



# Children's Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report

April 2021 to March 2022



putting  
the child first

## TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Highlight Summary .....	3
1. Purpose of the Annual Report.....	4
2. Role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).....	4
3. Role of Child Protection Conference Chairs .....	5
4. Impact of IRO/Conference Chair Work.....	6
5. Professional Profile of the Children Independent Reviewing Team.....	8
6. Learning and Development .....	9
7. Regional, National and Local Links.....	9
8. Voice and Influence of Children .....	11
9. Highlighted Achievements in 2021/22 .....	12
10. Profile of Children in Sunderland .....	14
11. Performance Summary - Child Protection 2021/2022.....	16
12. Participation and Views within Child Protection .....	20
13. Performance Summary - Cared for Children .....	21
14. Participation and Views – Cared for Children.....	23
15. Dispute Resolution Procedure (DRP) .....	23
16. Quality Assurance Work.....	28
17. Our Customer Feedback.....	28
18. Our Priorities for 2022 - 2023 .....	30
19. Conclusion.....	31

## HIGHLIGHT SUMMARY

### What have we achieved?

In 2021 all our independent reviewing officers attended national training regarding up-to-date research around their roles and responsibilities for children that we cared for. The training has had a positive impact as children continue to tell us that their cared for reviews are supporting them to achieve their outcomes and goals.

We have continued to implement signs of safety and following further training in June 2021 we revisited and adapted the signs of safety conference agenda, so it is more in line with a strength-based model. The impact of this change is that parents are telling us that they feel more included in conferences and more valued in understanding how they evidence safety for their children.

We have managed service delivery challenges during the ongoing pandemic and have adapted our delivery model to include options for families, so they are able to attend meetings. Parents have told us that being present in the meetings has helped them to better understand the worries and strengths whilst being guided and supported by the Conference Chair.

Despite the challenges posed to service delivery because of Covid-19 we have continued to perform above national and local benchmarks regarding timeliness across the whole service.

The service relocated in December 2021 and were influential in designing the new office and meeting spaces, ensuring it was flexible and inclusive for children and their families. To date we have received positive feedback from families who tell us the meeting spaces are more accessible and family orientated making it easier for them to engage.

We have strengthened how we record our tracking of children's plans which means that we can clearly evidence how we are monitoring and progressing actions in a timely way for children. Ofsted in 2021 reported that that our IRO footprint was clear and evident on children's records.

We have strengthened how we use Mind of My Own within IRO practice. The impact is that there is a stronger voice evidenced on the child's records about their views being gathered, considered, and recorded in cared for meetings.

### What are we worried about?

Children at the time of their second cared for review do not always have a clear plan of permanency.

There are national issues in relation to resources for homes (accommodation) and carers for our cared for children.

Nationally and locally, we are starting to see a growing impact of children living within poverty whereby they are at risk of harm is being impacted by economic factors in the family home. In turn we anticipate a rise in the use of the category 'neglect'.

### What will we do next?

Although permanency timeliness can often be linked to assessments being directed as part of care proceedings, we are looking to see what we can do differently to improve the timeliness of a permanency decision being made for the child.

IROs will continue to work with colleagues in social care and commissioning to seek the best homes (accommodation) and carers possible for cared for children and will track and monitor their plans closely to ensure they best meet their needs, in keeping with their care plan.

We will work with our colleagues in social care in the implementation of Young People's Child Protection Plans, which embeds learning from recent learning reviews on how services nationally need to work more constructively with young people who are exposed to risks as a result of harm outside of the family home.

## **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 2021 to 31st March 2022. 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 care planning.
  - Promote corporate parenting to enable positive outcomes for children in the cared for system.
  - Chair placement order and adoptive placements, 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 concerns 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.



### MARK'S STORY

Mark is a 12-year-old boy who became cared for child due to him not being kept safe. Mark was adopted but sadly for Mark his adoptive parents broke up and he could no longer stay in their care so became cared for again. During this time, it became clear that Mark's journey as a child had been difficult and he blamed himself for not being loved by a family. The IRO and the social worker identified the need for Mark to understand his journey and timescales were put in place to support Mark's understanding. Mark told his IRO that he felt scared of his emotions and didn't understand why he was not loved by a family.

The IRO built a relationship with Mark, and it became clear that he had a lot of negative feelings about himself, such as feelings of guilt and telling people that it was all his fault that he did not have a family of his own. The IRO used the cared for reviews and pre-cared for visits as mechanisms to celebrate Mark's achievements and made a clear recommendation for life story work to be completed so he could understand his journey.

The approach of the IRO on both building a relationship with Mark and his social worker has been key to Mark no longer expressing feelings of guilt. The tracking of his life story work by the IRO over a 6-month period has given him the tools he has needed to talk about his childhood and loss. This tool has helped Mark's current carer work through some of the challenges at home to a point that they feel able to keep Mark for the rest of his childhood. Mark now talks about being loved and feeling safe with his carer.

### REBECCA'S STORY

Rebecca is a child who has been known to children's services due to child protection concerns. The worries were that Mam and Dad were arguing and Dad would hit Mam, which made Rebecca scared and frightened. Rebecca also told us that Mam and Dad both drank alcohol and sometimes they would not wake up. Her older adult brother was also a worry as he would argue and hit her. On one occasion he pushed her downstairs whilst their Mam and Dad were drunk and Rebecca was hurt and needed hospital treatment. During these times Mam and Dad always told us that they loved their children and really wanted to keep them safe from harm.



In the most recent referral, we were being told that the above problems were happening again and Rebecca was scared. We used Signs of Safety and the new conference agenda at the most recent initial child protection conference meeting. This model allowed Rebecca, parents and other attendees to focus upon what was working well and what Rebecca needed to feel safe. In doing this the Conference Chair skilfully moved the discussions from risk to strengthening safety and empowered the parents with the support of their family to look at what they would do to mean that Rebecca no longer needed to worry and felt safe. The change in approach allowed parents to understand things from Rebecca's view and feel safe to consider if being together as a couple was right for Rebecca.

By the conference focussing upon safety and valuing the parent's role in achieving this for Rebecca, it supported Mam and Dad making the decision that they should no longer be in a relationship but still bring their daughter up together. The impact of this reduced the risk of physical harm to Rebecca and led to her child protection plan ending but with her having a safety network of adults who help her to stay safe.

## TOM'S STORY

Tom is a young man who lived at home with his parents and siblings where there was significant long-term domestic abuse. Despite our best efforts and Tom's own wishes to remain in the care of his Mam and Dad the decision was made at the age of 13 that Tom needed to be cared for by Together for Children. At the time of him becoming cared for, Tom was a non-school attender and had many emotional unmet needs. He lacked impulse control, and this led to him communicating via aggressive outbursts which often led to carers being hurt.



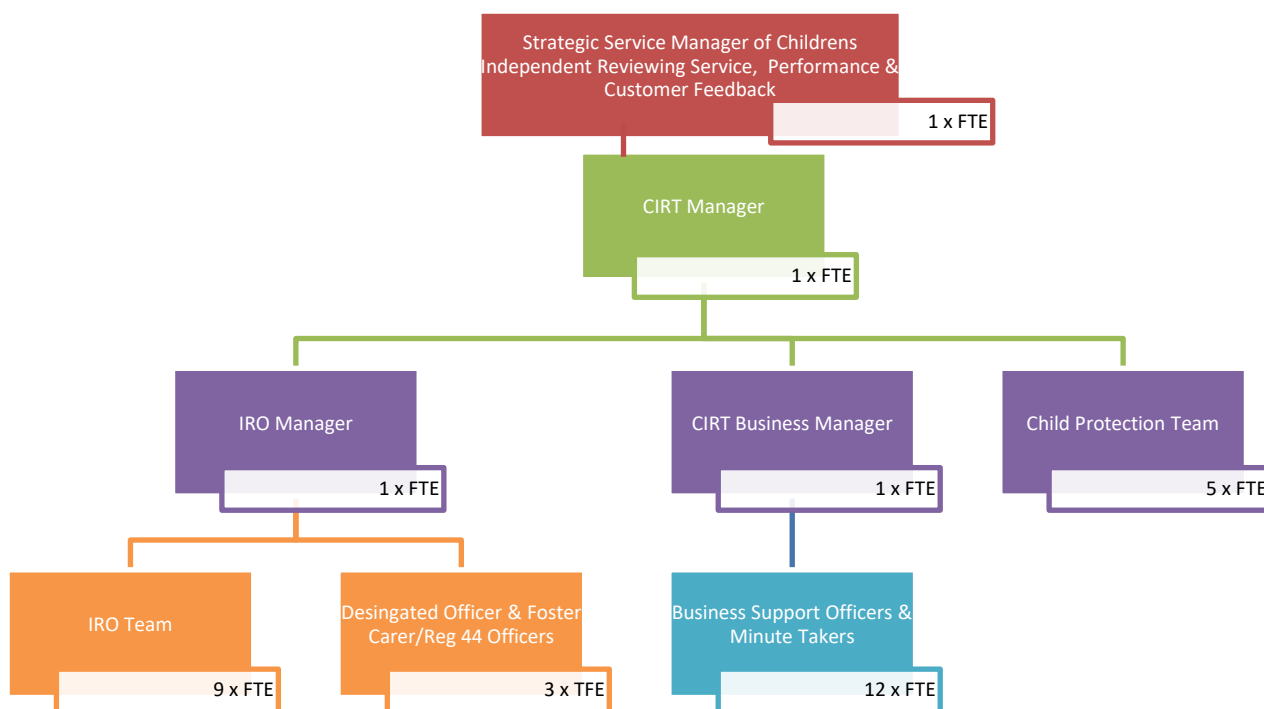
The IRO established a positive relationship with Tom and visited him prior to all his cared for reviews. The IRO praised his achievements during his reviews and worked with the care team so that Tom went from being an angry, unhappy young person to growing into a confident, determined person.

Tom moved into a children's home and went from strength to strength. He formed relationships with staff who helped him build his relationships with his Mam and Dad. Tom started to attend school regularly and is going to take GCSE exams this summer.

During his Cared for Reviews, Tom voiced that he wanted to return home. Through his cared for reviews, the IRO listened to Tom's voice and engaged with the social worker who arranged for repeat risk assessments to be undertaken. Tom was able return to the care of his Mam with the plan to revoke the care order. Mam's situation had changed; she was no longer in a relationship with an adult who could hurt Tom and through the assessment was able to tell us what she would do to keep Tom safe and how she would make sure that any new relationship would ensure that Tom was given time to develop a relationship prior to any changes to his living arrangements.

## 5. Professional Profile of the Children Independent Reviewing Team

- 5.1. Our service sits within the Corporate and Commercial Directorate in Together for Children and is managed independently of children's social care line management. We have the required management capacity to lead and develop our service and provide appropriate levels of support to our workers including supervision and monitoring.



- 5.2. 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.
- 5.3. Our Business Support Team provides minute taking services and administrative support to the whole Children's Independent Reviewing Service and manages reception duties.
- 5.4. 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.
- 5.5. The structure chart shows that we also have the Designated Officer, Regulation 44 Officers and Foster Carer Review Officers in our service. A separate annual report is produced covering the Designated Officer role.

### Caseloads

- 5.6. The overall average caseload for CIRT is 61 which is a decrease from the previous year. The average caseload for child protection cases is 65 and the average caseload for cared for is 59. The current IRO handbook advises that IRO's should have a caseload of between 50 and 70. It is anticipated that following Josh McAllister's national review of Children's Services in England,



that further direction/steer will be given to the ongoing role of the IRO/Conference Chair via an updated version of the IRO Handbook.

## Supervision

- 5.7. 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 fortnightly team meetings at which research, practice guidance and learning reviews are discussed and disseminated to staff. Staff have also been encouraged to engage in monthly sessions regarding Signs of Safety / Signs of Success and learning from CIRT audits has been used to steer changes in practice for children.

- 6.2. We identify training requirements through supervision, team meetings, appraisals, training analysis, observations and the Ofsted inspection. The following training has been undertaken within this reporting year:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| • Trauma informed practice                              | • Advanced IRO Training (Edgehill University)                         |
| • Signs of Safety (Harm Matrix)                         | • Arcbox  |
| • Signs Of Safety child protection conferences (2 days) | • Mind of My Own  |
| • Non-Verbal Communication                              | • Somerset Ruling and the impact on progression of adoption plans     |
| • Signs of Safety Snapshot - Journal and Fire Drills    | • Star and Arthur - what we know to date and what we need to consider |
| • Signs of Safety Snapshot - Safe Houses                | • Contextual safeguarding   |
| • Signs of Safety - Timelines and Trajectories          | • Voice of the Child Team training                                    |
| • Safe and Together Global Practice                     | • Signs of Safety - First Visits                                      |
| • Coaching  | • Regional IRO conference   |
| • Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers                          | • Trauma informed practice workshops                                  |
|   | • Supervision skills  |

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 meets 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. Over the last year we have also created a shared drive in Teams to enable all members to upload best practice documents to share with each other. This has been particularly important in the development of Young People's Plans. The impact of this work is raising the profile of the IRO's with our multi-agency partners. For example, the Judiciary Service has now issued updated guidance regarding expectations in final evidence bundles for children which now asks for an IRO court statement outlining their views on the final care plan.

- 7.2. The regional group have met to discuss and consider the implications regarding the changes in legislation around the use of unregulated homes, learning from child deaths, whilst reviewing ongoing strategies for strengthening the influence that children have upon shaping the service.
- 7.3. The regional group has continued to influence and develop practice and policy by having representation at National Independent Reviewing Officer Management (NIROM), whose focus has remained upon engagement of children. This reporting year Sunderland has now taken on the role as deputising when the two identified IRO Managers are not able to attend, further raising our profile at a national level.
- 7.4. We have also sought to maintain direct 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 agree an agenda in advance to discuss strengths or worries that they may have relating to practice.
- 7.5. 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
  - NHS Complex Case Panel
  - Liquid Logic Operational Group
  - Change Council
  - TfC Children Resource Placement Panel
  - TfC Legal Services, Social Care and CIRT
  - Corporate Parenting Board
  - Care and Legal Gateway Panel
  - 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, portfolio holder for children within the City of Sunderland
  - Headteachers Forum
- 7.6. Attendance at the above groups provides the opportunity for improved working arrangements, which in turn leads to better outcomes for the children and families that we work with. One example has been the introduction of a pre-meeting discussion between the allocated social worker, team manager and conference chair prior to ICPC. The impact of this has been social workers and conference chairs feeling better prepared in supporting the family. The groups provide an opportunity to influence practice and procedural developments, which ultimately supports Together for Children to deliver positive outcomes for the children of Sunderland.
- 7.7. We also support partners via training and development sessions. For example, we delivered training for Northumbria Police, GP services and Wear Recovery. The purpose has been to raise awareness of changes in practice and to help their individual organisations further embed Signs of Safety/Success.

## 8. Voice and Influence of Children

- 8.1. The voices of children play a key role in influencing our work and provide a vital grounding and reality check as to how things are working in practice. '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.....
"You would like a choice of how your meetings should be held, you said sometimes having it virtual is easier than having too many people in a room but also said that having the meeting face to face makes you feel more comfortable because you have known the IRO for a long time"	→	We created a menu where you can choose whether you would like to have your meeting face to face, virtually or even a mixed meeting which is called hybrid. We also included other choices such as who you would like at your meeting and how you would like to share your views
"You would like your social worker to chair your cared for review "	→	We spoke with your social worker and arranged a way for your social worker to chair the meeting in place of the IRO.
"You wanted the language to be changed in your meetings and the minutes to the meetings to reflect the change in language"	→	The IROs are changing the jargon and are using the language you have asked such as care leaver to care experienced, placement to home ect.
"You want to be spoken to clearly, in a quiet place and to help you communicate you would like your IRO and social worker to use pictures and symbols and to give you simple choices"	→	When visiting your IRO uses Mind of My Own which has lots of pictures and simple options for you to use to help you communicate what you want us to know and help you with so that this can be talked about in your cared for review

- 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.

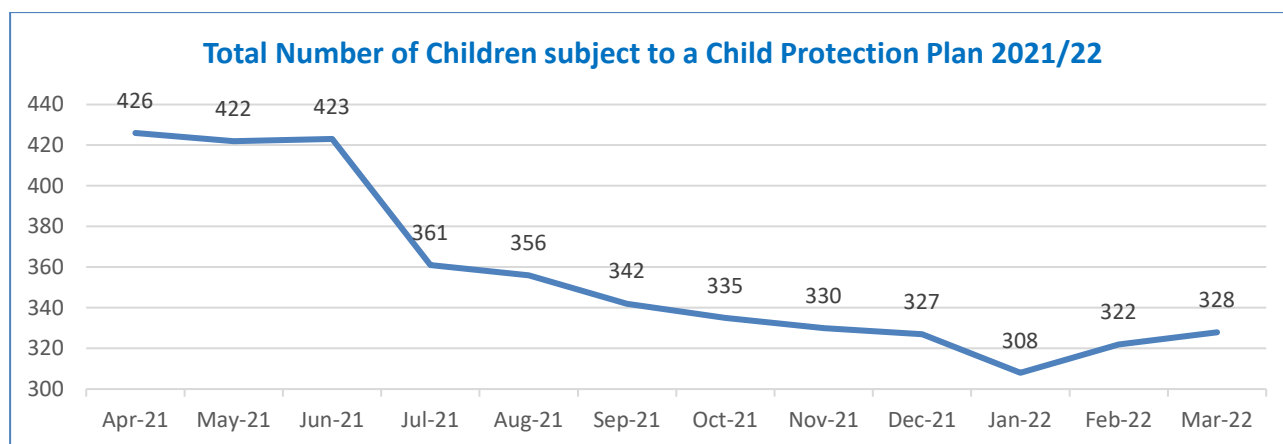
## 9. Highlighted Achievements in 2021/22

21/22 Priorities	Progress & Outcomes
Move towards having two teams; 'Cared for' and 'Child Protection' to further strengthen skills and practice for children.	In April 2021 we move to a preference model which enabled staff to practice either predominantly cared for children or the child protection arena. This model has seen some positive changes in relation to practice with consistency in quality being improved. We continue to manage workloads in keeping with children's needs within the city.
In line with the government 'roadmap out of lockdown', engage in more face-to-face meetings with children and their families to ensure the child is at the centre of practice and to support each other in our shared understanding of the needs of individual children.	Throughout this reporting year it has continued to be a challenge in respect of face-to-face meetings being able to be held due to the impact of Covid-19. However, despite these challenges we have actively promoted face-to-face meetings during periods where government guidance has allowed us to.  From March 2022, our risk assessments were refreshed to enable all families to have face to face meetings. We continue to embed the ethos that every encounter is an opportunity to learn more about the child's situation and to promote their wellbeing.
Embed our newly developed engagement tools to encourage children to contribute their views, wishes and feelings in their reviews.	Every staff member has their own set of engagement tools. We have increased our training regarding Mind of My Own and staff have risen to the challenge of embedding the Voice of the Child in practice. The impact of this was acknowledged in our Ofsted inspection in 2021 and has been noted during internal audits. This means that our practice and planning is influenced, where appropriate to do so, by the child's voice.  <i>Ofsted 2021 said that "Hearing the voice of the child is an exceptional strength in Sunderland."</i>
Establish meaningful options for children to help chair their cared for reviews.	CIRT now has a "Child's Menu" which is shared with them during every pre-cared for visit to outline the different options we can use to help them take part in their review. The impact of this is we are starting to have examples of children chairing their own reviews. This continues to be an area that we want to build upon as the progress to some extent has been impacted by Covid-19.
Evolve our practice to support and empower survivors of domestic abuse through the delivery of child protection conferences and reviews.	As a service we have moved away from victim blaming and seek to work with survivors and their children in a way that challenges the abuser's behaviour. Staff have had access to the Safer Together training and value the support the non-abusive parent needs. This change in practice will continue to be an area we revisit regularly to embed the cultural shift needed in Sunderland.
Strengthen how plans are recorded so that they are SMART to help parents,	Training was delivered in July 2021 regarding Signs of Safety which covered plans. The impact of this training and the training undertaken by social workers is leading to improved SMART plans.

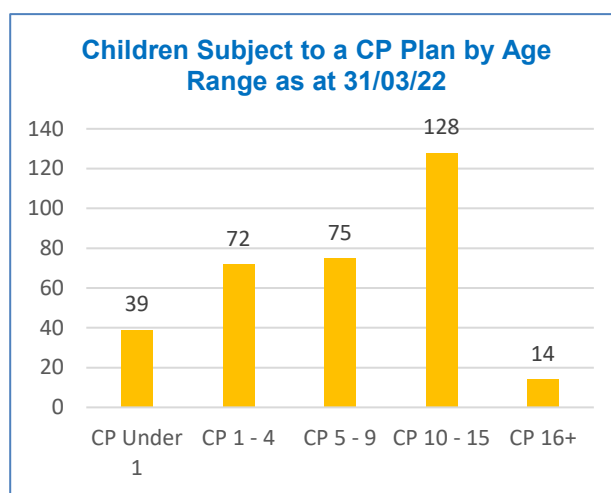
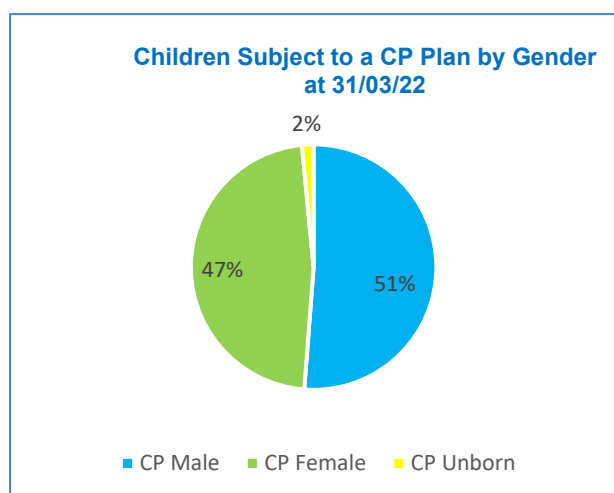
21/22 Priorities	Progress & Outcomes
carers and professionals understand clearly what is required to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the child.	<p>The evidence that supports this, is that the length of time children are subject to plans continues to reduce, indicating that mechanisms are in place to effectively limit drift and delay for children.</p> <p>Ofsted said in 2021 <i>“Child protection plans are of a high quality, providing clarity about what needs to happen linked to the child’s timeframe for change”</i></p>
Continue to embed signs of safety/ success into our day-to-day practice.	<p>Since our last annual report, we have reviewed our practice in child protection and implemented a new standard agenda which was designed in consultation with our Signs of Safety consultant. Regarding cared for reviews, we have worked at a national level in influencing the development of new paperwork which will hopefully be implemented in the early part of the next reporting year.</p>
Continue to work with Social Care and partners to explore different ways of working with teenagers.	<p>As outlined above, during this reporting year we have worked with partners via SSCP and now are at the position of implementing Young People’s Plans from 01/04/2022.</p>
Use performance data more intelligently to produce greater insight and evidence regarding the impact that our work is having on children.	<p>We are in the process of developing our Power BI scorecards, which gives us live access to information regarding children and IRO’s. This has enabled us to understand better how our work is leading to improved oversight and outcomes for children, for example it enables us to identify gaps and ask questions around the impact that these gaps have upon children.</p>
Further improve the quality of our recording so that we fully demonstrate the impact of our work from the child’s perspective.	<p>We have introduced our recording template into Liquid Logic and fully embedded the ethos of Signs of Safety. The impact of this has been acknowledged during our Ofsted inspection</p> <p>Ofsted said in 2021 <i>“Cared for children’s reviews are regular and comprehensive and there is good evidence of tracking and monitoring of children’s progress by the Independent Reviewing Officers.”</i></p>
Continue to work with agencies and social care to improve the timeliness of child protection conference reports.	<p>We have strengthened the processes with regards to ensuring that agencies are provided with their performance data. We have undertaken training with individual agencies where difficulties have been evidenced regarding their timeliness. This has led to some real improvements; however consistency remains a challenge.</p>
Use our position as conference chairs/IROs within the wider Together for Children agenda to help to improve practice and outcomes for children.	<p>We have embedded a model of joint thematic audits so that we learn together and develop together. This means that we have a whole service-learning ethos which enables us to celebrate positive practice and better outcomes for children.</p> <p>Ofsted said in 2021 <i>“Managerial oversight has demonstrably improved with clear manager oversight at all levels, including by child protection chairs, throughout a child’s written records”</i></p>
Seek to strengthen how we can impact upon more timely decisions regarding permanence at the second review.	<p>As identified, this continues to be an area for further joint understanding between the different departments within TfC. To aid this a thematic audit is due to commence in April 2022 looking at both children who have had a permanency plan and those who have not by the second review. Therefore, this remains an ongoing priority for the service.</p>

## 10. Profile of Children in Sunderland

### Child Protection



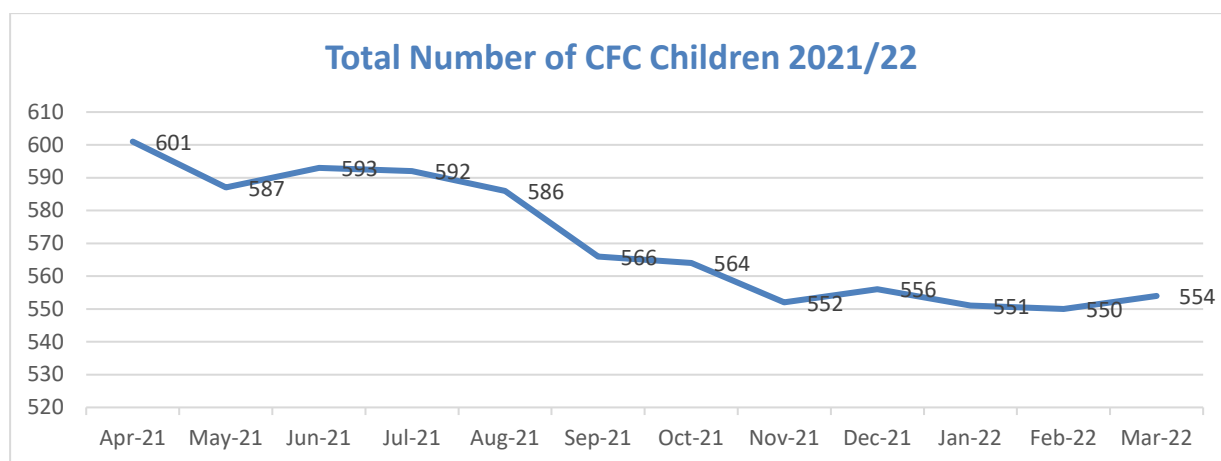
**10.1.** The number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan in Sunderland has reduced across the year by 23% between April 2021 and March 2022. The impact of workforce stability, implementation of a consistent model of practice has all led to a reduction in children needing protection plans. Since the lowest level in January 2022, we have started to see a more upward trend with neglect becoming more prominent. *The year-end position in relation to the rate of children on a child protection per 10k plan places Sunderland (60.52) below the median (63.35) when compared with Local Authorities in our region.*



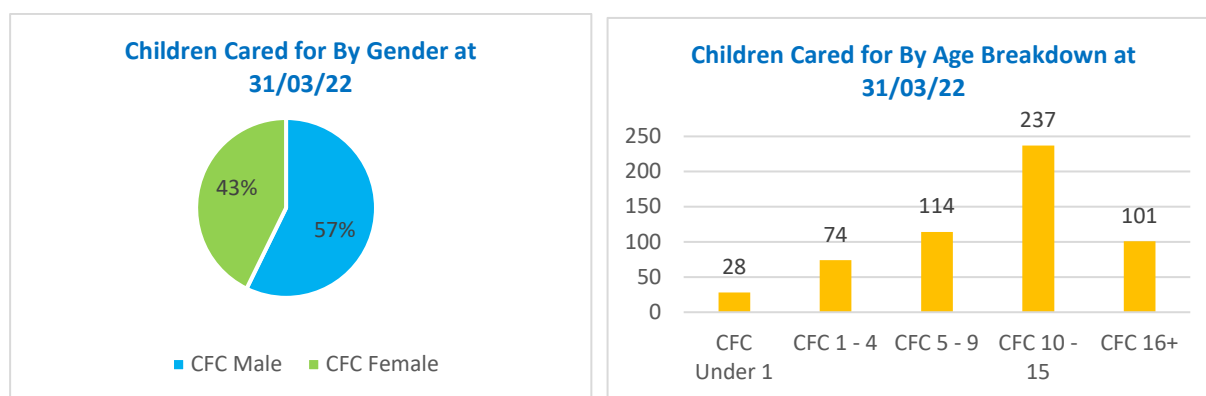
**10.2.** There continues to be an even balance of male and female children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan. Most children on a plan are aged between the years of 10 and 15. In response to this we have worked with partners to consider how we support these children better when the risk is outside of parental control. We envisage that this work will see a reduction in the coming year as compared to 20/21 data there are signs of this work impacting upon children in this age range needing plans. The reason for us envisaging ongoing reduction is due to increased targeted work based upon relationships and management of risk within the child's network.



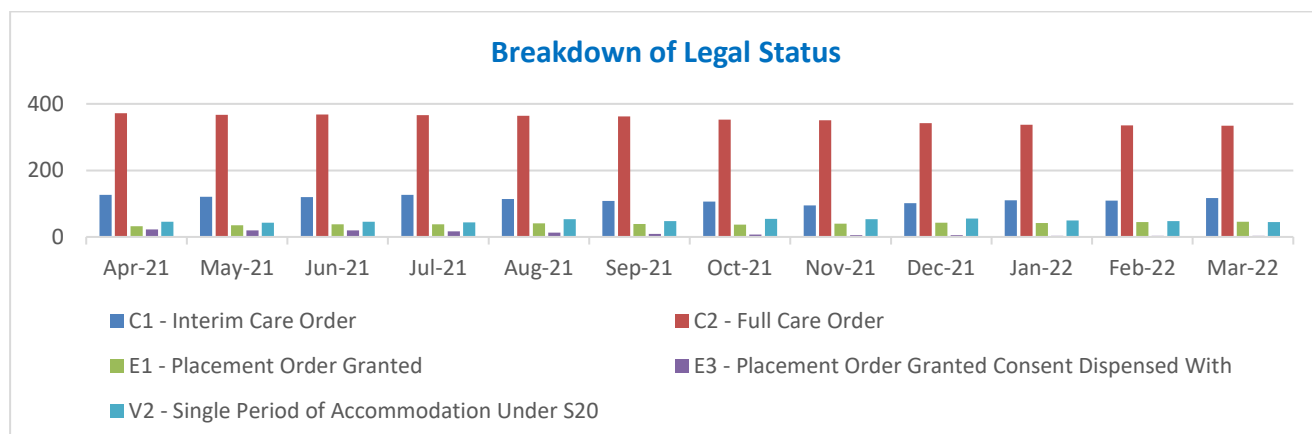
## Cared for Children



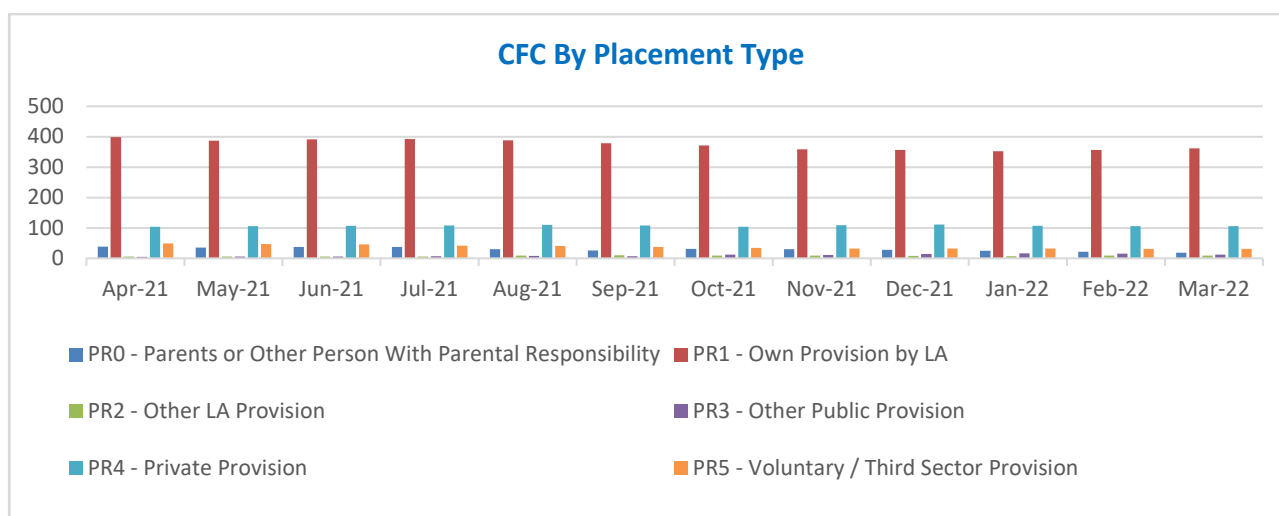
- 10.3. The number of children cared for by Together for Children has reduced across the year with an overall reduction of 9% from 601 in April 2021 to 554 in March 2022. Further evidencing that working with a strength-based model is leading to children not needing to become cared for. Also improved timeliness of care proceedings means that children are exiting cared for arrangements sooner. *The year-end position in relation to the rate of cared for children per 10k plan places Sunderland (100.6) below the median (113.75) when compared with Local Authorities in our region.*



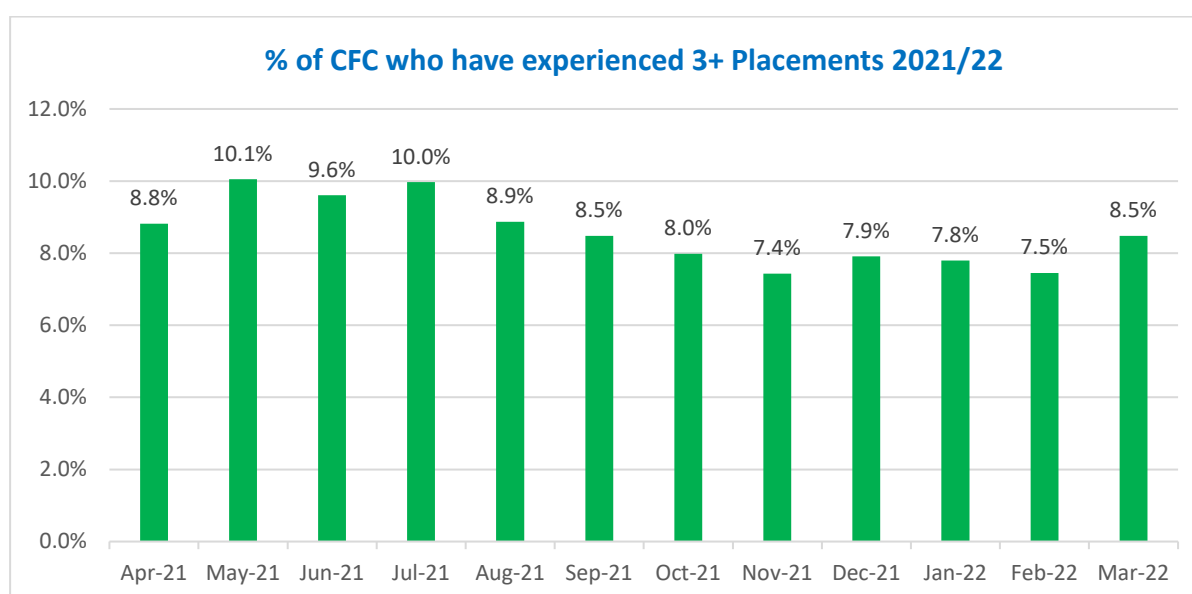
- 10.4. Slightly more cared for children are male over female. Most children who are cared for by Together for Children are aged between the years of 10 and 15 which is the same age group as child protection and highlights why TfC together with partners are now working differently and are hopeful that Wear Together will help reduce the number of cared for children in this age range. Wear Together is targeted at providing intensive support for families to help prevent children becoming cared for.



- 10.5. On the 31/03/22 there were 45 children accommodated via S20, which is a reduction from the previous year at 63.



- 10.6. The placement type continues to evidence the ongoing commitment of Together for Children to provide in house care for children so that they can remain living in communities that they best identify with. This 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. For the position as at the end of March 2021/22 was 8.5% which is 1% less than the previous year meaning that a greater percentage of our cared for children are experiencing more stability in their homes.

## 11. Performance Summary - Child Protection 2021/2022

- 11.1. We have held a total of 807 conferences this year; 277 have been Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs), 9 transfer in conferences and 521 have been Review Child Protection Conferences (RCPCs). Overall, this is a reduction in child protection meetings of 10% when compared with the previous year.

- 11.2. Throughout the year our Conference Chairs have had to continue to accommodate changes in practice because of COVID-19. Participation in conferences has largely operated via a hybrid approach informed by family choice and the assessment of risk. All child protection conferences have been organised to enable families and professionals to consider the needs of children.
- 11.3. In 2021/22, a total of 589 child protection plans were ended:
- 201 ended under six months
  - 386 ended between six months and two years
  - 2 ended after two years
- 11.4. The reasons for children's plans ending are due to a mixture of improved safety for the child as the result of tried and tested safety plans and safety networks or due to changes in the child's living arrangements i.e., child becomes cared for or is placed with family members. In relation to the two children's plans who ended after 2 years, their plans were impacted by us waiting for a findings of fact outcomes regarding of allegations of abuse. Scrutiny is in place for any plans that progress over 16 months via supervision and care and legal gateway.

### Timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC's)

- 11.5. 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.

% Of ICPC Held in Timescale	Sunderland 20/21	Sunderland 21/22	Statistical Neighbours	England
	88%	84%	87%	83%

- 11.6. Within the last year, 84% of ICPC's were held within timescale. This represents an 4% decrease in performance when compared to the previous year. We are performing slightly lower than England and our statistical neighbours as of 2021.

- 11.7. The reasons for those ICPC's held out of timescale are detailed in the table below:

ICPC - Reasons for out of Timescale	20/21	21/22	Variance
Late Notifications	14	13	-1
Admin Errors	4	2	-2
Missing Information /Reports	10	4	-6
Non-Attendance by Significant Person	8	19	+11
Non-Attendance by Other Professional	1	4	+3
Extension Agreed by Professionals	1	2	+1
<b>Total Number of Children</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>83</b>	

- 11.8. In 2021/22 there were 13 late notifications received which resulted in conferences being held out of timescale. 5 of the 13 late notifications were stood down as insufficient notice (five days) was given for external agencies to prepare and submit reports for the meetings. This specifically impacted Northumbria Police who require sufficient time to undertake police checks for inclusion in their reports.
- 11.9. There were 4 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 19 meetings were impacted by non-attendance by a significant person, this being the child's parent or carer. As we have progressed through periods of the country going in and out of lockdown this has led to family members catching covid making them unavailable for engagement in the conference.

- 11.10. Overall, initial conferences for 83 children were held out of timescale, which is an increase from 68 in the previous year.
- 11.11. 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)**

- 11.12. 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.

% Of RCPC Held in Timescale	Sunderland 20/21	Sunderland 21/22	Statistical Neighbours	England
	98%	98%	94%	93%

- 11.13. Within the last year, 98% of all RCPC's were held within timescale which is the same as last year. We are performing 5% above England and 4% higher than our Statistical Neighbours as of 2021.

- 11.14. The reasons for those RCPC's held out of timescale are detailed in the table below:

RCPC - Reasons for out of Timescale	20/21	21/22	Variance
Admin Error	3	1	-2
Missing Information /Reports	3	4	+1
Non-Attendance by Significant Person	5	2	-3
Non-Attendance by Other Professional	1	1	-
Extension Agreed by Professionals	1	3	+2
<b>Total Number of Children</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>-8</b>

- 11.15. In 2021/22, 1 RCPC was out of timescale due to lack of quoracy. The number of reviews delayed due to family availability has also decreased in this reporting year.
- 11.16. Overall, review conferences for 17 children are recorded as being held out of timescale which is a reduction of 8 children compared with data last year.
- 11.17. For those children, where conferences were out of timescale, plans were agreed to ensure their safety. We are taking a proactive approach in limiting 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.

## Timeliness of Reports for ICPC and RCPC

- 11.18. Provision of reports within timescale from professionals for both ICPC's and RCPC's is an area where improvement is required.

21-22 Report Timeliness	ICPC 20/21	ICPC 21/22	Variance	RCPC 20/21	RCPC 21/22	Variance
Children's Services	57%	41%	-16%	34%	33%	-1%
Police	58%	94%	+36%	24%	84%	+60%
GP	67%	59%	-8%	48%	57%	+9%
0-19 Service	67%	65%	-2%	43%	39%	-4%
Education	75%	67%	-8%	26%	40%	+16%

- 11.19. Social Worker reports available by the required timescales have decreased since the previous reporting year, from 57% to 41% and RCPC's from 34% to 33%. Whilst improvements have been achieved at some points throughout the year, overall, performance remains well below the TFC target of 80%.
- 11.20. The timeliness of reports submitted by other agencies ranges between 59% and 94% for ICPC's and between 39% to 84% for RCPC's. There is a dependency on the social worker returning invitations to allow sufficient time for confirming dates and for agencies to complete reports. This is a particular issue for the Police, as without its updated list of adults around the child they are not able to undertake the checks required on their database.
- 11.21. We will continue to provide regular figures to Social Care and agencies together with any supplementary information that will help to improve timeliness.

## Progression of Child Protection Plans

- 11.22. Where a child is subject to a child protection plan for longer than 12 months, we must consider the reasons why. Conference Chairs consider what alternative intervention is required to reduce the risk of significant harm to the child. The longer a child is subject to a plan can be an indicator that the plan may not be achieving the required outcome for the child.
- 11.23. Our Conference Chairs track the progression of the plans and use their position to resolve issues where there are concerns regarding drift and delay. Compared with last year, the impact has led to an ongoing decrease in the number of plans open longer than 12 months from 40 children to 37 children as of the end of the reporting year. This further supports the position that good communication between the conference chair and social worker between conferences via tracking is having an ongoing positive impact in plans moving forward for children.
- 11.24. In addition to the above processes children with Child Protection Plans over and above 12 months are also reviewed within the Care and Legal Gateway Panel where CIRT are represented so that decisions can be made regarding the potential need to escalate matters by issuing the Public Law Outline.

## Child Protection Categories

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

Child Protection Categories	2020/21		2021/22		Number Variance
	No of Children	% Of Children	No of Children	% Of Children	
Neglect	152	35.98%	142	43.29%	-10
Emotional Abuse	245	59.61%	172	52.44%	-73
Physical Abuse	3	0.73%	8	2.44%	+5

Sexual Abuse	11	2.68%	6	1.83%	-5
--------------	----	-------	---	-------	----

- 11.26. There are 142 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. Towards the end of the reporting period, we have seen an increase in children whose plans have started due to neglect. It is anticipated that the cost of living crisis within England is likely to see the ongoing increase in this category. Up to date research and writers have highlighted the link between poverty and a reduced resilience of families to overcome financial stress. Whilst poverty itself is not pre requisite to neglect it is factor that does have an impact upon families ability to cope. (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2017 and Josh Macalister Interim Review of Children Services report 2021)
- 11.27. The number of children subject to a plan under the category of Emotional Abuse has decreased by 73. This suggests that as we have come out of the tightest Covid-19 restrictions that the increased mobility of families has enabled them to remove themselves from abusive situations.
- 11.28. The category of Physical Abuse has seen an increase in the number of children from 3 in 2021 to 8 in 2022. The category of Sexual Abuse has decreased in the last year from 11 in 2021 to 6 in 2022. 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

- 11.29. A tracking discussion describes a contact between a Conference Chair and the allocated Social Worker for a case. We plan that they should be held as soon as one is needed to track a child's plan is moving forward, but no later than the mid-way point after each review.
- 11.30. We held 1060 child protection tracking discussions within the reporting year which is a slight decrease from 1199 last year. The decrease correlates with the overall reduction in requests for ICPC's and the fact that plans for children have been progressing timelier reducing the need for tracking being undertaken.

## 12. Participation and Views within Child Protection

- 12.1. Where children attend a conference, the Conference Chair will invite them into a pre-meeting half an hour prior to the start of the meeting to support their engagement. Where a child is not attending a conference, the Conference Chair will encourage the professionals working with the child to collect their views using the child protection conference pack or the Mind of My Own application which is a digital participation tool. During this reporting year we have continued to offer pre-meetings however due to the pandemic these have been achieved via several methods including telephone contact, conference calling, Microsoft Teams and face-to-face meetings where it has been risk assessed as safe to do so.
- 12.2. In 2021/22 we introduced a new Microsoft Form questionnaire which has assisted us in being able to gather feedback from parents during the Covid restrictions. Most comments received have been positive with parents and professionals confirming a positive experience in conference with comments such as:





- 12.3. Participation has remained a core value for our service with parents and professionals. We have been flexible in our delivery using all the learning that was undertaken at the start of the pandemic to operate an inclusive model of practice. During this year parents and professionals have continued to express their appreciation for our professionalism and skills in enabling child protection conferences to remain child focused and relevant.

## 13. Performance Summary - Cared for Children

- 13.1. As of the 31/03/22 Sunderland had 554 cared for children, which is a 10.5% decrease of the cared for population from the previous year end data. The table below provides a summary of cared for activity.

Indicator	20/21	21/22	Variance
% Of Cared for reviews held in timescales	99%	98%	-1%
% Of Cared for reviews where a child participated within the review	94%	94%	-
% Of Cared for children with an up to date care plan	98%	97%	-1%
% Of Cared for children with an up to date PEP	99%	100%	+1%
% of CYP with an up to date health assessment	87%	86%	-1%
% Of Cared for children accommodated under section 20	10%	8%	-2%
% Of cared for children with a primary plan of permanence by the second review	34%	36%	+2%

### 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 1,643 cared for reviews this year which is a decrease of 92 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 has slightly decreased from 99% in 2021 to 98% this year. We have listed the reasons for a child's review being held out of timescale in the table below.

Review OOT Reasons	20/21	21/22	Variance
Late Notification	1	5	+4%
Administration Error	7	16	+9%
Non-Attendance by Significant Person	6	13	+7%
Extension Agreed by Professionals	4	4	-
External Professional/Agency Unavailable	2	0	-2%
<b>Total Number of Children</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>38</b>	

- 13.4. As highlighted above the first three categories have seen an increase, with one of the big factors being that as we have come out of tight Covid restrictions that parents and professionals have had greater exposure to Covid-19 meaning that they have not always been in a position to update systems or engage.

### Pre-Cared for Review Visits

- 13.5. An IRO arranges 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 and their plan.
- 13.6. We have held a total of 1286 held in 2021/22 which is 6% decrease from previous year of 1366., h 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 liquid logic and within the cared for review documentation.

### Tracking Discussions

- 13.7. A tracking discussion is a contact between an IRO and the allocated Social Worker for a 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 1453 tracking discussions in 2021/22 which is a decrease but reflects the decrease in the cared for population. 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

- 13.8. The number of cared for children with Personal Educational Plans (PEP) has increased from 99% in 20/21 to 100% in 21/22, meaning that every child now has an up-to-date plan of support. PEP is the education plan that outlines individual targets and the support that will be put in place to help a child achieve those targets. The aim of the PEP is to support the child to overcome the disadvantages that research tells us they face, as a result of being a 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 3 children placed in secure accommodation which is an increase from 2 in the previous year. Whilst numbers remain relatively low there have been other children who have been identified as requiring secure accommodation, however due to national shortages beds have not been available. When a resource is not available the child's IRO works with Social Care in providing support and assistance to help best meet their needs.

## 14. Participation and Views – Cared for Children

- 14.1. This year, 94% of children participated in their reviews for 2021/22, which is the same as last year. We have continued as a management team to undertake dip samples of IRO recording and strengthened our use of Mind of My Own in our pre-cared for visits.
- 14.2. In the last reporting year CIRT completed 25 Mind of My Own statements with children. This year we have completed a total of 171. We have achieved this by investment in training and the purchasing of cellular tablets making it more accessible for IRO's to complete directly with children. In acknowledgement of this increased uptake, we have purchased further cellular tablets which will hopefully continue to drive up the number of Mind of My Own statements completed.
- 14.3. To ensure that the child's voice is heard, CIRT continues to work closely with the Children in Care Council (Change Council) by attending their meetings when requested. We have also supported Early Help activities and assisted in engagement with children's groups in Sunderland STARS, a cosmic epiphany, and Youth Parliament to collect a wider perspective of the child's voice.
- 14.4. In 2021/22 we have continued to provide children with introduction letters and IRO profiles when they become cared for. All profiles in this reporting year have been updated and are currently in the process of being uploaded on to the CIRT designated web page to strengthen accessibility for children.
- 14.5. Below are some of the positive things that children have said worked well during the last year.
- *My meeting helped me understand things about the plan and what my future holds and I felt my views were heard*
  - *My IRO supported me in sharing my views at my review*
  - *I'm clear about my future and my plan*
  - *Having a meeting virtually is easier because there is no travelling and more relaxed*

- *Where I live is good and I feel hopeful, calm and excited.*
- *My IRO is fabulous and Lovely.*
- *My IRO helps me by listing and helps others understand what saying in my meeting*
- *I live in a proper mansion with gold door handles, I'm really jolly and enthusiastic about my life and I have an awesome family and get like a million pounds for my birthday*
- *Things I didn't understand I now do they got explained to me*

## 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.
- 15.3. In 2021-22 we raised a total of 69 DRP's which are summarised below.

### DRP's – Child Protection

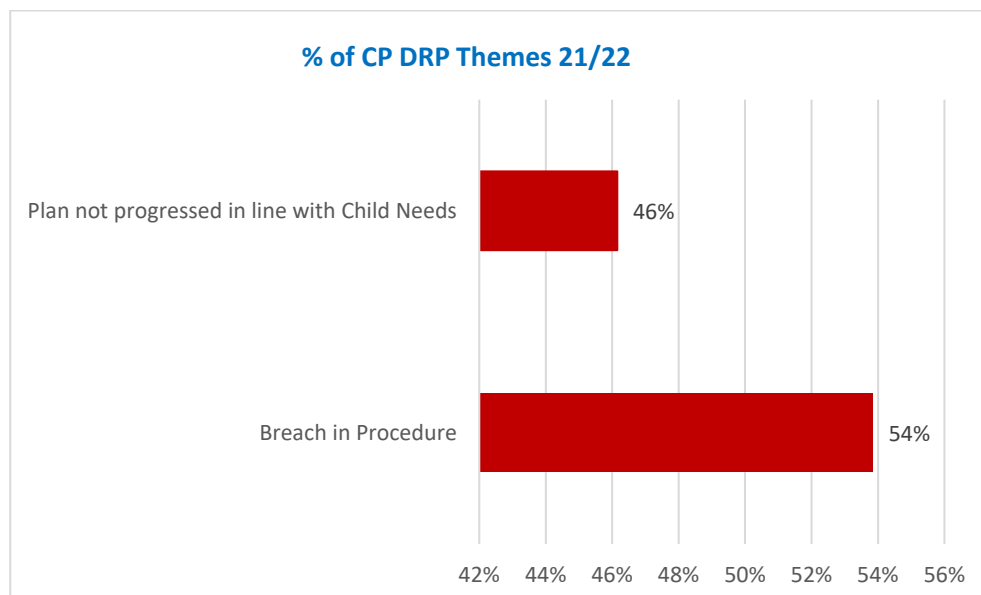
- 15.4. The table below shows the number of DRP's raised in relation to child protection.

Child Protection DRPs	20/21	21/22	Variance
No of DRPs Raised	36	35	-1

- 15.5. 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	35	0	0	0	0	35

- 15.6. All DRPs raised in respect of child protection have been resolved at the early alert stage and have not needed to be progressed through to stage 1 or higher.
- 15.7. The child protection DRP themes and issues can be seen within the chart below.



15.8. The highest themes remain in line with those from the previous reporting years; issue not addressed, lack of progress, late or no Social Worker report and Social Worker report not shared with parents. In line with our updating of our DRP process and categorisation in 2021 we streamlined the themes hence the reason for the reduction in the number of different categories. CIRT continues to work closely with our colleagues in social care to overcome the above challenges so that it is in the best interest of the child.

15.9. Below is an example of DRP raised for children subject to a child protection plan.

DRP Challenge	Outcome for the Child
The Chair raised a DRP due to the child protection conference having to be stood down as procedural fairness had not been followed. Mam and the children had not received a copy of the report to help them understand the worries social care have about the family. This led to a delay in decision making as the conference then had to be rearranged. The DRP also highlighted that this would be the third child protection plan for the children and no senior management oversight had been sought to ensure that the intervention being recommended was the most effective to get better outcomes for the children and family.	The child protection conference was rearranged immediately for 5 days after the original planned date. The social worker shared the report with mam the same day and this ensured that mam and the children had a copy of their report to help them understand the worries social care have in preparation for the discussions. This meant that the children also are aware of what safety is in place for them. In addition, the multi agencies present were part of the interim safety planning as well as mam until the rearranged conference could take place. The social worker also agreed to map out the worries and strengths and present this to care and legal gateway to discuss the third child protection plan, the aim for this is to ensure that the most efficient interventions are being provided to families to have the most effective outcome.

### DRP's – Children Looked After

15.10. The table below shows the number of DRP's raised in relation to cared for children.

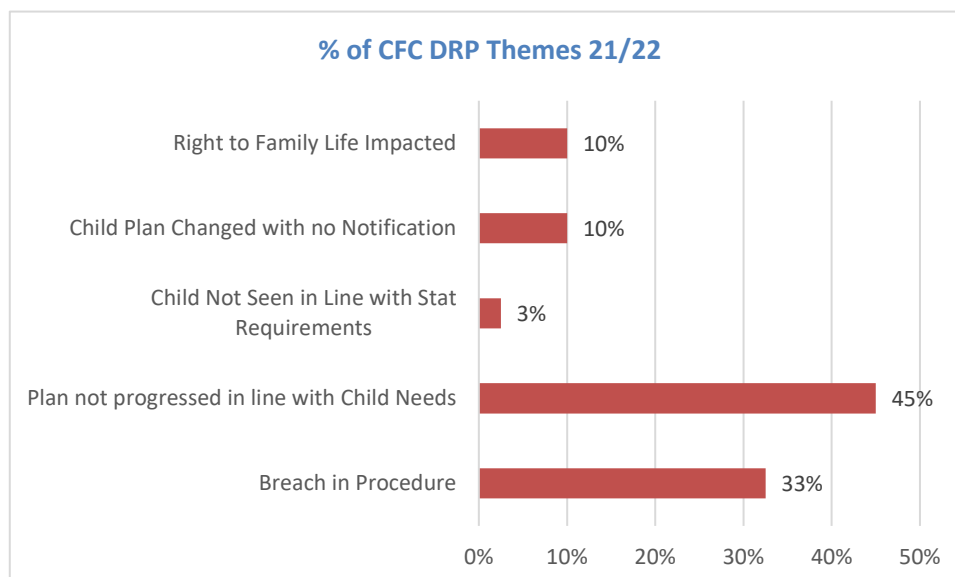
Children Cared for DRPs	20/21	21/22	Variance
No of DRPs Raised	76	34	-42

15.11. 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	19	11	3	0	0	33

15.12. The majority of DRPs have been resolved at alert or stage 1, with three progressing to stage 2.

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



15.14. As with CP we have streamlined the categorisation in this reporting year, it is fair to say that whilst there has been an overall reduction, the main issue continues to be delays in progressing? care plans. In this year covid recovery has had an ongoing impact upon the availability of appropriate experts leading to some delay. The second highest category relate to breaches in procedure, such as late reports or missing information.

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

DRP Challenge	Outcome for the Child
The IRO raised a DRP due to a delay in a child's plan being progressed in line with their needs. In the young person's previous Cared for Review it was identified that the young person required significant dental work which included cosmetic dental treatment. Social Care agreed at the time of the review to fund the additional costs. However, there was a delay in this progressing at the most recent cared for review and it transpired that the finance for the treatment had not yet been before the finance panel to be agreed.	The social worker completed the forms for finance panel, and this has now been agreed so that treatment for the young person can begin.  For the young person this means that she can smile without being self-conscious.
The IRO raised a DRP due to a child not being seen in line with the statutory requirements and the plan not being progressed in line with the child's needs. During a pre cared for visit carried out by the IRO to seek the child's views in preparation for her cared for review, the IRO noted worries around Dad and his	The Team Manager acknowledged the importance of the visiting whilst sharing a reason for the visiting frequency not being adhered to. Although this can't change anything for the child immediately regarding the missed visits, this highlighted an area of improvement for the Team Manager who agreed to address this individually and agreed to increase visits to support the family during



DRP Challenge	Outcome for the Child
partner having difficulties with managing some behaviours with them being new to parenting. When reviewing the case, it was identified that weekly visits from the day the child moved in with her dad and partner, the visits had not taken place and the IRO felt that these would have helped identify earlier support necessary to maintaining the stability of the family. In addition, the IRO noted no words and pictures had been completed to help the child understand her journey and what we had done to help her get to where she is now and what we have agreed to do to keep her safe and happy.	this important time. It was also agreed words and pictures would be completed with the family to give the child a story of her experiences to help her understand why she had to live outside her Mam and Dads care for a short while, and an understanding of what everyone did to get her back with her Dad and his partner, and a story of what everyone will be doing to keep her safe now and in the future.

- 15.16. 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

- 15.17. This year, the IROs and Conference Chairs have continued to highlight to Social Workers and their Team Managers a instances of good practice, which has led to timely and positive outcomes for children. Some examples are listed below:

- "I want to take the opportunity to tell you that "children's home worker" is the very best communicator I have come across since returning as an IRO. They are exception in letting other professionals know what is happening to XX which is invaluable to an IRO."
- I was very impressed reading the social workers report prior to the conference due to the quality of their work, but even more so with the clear evidence of work they had carried out in getting the "child's voice". The social worker had used words and pictures which enabled me as the conference chair to read in readiness for the conference. In addition, the social worker fully supported the child's dad in being able to engage in the conference and showed her use of signs of safety in building upon strengths of the family.
- Following the most recent Review Conference for XX. The social worker attended and demonstrated excellent understanding and empathy with X and Mam, surrounding the worries we have of them being exposed to abusive and harmful behaviours from dad. The social worker was able to be realistic and empathetic with Mam around what needed to happen in terms of safety planning and where in terms of her feeling strong enough to involve Police and family members when danger arose and advocated for mam appropriately, balancing this with the need to prioritise XX safety and get a good safety plan together. The social worker was focused on supporting Mam, keeping X safe and trying to devise a plan that would support family time. She was sensitive around exploring worries we have around Mam's vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms around alcohol and exploring this with mam and her partner and how this can impact on XX. The social workers approach was steeped in the Safe and Together approach and feedback from mam was positive in how she experienced the meeting and the support she has received from her.

## 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:

- Participation of the young person and their family in cared for reviews.
- Observed practice on child protection conference chairs.
- Were cultural and identity needs of the child have been considered and addressed within the most recent cared for review.
- Signs of safety and its use at ICPC.
- Repeat child protection plans within a 2-year period.
- Observed practice on cared for reviews.
- Cared for children and young people with repeat home moves.
- The use of mind of my own within children's independent review service.
- Quarterly peer observations.

The impact of this work has continued to highlight areas of good practice and the impact of the work that we do upon children's plans, for example observation of practice completed in both cared for reviews and child protection conferences has demonstrated consistency in practice , and that progress continues to be made re the implementation of signs of safety.

We know from our audit work and our Ofsted inspection in 2021 that we have a strong footprint on the child's file, and that we evidence the impact of our work for children. CIRT continues to build upon how we use our role to strengthen learning, we use audits as a key tool to learn from and to implement changes in practice therefore in 2022/23 we have a clear programme of auditing work which will need to be undertaken to help us strengthen further areas of practice. The themes that have been identified to date are repeat CP plans within a 24-month period, plans of permanency at their second cared for review and improved child engagement.

## 17. Our Customer Feedback

17.1. Our customer service feedback is captured in several ways, such as feedback collected through the Microsoft questionnaire from parents, training feedback sheets, meetings with children, Mind of My Own application (an online feedback tool for children), the TfC compliments process and via email from professionals.

17.2. The service has received 27 compliments in the last year. We have also continued to receive additional positive informal feedback, examples of which have been around our flexible approach to work, supportive manner in assisting service development and our child focussed approach.

17.3. Below are some recent examples of feedback received:

- 0-19 Service – "I just wanted to share some feedback following a meeting chaired yesterday for XX. The meeting was extremely difficult due to lots of issues with the current home that XX is residing in and the care staff there. The chair was very supportive and managed the meeting really well and was invaluable to her when trying to keep things focused on the YP and the plan moving forward."
- Police – "I just wanted to say, having not done a Child Protection Review Conference in a while, how great it was to have such a streamlined meeting. I was fully braced to go through the detail of each report but was delighted when the chair asked everyone if they had any other worries/strengths etc that they wanted to share that were not already captured in the reports. We were done and dusted in little over 90 minutes which was great considering it was for 3 children, but even better for the parents as it did not prolong them having to listen to everyone's worries being repeated and repeated."

- Parent – “Following a RCPC today a father told me, the building is much more comfortable than Lambton House and having a car park makes it much easier to access.”
- Voluntary sector – “I would like to feed back that the meeting this morning and the document produced has been extremely helpful in capturing concerns and identifying actions that would help us to support XX and her family in ensuring she is safe, and we have a good plan moving forward. I really appreciated his support in doing this and the guidance given in the process 2021”
- Barrister – “Just spoke with Counsel who said the IRO and social worker did a fabulous job in giving evidence which supported the making of the Order.”

- 17.4. Within 2021/22 we received 2 new complaints relating to the IRO service. With regards to one of these complaints no elements were upheld and the Stage 2 investigation concluded there was no learning for CIRT. As a result of the second complaint learning has been taken forward to ensure that birth parents continue to have access to relevant information following the making of a final order.
- 17.5. The Sunderland Safeguarding Children’s Partnership (SSCP) has received informal feedback but none of these concerns have escalated to a complaint.
- 17.6. With regards to our service, we will continue to liaise with the SSCP to reflect any learning with regards to feedback.
- 17.7. Below are some examples of how we have responded to feedback received from families, our IRO’s and Conference Chair’s and our partnering agencies.

You said.....		We did.....
<p><b>Police said:</b> “They wanted more training around Signs of Safety and the new Child Protection agenda”</p>	➔	<p>We delivered a further two CP Signs of Safety conference sessions which has meant that Police have got an increased number of staff who can produce reports and attend CP conferences. The impact can be seen in the improved performance regarding timeliness of reports.</p>
<p><b>CAFCASS said:</b> “They wanted to be able to have discussions with children’s IRO’s during care ..”</p>	➔	<p>We provided CAFCASS with all our staff’s contact details and the impact of this is there is increased communication between the two services in line with good practice.</p>

You said.....		We did.....
<b>Health GP said:</b> "They wanted support with GP training, re CP conference"	➔	IRO team members that can help provide training. But also agreed a joint audit to be carried out after 3 months to monitor progress.
<b>Several parents said:</b> "They felt that Lambton House wasn't an appropriate venue for children's meetings"	➔	We have relocated and invested in a purpose-built conference suite which parents tell us is accessible, friendly and welcoming.
<b>Early Help said:</b> "CIRT is not using the Mind of My Own application with cared for children"	➔	We reallocated the tablets purchased as part of Covid contingency planning and put on additional training for IRO's. The impact of this has been a significant increase in the number of Mind of My Own statements being completed with children by CIRT
<b>Our Learning Review said:</b> "We need to consider how we work better with teenagers when the risk is also outside of the family home."	➔	We have worked with partner agencies and the SSCP and implemented a new child protection / young people pathway into Liquid Logic which now means conferences for young people who meet the criteria will be conducted differently to increase the young person's engagement

## 18. Our Priorities for 2022 - 2023

- To continue to place children at the centre of our practice.
- To have more children having a clear plan of permanency approved by the time of their second cared for review.
- 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.
- 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.
- Continuing to develop working relationships with the audit team supporting shared learning and identifying areas for strengthening practice for children.
- Continue to look for creative ways of engaging children and young people in their meetings and strengthening the influence that the voice of the child has upon plans and outcomes for their future.

- Continue to work with the Signs of Safety team in evolving practice in child protection and cared for meetings.
- Respond and adopt practice in line with any government recommendation from the national learning review into Star and Arthur's deaths. Learning review due for publication in May 2022.
- Consider and respond to Josh McAllister's report into Children Social Care due for publication in May 2022.
- 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.

## 19. Conclusion

- 19.1. This reporting period, in some respects, has been equally as challenging as the last annual report in 2020/2021 due to the ongoing impact linked to COVID19, however despite these challenges CIRT has remained committed to its core value of the voice of the child and engagement. Practice in Signs of Safety has continued to evolve with evidence of it having a positive impact upon the number of children needing child protection plans.
- 19.2. Our hard work regarding plans and them being SMARTER was highlighted during our OFSTED inspection and as a service we continue to build and value the importance of relationships with children, parents, carers and professionals. We have been able to embed short break cared for reviews and where needed raised concerns regarding any delay in being able to provide service. IRO's themselves have continued to grow in confidence in their role and with the increased training offer use their position within the organisation to support and influence plans for children.
- 19.3. The outcome of our 2021 OFSTED report has provided us with confidence in our practice and working model with partners. In 2022/23 we are looking forward to implementing young people's plans and providing teenagers with a more empowering experience of engaging in the young person's child protection conference. We foresee increasing pressures in the coming year for our families due to increasing economic pressures and we will aim to work with organisations in identifying pathways of support whilst keeping children safe.
- 19.4. We want to continue to build upon our skills and use of Signs of Safety, looking more to how we use the model for children in care to build on success and stability; help deliver meaningful outcomes for them such as where possible helping family members to still be involved even when their children cannot live with them.
- 19.5. To continue to use our influence within the North East Regional IRO Group to build a regional standard of practice and expectations for children, continuing to share learning around what we do well and what we can learn from each other.





# together for children

SUNDERLAND

**Report Authors:**

CIRT Service Management & Business Manager

**Report presented to:**

TfC Senior Leadership Team & Corporate Parenting Board

---

All data provided in this report for 2021/22 is provisional pending the submission to and publication of data by the Department for Education

---