when placed with them prior to adoption;

Of note is that there have been no occasions when the IRO felt a child was inappropriately looked after or that their placement was significantly failing to meet their needs.

### **Timeliness, Monitoring and tracking of Care Plans between LAC Reviews**

98% of reviews take place within the statutory due period. This is excellent performance and ensures that the child's circumstances are reviewed regularly and reduces the opportunity for a child's circumstances to drift. Where the review has not taken place in timescale the review was reconvened quickly. 10 reviews were held out of timescale across the year, with all but two being delayed to allow the young person to attend, and the remaining two due to administrative errors in booking the review). The IROs routinely check and monitor the progress of the care plans through access to the ICS system. Over the course of 2013/14, the IROs collectively viewed 3,547 ICS records on the system.

IRO's are also frequently consulted by Social Workers and carers regarding issues, although a full understanding of when the IRO must be informed of issues within placements is yet to be fully understood and embedded in routine practice. The service has issued guidance to all Social Workers regarding the required content of LAC review reports (appendix 1) in order to support best practice in this area.

### **Links to Voices Making Choices (Children in Care Council)**

An update from Heather Wilkinson IRO:

*'My role within the IRO Team has been to champion the IRO Handbook and Care Standards. As part of this I have ensured that I have a regular presence at the meetings convened by VMC and YVMC. This has been an ideal opportunity for us to hear the views of our Looked After children and young people and to learn from them.*

*Positively, most of the children and young people have told me that they know who their IRO is and that they feel able to take part in their Looked after Reviews. We have agreed that the next step to this is for some of them to be co-chairing or chairing their own reviews. I will be looking to develop this further with the group and my colleagues.*

*It is hoped that the introduction of MOMO ('Mind of my own') to children and young people in Northumberland will promote children and young people being involved in meetings about them and in planning. This is an app that they can have on their computer, tablet or phone which enables them to make notes to prepare for their looked after review, email agreed persons, including the IRO, about a problem they may be having, to make a complaint or share their views on their plan and foster care or residential placement.*

*Children and Young people have frequently found the Care Plans produced with the local authority's computer system too complicated and confusing, and as such have not seen the plan as belonging to them. YVMC and VMC devised a plan; 'My Plan' (see appendix 2) that they would like to see used to capture their individual plan and their views in a format that they find readily accessible. It has been agreed that this plan will be used as a tool (to be completed by the allocated social worker) with children and young people subject to any plan, including a child protection plan. There is now an expectation from the IRO that these plans are presented and discussed at the child's looked after review.*

*In terms of Children and Young People participating in Child Protection Conferences, YVMC and VMC have been willing to explore with me how they have felt about their experiences of Child Protection and what they would want to see in place for other children and young people who experience this. The use of the 'My Plan' is one means, support for a young person so as they are able to attend a conference is another. We are also developing a means by which the chair of the review and child or young person can correspond so as to ensure the representation of their views. '*

## **Impact of the permanency IRO**

The Pre-proceedings Team was established in September/October 2013 and comprised of a Team Manager, Child Care Solicitor, and Independent Reviewing Officer funded by the adoption grant. The remit of the Team was to look at the Public Law Outline (PLO) and the changes that have come through statute and imbedded within the new Children and Families Act 2014. The revised PLO is to reduce delay in making plans for children through the Courts. The new framework looks at a timescale of 26 weeks from the date of issuing proceedings to the date of final hearing.

The focus of the team is to enable the Local Authority to have processes in place to address the much reduced court timetable and ensure that planning for children is both timely and robust. The team also wanted to introduce consistency and quality within the reports and assessments that are to be prepared for the Court.

The Team made a significant impact on process and practice by:

- The introduction of the Legal Planning Meetings – developed to consider assessments, issues of parenting, kinship assessments and screening and threshold. The templates for the meeting steer the Social Work Team to consider what may be required for Court in the event of issuing proceedings.
- Parenting assessment- that is now linked to and works well with the Children and Families Assessment and is linked into ICS.
- Provided training- to all the field social workers and team managers, family support workers, children's support team, child Care legal team and latterly health visiting colleagues about the new PLO framework and the expectation placed on them from both the local authority and Courts.
- Tracking and monitoring- having oversight of cases entering into the PLO process either through a letter before proceeding or immediate issue and into the Court arena.
- Liaising- with CAFCASS in relation to their roles and the role of the IRO in order to build better communication and clarity around expectations.

Specifically the IRO has:-

- Delivered training to the magistrates' at the County Court about the IRO role and function in oversight and monitoring of the child's plan both during the Court process and afterwards.
- Assumed a specific remit to take unborn babies where children had previously been removed or where we were clear the case was likely to enter into proceeding. This is to promote support and timely progression of the planning and to ensure legal planning meetings are taking place at an early.

## **Annual work programme for next year April 2014 – March 2015**

The focus of work for the following year includes:

1. Continued efforts to meet the requirements of the IRO handbook- specifically, meeting with Looked After children between review periods, improving the distribution of review minutes in timescale and monitoring IROs activity and caseloads.

2. Improving and facilitating greater contact with CAFCASS
3. Continue to strengthen a collaborative relationship with Children's Social Care in the joint pursuit of effective practice and planning through regular joint forums
4. Continue to develop mechanisms which facilitate the meaningful involvement of looked After children in service improvements across the range of related provision in Northumberland.

## **Overview and Summary**

### **Conclusion**

IRO's continued to promote the meaningful involvement of Looked after Children in their reviews, and will ensure that the child's views are always considered. The Looked after Reviews in Northumberland were within timescale 98% of the time and challenges regarding the quality of services delivered to Looked after Children are consistently made with positive outcomes. This demonstrates strong impact by the service on the timeliness of progressing care plans and improving the quality of services provided to our Looked After children and Young People. In addition there is a strong contribution from Looked after Children in having a voice in their reviews and therefore contributing to and influencing their plans. Looked after Children benefit from good care provision and decision making which is child focussed and in keeping with identified needs.

The Northumberland IRO service has made a significant contribution to the improvement for children in the looked after system over the past year. They have accomplished this by putting the child's voice at the centre of the care plan and by careful monitoring of the overall quality of care plans and raising practice challenges with Children's Social Care to good effect; however there are challenges that remain to be met by the IROs, including improving the timely production of LAC review minutes and strengthening the role with Looked after children between review meetings. The capacity of the service remains a significant challenge in meeting the full breadth of the expectations of the IRO handbook. Notwithstanding this the service has utilised the involvement of client relations to further be informed regarding the views of children both through direct contact and with the regulation 33 function ensuring any concerns within residential care are quickly identified and addressed. This is an area of good practice. Similarly one IRO has a specific role in meeting regularly with the VMC group.

It is the view of the IRO service that in all the circumstances the Corporate parenting committee and the Executive Director of Wellbeing and Community Health Services can be reassured that the needs of children who are looked after are well served and where there are shortcomings identified these are both identified and dealt with promptly.

**Steve Day**

**Safeguarding Services Manager and |principal Social Worker**

**April 2014**

## **Standards for Social Workers LAC review report**

***The report must be shared with the parents at least 3 days prior to the review.***

***The report must be authorised by the team manager.***

1. The reason the child became looked after needs to be comprehensively explained and give a picture of the child's changing circumstances and needs. The child's life journey and experiences should be apparent and inform the care plan. Significant changes in the circumstances of the birth family such as births, marriages or deaths should be reported and the impact on the child analysed.
2. If the child is also subject to a child protection plan this must be included in the report and under which category.
3. The section on the child's legal status must give an update regarding any PLO proceedings and explore any issues concerning drift and delay.
4. The decisions from the previous review must be listed and a comprehensive update provided against each recommendation.
5. Social work visits must be listed and a description of the purpose of the visits included. This section should reflect the outcomes of the social work interventions undertaken during the review period and demonstrate how the Council has exercised its corporate parenting responsibilities.
6. Children should not be grouped together and must be considered individually
7. The significance and outcome of meetings held during the review period should be reflected
8. The date of the placement agreement meeting and care team meetings must be included.
9. Child's health needs must be explored in full and include any issues identified -and explained- within the context of the child's age and development. This section must be sufficiently covered so as to clearly inform the plan for the child
10. Child's education provision must be explored fully including changes of school/nursery and reasons why. Child's education development and attainments need to be explained fully including any changes in their behaviour in school/nursery. This section must be sufficiently covered so as to clearly inform the plan for the child
11. Emotional development of each child needs to be explored fully within the context of their changing circumstances. Changes in behaviour and demeanour need to be explored and understood. Where services are involved the impact of work should be evaluated and further need explored. This section must be sufficiently covered so as to clearly inform the plan for the child.
12. Placement issues must include an assessment of how effective the placement is in meeting the needs of the child and promoting the identified plan. A description of how the placement is achieving the goals should be included and where additional tasks or changes need to be made these should be explained.

13. Contact arrangements must be explored in full with date, time, and duration and frequency explained. Information on how the contact is impacting on the child and contributing or hindering the plan must be evaluated. Ongoing or proposed changes to the contact arrangements must be well argued and be in keeping with the needs of the child.
14. Child's views, wishes and feelings must be fully explored and clearly represented in the report. Even if the child is deemed too young their presentation and demeanour in placement should be explained to give a picture of how the child may be feeling.
15. Parent's views must be explored fully with any complaints, disagreements or compliments reported.
16. The recommendation and proposed plan must:
  - be child focused and designed to affect change in a timescale appropriate for the child. The plan should address any causal factors as well as symptoms. Any proposed services should be directly linked to improving the circumstances for the child and specify the time frame in which improvements must be evidenced.
  - Specify tasks and be attributable and timed
  - Contain a realistic and proportional contingency plan.
  - be designed to keep the child safe and meet the identified needs in a timescale appropriate to the child.
  - be tailored to individual needs of children

Steve Day

Safeguarding standards manager and Principal Social Worker

September 2013



# My Care Plan

Name: .....

Date: .....

## Health



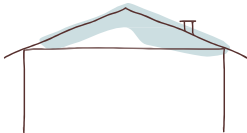
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## School



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## Home



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## Family



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## Hobbies



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## Safety



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## Money



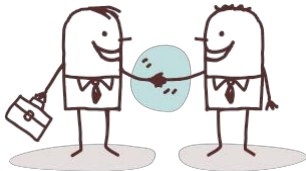
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## Contact



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## Other things I want to say



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Signed (Social Worker):

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Signed (Child/Young person):

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Copied to:

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