

together for
children
SUNDERLAND

Children's Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report

April 2022 to March 2023



putting
the child first

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HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY

What have we achieved?

In 2022 our second round of national training was undertaken so that all IROs in the service have completed the bespoke NE12 training delivered by Edgehill University. This equips the IROs to carry out their role with up-to-date knowledge and research.

As all Covid restrictions were lifted during 2022/23 we have seen an increase in children and family members attending their Cared for Reviews and Child Protection Conferences.

We have continued to promote Mind of My Own and have supported children and young people to use the app. We have invested in devices that can be used by children, young people and IROs to access the app and the usage of Mind of My Own has continued to increase.

The service engaged within the national review of Children's Services in England that put forward recommendations to remove the role of the IRO. The service shared their views on the positive impact that our role has on children in Sunderland. The outcome of the review was not to progress the recommendation.

We have continued to adapt and strengthen our practice within the area of Signs of Safety in 2022/23. We are using signs of success, cared for paperwork in Liquidlogic which has helped to use the model more effectively with children and families across all areas of our practice.

We have continued to work with partner agencies to support children and their families in being prepared for meetings. For example, we have seen improvements with regards to the timeliness of reports provided by agencies for child protection conferences. Children and parents have told us that they feel more prepared to engage and hear information about them when they receive the reports beforehand.

What are we worried about?

We have seen an increase in social care becoming involved in children's lives for a second and subsequent time due to risk of harm. Therefore, we have continued to work with our partners in gaining a greater understanding around why children are requiring repeat child protection plans.

The impact of poverty upon the lived experience of children in Sunderland has increased during this reporting year. This means we have seen more examples of neglect than in the prior reporting period.

What will we do next?

Improve overall attendance of children in their Child protection conferences so that we remain focused upon helping families improve the lived experience for children who are deemed the most vulnerable.

We want to strengthen our practice so that when we write to the child it is written in a way to help them understand what it is we have talked about.

We are considering what further support we can provide to children and families who are attending meetings including themes such as accessibility, the use of advocacy, technology, the meeting environment, and information provided before the meetings. We will be using feedback from families to help with identifying improvements and changes.

1. Purpose of the Annual Report

- 1.1. This annual report has been produced by the Children's Independent Review Team (CIRT) in line with statutory guidance and covers the period 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023. It provides an overview of the work undertaken by the service in relation to child protection and cared for children.
- 1.2. The report highlights what is working well, what we are worried about and areas for improvement. It identifies emerging themes, examples of good practice, and identifies priorities for the next 12 months.

2. Role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

- 2.1. Our IROs chair reviews for children who are cared for by Together for Children and Sunderland Local Authority. IROs have an important role to make sure that the decisions taken, are the ones that are best for the child or young person, that safety goals are progressing, Care Plans are followed and that everyone respects the rights of children.
- 2.2. The role of the IRO was established by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, s.118 (amended s.26 of the Children Act 1989) with the responsibility of reviewing placements and plans for children in care. The 2008 Act extended the IRO's responsibilities to have more effective independent oversight of the child's case and to ensure the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process.
- 2.3. The primary roles and responsibilities of our IROs is to:
 - Review and scrutinise care plans to ensure they are legally compliant and in the best interests of the children.
 - Chair children cared for reviews.
 - Ensure that the voice of the child is heard and given appropriate weight within their care planning.
 - Promote corporate parenting to enable positive outcomes for the children they care for.
 - Chair placement order and adoptive placement reviews, ensuring they are appropriate to the child's needs.
 - Provide a quality assurance and scrutiny function, and where appropriate challenge to Children's Social Care in relation to practice.
- 2.4. Another key role for our IROs is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. Where problems are identified in relation to a child's case (e.g. relating to care planning, implementation of the plan or decisions relating to it) the IRO will, in the first instance, seek to resolve the issue informally with the social worker or the social worker's managers. The IRO will make a record of this on the child's file. If the matter is not resolved in a timescale that is appropriate to the child's needs, the IRO will consider taking formal action.
- 2.5. The independent reviewing officers are seen to be well placed to identify both strengths and worries with regards to practice, including general themes amongst the cared for children population and strengths and weaknesses in relation to Sunderland's corporate parenting responsibility for cared for children. Thematic strengths / worries are identified and raised with senior operational managers with a level of timeliness appropriate to their impact on the safety and welfare of children.

3. Role of Child Protection Conference Chairs

- 3.1. Child protection conferences are meetings that take place when we are worried that a child may be at risk of significant harm. The conferences are managed by an independent conference chair. Where concerns relate to an unborn child, consideration is given as to whether to hold a child protection conference prior to the child's birth.
- 3.2. An initial child protection conference brings together people who are important to the child. This includes family members (and the child where appropriate), supporters, advocates, and practitioners most involved with the child and family who are best placed to make decisions about whether the child is at risk of significant harm. If they think this is the case, they will work with parents and the child (if present) to create a child protection plan that focuses on what people are worried about.
- 3.3. Our Signs of Safety approach makes the conference easy for everyone to understand. It helps everyone to identify what we are worried about, what is going well and what needs to happen to make the child safe – this means that people are asked to use language that everyone understands.
- 3.4. Once everyone understands what the worries are (danger statements), and what they are working towards (safety goals), the conference decides whether a child protection plan is needed, and the Chair uses a scaling question to help participants think through this decision. If it is decided that a child protection plan is needed, the final part of the conference will look at what needs to happen to enable the child to be safe from harm. This means identifying actions needed and the people responsible for carrying out those actions, including the parents/carers and when they will complete these actions. This is called the outline child protection plan.
- 3.5. Three months after the initial child protection conference, a review child protection conference is held. After that, a review child protection conference happens every six months. The review will consider whether the child protection plan should continue or should be changed. Reviews continue until it is decided that a plan is no longer needed to safeguard the child.
- 3.6. When chairing either initial or review child protection conferences, the role of our conference chairs is to ensure information is appropriately shared and concerns and actions are identified collectively to ensure children are kept safe. The chair will meet the child and parents in advance to ensure they understand the purpose and process. The chair will also ensure that parents are clear about any recommendations and plans made involving them or their family.
- 3.7. Our child protection conference chairs are all practitioners but do not have operational or line management responsibility for the child or young person. Wherever possible, the same conference chair will host all subsequent child protection reviews in respect of a specific child.
- 3.8. Another key role for our conference chairs is providing independent oversight of child protection work and planning and contributing to the raising of practice standards. Conference chairs must ensure that problems identified in relation to a child's case or practice, in the first instance, are raised informally with the social worker or the social worker's manager. The Chair will make a record of this initial informal resolution process and if the matter is not resolved in timescale, the chair will consider taking formal action.

4. Impact of IRO/Conference Chair Work

- 4.1. Below are some anonymised stories of work that our service has achieved for children. In terms of confidentiality names and dates have been changed but the stories are real examples from the past year.

Dan

Dan is a 14-year-old young person who lived at home with his dad. Dan's family and all professionals working with him were all worried about him due to concerns that he was becoming involved in gangs, using drugs, and not going home at night. Dad told us that due to his worries for Dan that they would often argue and more recently things had got so bad that he had hit Dan in the face. Dan also told us that he felt scared of his dad because of this.



As a result of the worries a Child Protection Conference was convened and Dan and his dad were both invited to attend, alongside the key people who knew Dan. The Conference Chair visited Dan prior to the conference date and talked to him about what his views were and to prepare him for the conference.

The young person's child protection pathway was used in the conference which enabled Dan to tell everyone what he was worried about, what he felt was going well and what needed to happen. Everyone heard how Dan and his dad loved each other very much but were struggling with the situation. By the end of the conference both Dan and his dad had a greater understanding of each other's worries and clear bottom lines and plan rules were introduced for the family to stick to, to keep Dan safe both living with his dad at home and also what needed to happen to help Dan be safer in the community.

The child protection plan continued to be reviewed by the Conference Chair and after a nine-month period Dan, his dad and everyone in the family and the professional network felt the risk had reduced and the plan was ended. Dan told us that he felt listened to and happy that by the time of the plan ending he was able to talk to his dad about his worries and saw his dad as being able to help him feel safe.

Paul and Peter



Paul and Peter are brothers who became cared for by Together for Children due to worries that their parents could not keep them safe. Although both boys were able to stay with their grandparents whilst care proceedings were underway, and the care provided was to an excellent standard, they did not see themselves as becoming carers. This made them conflicted in being able to make a final decision around caring for the boy's long term, and delayed planning for the boys while they made big decisions.

The IRO was concerned that the boys did not understand why the Judge's decision was taking so long; why they were unable to be cared for by their parents and what their final plan would look like.

The IRO utilised the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP) to highlight worries regarding the boys understanding of what was happening. The outcome of the DRP was that Paul and Peter now have a words and pictures explanation of why they were unable to be cared for by parents, their final care plan and what this means for them.

Rory

Rory is a 1-year-old child who was living with his extended family member and came into care due to an unexplained injury sustained whilst in the care of his parents. The IRO was informed by the Social Worker that care team meetings and family network meetings were often very challenging and often lost sight of Rory.

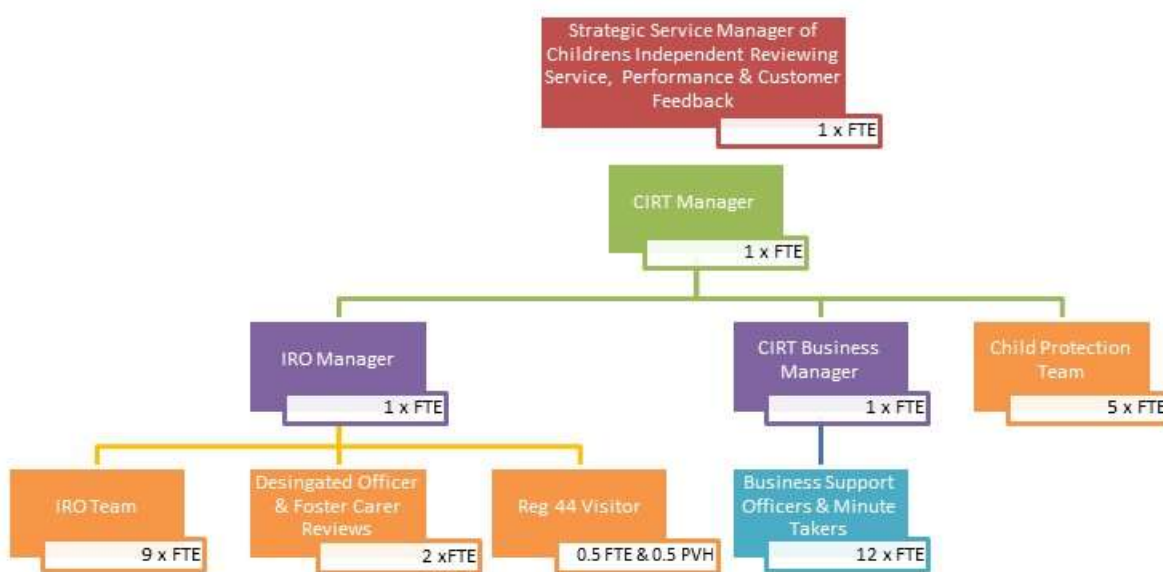


The IRO was very clear in explaining the purpose of the review was to look at the care planning for Rory, explaining that whilst they knew everyone around the table loved and cared for Rory, that was why at times their emotions could become difficult to cope with.

In the review, the IRO asked family members to imagine that Rory was in the review with them and to think about what he may say if he was physically there and able to verbalise for himself. This approach worked very well, and the family members allowed themselves to step into Rory's shoes and to really think about what would be best for him. Each time family strayed into the frustrations with each other, the IRO acknowledged their feelings and respectfully moved them on and refocussed them back to Rory needs.

The IRO was able to use their independence and chairing skills to support and guide the family to see and hear Rory in his care planning review, to work together to keep him safe from further harm.

5. Professional Profile of the Children Independent Reviewing Team



- 5.1. Our service is within the Corporate and Commercial Directorate in Together for Children. We have 14 full-time equivalents (FTE) Independent Reviewing Officers/ Child Protection Chairs who are all registered Social Workers with at least five years post qualifying experience.
- 5.2. Our Business Support Team provides minute taking services and administrative support to the Children's Independent Reviewing Service and manages reception duties.
- 5.3. The profile of our team is diverse, offering a wide range of knowledge and practice experience. In terms of diversity, the profile of our service is representative of a range of ages, gender, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds. We have benefitted from a stable group of Independent Reviewing Officers and Conference Chairs and have kept changes of Independent Reviewing Officers for children to a minimum with four staff leaving the service this year due to retirement, and promotions. A separate annual report is produced covering the Designated Officer and the Regulation 44 role.

Caseloads

- 5.4. Due to service currently being fully staffed with no sickness absence, the average caseload for child protection cases is 60 and the average caseload for cared for is 56 which is a decrease from last year.

Supervision

- 5.5. All workers within our service receive regular individual and group supervision and have access to informal supervision as and when needed. Peer supervision is a reflective discussion using Signs of Safety regarding individual cases. There continues to be a real commitment by the management of the service to ensure that the level of supervision and support is of the highest standards.

6. Learning and Development

- 6.1. As part of our commitment to ongoing learning and development, all our workers continue to have access to learning events such as legal briefings, staff briefings, Safeguarding Partnership training, and IRO specific training delivered by Edgehill University and funded by the Northeast Regional IRO Network. We have also held monthly team meetings at which research, practice guidance and learning reviews are discussed and disseminated to staff.

- 6.2. We identify training requirements through supervision, team meetings, training, observations. The following training has been undertaken within this reporting year:

Mandatory Training (all staff):

- Stress and Emotional Resilience
- Cyber Ninjas (GDPR)
- Introduction to Health and Safety
- Slips, Trips and Falls
- Cyber Ninja (GDPR Refresher)
- Fire Safety Awareness
- Manual Handling and Back Care
- DSE (Display Screen Equipment)

Mandatory Training (Managers):

- Attendance Management Training
- Risk Assessment and Safe Working Procedures Overview
- Health and Safety Management System (HSMS)
- IR1 Reporting
- Health and Safety - Managers Roles and Responsibilities

Other Training:

- County lines
- What it takes to build a network
- Signs of success
- Early permanency
- Family network overview
- PREVENT
- Safe and together training
- Trauma informed practice
- Signs of Safety child protection conferences (1 days)
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers
- Mind of My Own
- Speech and language communication needs
- When babies can't speak
- Domestic abuse workshops
- Emotional resilience
- Fine art of keeping a family together
- Mind of my own
- Sexualised trauma
- Advanced IRO Training (Edgehill University)
- Somerset Ruling and the impact on progression of adoption plans
- Arcbox
- Star and Arthur Safeguarding Review





In addition to the above training courses the IROs/Conference Chairs have continued to access Community Care Informed database and Signs of Safety learning space which provide updates to articles and research in areas of social work practice.

7. Regional, National and Local Links

- 7.1. Our management team continues to meet quarterly with IRO managers from the Northeast. This regional group considers changes to policy and practice, gathers relevant statistical information at a regional level and works toward consistent practice in the region. This has led to the development of a regional training plan for IRO's.
- 7.2. The regional group have met to discuss and consider the implications of the Children's Social Care Review and have provided responses at a national level to influence ongoing practice development for children. We have done this through continuing to have representation on the National Independent Reviewing Officer Management (NIROM)
- 7.3. We have maintained and built upon our working relationships and links with TfC children's social care services. The management team meets regularly with Service Managers in Social Care. The IROs and Conference Chairs meet with social care Team Managers where they discuss practice development with a focus upon problem solving.
- 7.4. We continue to liaise with our local partners and are represented at the following groups:
- Sunderland Safeguarding Children's Partnership (SSCP)
 - Regional NE 12 IRO Managers Group
 - Liquid Logic Operational Group
 - Change Council
 - TfC Children's Partnership Commissioning Panel
 - TfC Legal Services, Social Care and CIRT
 - Corporate Parenting Board
 - Care and Legal Gateway Panel
 - Assistant Directors of Children's Safeguarding Group
 - Harrogate District NHS Foundation Trust & Children's Independent Reviewing Service Management Forum
 - Northumbria Police & Children's Independent Reviewing Team Management Forum
 - CAFCASS & TfC Management Forum
 - Quarterly meetings with Councillor Farthing,/Price portfolio holder and deputy for children within the City of Sunderland
 - Headteachers Forum
- 7.5. In this reporting year the above work has continued to influence practice for children and provided opportunities to discuss and address any short comings.

8. Voice and Influence of Children

- 8.1. The voices of children continue to influence practice and therefore putting the child's voice remains a central part in everything we do. 'Putting the child first' is central to everything we do and therefore we want to offer meaningful opportunities for children to contribute their views and opinions, so they can participate in decisions and activities that shape and influence practice, policies and services that can impact on their lives.
- 8.2. Over the last 12 months, children have continued to tell us what is important to them and below are some examples of their views and opinions:

You said.....		We did.....
<p>“You want to be able to influence and support the recruitment process of the IRO Manager.”</p>		<p>We invited representatives from the Change Council to be part of the interview panel for the IRO Manager recruitment in September 2022.</p>
<p>“You like to complete Mind of My Own Statements with your IRO.”</p>		<p>We invested in some new tablets for IROs to use when they visit children.</p>
<p>“We want to be able to attend in person”</p>		<p>Our invitation process was updated to advise professionals if they wished to attend the conference in person they could. This message was shared with partner agencies.</p>
<p>“We want to have choice over our Cared for Review. We want to decide who will attend our meeting and where and when the meeting will be held.”</p>		<p>We have created our Practice Standards which is clear that all children will be offered a visit before their review by their IRO to ensure the arrangements are all agreed in advance before the Cared for Review.</p>

8.3. Listening to children is a core value of CIRT which we want to continue to hear and demonstrate how it is leading to changes in how we undertake our job on their behalf. In the coming year, whilst acknowledging the achievements we have made in listening, we are eager to further strengthen the child and their family in our work by undertaking the following:

- Create opportunities outside of statutory meetings for children to be able to communicate safely with conference chairs/IRO’s
- Embed Young Person’s Plans and the ethos of their engagement / chairing of their meetings, so that children have the true sense that the actions we take are done with them rather than done to them to manage risk.
- Build upon our strengths in valuing the child’s family network to help them manage the risks to children and therefore reducing the need for them to be either cared for or subject to a child protection plan. As we know children have better outcomes when they can be kept safe within their family network.

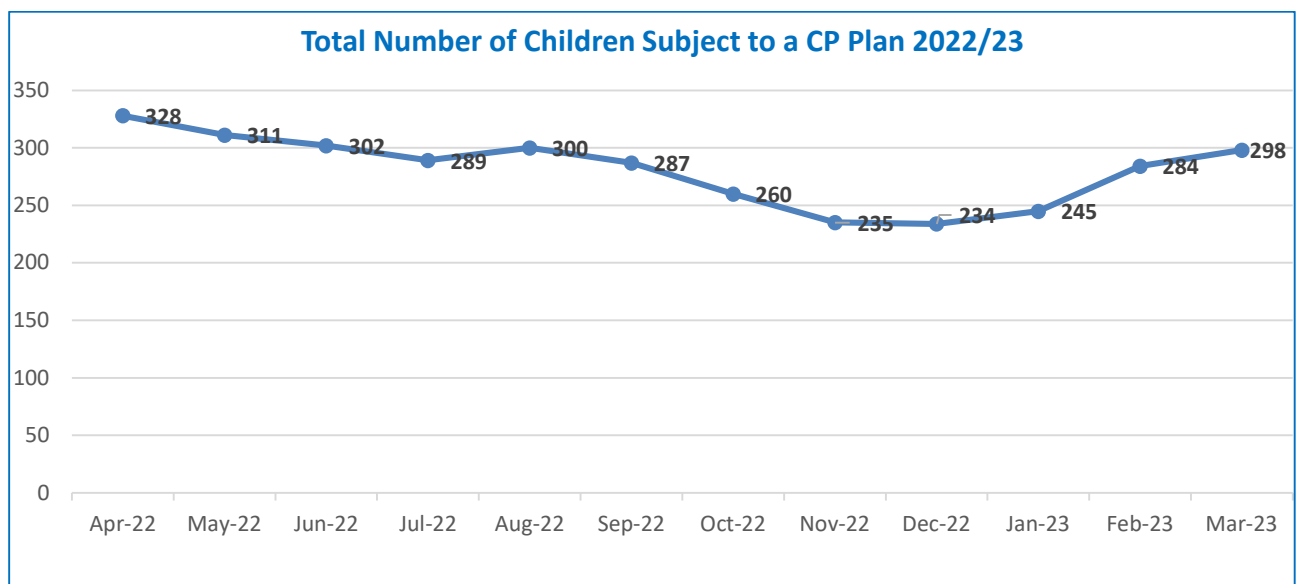
9. Highlighted Achievements in 2022/23

22/23 Priorities	Progress & Outcomes
To continue to place children at the centre of our practice.	Since the last report we have seen IRO conference chairs continue to show their commitment to placing the voice of the child central to the work that they undertake. Pre-cared for visits have continued to be offered and mind of my own uptake increased during this period. In the area of Child Protection, we have seen more teenagers attend their conferences sharing their worries and life experience.
To have more children having a clear plan of permanency approved by the time of their second cared for review.	In this reporting year, 50% of children had a plan of permanence at their second review. Whilst there is still more work to do to increase this figure, it shows a 14% increase when compared with the previous year. The main reason for permanency plans not being in a position to be reviewed by the time of the second review is due to key assessments directed by the courts remaining outstanding.
Continue to work with all parties in helping to ensure that children live in homes that keep them safe and make them feel valued so that they have stability.	CIRT have continued to provide feedback in multi-agency arenas around the standard of care that children have received such as our attendance at the weekly Children's Partnership Commissioning panel. We have engaged in reviews of all care orders for children in care meetings chaired by the Director of Children's Social Care. In addition, we have continued to hold cared for reviews at times that children have needed them, so to review the lived experience of children timely and consistently.
Getting the balance right with regards to the modelling between child protection and cared for work, so that growing confidence in the area of preference does not leave staff feeling de-skilled in the other area of their work.	We have continued to review our workload allocation, listening to individuals whilst ensuring the needs of the child are central to the decision making. This has meant the workforce remains confident and skilled in both cared for reviews and child protection conferences.
Continuing to develop working relationships with the audit team supporting shared learning and identifying areas for strengthening practice for children.	In this reporting year we have worked together with the audit team and reviewed the data for National Learning Reviews. This has strengthened how we share information and remains an area of ongoing development.
Continue to work with the Signs of Safety team in evolving practice in child protection and cared for meetings.	CIRT has continued to have representation on the Signs of Safety implementation group. The workforce has undertaken ongoing reviews of practice in the areas of cared for and CP. 2.5 days training has been delivered, focusing upon SOS and success. This has led to the introduced of the new format for cared for reviews being embedded into practice for children.
Respond and adopt practice in line with any government recommendation from the national learning review into Star and Arthur's deaths.	The national learning reviews coincided with the publication of Josh McAllister's report. Sessions were undertaken with staff so that immediate consideration could be given to the learning and recommendations. Practice has evolved with staff being asked to ensure that we know at all times the family network, the relationship

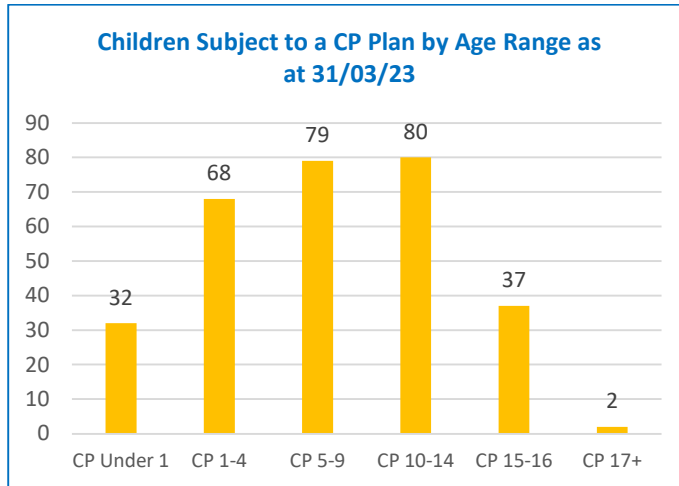
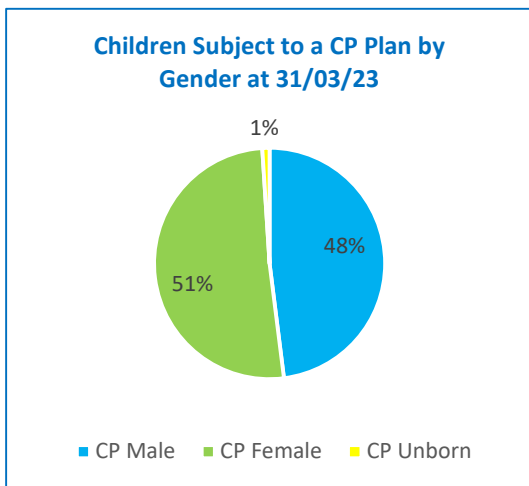
22/23 Priorities	Progress & Outcomes
Learning review due for publication in May 2022.	children have within these networks and the possible risks posed by adults known to the child.
Consider and respond to Josh McAllister's report into Children Social Care due for publication in May 2022.	We provided a local and regional response to the report and were pleased that government chose not to follow the recommendation in relation to the IRO role.
Build upon the work already undertaken in helping children where the risk is outside of the family home by building upon our young people's plans and practice	Our processes were strengthened in 2021/21 and we have seen young people's conferences being held in 2022/23 with children attending conference and sharing their views on their plans. Working with children and families in this way will help to improve outcomes for children.

10. Profile of Children in Sunderland

Child Protection

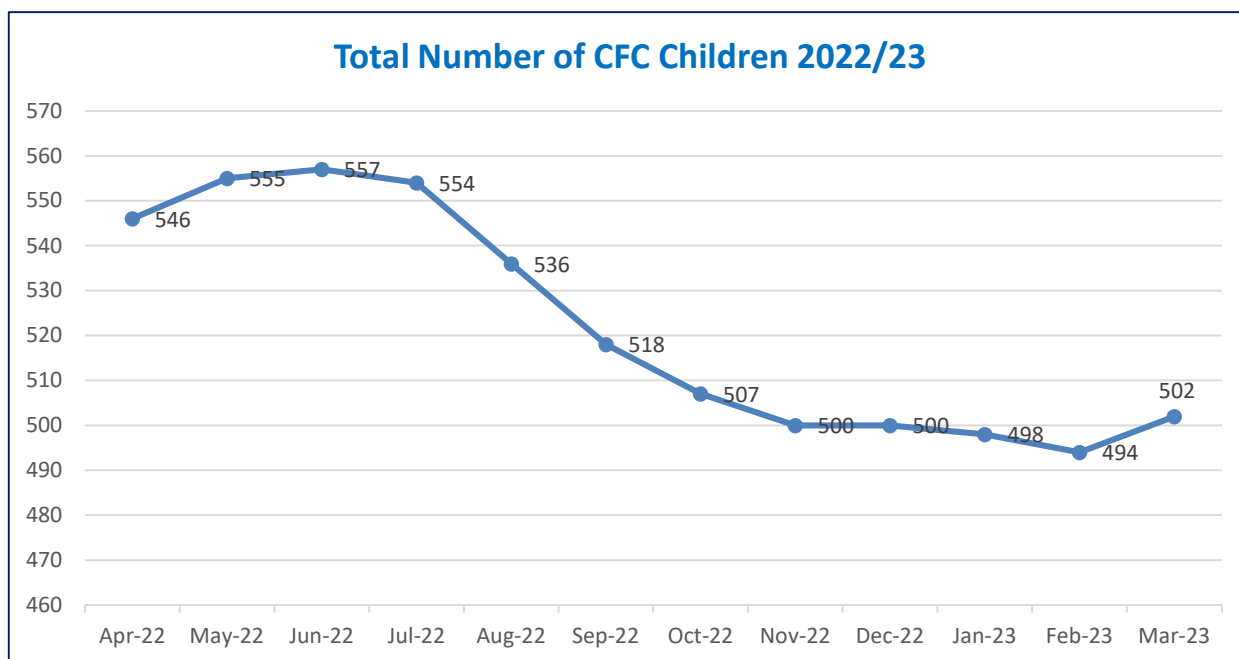


- 10.1. The number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan in Sunderland has reduced across the year by 30 children between April 2022 and March 2023. The number of children subject to child protection plans in Sunderland has continued to follow a year-on-year decrease with Q3 showing the lowest figures. However, by the end of Q4 children subject to Child Protection Plan was starting to follow an upwards trajectory.

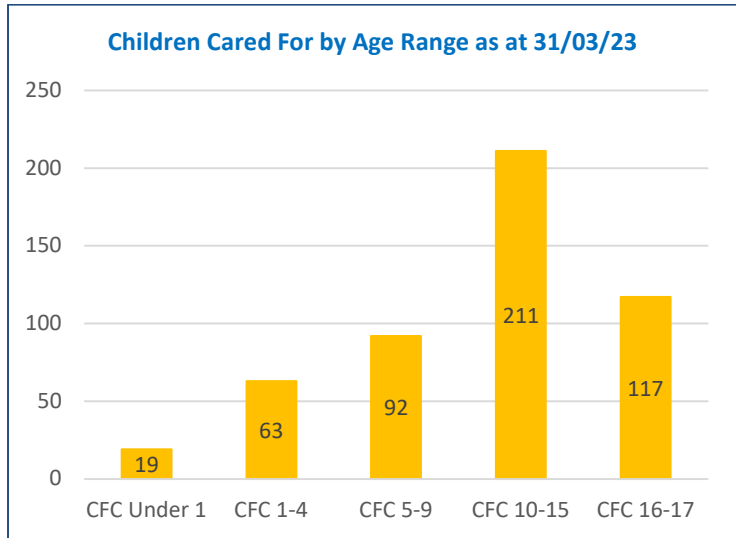
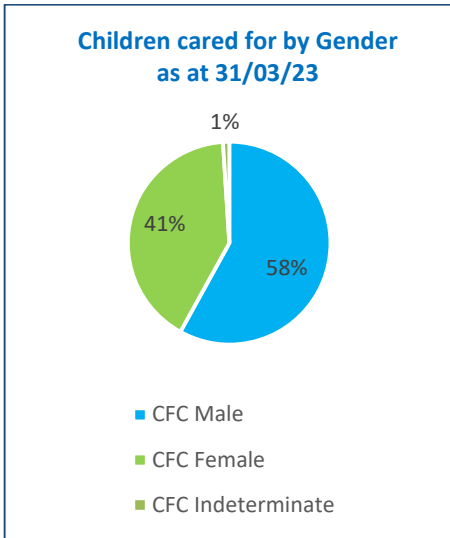


10.2. There continues to be an even balance of male and female children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan. Most children on a plan are aged between the years of 10 and 14. Targeted work continues to be ongoing via Wear Kids and the Young People’s Team. In this reporting year we have seen a reduction within this age range of children having CP plans therefore indicating the work is having a positive impact.

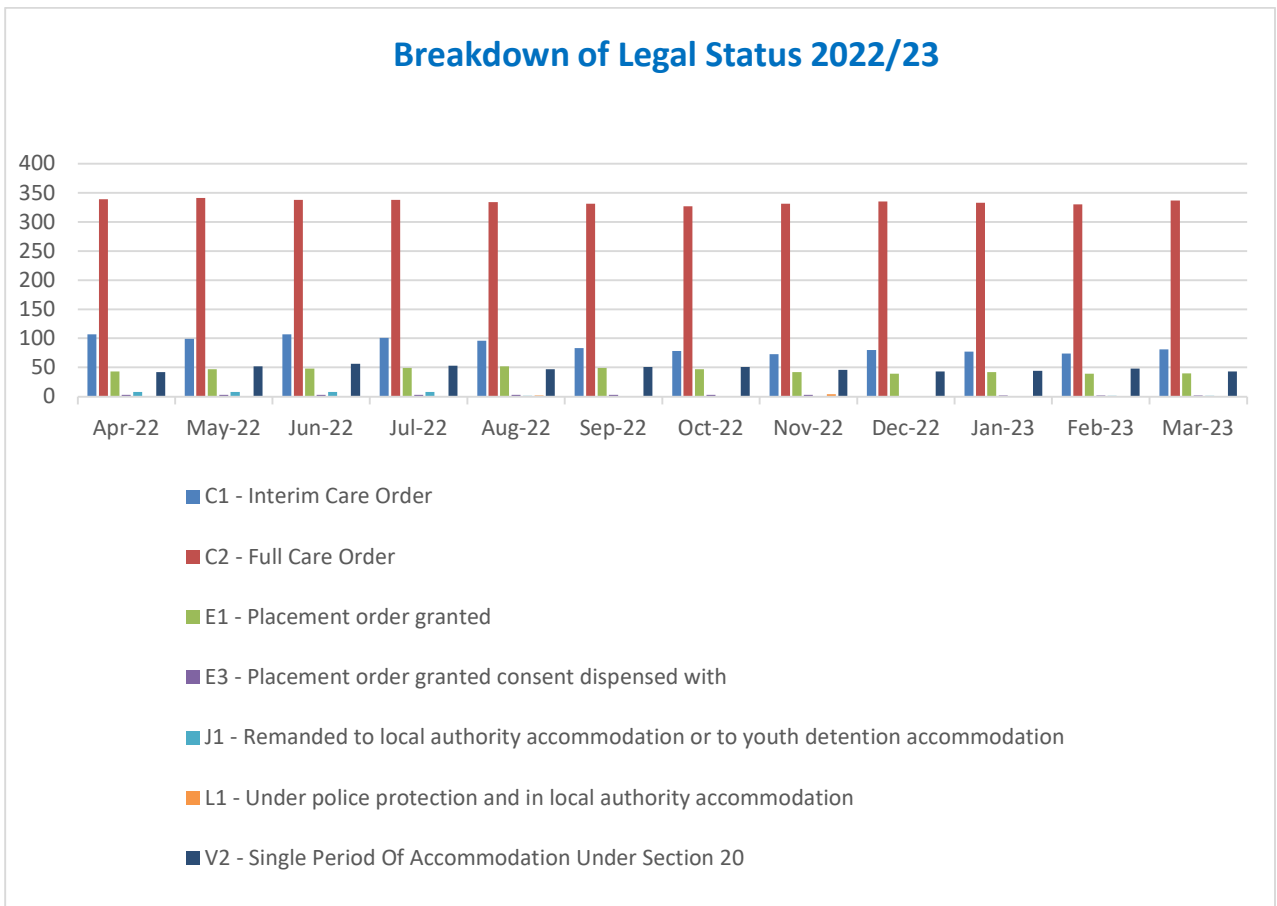
Cared for Children



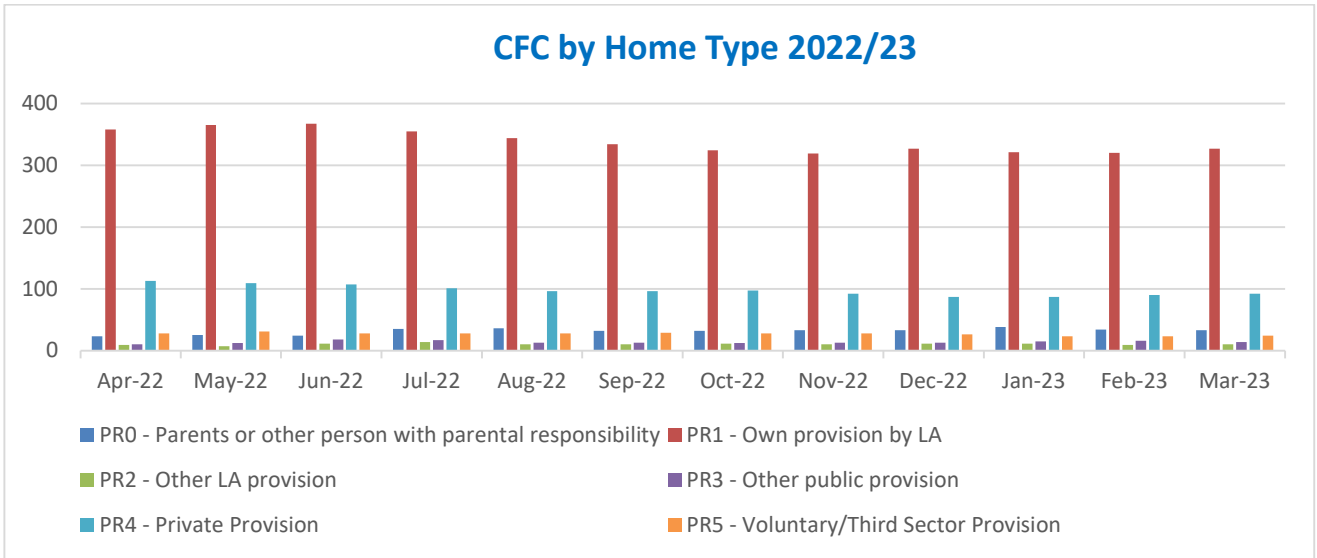
10.3. The number of children cared for by Together for Children has reduced throughout the year from 546 in April 2022 to 502 in March 2023, suggesting that working within a strength-based model is leading to children not needing to become cared for.



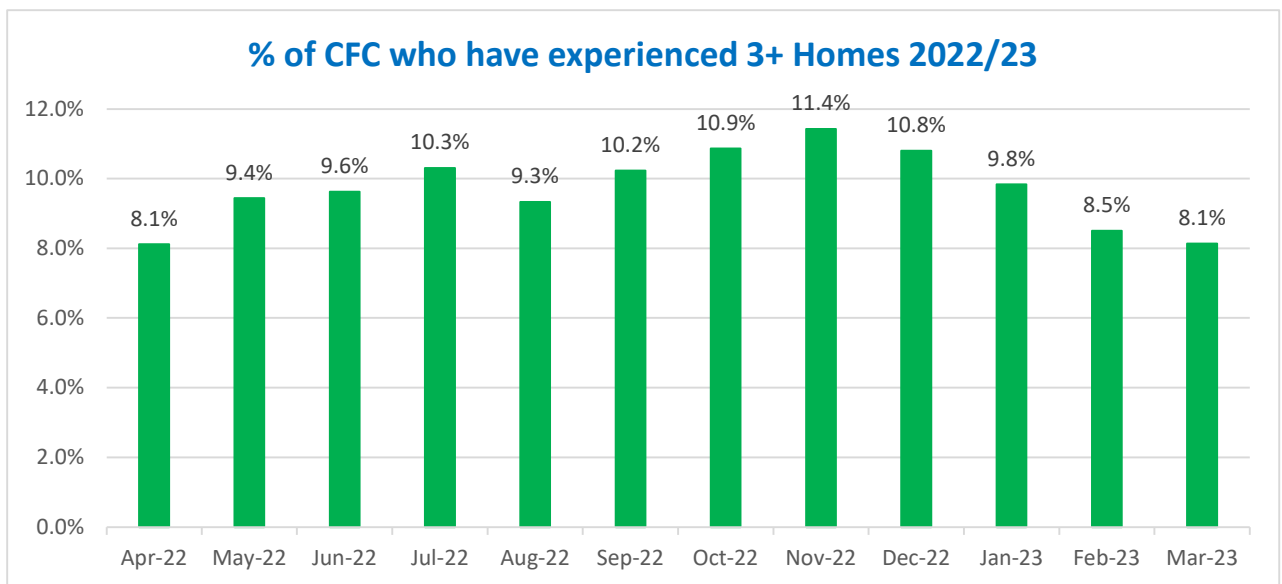
10.4. Slightly more children are male over female and this continues to follow a national trend. Whilst the age range 10-15 continues to be our highest group for children being in care it has reduced from the previous year by 26 children, evidencing that our interventions for this age range are having a positive impact.



10.5. On the 31/3/23 there were 43 children accommodated via S20, which is a slight reduction from the previous year of 45.



10.6. The above chart shows that Together for Children have an ongoing commitment to provide in house care for children so that they can remain living in communities that they best identify with. This also means that we can have greater influence in ensuring their needs are met as it removes the potential complicating factor of distance to travel for school, family time and meaningful appointments.



10.7. At the end of March 2023, 8.1% of children experienced three or more homes which is 4% reduction compared with the previous year. Children have experienced stability within their homes which is a good indicator that we are helping children make connections within their communities.

11. Performance Summary – Child Protection 2022/23

- 11.1. We have held a total of 695 conferences this year; 271 have been Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs), 12 transfer-in conferences and 412 Review Child Protection Conferences (RCPSs).
- 11.2. In 2022/23, a total of 511 children’s child protection plans were ended:
- 194 children’s child protection plans ended under six months period.
 - 311 ended between six months and a two-year period.
 - 6 children’s child protection plans ended after two years, this related to 2 sibling groups due to extenuating circumstances involving Police investigations.

Timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC’s)

- 11.3. An ICPC should be held within 15 days from the date of a strategy, where a child protection investigation has been carried out. The table below shows the current performance together with the latest comparator data.

% ICPC Held in Timescale	Sunderland 21/22	Sunderland 22/23	Statistical Neighbours	England
	84%	85%	82%	79%

- 11.4. Within the last year, 85% of ICPC’s were held within timescale. This represents a 1% increase in performance when compared to the previous year. We continue to perform better than England and our Statistical Neighbours.
- 11.5. The reasons for those ICPC’s held out of timescale are detailed in the table below:

ICPC - Reasons for out of Timescale	21/22	22/23	Variance
Late Notifications	13	14	+1
Admin Errors	2	3	+1
Missing Information /Reports	4	5	+1
Non-Attendance by Significant Person	19	7	-12
Non-Attendance by Other Professional	4	1	-3
Extension Agreed by Professionals	2	1	-1
Total Number of Children	83	88	+5

- 11.6. In 2022/23 there were 14 late notifications received which resulted in conferences being held out of timescale. 11 of these were stood down due to insufficient notice (five days) being given for external agencies to prepare and submit reports for the conferences. This specifically impacted Northumbria Police who require sufficient time to undertake police checks for inclusion in their reports.
- 11.7. There were five occasions this year where key information was not available for conference, and in the best interests of the child the meetings were stood down. A further seven meetings were impacted by non-attendance by a significant person, this being the child’s parent or carer.
- 11.8. Overall, initial conferences for 88 children were held out of timescale, which is an increase from 83 in the previous year.
- 11.9. We continue to actively monitor conference meeting activity and provide weekly updates to Service Managers within Social Care. We have also continued to provisionally plan ICPC’s at the start of the Section 47 investigation giving Social Care and other organisations the full 15 days to plan for the ICPC.

Timeliness of Review Child Protection Conferences (RCPC's)

11.10. A child protection plan should be reviewed at an RCPC within three months of the Initial Child Protection Conference and then at intervals of no more than six months. The table below shows the percentage on RCPC's held in timescale in Sunderland.

% RCPC Held in Timescale	Sunderland 21/22	Sunderland 22/23
	98%	98%

11.11. We continue to maintain our high performance of 98% of RCPS meetings being held in timescale. The reasons for those RCPC's held out of timescale are detailed in the table below:

RCPC - Reasons for out of Timescale	21/22	22/23	Variance
Admin Error	1	1	-
Missing Information /Reports	4	0	-4
Non-Attendance by Significant Person	2	4	+2
Non-Attendance by Other Professional	1	2	+1
Extension Agreed by Professionals	3	1	-2
Total Number of Children	17	17	0

11.12. For those children, where conferences were out of timescale, plans were put in place to ensure their ongoing safety. We continue to take a proactive approach in seeking to limit the number of reviews that fall out of timescale by ensuring data is provided weekly to Children's Social Care Management, and that individual direct contact is made with Team Managers, where required.

11.13. In the reporting year 15% of children who were made subject to a child protection plan had a repeat episode within the 2-year period. This represents an overall increase from the previous year of 8%. This means that worries have been raised again regarding 72 children that we have already tried to help. Auditing work is being undertaken to further evidence the reasons for this increase and to determine if there is any correlation with the reduction in child protection numbers and the length of child protection plans.

Timeliness of Reports for ICPC and RCPC

11.14. The provision of reports within timescale from professionals for both ICPC's and RCPC's is shown in the table below:

21-22 Report Timeliness	ICPC 21/22	ICPC 22/23	Variance	RCPC 21/22	RCPC 22/23	Variance
Children's Services	41%	44%	+3%	33%	41%	+8%
Police	94%	96%	+2%	84%	91%	+7%
GP	59%	60%	+1%	57%	61%	+4%
0-19 Service	65%	77%	+12%	39%	50%	+11%
Education	67%	63%	-4%	40%	40%	-

11.15. The timeliness of Social Worker reports has increased from the previous reporting year, from 41% to 44% and RCPC's from 33% to 41%. Whilst improvements have been achieved, they still fall well below the TFC target of 80%.

11.16. The timeliness of reports submitted by other agencies ranges between 60% and 96% for ICPC's and between 40% to 91% for RCPC's. Both sets of data highlight improvements in ensuring families have access to reports prior to conference from the previous year. Police have continued to improve from the previous year and in quarters 3 and 4 the work that has been undertaken with the 0-19 service has also seen improvements in their end of year data.

11.17. We will continue to provide regular figures to partner agencies and offer help and support in assisting ongoing improvements in this area of practice for children and families.

Child Protection Categories

11.18. The following table shows a breakdown of the categories for children subject to a Child Protection Plan.

Child Protection Categories	2021/22		2022/23		Number Variance
	No of Children	% Of Children	No of Children	% Of Children	
Neglect	142	43.29%	176	59.06%	+34
Emotional Abuse	172	52.44%	95	31.88%	-77
Physical Abuse	8	2.44%	19	6.38%	+11
Sexual Abuse	6	1.83%	8	2.68%	+2

11.19. There are 176 child protection plans within the category of neglect; within these cases there is often evidence of a combination of risks which relate to; substance misuse, mental health, and domestic abuse. In this reporting period as anticipated last year the impact of the cost-of-living crisis is consistently apparent in children’s lives leading to a further increase in the category of neglect. Often neglect is an area that fluctuates depending upon wider economic factors and explains some of the increase of children becoming subject to a child protection plan for the second time as support alone cannot offset the impact of financial hardship experienced by children and families living in Sunderland.

11.20. The number of children subject to a plan under the category of Emotional Abuse has decreased by 77, whilst the issue of violence within the home remains prevalent in Sunderland it’s not a factor that stands alone in isolation. Often emotional abusive situations are compounded by the issues noted within the category of neglect. Therefore, the decrease in this category coincides with the year upon year increase in the use of the category of neglect.

11.21. The category of Physical Abuse has seen an increase in the number of children from eight in 2022, to 19 in 2023. The category of Sexual Abuse has increased by two in 2023. Work continues to ensure that categories are used appropriately and reflect the area of risk of significant harm for the child.

Tracking Discussion Child Protection Reviews

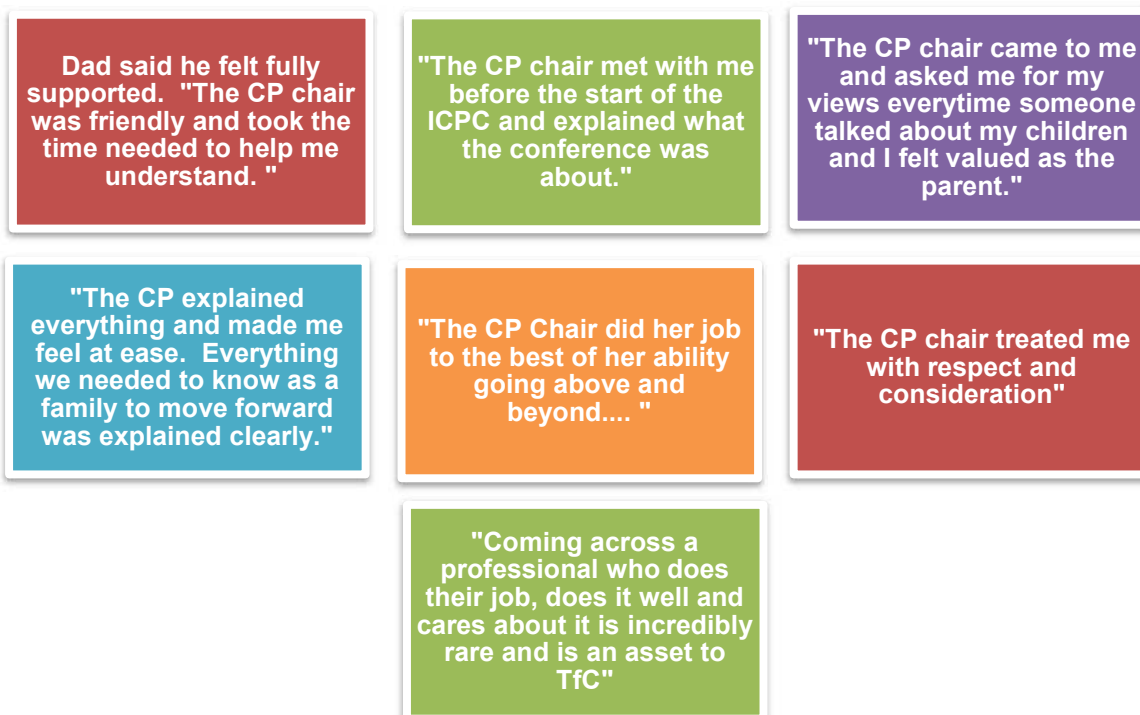
11.22. A tracking discussion describes a contact between a Conference Chair and the allocated Social Worker for a child. We plan that they should be held as soon as one is needed to ensure that a child’s plan is moving forward. Tracking however must take place no later than the mid-way point after each review.

11.23. We held 882 child protection tracking discussions within the reporting year. Performance in this area has remained high for children subject to a child protection plan.

12. Participation and Views within Child Protection

12.1. Involving children in their CP conference meetings remains an area of focus for the team. We have various ways of supporting children to share their lived experience within a CP conference and have continued to promote pre-meetings, the use of questionnaires and Mind of My Own. We have seen children themselves attend more conferences than previous years and this is linked to the evolving practice within the Young Persons team.

- 12.2. In 2022/23 we have seen our conferences evolve back to all parents being physically present and attending with their support networks. Parents have continued to advise us that the venue at Stanfield is accessible and suitable for the meetings. They feel the venue meets the needs of children in providing a safe, clean, and well invested environment. Parents have continued to comment upon how supportive and skilful conference chairs are in helping them to engage and feel valued.
- 12.3. We have continued to support parents where necessary to engage in conferences through TEAMS when they have not been able to attend in person due to either underlying health and wellbeing issues or through personal choice.
- 12.4. Below are some comments received during 2022/23, relating to CP conference meetings.



- 12.5. From the comments we have received we remain confident that we have a skilled workforce with an environment to match. This enables us to tailor CP conferences within the context of the individuals' family's needs and the legal framework governing practice.

13. Performance Summary - Cared for Children

- 13.1. As of the 31/03/23 Sunderland had 502 cared for children, which is a 9% decrease of the cared for population from the previous year end data. The table below provides a summary of cared for activity.

Indicator	21/22	22/23	Variance
% Cared for reviews held in timescales	98%	98%	-
% Cared for reviews where a child participated within the review	94%	94%	-
% Cared for children with an up-to-date care plan	97%	97%	-
% Cared for children with an up-to-date PEP	100%	98%	-2%
% Cared for children with an up-to-date health assessment	86%	87%	+1%
% Cared for children accommodated under section 20	8%	9%	+1%
% Cared for children with a primary plan of permanence by the second review	36%	50%	+14%

Timeliness of Child Cared for Reviews

- 13.2. An initial Cared for Review is required within 20 working days of a child becoming cared for, a second review within three months and subsequent reviews six monthly. Reviews can be held early where there is evidence of a significant event in the child's life or where consideration is required for changes to the care plan. We have held 1,489 cared for reviews this year which is a decrease of 154 compared to the previous year, again evidencing that our interventions on seeking to support children remaining safely at home is starting to have a direct impact upon both the cared for population and the time that children remain in care.
- 13.3. The percentage of reviews held in timescale in 2022/23 has remained the same as the previous year at 98%. We have listed the reasons for a child's review being held out of timescale in the table below.

Review OOT Reasons	21/22	22/23	Variance
Late Notification	5	2	-3
Administration Error	16	9	-7
Non-Attendance by Significant Person	13	7	-6
Extension Agreed by Professionals	4	3	-1
External Professional/Agency Unavailable	0	1	+1
Chair Unavailable	0	5	+5
Report Reading	0	1	+1
Total Number of Children	38	29	

Pre-Cared For Review Visits

- 13.4. IROs arrange a Pre-Cared for Review Visit (PCV) with a child prior to their Cared for Review. This gives the IRO and child the opportunity to directly discuss the care plan and the structure of the child's forthcoming review to ensure it is firmly focussed on the child.
- 13.5. We have held a total of 1,031 pre-cared for review visits in 2022/23. The Children continue to tell us that our pre visits are important to them and that they want to see their IRO prior to their cared for review so that they can talk to them in private. We have continued in this reporting year to undertake pre-cared for visits via a combination of methods including Microsoft Teams, telephone calls and face to face visits. If a child does not wish to have a PCV the reason is noted on our case management system and within the cared for review documentation.

Tracking Discussions

- 13.6. A tracking discussion is a contact between an IRO and the allocated Social Worker for a child's case. Tracking discussions are planned after each review and take place as and when required, depending upon the progress of the child's plan. We have held 1,305 tracking discussions in 2022/23. Tracking discussions continue to provide the IRO and the child's allocated Social Worker with the opportunity to reflect upon how the child's care plan is progressing and provides the IRO with an opportunity to share their experiences and practice knowledge should a Social Worker be faced with an area of a child's care plan that is not moving forward.

Education

- 13.7. The number of cared for children with Personal Educational Plans (PEP) has decreased from 100% to 98%. This means that whilst our overall performance remains high that there has been some occasions where children have not had a valid PEP. In these instances the IRO for the child would ensure that there is an agreed plan to remedy the situation that works within the child's timescale.

Health Assessments

- 13.8. Children in our care have annual health assessments. In this reporting period 97% of cared for children received a health assessment in timescale. We know in the coming year that we aim to undertake ongoing work with our counterparts in Health to seek more reassurances that children who are in our care have access to robust provisions that are meaningful to improving the overall outcome for the cared for child.

Secure Accommodation Panel Reviews (SAR)

- 13.9. With regards to children who have been placed in Secure Accommodation under Section 25 of the Children Act 1989, (Welfare Secure) a Secure Accommodation Review (SAR) panel must be arranged within 20 working days of the order being made and subsequently three monthly. We continue to have a reciprocal regional arrangement in place with South Tyneside and Gateshead Local Authorities to accommodate the SAR panels as there is a requirement for three IROs to be in attendance, one of which must be independent.
- 13.10. In the reporting year we have had four children placed in secure accommodation which is an increase of one in the previous year. TfC continue to seek resources that can help the most vulnerable of children within community settings as we know that children do best when they live in communities, they feel connected to and with carers who invest in a relationship with them. In addition to this securing a secure welfare bed remains challenging on the continued limited numbers available.

14. Participation and Views – Cared for Children

- 14.1. The number of children participating in their reviews remained the same as the previous year at 94%. In this reporting year we have completed 228 Mind of My Own statements which is an increase of 57 compared to the previous year. We have continued to invest in technology which is enabling more IROs to be able to use Mind of My Own interactively during their pre-cared for review visits.
- 14.2. Below are some of the positive things that children have said worked well during the last year.
- *Knowing who looks after me is important and I would rate them 10 but if I could it would be 1000!*
 - *A young person told us in a recent review that “My life is the best in the world”.*
 - *I am really settled in my residential home and have no plans to move anywhere else. The staff supported me to visit a really important person in my life in Paris.*
 - *A young person told us “the best thing is my carers as I like them, the four dogs and two cats”.*
 - *Two brothers told us that everything was good for them and that they didn’t have any worries, but if they did, they would talk to a trusted adult and named their social worker, teacher and mam.*
 - *“The best thing in life is living with my carers as we do lots of things and have lots of fun together”.*
 - *This child told us that she loves her bedroom and her new dolls house, and she likes going to the caravan with her carers.*

- *A brother and sister love where they live and the family time they have with their mum. They also love riding horses with their carers.*
- *The best thing about where I live is that I get to stay with my big brother and my family whilst my grandparents keep me safe.*

14.6 Below are some of the thing's children have told us isn't working so well for them:

- *I don't know my care plan.*
- *I want to be back home living with my parents.*
- *I don't want to live in residential care, and I want to be in a foster carers home.*
- *Why does it all take so long?*

14.7 The above are real statements that children tell us about key things that we don't always get right. We know that these are areas of real challenge for some of our children but also for IRO's as these statements confirm some of the reasons why IRO's raise challenges on behalf of children. However, these statements need to be seen within context as there are often other competing factors that impact upon being able to provide young people with the answers that they require. However, where challenge is required IRO's will ask difficult questions on behalf of the children.

15. Dispute Resolution Procedure (DRP)

15.1. The DRP process has four stages in total; the process ordinarily begins with a DRP alert which involves the IRO/Conference Chair (within 24 hours of identifying an issue) contacting the Social Worker or Team Manager by telephone to raise the concern with the aim of seeking to resolve the issue or concern immediately. Where this cannot be achieved, 10 days is given to seek to find an agreed resolution for the child. This is stage 1.

15.2. Following the 10-day timescale, should the issue remain unresolved or if the IRO/Conference Chair feels it necessary, they can escalate the matter up through the levels of Case Management. Once the DRP has been initiated the issue(s) should be addressed within an overall 20 working day timescale.

In 2022-23 we raised a total of 84 DRP's which are summarised below.

DRP's – Child Protection

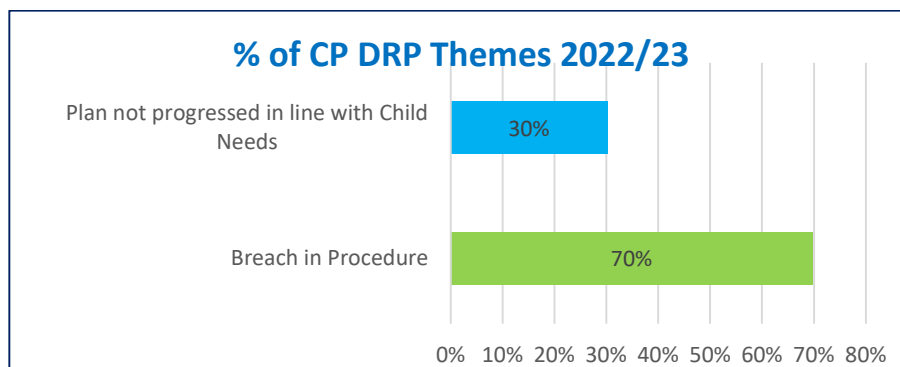
15.3. The table below shows the number of DRP's raised in relation to child protection.

Child Protection DRPs	21/22	22/23	Variance
No of DRPs Raised	35	37	+2

15.4. The following table highlights the different stages in which DRP's have been resolved for children subject of child protection plans in this reporting year.

Child Protection DRPs	Alert	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Total
Stage DRP Closed	33	4	0	0	0	37

15.5. Only four DRP's were escalated to Stage 1 of the process. This means that 89% of DRP's have been resolved at the earliest stage of notification. The child protection DRP themes and issues can be seen within the chart below.



15.6. The central reason for DRPs being escalated remains procedures not being adhered to. We continue to work closely with our colleagues in children's services to raise strengths and weaknesses via the DRP process so that issues are addressed timely for children and their families.

15.7. Below are two examples of DRPs raised for children subject to a child protection plan.

DRP Challenge	Outcome for the Child
<p>A child aged 16-years was presented to an Initial Child Protection Conference due to concerns that there was nobody to keep her safe within the family.</p> <p>Due to a problem with her parent in her early childhood she had been living with her grandmother, but following some issues, the young person became homeless. At the ICPC concerns were raised about the young person living with a family friend and this being a family arrangement because when the young person asked to become cared for, she was told she was too old.</p>	<p>The young person was made subject of a Child Protection Plan within the ICPC due to the worries around Neglect. The issue of her living arrangements and framework was raised by the Conference Chair with the Team Manager. The young person was made aware of their rights under the Southwark Judgement 2009 to request to be a cred for child. Upon being advised of this the young person asked to be cared for and Together for Children found a home for her while assessments were ongoing. Her Child Protection Plan was then ended as she was now a cared for child.</p>
<p>An ICPC was requested for a 15-year-old due to concerns being raised around how her mam and dad were caring for her and keeping her safe. The CP Conference Chair contacted the young person who was aware of the worries and why TfC Social Care were involved but was not aware of the date of the ICPC.</p>	<p>The Conference Chair spent time with the young person talking about how the conference is held, the purpose and the structure. The young person and the conference chair agreed on how they would be involved in the conference and the date of the conference was set five days later to enable all services to share their report directly with the young person. This meant that the conference was ran in a way that promoted young person being able to share her views and opinions about what everyone else was saying but more importantly everyone could hear first-hand what the worries were for the young person.</p>

DRP's – Cared For Children

15.8. The table below shows the number of DRPs raised in relation to cared for children.

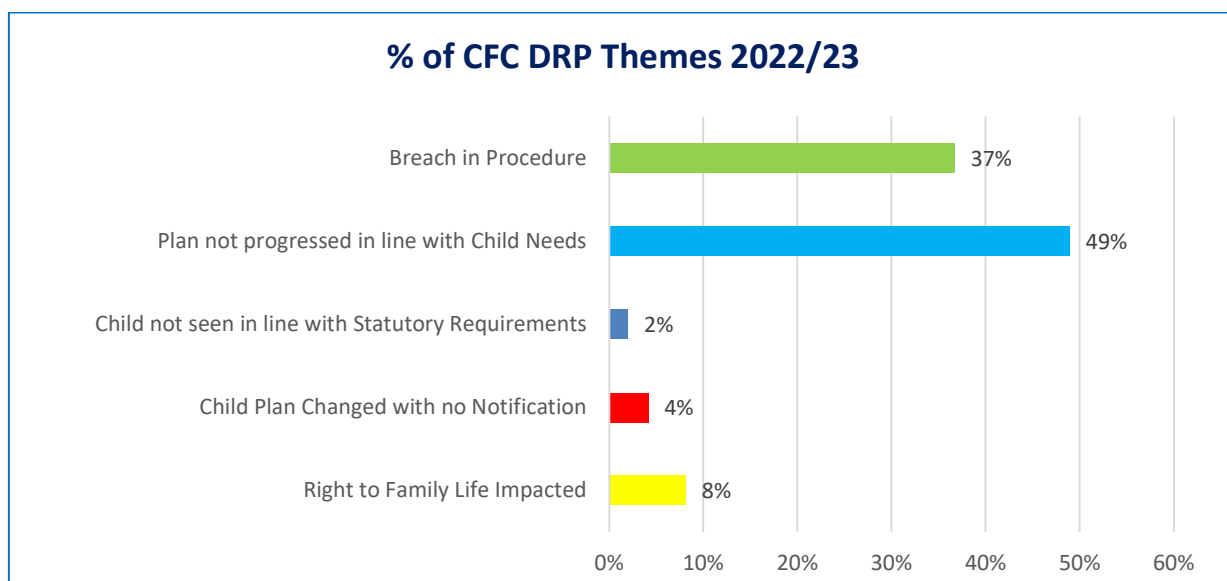
Children Cared for DRPs	21/22	22/23	Variance
No of DRPs Raised	34	47	+13

15.9. The following table highlights the different stages in which DRPs have been resolved for cared for children in this reporting year.

Children Cared for DRPs	Alert	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Total
Stage DRP Closed	40	7	0	0	0	47

15.10. The majority of DRPs have been resolved at alert or stage 1; there have been no escalations beyond Stage 1 in this reporting year.

15.11. The children cared for DRP themes and issues can be seen within the chart below:



15.12. As in the last reporting year the central reason for DRPs being raised for cared for children continues to be delays in the child's plan being progressed. Whilst this remains a difficult area to overcome as it is often impacted by unforeseen events such as changes in personnel, sickness or delays in specialist assessments, TfC continues to be committed to seeking to improve the timeliness of plans being progressed. The second highest category continues to relate to breaches in procedure, such as late reports or missing information.

15.13. Below are examples of DRP raised for children who are cared for:

DRP Challenge	Outcome for the Child
The IRO raised a DRP on behalf of a child aged 12 as they told their IRO that they did not know what their final care plan was, and they were sad that they had not been provided with photographs of key family members. The child shared in their review that this made them feel frightened as they needed to know who would be looking after them.	The worries were raised with both the Social Worker and Team Manager for the child, and they acknowledged that there had been some delays and gaps in keeping the child up to date regarding their long-term care plan. The Team Manager and the Social Worker provided a plan of when work would be completed to help the child understand their plan and to share key photographs of the family. The plan was communicated to the child by both the Social Worker and IRO and then the actions were followed up by the IRO within four weeks of the DRP. This resulted in the child telling their IRO that whilst they were sad that they couldn't live at home with their mam and dad they felt safe and happy with their family member.

DRP Challenge	Outcome for the Child
<p>A 15-year-old girl who was cared for under a Full Care Order due to a long history of neglect from her parents. She was living in one of TfCs homes, but she wanted to live with her extended family, and this was to be discussed in her cared for review. However, assessments, checks and paperwork that were needed to enable her IRO to consider the young person's plan were not available.</p> <p>The impact of this for the young person was that consideration could not be given to her planning and this was the cause of more upset and frustration for her. Also arrangements for living with her extended family member was called into question.</p>	<p>The outcome for the young person was that a further review was planned within 4-weeks of the original cared for review. During this time the IRO sought key assessments in relation to the young persons extended family menders and TfC Social Care presented their assessment and updated care plan. The IRO sought the views of the young person about the proposed changes.</p> <p>In the interim, whilst assessments were being finalised a viability assessment was progressed on the extended family member who supported overnight stays. The outcome was that there was a planned move for the young person to live with her extended family.</p> <p>The matter was resolved at Stage 1 of the DRP process, and the learning was that assessments need to be timed and approved before seeking a change in a child's care plan.</p>

15.14. Over the last year we have continued to use a full range of skills to best link our challenge with achieving good outcomes for children. IRO's work closely with children's social workers and have further strengthened their tracking of plans for children which has subsequently led to early identification of difficulties leading to solutions being identified for children. We continue to be represented on the weekly Care and Legal Gateway Panel where discussions are held around the actions required for children whose plans are not progressing in a timely manner.

Reporting Positive Practice

15.15. This year, the IROs and Conference Chairs have continued to highlight to Social Workers and their Team Managers instances of good practice, which has led to timely and positive outcomes for children. In this year we have started to see the impact of the Young People's Team and their creative way of working with older children and the continued impact of having an Unborn baby Team.

16. Quality Assurance Work

16.1. Over the course of the last reporting year, CIRT has continued to undertake a range of quality assurance work which has included the following:

- Repeat CP plans.
- Parental participation in CP conference and their views of CIRT.
- 0-19 service and barriers to meeting timescales regarding conference reports.
- Observe practice on cared for reviews.
- Observe practice on CP conferences.
- Mind of my own and how it's being used.
- Looked after medical assessment and the impact upon cared for reviews.
- Peer observations.

The impact of this work has continued to highlight areas of good practice children and their families continued to advise us that we seek to include them in their meetings and value their views and opinions. Our joint work with partners such as 0-19 service and this reporting year has been key to improving families having more timely access to reports for child protection

conferences. In 2023/24 we will continue to undertake audits to advise and inform ongoing practice development for CIRT.

17. Our Customer Feedback

- 17.1. Our customer service feedback is captured in several ways, such as feedback collected through a Microsoft questionnaire from parents, training feedback sheets, meetings with children, Mind of My Own App (an online feedback tool for children), and during this reporting year audits have been completed with parents following CP plans ending. TfC continues via their compliments process to also capture feedback regarding CIRT and its practice for children.
- 17.2. The service has received 7 compliments in the last year. The compliments range on commenting on the professionalism and sensitive manner in which IRO conference chairs engage with families and children at what is the most challenging times for them as a family. Below are some recent examples of feedback received:
- Police – Police advised that CIRT is organised and well-structured which supports them in being able to provide the necessary information for child protection conferences.
 - Parent – “I just want to thank you CP chair, you are such a lovely person and you made me feel so at ease. I am glad I had you to chair my children’s meeting and not some professional who did not understand, so thank you for the (bottom of my heart)”
 - Young Person – “I just want to say how good it was to spend time with my IRO who drew pictures and took time to listen to me”.
 - Social Worker – “I just want to say I felt the IRO was amazing, they were consistent in their approach, attentive, and completing focused on the children including the most difficult parts of the review..... I felt mother is particularly thankful for your support and approach”.
 - Foster Carer – “I want to tell you how much we appreciate the support that you offered to YP ourselves around his learning and behavioural difficulties and getting the school to bring about a support plan to the YPs reviews”.
- 17.3. Within 2022/23 we received two complaints relating to the IRO service. The learning from those complaints has led to strengthened processes around the sharing of information prior to conferences. An example is that during a Royal Mail strike supportive documentation was not received and therefore parents raised concerns that they had not been able to prepare for the meeting.

Also, within this reporting year we have received a first appeal to the outcome of the CP conference from parents via the SSCP complaints procedure which continues to be progressed at the current time.

18. Our Priorities for 2023 – 2024

Empowering children & young people to use their voice and influence.

- 18.1. We plan to strengthen the voice and influence of children within Child Protection Conferences and promote children’s participation going forward. We plan to continue to offer children a choice regarding their Cared for Reviews and further strengthen the relationship children have with their IRO.
- 18.2. We plan to seek new ways to achieve feedback from children, care experienced young people and their families regarding the services they receive from CIRT and use this to influence our practice going forward.

Supporting our workforce and making the best use of resources.

- 18.3. Our management focus for the year ahead is to successfully integrate the CIRT into the Social Care Directorate within the organisation and utilise the new opportunities this can bring for joined up working whilst maintaining a strong independent role.

Inspiring creative and innovate practice.

- 18.4. We plan to use the Thrive Model with our IROs and Conference Chairs to enable them to identify how they feel that they can further develop our IRO service, therefore utilise our excellence within the team and create ways to share experience and knowledge to improve our practice for children and their families.
- 18.5. We plan to continue to build upon our delivery of the Signs of Safety Model of Practice and further embed Signs of Success and Belonging within our reviews for Cared for Children.

Leading and influencing future policy and direction.

- 18.6. We plan to continue to develop our audit work within the CIRT service alongside the wider organisation and partners to continue to promote learning and sharing of knowledge and ways to improve practice. We will continue to be involved with the Regional IRO network to consider changes to policy and practice, gathers relevant statistical information at a regional level.
- 18.7. We will continue to share with the wider organisation any trends in practice and provide challenge when needed for children.

19. Conclusion

- 19.1. The CIRT service has continued to be committed to seeking to influence and improve outcomes for children and their families. The service continues to evolve looking for ways of strengthening practice whilst supporting change. Whilst we have seen the increasing pressure on families and children with regards to the cost-of-living crisis ultimately plans remain appropriate and continue to progress in the amin for children and their families.
- 19.2. Despite the ongoing strengths in our performance and the data, there are areas that further consideration needs to be given to improve longer term outcomes for children. Our data for children becoming subject to child protection plans for the second or subsequent time is an area of focus that we need to further analyse to reduce the risk of children being subject to child protection plans on more than one occasion.
- 19.3. Ongoing collaborative work within the region, both with our IRO colleagues and the wider professional network, will remain key to continuing to drive forward the voice of the child and to strengthen evidencing the impact of our work on outcomes for children.
- 19.4. The role in 2022/23 has been challenging for the IRO workforce due to the review into Children's Care and the subsequent government response.

together for children

SUNDERLAND



Report presented to:
TfC Senior Leadership Team & Corporate
Parenting Board

**All data provided in this report for
2022/23 is provisional pending the
submission to and publication of data by
the Department for Education**