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1. Introduction

1.1 The completion of this report is a requirement of The Adoption and Children Act 2002. The statutory guidance for the Independent Reviewing Officers (the IRO Handbook) specifies that the manager of the IRO service ‘should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of members of the corporate parenting board’.

1.2 The Annual IRO report is produced by the Children’s Safeguarding Standards Unit (CSSU) and provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Service in Newcastle Local Authority. The report identifies good practice as well as highlighting areas for further development in relation to the IRO function. In addition the report provides an overview of the other activities and functions of the Children’s Safeguarding Standards Unit (CSSU), including information on the performance of the unit in a range of responsibilities.

1.3 The report covers the period 1st April 2014 to 31st March 2015 and should be read in conjunction with:

- Annual Report – Private Fostering 2014/15
- Annual Report – Local Authority Designated Officer 2014/15

Purpose of Service and National Context

1.4 Local Authorities are ‘corporate parents’ for the children and young people they are looking after, and effective care planning is essential for the children’s wellbeing and the best possible outcomes. In 2004, a system of ‘independent reviewing officers’ (IRO’s) was established to monitor the way that local authorities implement the plans, and to ensure that the child’s wishes and feelings are fully considered. Since then, questions have been asked about how effective and truly independent the IRO’s are. In April 2011, new government regulations and statutory guidance about care planning came into force, which (amongst other things) strengthened the IRO’s role and laid out the role and function of the IRO in a ‘handbook’.

1.5 The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the LAC review process to a wider overview of the child’s case, including the regular monitoring of the care plan in between reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for Looked After Children (LAC) and for challenging drift and delay in the implementation of care plans.

1.6 In November 2011, the Family Justice review reported that ‘the work of the IRO’s and their impact needs to be more clearly seen and understood’. If a dispute between an IRO and the local authority cannot be resolved locally, ultimately the IRO can refer the case to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).
1.7 In June 2013 Ofsted published a report, Independent Reviewing Officers: taking up the challenge? The report evaluates the effectiveness of IROs in discharging their responsibilities towards looked after children. Inspectors visited 10 local authority areas. The report identifies a number of key findings and recommendations.

1.8 The National Children's Bureau research entitled ‘The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England’ (March 2014) provided a wealth of information and findings gathered over a 2 year study, and outlined a number of important recommendations most notably ‘the IRO should be independent, authoritative and experienced’. The service should be focussed on the child to ensure better care planning and evidence better outcomes.

2. **Role and function of the Unit**

2.1 Newcastle’s CSSU is committed to achieving the best outcomes for all children and young people in Newcastle, particularly the most vulnerable, such as those children who are looked after and those subject to Child Protection Plans, through an ethos of continuous improvement in safeguarding performance and service delivery.

2.2 The CSSU has an independent role to ensure that all children, whatever their religious or cultural background, receive the same care and safeguards with regard to abuse and neglect.

2.3 The CSSU is responsible for the following statutory functions:

- The convening and chairing of child protection conferences
- The convening and chairing of reviews for looked after children
- The convening and chairing of reviews for children placed for adoption
- The convening and chairing of reviews of foster Carers
- The convening and chairing of complex abuse meetings
- Regulation 44 visits
- Monitoring and reviewing all Private Fostering arrangements
- The convening and chairing of AIM meetings
- The role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) in respect to allegations against staff
- Subject access requests

2.4 In addition the Unit has responsibility for Viewpoint, disruption meetings and secure records.

2.5 The statutory Independent Reviewing function of the Unit remains its core business, but the scope of work has continued to widen. CSSU has additional responsibilities to the Newcastle Safeguarding Children Board (NSCB) in terms of contributing to case reviews, performance monitoring, audit and quality assurance, children’s participation and training. The Unit has a key role in ensuring effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements on behalf of the NSCB through the Standards and Effectiveness Management Group (SEMG).
3. Professional Profile of the IRO Service

Current Staffing Structure

3.1 Responsibility for the activity and development of the Unit lies with the Service Manager Safeguarding Standards, who reports directly to the Director of Wellbeing Care and Learning, with a close link to the Assistant Director of Children’s Social Care. Responsibility for the line manager of the CSSU sitting with the Director and therefore outside of Children’s Social Care strengthens its independence, but also supports ability to challenge, whilst maintaining good links to social work services.

3.2 The direct link to the NSCB presents the Children’s Safeguarding Standards Unit with an unprecedented opportunity to position itself as the key instrument of inter-agency performance monitoring and quality assurance activity and again supports its independence.

3.3 The current staffing structure includes:

- Service Manager, Children’s Safeguarding Standards Unit
- 10.5 fte Independent Reviewing Officers (includes 1 vacancy currently covered by agency staff)
- Quality Standards Officer
- 1 Senior Practitioner, Secure and Access to Records
- 1 fte (2pt workers) Social Workers Access to Records
- Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)
- 2 Viewpoint Workers

3.4 As referred to in the last annual report budget reductions did have a direct impact on the CSSU, which amounted to 20% of the overall budget.

3.5 The budget reductions which remained for 2015/16 were therefore to reduce the CSSU staffing establishment by 1.5 fte IRO. However at the end of 2014 this was no longer feasible due to the increase in overall activity, and therefore the caseloads of the IROs. It was therefore agreed that a reduction of 0.5 fte (IRO post) would be made rather than the full 1.5. This was achieved by March 2015.

3.6 Since this time the CSSU has only managed a short period without the need to recruit agency staff, this has been due to covering sickness and vacancies.

3.7 More recent information demonstrates that Newcastle has been the only authority, certainly regionally, to have reduced its number of IROs, with many increasing their establishment.
3.8 Whilst the LAC population has reduced, the IRO caseloads have remained high mainly due to Child Protection activity. More information in relation to IRO caseloads can be found in section 4.6.

3.9 The CSSU has also seen the impact of more complex families coming into the Child Protection Conference process with a wider range of vulnerabilities and therefore increased risks.

3.10 Newcastle continues to have a high proportion of second and subsequent child protection plans and despite a focus on this issue by the NSCB, including learning from audit, there has been little impact made on consistently reducing the overall numbers.

3.11 The CSSU has also seen the impact of an increase in police investigations which has been due in part by a large scale police investigation into sexual exploitation, but also in relation to the general increase in police investigations due to the ‘Savile affect’. This has increased the work of the Access to Records Social Workers which includes providing information for the Police and overseeing the viewings of files.

3.12 It has been recognised however that caseloads for IROs in Newcastle are too high and unless addressed will impact on the ability of the IROs to full-fill their responsibilities outlined in statutory guidance, particularly in relation to monitoring cases and identifying any drift or delay, an area that was identified in Newcastle’s last Ofsted inspection in 2012 as in need of attention. It is therefore positive that a proposal for an increase in staffing (2fte IROs and 0.5fte Access to Records Social Worker) has been agreed.

3.13 The IROs are all at level N10 which is equivalent to Children’s Social Care Team Managers in Newcastle. In terms of diversity we currently have a mix of male and female, although predominately female. There are no IROs from a BME background. We have:

- 1 IRO with specialist disability experience
- 1 IRO provides a dedicated review service to children placed for adoption
- 1 IRO undertakes reviews of all children subject to Private Fostering Arrangements
4. Activity and Key Performance Indicators

4.1 Child Protection and Looked After Numbers

4.1.1 The chart above provides the numbers of children subject to a Child Protection Plan (CPP) and Looked After (LAC) at the end of each month over the last 3 years. 2014/15 saw the numbers of children subject to a CPP increase with 429 children the subject of a CPP at the end of the year, an increase of 15% (55 in actual numbers) from the previous year 2013/14. This follows an increase of 19% (61 in actual numbers) between 2012/13 and 2013/14.

4.1.2 While numbers of children subject to a CPP have increased the number of LAC at the year-end reduced significantly. 505 children were LAC at the end of 2014/15 a reduction of 9% (52 in actual numbers) from 557 at the end of 2013/14. With the exception of February 2015, the figure at the end of March 2015 is the lowest for any month reflected in the 3 years covered in the chart.

Child Protection and Looked After rates per 10,000

4.1.3 Rates per 10,000 are used as a method of benchmarking local authorities CPP and LAC numbers against each other, using a more comparable method than simply comparing actual numbers. Figures are expressed as a ratio and are calculated by dividing the local authorities’ actual numbers by its total 0-17 child population estimate sourced from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). The 2 charts which follow benchmark Newcastle’s rates per 10,000 of Children subject to a CPP and rates per 100,000 of LAC against average rates for its 3 comparator groups of North East authorities, Statistical Neighbours and England as a whole.
4.1.4 The chart above shows over the last 5 years Newcastle has had higher than average rates and therefore numbers of children subject to a Child Protection Plans (CPP) compared to various local authority comparator groups in each of the years, and in 2014/15 continues to do so. The increase in overall CPPs at the end of the year mentioned in paragraph 4.1.2, resulted in an increase in the CPP rate per 10,000 from 67.8 in 2013/14 to 77.6 in 2014/15. Having narrowed in 2012/13 and 2013/14, the increase in the rate in 2014/15 resulted in the gap to the various comparator authority groups widening, with Newcastle again having notably higher rates of CP cases then other local authorities both nationally and regionally.

4.1.5 As with rates of CPPs Newcastle has historically had higher than average rates and therefore numbers of looked after children also, however in 2014/15 the reduction in the number of LAC mentioned in paragraph 4.1.3 resulted in the rate per 10,000 reducing significantly from 102 to 92.2 per 10,000. Newcastle's rate of LAC per 10,000 has remained fairly static for a number of years, ranging between 98 and 102. The reduction in 2014/15 is the first significant reduction in LAC rates for 5 years, and it is the first time in 5 years the rate has been lower than the latest statistical neighbour average.
4.1.6 The table above provides key monitoring data relating to activity within the child protection process. With the exception of rates per 10,000 of referrals to children's social care and rates per 10,000 of LAC there has been an increase in activity across the remaining indicators. In summary in 2014/15:

- 18% reduction in rate of referrals to children’s social care
- 5.4% increase in the rate of Section 47s initiated
- 5.5% increase in the rate of Initial Child Protection Conferences
- 9.2% increase in the rate of children becoming the subject of a CPP for physical, emotional, and sexual abuse or neglect
- 10% reduction in the rate of looked after children

4.1.7 With the exception of referral rates and LAC rates the majority of activity has remained higher than the statistical neighbour and England averages. However while the majority of the CP activity indicators increased slightly in 2014/15, the increases were not as extreme as those seen in 2013/14 where some increased by 30%.
4.2 Child Protection Conferences, Plans and Population Characteristics

4.2.1 The chart above shows overall Child Protection conference activity over the last 5 years. The total number of children subject to a Child Protection Conference in 2014/15 was 1770, an increase of 12.5% from 1574 in the previous year. This is the second year in a row the figures have increased, following an 8.4% increase in 2013/14. The increase in numbers was reflected across both types of conference, to varying degrees however, the number of children who were the subject of an Initial Child Protection Conferences increased by 5.9% in the latest year following a 28.3% increase in the previous year. While those subject to a Child Protection Review Conference increased by less than 15.6% in 2014/15 following a 0.9% increase in 2013/14.

4.2.2 The chart above shows overall activity in relation to CPPs, numbers starting and ending in each of the last 5 statistical years, up to and including the latest year of 2014/15. CPP activity has steadily increased over the last 2 years. In total 918 CPPs were either started or were discontinued in 2014/15, this represents a 7.7% increase in overall numbers compared with the previous year when the total number stood at 852, this follows another increase 4.9% in the previous year between 2012/13 and 2013/14.
4.2.3 The number of children becoming subject to a CPP in the year continues to be high compared to previous years, and has increased year on year over each of the last 2 years. A total of 485 child protection plans started in 2014/15 which is the highest number in any of the last 5 years reflected in the chart. 485 is an increase of 6.4% or 29 in actual numbers from the previous year, and this follows 21% in the previous year between 2012/13 and 2013/14.

**Child Protection Population Characteristics at year end**

**Gender and Age** - The charts above show over the last 4 years, males have consistently accounted for the largest proportion of children subject to a CPP at the year end. It is the younger age children who typically account for the largest proportion of CPP cases. Traditionally individually children aged 1-4 have accounted for the largest proportion subject to a CPP, however in the last 2 years it is children aged 5-9 accounted for the most.
4.2.5 **Ethnicity of CP cases** - The 2011 census data tells us that 78% of the Newcastle 0-15 year’s population were from a White background, with 22% from a BME background. More specifically 13% from Asian/Asian British background, 3% Black/Black British background, 3% Mixed ethnic background and 3% other ethnic background.

4.2.6 The charts above shows that at each of the year ends the percentage of children subject to a CPP who were from a Black Minority Ethnic (BME) background was below the 22% Newcastle benchmark, only fluctuating slightly between 8.3% and 12.4%. However there has been a steady increase each year since 2012/13 to 12.4% in 2014/15. At the end of 2014/15 the pie chart shows children from an Asian or Asian British background accounted for a 5% of all children subject to a CPP, while those from a Black or Black British background accounted for only 1%.

![Category of abuse chart](chart.png)

4.2.7 **Category of abuse or neglect** - In each of the years shown in the chart above emotional abuse added with neglect cases accounted for the majority of children subject to a CPP, accounting for between 82% and 90% of plans at the end of each year. Emotional abuse cases accounted for the largest proportion of cases individually in 3 out of the 4 years including the latest year 2014/15, when 46% were because of emotional abuse. When linked with other categories emotional abuse is identified in 53% of cases. Neglect is typically the second largest category accounting for between 36% and 38%, in the latest year 36% of cases were subject to plans because of neglect, and when linked with other categories this rose to 38%.

4.2.8 The proportion of cases subject to a CPP as a result of physical abuse has fluctuated notably and in the latest year increased to 8% from 5% in 2013/14. Over the 4 years shown in the chart the proportion of cases subject to a CPP as a result of sexual abuse remained low at between 1% to 4%. Cases subject to a CPP as a result of multiple categories has typically accounted for around 8% to 9% of cases over the last 2 years. Typically these are cases with a primary category of abuse of neglect or emotional and coupled with another factor.
### 4.3 Key Child Protection Performance Indicators

#### 4.3.1 The chart above monitors the proportion of CPPs that are second or subsequent CPPs. This indicator is calculated by dividing the number of children who became the subject of a second or subsequent CPP by the total number who became subject to a CPP in the period. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a lower figure. However, it is acknowledged that a second or subsequent child protection plan will sometimes be necessary to deal with adverse changes to the child's circumstances.

#### 4.3.2 When benchmarked against comparator authority averages, Newcastle has had higher than average rates of children who become subject to a CPP for a second or subsequent time for a number of years. While remaining higher than the three comparator groups in 2014/15 the figure remained fairly stable at 22.4% compared with 22.1% in 2013/14.

#### 4.3.3 An audit of Second CPPs undertaken 2014/15 by the NSCB identified a number of issues areas affecting performance in this area including the effect of long-term neglect and inability to sustain change by families, professional challenge, contracts of expectations and step-down arrangements. An action plan for improvement was subsequently developed. Neglect has also been identified as a significant factor in these cases and the NSCB are overseeing the now development of a Neglect strategy for working with families where this is an issue. This work links to the development of the some of the new Family Insights units.
4.3.4 Performance for this indicator has been consistency good across the last 4 years. In the latest year ending 2014/15, 4.0% of CPPs ending did so after 2 years or more. 4.0% is a slight increase from 2013/14 and slightly higher than statistical neighbours, however remains below the latest national averages.

4.3.5 The increase of CP plans lasting 2 years or more is attributed to IROs, in response to learning from an NSCB audit, being more robust in ensuring that all actions in a plan had been completed and seeking evidence of change in a family before discontinuing a Child Protection Plan.

4.3.6 The above chart tracks the percentage of Child Protection cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales in the year. Good performance for this indicator is typified by a higher percentage, ideally 100%. Newcastle continues to perform well on this measure. In each of the years reflected in the chart, up to and including the latest year 2014/15 Newcastle’s percentage has been higher than each of the 3 comparator group averages. In the latest year 2014/15, 98.3% of cases were reviewed within timescales.
4.4  Looked After Reviews and Timescales

4.4.1 The chart above shows activity relating to looked after children statutory reviews over the last 5 years. As a result of the reduction in LAC numbers overall, discussed in paragraph 4.1.2, the total number of children subject to LAC reviews in 2014/15 reduced by 4.5% to 1506 in 2014/15. The changes in numbers varied between different types of reviews, while 28 day reviews reduced by 30.3% as a result of a reduction in admissions to care, other LAC reviews including 3 months and 6 month increased slightly by 0.6% to 1243. The number of Decision Making conferences, which take place within a few months of child’s admission to care also reduced as a result of fewer admissions, by 26.2% to 93 in the year.

NOTE: The DfE on 16th Jan 2013 explained that problems historical annual data have prevented publication of benchmarking data for this indicator since 2009/10; therefore any benchmarking in the chart is based on the latest data available and so would be used with caution.
4.4.2 The above chart tracks the percentage of LAC cases which were reviewed within statutory timescales in the year. The percentage of LAC reviews held within timescales in Newcastle has been fairly consistent over the last 5 years fluctuating between 97.0% and 99.0%. While more recent national benchmarking data is not available for this indicator when benchmarked against the latest data that is available performance for this measure continues to be good, with each of the 5 years figures being higher than each of the comparator group averages show in the chart. The latest figure for 2014/15 was 97.0% in timescales.

4.5 Independent Reviewing Officer (Adoption)

4.5.1 This role of Independent Reviewing Officer (Adoption) is undertaken by Liz Ronan, who provides a dedicated reviewing service to children placed for adoption. The range of tasks carried out by the IRO (Adoption) includes:

Chairing reviews:
- Children who are in adoptive placements
- Babies relinquished for adoption prior to placement
- Children for whom placement orders have been granted but are not yet placed
- Adopters’ annual reviews (if no placement achieved)
- Post adoption reviews as and if required
- Initial Child Protection Conferences and Child Protection Reviews

Ensuring that key elements of adoption legislation are adhered to:
- Adopters are clear about their parental responsibility
- Clear and meaningful adoption support plans
- Clear contact plans, especially between siblings who are also in adoptive placements
- Support and statutory visits are made as required by regulations
- Recording requirements are maintained

4.5.2 Key areas that the role addresses are that of matching issues, pre and post adoption support (including liaison with CYPs regarding complex cases and specialist packages of therapeutic support) contact issues and life story work, in addition to identifying any delay in finding a family, the timing of the adoption application and whether any delay in starting proceedings is a cause for concern. These are essential to the plan progressing, the placement working well and ensuring the right services are in place to support the placement. Liz regularly provides information for Resource and Care Panel on specific cases.

4.5.3 Over the last 12 months Liz Ronan has seen an increase in older children who have complex needs which have therefore needed a more robust and timely package of support, Liz has been key in ensuring this happens and identifying any gaps.

4.5.4 Liz provides a consistent approach for this cohort of children and has built up expertise in this area, whilst maintaining her skills and knowledge in relation to child protection by chairing some child protection conferences.
4.5.5 The chart above shows the number and proportion of different types of reviews for children chaired by the IRO (Adoption) in the full year 2014/15. A total of 354 reviews were chaired for children in the latest year. These included a combination of LAC reviews (28 day, 3 month and 6 month), Adoption and Adopters reviews and Child Protection reviews. While 30% of the reviews undertaken were child protection, the majority of the work of the IRO (adoption) related to looked after children at 70%. More specifically 29% (102) of the reviews were Adoption Reviews, 4% (14) were Post Placement Order Reviews, 3% (11) were Adopters Reviews, 31% (112) LAC reviews with the remaining 11%, 30% (105) were child protection reviews and 3% 'Other' reviews which are child protection related.

4.6 IRO caseloads
4.6.1 The IRO Handbook1 (DfE 2010) recommends that caseloads for IROs should range between 50 and 70 LAC children. Nationally, the average caseload for an IRO was identified as ranging between 50 and 95 (National IRO services/DfE partnership in 2013/14), while locally regional benchmarking data from North East authorities suggests from April 2015 caseloads are higher, ranging between 70 and 108. The size of caseload alone does not indicate the overall workload for each individual IRO as individual roles and responsibilities vary within the team as described throughout this report, including training, Private Fostering, Complex Abuse meetings, AIM meetings, Secure Reviews, ICS / Carefirst developments, together with input into audits and case reviews.

4.6.2 IRO caseload data is collated and reported to the CSSU Service Manager on a quarterly basis. The top chart (above) shows the number of individual children allocated to individual IROs at the end of quarter over the last 12 months. The chart identifies if the IRO is part time (PT) and so would be expected to have approximately half the caseload of a fulltime IRO. The chart also provides data for average caseloads at the end of each of the periods.

4.6.3 While individual figures vary by IRO, typically full-time IROs have had average caseloads ranging between 100 to 109 children at the end of each month, which is similar to 2013/14 and remains notably higher than the recommended national caseload level. Across the year the average has reduced from 109 to 100, primarily as a result of the reduction in the LAC population. Average caseloads for part time IROs have ranged between 49 and 59 across the year, which is slightly higher than full-time IROs averages if doubled to compare.

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4.6.4 The chart (above) provides a breakdown of the type of cases allocated to IROs mid-March 2015. The Unit seeks that IROs have a proportionate mixture of CP and LAC cases that reflects the overall proportion of cases that are CP and LAC open across the whole service. This typically means IROs should have around 40% being CP and 60% LAC. In the main, while there are some slight variations allocation processes have been effective in ensuring workers have the appropriate balance of each of the case type. Use of this comparative data when undertaking allocations helps ensure this distribution.

4.6.5 The IRO guidance puts an emphasis on ensuring that the size of the case load enables IROs to have sufficient time to provide a quality service to each LAC including, amongst a number of responsibilities, monitoring drift, undertaking follow up work after the review, consulting with the social worker following any significant changes and meeting with the child before the review. The requirement around the size of caseloads for IROs is an area of the guidance which has provided significant challenge. Using the above management information has enabled caseloads to be monitored closely and used within individual supervision as well as caseload management meetings with the IROs and has supported the proposal for increased staffing.

4.7 Foster carer reviews

4.7.1 The Independent Reviewing Officers are responsible for reviewing foster carers on an annual basis and reporting to Fostering Panel. The number of Foster Carer Reviews completed over the past 3 years has remained fairly consistent only fluctuating between 245 and 251 foster carers being reviewed each year.

Number of Foster Carer Reviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Reviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011/12</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/13</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013/14</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014/15</td>
<td>245</td>
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4.7.2 Whilst IROs have provided independent and consistent reviewing of Foster Carers it is recognised that the process requires a review to ensure it more collaborative, robust and that the impact of the reviews can be evidenced, this is an area of development identified for 2015/16.
4.8 Private fostering arrangements

4.8.1 All Private Fostering arrangements agreed at the Community Arrangements Panel are reviewed by an Independent Reviewing Officer. The first review is held within three months of the arrangement being agreed and then at intervals of six months for the duration of the arrangement. The continued suitability of the arrangement is addressed at each review with the aim of ensuring that the welfare of children who are being privately fostered is being satisfactorily safeguarded and promoted.

**Private Fostering Reviews Performance 2014/15**

- A total of 10 Private Fostering Reviews were held in 2014/15
- These were held for 7 individual children and young people
- 100% of these reviews were completed within the required timescales

4.8.2 Privately fostered children are encouraged to participate in reviews and are given the opportunity to complete a Viewpoint questionnaire beforehand. Viewpoint is a computer assisted interviewing process which allows the child to present their views in respect of their Private Fostering arrangement and care planning, see section 4.10 for more information about the use of Viewpoint in the Unit.

**What did Viewpoint tell us in 2014/15**

- 6 individual children and young people, aged between 7 and 16 completed a Viewpoint Questionnaire
- Each child completed at least 1 or more Viewpoint for their Private Fostering review in 2014/15
- Although the numbers who complete the questionnaires were small, they tell us that children living in Private Fostering arrangements were generally positive about their experiences

**Of note:**

- **Children said they understood why they were living in their Private Fostering arrangement** – 80% said they “definitely knew” and 20% “thought they knew” why they were living in their arrangement
- **Children said they were happy where they were living** - 100% said they were ‘completely’ or ‘just about’ happy where they were living
- **Children said they felt safe where they are living** - 100% said they felt ‘completely’ or ‘just about’ safe where they were living
- **Children said they were happy with their education** - 100% said they attended school every day, and none of them said there was anything at school that they worried about
- **Children said they didn’t have any worries about their health** – 80% said they had no worries, 20% said they maybe had worries about their health
4.8.3 The chart above provides summary figures from the Private Fostering 1 Return (PF1) for Newcastle only over the last 7 years. Having decreased slightly in 2011/12 and 2012/13 overall, Private Fostering activity continues to be low compared with previous years. In the 2014/15 there was an increase in the number of new notifications and arrangements starting, however there was also a significant increase in the number of arrangements that ceased in the year, resulting in the number of children in Private Fostering arrangements at the end of the year reducing. Of note in 2014/15:

- 6 new notifications of a Private Fostering arrangements were received
- 6 new arrangements started, an increase from 2 in the previous year
- 11 arrangements ended in 2014/15, an increase from 4 in 2013/14
- The proportion of cases which were visited within the required timescales remained higher than both the latest national and north east averages in 2014/15
- At the end of 2014/15, 3 young people were in a Private Fostering Arrangement, 5 less than the end of the previous year

4.8.4 The Private Fostering Annual report is provided to the NSCB via its Standards and Effectiveness Management Group (SEMG). In 2015/16 following consideration of the annual report for 2014/15, Private Fostering will be added as a standard agenda item and the group will explore strategies for increasing notifications of new arrangements.
4.9 Regulation 44 visits (previously Regulation 33)

4.9.1 Over the year the Unit has continued to have responsibility for undertaking all Regulation 44 Visits to the 4 Local Authority residential Units. The Regulation 44 form is regularly reviewed and improvements made. Each month the report is signed off by the Corporate Parenting Manager and Director of Wellbeing Care and Learning and sent to Ofsted with a copy to the Assistant Director of Children’s Social Care.

4.9.2 The DfE amendments to the children’s Homes Regulations January 2014, which came into force from 1 April 2014, no longer allow for IROs who are managed within the Local Authorities directorate that carries out the social services functions relating to children to undertake Reg 44 visits its own children’s homes. Therefore since 1 April 2014 a reciprocal arrangement has been in place with Gateshead City Council, which is subject to regular review to ensure quality, consistency and compliance.

4.10 Participation (including Viewpoint)

4.10.1 A key role of the Unit is to seek regular feedback from children and young people regarding their views to inform planning, but also their experience in care and the difference the IRO has made to their lives. This information is collated and used to drive improvement.

4.10.2 Ensuring LAC and children subject to child protection plans are able to participate as fully as possible in planning and decision making is a key priority for the CSSU. IROs have a key role to actively seek the views for children who do not wish to attend their conferences and reviews and to see what would assist in supporting them to participate. This has included more children being supported to attend, some children being involved the actual chairing of their LAC Review meetings, but particularly in the range of ways children can participate, especially for those who have additional communication needs.

4.10.3 Performance has been good in relation to participation in LAC reviews with data for 2014/15 suggesting 95% of LAC who were reviewed during the year participated in all their reviews, a figure which has remained fairly consistent over the last few years however the unit continues to seek to improve further. Examples of young people co-ordinating their Looked After reviews alongside the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) ensuring they were clearly involved in developing their own care plan, was identified as good practice in audits.

4.10.4 An example of how the IRO role has supported a child to participate in their conference can be found at Appendix 4.
Viewpoint

4.10.5 The CSSU has had 2 full-time Viewpoint workers for over 10 years now, who continue to gain the views of children for their LAC reviews primarily, but not exclusively, through the use of the Viewpoint computer assisted interviewing programme. Where a young person may not wish to complete the computerised questionnaires the Viewpoint worker will meet with them for a discussion to gain their views. The young person’s answers and feedback are then provided direct to their IRO, social worker and team manager in order to inform their review and contribute towards the care planning. Appendix 1 and 2 of this report provide case examples of where Viewpoint has resulted in a positive outcome in a case they have worked with in the year.

4.10.6 Viewpoint workers will offer to meet any young person aged 4 to 18 who wish to participate including those with disabilities, those subject to short breaks, those subject to pre Adoption reviews, children placed out of area and children remanded to secure accommodation. Viewpoint is also offered to children subject to Private Fostering arrangements. The computerised questionnaires allow the child, if they wish, to present their views both positive and negative, in respect of their full time or respite care. The questionnaires are structured to reflect the age and cognitive ability of the child. Each question is scored to give a statistical profile of the children’s experience and how effectively they are being supported to achieve the five outcomes. Viewpoint is structured in age bands (4 years, 5 – 7 years, 7 – 9 years, 10 – 14 years and 15 years onwards).

4.10.7 Every 6 months a report is provided by the Viewpoint Company that aggregates results from all Viewpoints undertaken over the last 6 month period. The latest report in the year, for the 6 months period between October 2014 and March 2015 showed:

- 316 children and young people completed a Viewpoint questionnaire;
- This is an increase from 279 in the same period in 2012/13 but a slight decrease from 343 in the same period 2013/14

4.10.8 Of the 316 children and young people who completed a Viewpoint in the 6 month period:

- 52% were male and 48% female (166 / 150)
- 5% were 4 years old (16)
- 14% were aged 5-6yrs (45)
- 18% aged 7-9yrs (56)
- 48% aged 10-14yrs (151)
- 15% aged 15yrs or older (48)
Using the Viewpoint Data - Voices for Choices and MALAP

4.10.9 Using the data provided in the 6 monthly report and locally collated information, meetings are held with Newcastle’s Children in Care Council “Voices for Choices” every 6 months to look in more detail at the themes emerging from the Viewpoint findings. The data from Viewpoint reflects children’s views in response to specific questions they have been asked and therefore exploring these findings with the young people in Voices for Choices provides an opportunity to check out whether the findings give an accurate reflection of the views of looked after children and to identify any issues which may have been missed. In addition it provides a process in which to consider how to improve services for looked after children which includes regular feedback from children and young people about the role of the IRO which has then been used to drive improvement. These meetings so far have been very positive and the young people have been keen to express their views and be involved further work.

Currently 480 looked after children and young people in Newcastle
402 are aged 4 - 18 years
316 did at least 1 Viewpoint in the previous 6 months

Most children and young people are positive about their experiences in care in Viewpoint.
Nearly all children say they feel safe in their placements
There are a few things that children and young people are less happy about, that have brought up regularly.

Are the right things talked about at LAC reviews?

Viewpoint tells us that the following are things young people want discussed more

- **Family**
  - Contact with family members, more contact, longer contact, specific family members, specific problems, listen to my preference for going back home or not

- **Where they live**
  - How long will they stay at placement, moving placement, wanting to stay where they are living, wanting to move in with a family member, wanting to go home

- **Planning folder young people**
  - Post-16 plans, independence, how long at placement, what are the plans for the future, when can I go home

- **Other**
  - Acknowledge positives and achievements, support to access hobbies or activities, rules and personal appearance

How long will I be living at my placement and with my carer?

I want to know quickly and clearly: How long will I be staying at placement? When will I be moving placement? Why I can’t stay where they are living? If I can’t or can’t move in with a family member? When I’m going home?

I’m not happy with the contact I get with my family and friends

I want to understand why I can’t have: More contact Longer contact Contact with specific family members I can’t have a preference for going back home or not

4.10.9 The graphic above provides an overview of the detailed results report provided from Viewpoints in the latest period up to the end of March 2015. The results demonstrate that in Newcastle looked after children tell us they are generally happy and feel safe in their placements. However there are a few issues that have been raised consistently by young people. These are shown in the graphic above and include issues around contact with friends and family and being able
to talk to their social workers. Also older children state they don’t wish to attend their LAC reviews and aren’t always happy that the right things are discussed at their review. These results are discussed with Voices for Choices and their feedback along with any actions identified are fed back to MALAP. The information from Viewpoint and Voice for Choices is used through the MALAP, to inform the Corporate Parent Strategy forward plan and therefore impact on service planning and delivery.

4.10.10 The process of meeting with Voices for Choices has developed a strong link between the IRO service and Newcastle’s Children in Care Council and enables them to be integrated into discussions and reviews of the progress and experiences of looked after children and young people. The positive outcomes achieved through Viewpoint have resulted in continued membership of the Investing in Children scheme since 2006.

4.10.11 A case example demonstrating the positive impact of the Viewpoint role can be found at Appendix 1.

Advocacy

4.10.12 In addition to Viewpoint the Unit is committed to promoting independent advocacy for children and young people. Newcastle City Council continues to have a contract with the National Youth Advocacy Service which provides an independent and confidential service. The unit has a responsibility in ensuring that children and young people who are subject to Child Protection Plans and those looked after are aware of the National Youth Advocacy Service and how to access it. In the main the Advocacy Service is accessed by LAC and there are plans in place for 2015/16 to increase its use for children subject to child protection plans.

Signs of Safety Children’s Tools

4.10.13 The Signs of Safety model continues to be implemented as a way of working with children and families. Implementation has seen an increase in use of the Signs of Safety children’s tools and where these are used this has maximised the impact of children and young people’s contribution and supported their involvement in decision making and planning, but also given a real sense of what the child is like and their lived experience. There is also evidence, identified through audit, of positive impact through examples of young people developing their child protection and LAC plans through a range of engagement techniques including direct work with children such as the “3 houses” in order to understand their worries and hopes and aspirations for the future.
Research – Northumbria University

4.10.14 The CSSU through the NSCB is supporting a PhD research study being undertaken by Justine Stewart, a Senior Lecturer at Northumbria University. The Research Topic is “Exploring children and young people’s views about their involvement in child protection conferences”.

4.10.15 The aim of this research study is to explore how children and young people perceive their role in child protection decision making forums. The study is an applied study; concerned with adding to the existing body of knowledge in the area of children’s rights in child protection practice; and to provide evidence for policy development at a local level. It places an emphasis on the role of the lived experience and aims to uphold core principles of social inclusion and social justice.

4.10.16 Justine is aiming to gain the views of children who have recently (within the last three months) attended their initial or review child protection conference. Data collection takes the form of a conversation with the child/young person at a time and location that is convenient to them. Whilst there are a number of themes to be explored, the process is intended to be led by the child/young person. The number involved so far have been dependent on whether children and families are willing to be part of the research and therefore provide consent. To date the numbers have been relatively small and therefore Justine is supplementing the conversations by undertaking an analysis of a sample of key documents for up to 30 children.

4.10.17 Early findings from the research have provided useful feedback and are already being used to improve the way we involve children in their conferences, for example children fed back the importance of planning room layout so they can have a say where they sit and who they sit next to. This has been fed back to IROs to ensure it becomes part of planning for every conference.

4.10.18 The research will continue over the next year and findings will be reported to the NSCB.
4.11 Access to Records and Secure records

4.11.1 The Social Workers Children’s Records ensure excellent standards of access to records including managing and processing all statutory requests. They provide social work support in sharing the record with the data subject, including referring any allegations made during the process and linking the subject to appropriate resources. They are responsible for ensuring senior management, legal services, the insurance section and the press office are aware of any potential complaints arising from access and managing any information required for the above processes. They are also responsible for managing data sharing in respect of historical access requests from all outside and partnership agencies in a secure and auditable manner. They provide training on the management of Subject Access Requests confidentiality and recording for staff, foster carers and students, and respond to both public and internal staff queries in respect of subject access requests.

4.11.2 The secure records post has now been combined with the Senior Practitioner (Children’s records) and in the latest year 2014/15, activities undertaken have included:

- Providing historical information in relation to allegations against staff for the LADO and complex abuse meetings
- Taking part in case audits for the NSCB Standards and Effectiveness Management Group (SEMG) and other audits as required
- Preparation of chronologies for serious case reviews, management reviews and other learning reviews and participation in those reviews
- Preparation of Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) reports, management reports and case review reports
- Providing information to CSSU manager in respect of large scale high profile Police investigations into child sexual exploitation
- Designing a process and providing training with CSSU Quality Standards Officer to all Children’s Social Care teams on the use of electronic Life Events Chronologies
- Liaising with and providing information for the authority’s insurers and with legal services in relation to proceedings lodged against CSC
- Providing auditable access for the independent investigators appointed in stage 2 and 3 complaints (historical cases)
- Reviewing and drafting procedures in relation to Secure Records and Access to records
- Providing secure and auditable access for the Police via the CPS protocol and liaising with legal services to ensure appropriate information is made available to the Court within timescales
- Supervision and day to day management of SW’s Access to records
4.12 Local Authority Designed Officer (LADO)

4.12.1 Since September 2011 Newcastle has had a full time dedicated post to carry out the duties of the LADO undertaken by Melanie Scott. The role of the LADO is to provide management and overview of cases where there are allegations against staff who work with children from all agencies. The LADO ensures that advice and information is given to Senior Managers within organisations and monitors the progress and timescales of these cases. The LADO ensures that there is a consistent approach to the application of policy and procedures, when managing allegations, and maintains a secure information database for all allegations. The following provides an overview in relation the numbers of referrals made to the LADO in the year. More detailed information regarding the full spectrum of LADO work in the year is provided in the Annual Report – Local Authority Designated Officer 2014/15.

- The charts above provide data for the actual number of referrals received by the LADO in the 4 year period 1st April 2011 to 31st March 2015, the charts include a monthly and quarterly breakdown of actual numbers received throughout the 4 years. The charts show in the latest statistical year 2014/15, between 1st April 2014 and 31st March 2015, a total of 80 referrals were received by the LADO, a reduction of 20 from 100 in actual numbers from the same period in the previous year 2013/2014.

- The charts below show the breakdown of referrals by organisation type.
4.12.3 The chart above shows the percentage of referrals that were received from which organisation source type. The individual referring organisations have been grouped under the 4 most common sources categories of Local Authority, Education, Health and Other. Referrals from a source categorised as local authority continue to account for the largest proportion of any group, accounting for 46% of all referrals received in the latest year 2014/15. While referrals from this source continue to account for the largest proportion, the actual proportion of referrals they account for has gradually reduced year on year from a high of 59% in 2012/13 to 46% in 2014/15.

4.12.4 Oppositely the proportion of referrals that have been received from an Education source have continued to increase, and in the latest year 2014/15 accounted for 16% of all referrals received by the LADO an increase from 6% in 2012/13 and 11% in the latest year 2013/14.

4.12.5 Referrals received from a source outside the 3 traditional source groups mentioned so far and which fall into the “Other” category continue to account for the second largest proportion of referrals received and have done so for the past 3 years. 36% of referrals received in the latest year were from this category, the same proportion as the previous year 2013/14. In each of the years the single largest proportion of referrals received in this category were from the Police, in the 2014/15 over half, 15 out of the 29 referrals received in this category, were from the police.

LADO evidence of impact

4.12.6 The relationship with Northumbria Police continues to work very well in particular with the Child Abuse Investigation Unit. There has been a good working relationship enabling cases to be resolved as quickly as possible. A Police Officer has been identified to enable the work with Mosques to continue.

4.12.7 The allegations workshops for Foster Carers have worked well. The feedback from Foster Carers demonstrates the procedures are being understood and are reassuring for them. One Foster Carer following the training had an allegation made against them and felt more educated on how the process works which reduced anxieties.

4.12.8 Referrals from private organisations had doubled this year. The breakdown in those organisations includes Private Residential Units and Independent Fostering Agencies. The LADO has briefed all the Residential Units in Newcastle on the allegations procedures and has regular contact with both Local Authority and Private Units. The rise in referrals shows that there is a good understanding of the procedures and reporting incidents.

4.12.9 Timescales for cases being resolved has improved further compared to last year with 75% being resolved under a month compared to 69% last year. The
majority of these cases are resolved within days. The more complex cases may take longer to resolve. 13% of cases were resolved in under 3 months which is a reduction compared to 23% last year. This demonstrates that cases are dealt with in a timely manner and that the consistent use of the procedures does not allow cases to be delayed for unnecessary periods of time. Those cases that take longer to resolve are usually cases where there is a police investigation and electronic devices need to be examined. Other cases that take longer to resolve may involve more than one alleged perpetrator or more than one alleged victim.

4.13 Signs of Safety (SoS)

4.13.1 The Signs of Safety model continues to be implemented as a way of working with children and families in Newcastle.

4.13.2 Training is now delivered in house which includes the children’s tools. In addition targeted consultancy support continues to be commissioned and provided for identified practice leads, which also provides a close link to the Signs of Safety Innovations Project (Munro, Turnell and Murphy).

4.13.3 Signs of Safety was initially implemented within Initial Children Protection Conferences where there had been a previous plan, this was following a successful pilot and was a step approved by the NSCB. The move to using this approach in conferences resulted in good feedback from both professionals and families attending the conferences, particularly in relation to feeling more engaged in the process and to being clear about expectations. From October 2014 Signs of Safety was implemented within all Child Protection Conferences. Whilst in the main feedback has been positive it was recognised that IROs needed to have a different skills set for conferences based on the SoS approach and therefore more bespoke training to compliment the SoS training already provided. A development day was therefore held for the IROs facilitated by an Independent Consultant who as part of the SoS Innovations Project specialises in implementing SoS in conferences. The day had a great impact on the IROs and resulted not only in strengthening their SoS skills in conferences, but also to adapting the SoS framework used in the conferences to include scoring the plan with the aim of increasing scrutiny, building more safety into the plan and therefore developing plans that are about intervention to bring about change rather than monitoring.

4.13.4 NSCB training for CP conferences is provided by the NSCB and delivered by IROs. It fully reflects the move to using the Signs of Safety model and captures staff from all settings who may attend child protection conferences as part of their work and their line managers.

4.13.5 There is commitment from Children’s Social Care and the NSCB to use SoS as a way of working with children and families. In addition to child protection conferences, implementation has included the use of the children’s tools in
direct work and it has been embedded in other processes such as the single assessment. There is already evidence to suggest that using SoS is having a positive impact. It is recognised however that to fully implement SoS, requires a whole systems approach in which SoS practice is supported by supervision and ongoing organisational processes that support and embed the model. Whilst Newcastle has made significant progress in its implementation, to make a difference to an agencies practice, culture and outcomes requires commitment to long term implementation and therefore continues to be a priority area as reflected in the CSSU annual delivery plan.

4.14 Management oversight and quality assurance

4.14.1 As part of the monitoring function IROs have a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority’s function as a corporate parent and identify any areas of poor practice. This includes identifying any concerns in relation to individual cases, an example of the effectiveness of the IRO role can be found at Appendix 5. Equally important IROs should recognise and report on good practice.

4.14.2 Through SEMG the Unit is involved in regular themed audits of children subject to child protection plans which has provided scrutiny of the role of the IRO in the care planning process for these children, highlighting any areas of concern or good practice. Audits of second and subsequent plans by SEMG in October 2014 directly involved IROs in understanding the many factors involved which then led to changes in practice.

4.14.3 All children looked after and children subject to child protection plans are allocated a designated IRO from the moment they enter the system with the key aim that the allocated IRO will remain consistent, until the child is no-longer looked after or subject to a Child Protection Plan. An introductory letter is sent to each looked after child when an IRO is allocated. Whilst the aim is to keep any changes of IRO to a minimum this has been a challenge over the last year due to staffing issues including sickness and vacancies and as a result the use of agency staff. Staff have now been recruited to the vacancies and the plan to increase the establishment by 2 fte IROs which will create more stability.

4.14.4 The quality and effectiveness of the IRO service is closely monitored. It was recognised in the previous year that whilst there were good examples of the effectiveness of the IRO role, there was a lack of consistency as to how this was evidenced and no systematic way of collecting and therefore demonstrating the evidence. From November 2014 IRO challenge and feedback data capture forms were introduced. This includes quantitative data such as attendance, participation of children and young people and attendance of professionals. Qualitative information includes feedback on the quality of reports, preparation for conferences by practitioners, evidence of how the child and/or families view have influenced decision making and planning. Specifically for reviews there is feedback on any evidence of drift/delay in the plan. As well as areas of concern IROs are asked to identify any good practice. Forms are
completed by the IROs and provided to Team Managers who are then asked to respond to any issues and any action they have or intend to undertake.

4.14.5 This provides an immediate feedback process for individual cases by IROs, but also demonstrates challenge by the IRO and what action has been taken as a result. It also enables themes to be collated to therefore impact on wider practice both within Children’s Social Care and partner agencies.

4.14.6 Since implementation there has been good evidence of the data captured forms being used by IROs.

4.14.7 Themes emerging include:

- Conference reports are not consistently shared by partner agencies with families prior to conference
- Attendance at conference by parents was reported to be good. Data captured showed that for 135 conferences at least one parent was in attendance (87%)
- In the majority of cases feedback was positive in relation to families views being heard and used to influence planning, where this was not the case tended to be when they were not present
- In the majority of cases feedback was positive in relation to core group minutes provided to conference and there were some good examples of where they included Signs of Safety analysis and proposed risk statement and clear evidence of how the plan had progressed. Where the feedback was less positive was in relation to review conferences where in some cases no minutes were provided, were too brief or did not set out clearly what had been achieved
- The majority of feedback was in relation to social workers, however in some cases a lack of reports from partner agencies was a concern
- Where reports were provided by partner agencies these were found to be of good quality and helpful in discussing risks
- Around 16% of children were recorded as attending their conference, however a large number were highlighted as too young to attend by the IRO
- The views of children and young people were evidenced in approximately 53% of conferences, however there were good examples highlighted where the views of young people had been gathered and used to inform the decision making in the conference

4.14.8 This has clearly improved the way we can evidence the impact of the IRO role and has contributed to strengthening the role. It has been difficult however to collate the findings due to the system used. In 2015/16 however we plan to improve this further through a more streamlined recording system which will include capturing the data within ICS making it easier to collate, scrutinise and report. In addition a specific ‘IRO oversight function’ will be developed within the child’s records so that IRO activity is easy to identify and report. These
developments will cover both children subject to Child Protection Plans and LAC.

4.14.9 Whilst an outline of the key themes has been provided for the purpose of this report, a full report will be provided to the NSCB.

4.15 Dispute Resolution Process

4.15.1 One of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. IROs within Newcastle continue to have positive working relationships with social workers and team managers of the children for whom they are responsible. Where problems are identified in relation to a child’s case for example in relation to care planning, resources or poor practice, the IRO will, in the first instance, seek to resolve the issue informally with the social worker or the social workers manager. If the matter is not resolved in a timescale that is appropriate to the child’s needs, the IRO will consider taking formal action through the dispute resolution process.

4.15.2 The dispute resolution process has been received well and staff together with IROs recognise that any problems or concerns regarding care plans need to be addressed initially through negotiation before instigating the dispute resolution process.

4.15.3 The dispute resolution process gives weight and strength to the role of the IRO and emphasises the need for the IRO to be accountable for the recommendations that are made at reviews. IROs will refer to the process when actions or recommendations have not been followed up on behalf of a child/young person or where care plans have been delayed and whilst in the main the majority are dealt with at Social Worker/Team Manager level, there are some examples of where there has been escalation to Service Manager and also to the Assistant Director.

4.15.4 An example of where an IRO has used the Dispute Resolution Process can be found at Appendix 3.

Independent legal advice

4.15.5 The CSSU has had Independent Legal advice available for the IROs since October 2011 when a reciprocal arrangement was put in place between Newcastle, North Tyneside and Northumberland. When this legal advice has been accessed by the IROs it has been incredibly useful in providing an independent view which in some cases has supported the IROs view of the case which has been opposed that of the LA solicitor, or has proved useful in providing legal advice which has then lead to the IRO requesting action that would strengthen the plan for the child. An example is provided at Appendix 2.
5. Key priorities for 2015/16

5.1 The CSSU identifies its annual priorities through a number of different sources which includes learning from audits, Serious Case Reviews, Appreciative Inquires, research, inspection, legislation and guidance.

5.2 The key priorities for the 2015/16 include:

1. **Effectiveness of IRO role** - including oversight of cases, leading to robust plans and avoidance of unnecessary delay.

2. **Children’s Voices influence planning for their future** – ensuring the voices of children inform all aspects of planning and decision making but also service improvement.

3. **Management oversight of IRO/LADO** – to provide assurance of the quality of the IRO/LADO service taking prompt action to rectify any poor performance.

4. **Ensuring safeguarding processes are fit for purpose** – including foster carer reviews, Decision Making Conferences, Disruption Meetings and a review of the implementation of Signs of Safety.

5. **Training and development and Learning** – so that CSSU staff continuously improve and develop, and use an evidenced based approach to their work.

6. **Ensuring the CSSUs work informs and is informed by strategic plans and relevant operational groups and processes** – enabling CSSU staff to contribute and respond to the wider agenda.

5.3 These key priorities are supported by a comprehensive delivery plan (see Appendix 6)
6. Overview and Summary

6.1 The unit has continued to make significant steps in implementing improvements in practice, however it has been a challenging year with the impact of high caseloads, staffing issues together with the impact of the large scale police investigation into sexual exploitation. The team has however despite this continued to focus on strengths and opportunities.

6.2 There has been significant progress made with implementation of Signs of Safety in child protection conferences and particularly with use of the children’s tools, with some examples of positive impact. There is a need to continue this improvement to ensure consistency of practice and full implementation in all aspects of our work with children and their families. This is therefore a priority for the forward plan.

6.3 Participation for LAC remains a strength of the Unit with its well embedded Viewpoint Programme which is reflected through continued membership of ‘Investing in Children’. There are also strong links between the Unit and Voices for Choices which provides the opportunity for their views to inform the development of services for looked after children. It also provides a forum in which to seek feedback on the effectiveness of the IRO service.

6.4 There has been improvement in the ensuring the participation of children in child protection conferences to influence planning for their future, however the data capture information together with early findings from Northumbria University research indicates this is an area which requires further attention. Whilst the research is providing some good feedback from children subject to child protection plans on the service they receive this is a relatively small cohort of children and therefore a more systematic way of hearing their views is required. This is a priority going forward.

6.5 Whilst the next 12 months will continue to be a challenge, there are some exciting planned developments which will be supported by the increased staffing establishment. The focus of the Unit has always been to strive for improvements in the quality of the service provided to safeguard children, promoting their welfare and in doing so keeping children at the forefront of everything thing we do.

Jayne Forsdike
Service Manager, Children’s Safeguarding Standards Manager

Jon Gaines
Quality Standards Officer
Appendix 1 - Case example – Viewpoint

Background

S is an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker, who arrived in Newcastle in May 2015. S was placed with a foster carer with other young people in the same placement. S had no English Language and was not able to express his feelings or thoughts without the assistance of an Interpreter.

The Viewpoint Worker became involved with S 24 days after his presentation to statutory services in Newcastle. The Viewpoint Worker visited S with the assistance of an Interpreter and the electronic Viewpoint questionnaire.

Intervention

The Viewpoint Worker spent 2 hours with S, supporting him to complete Viewpoint. The questionnaire promoted discussion about how S was feeling and gave him an opportunity to discuss issues of concern to him.

Whilst S was happy with his carer and most aspects of his placement, he did disclose some unhappiness that was related to potential bullying from other young people living in the same home.

S was very upset and disclosed worrying issues relating to other young people in placement. He told the Viewpoint Worker he had felt physically threatened and that he had been hurt by another young person.

S had not disclosed his concerns to his Social Worker or Foster Carer. The time spent with the Viewpoint Worker completing the Viewpoint questionnaire assisted this young person to raise his concerns.

Outcome

With S’s permission, the Viewpoint Worker was able to quickly alert the Foster Carer, Social Worker and Independent Reviewing Officer to his worries and immediate action was taken to ensure S was safe and not being bullied.

At the Visit, the Viewpoint Worker gave S a coloured piece of card and with the assistance of the Interpreter, told S that he should give this card to his Foster Carer should he have any problems. This meant that the Foster Carer would immediately be aware something was wrong, even if the young person could not explain what the problem was straight away.

The Viewpoint Worker visited S again 2 months after the initial visit to be greeted by the young person at the door. S was visibly much happier and things in placement had significantly improved. When asked to describe how things were in placement 2 months on, S said “good, good”, with a big smile on his face.
Appendix 2 - Case example – IRO

Background

Child (A) 10 years old living at home with both parents Mr E and Ms W. Long history of domestic violence, mother has presented at A&E twice with orbital fractures to her face and there has been evidence of bruising to Ms E on numerous occasions but very few CCN’s submitted and little police information. However more recently Ms W did make a statement to the police regarding an assault by Mr E which she then retracted prior to conference.

The social worker was concerned about the couple’s lack of engagement, Ms W’s vulnerability and fear of her partner. Also Mr E’s hostile presentation, denial of any of the issues and the fact he had recently built a 6 foot fence around his property and had installed security cameras which professionals found intimidating when trying to visit the home.

ICPC convened due to concerns around Domestic Violence and A’s physical and emotional safety while living in the home.

A split conference had been planned to allow Ms W to speak more freely about what she had experienced. However when the couple arrived for the meeting Ms W presented as distressed and terrified stating that she would only come into the meeting with Mr E and refused to speak with professionals alone.

The IRO decided to proceed with the conference on this basis but was aware that it would not be possible to discussed / disclosed all of the concerns as this could put Ms W and A at further risk of harm. Mr E presented as angry and defensive so security were alerted to the possibility they may need to intervene.

It became apparent during the conference that an effective safety plan had not been implemented between the Strategy Meeting and the Initial Conference taking place and few protective factors were evident to safeguard A. Ms W was visibly afraid and her reliance upon her partner became clear when she disclosed that she struggled with basic numeracy and literacy.

A decision was taken to put A on a Child Protection Plan. A plan was put together however due to the parent’s denial of the issues and full disclosure of information being inhibited due to concerns for A and Mr W’s safety, the plan did not fully reflect all of the concerns.

IRO Intervention

Following the conference the IRO advised the social worker to speak with her manager about obtaining an EPO/PPO given there was no safety plan in place.
The IRO met with the team manager and service manager and it was their view that the grounds for an EPO/PPO would not be met. A prosecution of Mr E following an alleged assault was not pursued by police but instead a 28 day DVPO was issued which provided only temporary protection and which Mr E breached. It was proposed that a legal planning meeting would take place the following morning.

Following the Legal Planning meeting the Local Authority Legal Representative again advised that the grounds for an EPO were not met and that the situation should be closely monitored and should anything change a further legal meeting could be convened.

The IRO then took the decision to seek independent legal advice. The independent legal advisor felt that if the family were not cooperating with the professionals then the best course of action would be to request an abridged Interim Care Order hearing so that A could be accommodated while assessments of the parents could be completed.

Outcome

Following seeking legal advice the IRO met again with the service manager and the social worker to discuss the legal advice and the progress of the case and again expressed concerns about the plan.

The case was then prioritised and allocated to the Family Insights Team specialising in working intensively with families where the main issue was Domestic Violence. The manager and social worker were then able to illustrate to the IRO a clear plan of working and explained in detail how they had for the first time been able to engage with Mr E and talk with the couple honestly and in a safe way about the real issues at hand. The social worker provided in writing a clear rationale around the work that was being undertaken and how A’s views were being sought. Mr E had also agreed to A being spoken to separately by the social worker which was felt to be a huge step forward.

The IRO agreed that given the family had begun to engage in a meaningful way the level of risk had decreased. However requested that she be kept updated of any significant changes to the family’s circumstances and should there be any deterioration in the situation she would again be pressing for the Local Authority to instigate legal proceedings.
Appendix 3 - Case example – IRO

Background

Two boys in long term foster care S and S (aged 8 and 10 years). At a 6 month LAC review both boys asked if they could have a passport so they could go on holiday with their foster carer. This was included as an action on the LAC plan with a timescale of 1 month. Following the review the IRO contacted the social workers manager to ask that the social worker was supported to make this a priority task as it had been outstanding for some time.

At the next review passports still had not been obtained. At this review S (aged 10) gave his IRO a letter asking if he could please have a passport as he was going on a school trip in 3 months and was worried he would miss out.

IRO Intervention

Having already spoken to the social worker and her manager previously and made them aware of the issue, following the review the IRO immediately initiated the Dispute Resolution Process. The IRO sent a formal letter to the social worker and her manager asking for a clear action plan to be provided within 5 working days detailing how the issue of the passports would be resolved. A response was received within this timescale outlining a plan whereby a Family Support Worker would be allocated this specific task and would apply for an emergency passport and attend the local passport office in person with the paperwork. A timescale of 2 weeks was given.

Unfortunately the process was complicated by the fact that the boy’s birth mother had changed her name by deed pole and was not known by her name on her birth certificate. As a result the maternal grandmother’s birth certificate was also required and she too had a different name to that on her birth certificate. The social worker explained to the IRO that this contributed to further delay and as such the passport was not obtained within the agreed timescale.

While the IRO acknowledged that this was an unusually complex circumstances she made it clear that had the task been actioned when first raised this could have been resolved in due course and not put the S’s school trip to France in jeopardy.

The IRO then requested a meeting with the service manager. In discussion with the service manager it was acknowledged that it was unacceptable that a child should be worried about missing out on a school trip due to a social worker not carrying out an agreed task. It was also identified by the service manager that it was not just S but a number of LAC children who were without passports.

The service manager agreed to do everything to make S’s passport application a priority and make sure he had it in time for his trip.
**Outcome**

The family support worker was given protected time to visit family members and obtain the relevant documents before taking the paperwork in person to the passport office and waiting for the passports to be issued for both boys. The passports were then delivered to the foster carers in time for S’s school trip.

S went on his first trip abroad with his class to France and since then both boys enjoyed their first family holiday abroad with their foster carer.

The service manager agreed to audit all looked after children in the service to see how many were without passports. This data was then communicated to the social workers and IRO’s so this could be addressed as a priority at each child’s upcoming review.
Appendix 4 - Case example – IRO

Background

R is a 13 year old girl, known to children’s social care since she was 3 as a result of concerns about her mother’s alcohol abuse and inconsistent engagement with services. R has been accommodated in the past for short periods while her mother accesses services, and has stayed with family members. R was referred when she told her school that her mother had not been home for a number of days and was drinking heavily before she left. A strategy meeting took place and an ICPC was convened.

Intervention

The IRO contacted the social worker before the conference to discuss the background and whether R wished to attend. It was agreed that the social worker would discuss this with R and arrange for her to meet the IRO before the meeting start time. R’s parent remained out of contact at that time and were not aware that the conference was taking place, issues about parental consent were discussed and it was agreed that legal advice should be sought, but that R’s participation should be promoted even if we were unable to secure parental approval.

R’s mum was located the day before the conference and advised that the meeting was taking place and of where R was staying, however her presentation suggested intoxication and the social worker was concerned that she had not fully understood the discussion. Mum was offered the chance to come to the conference at a later time as R did not want to be in a room with her at that time, however she did not attend.

IRO met with R before the conference with her social worker, R was happy to talk in the meeting about her wishes and feelings and at the time was angry with her mum for abandoning her. She wanted to ask professionals to help her find somewhere else to live for the rest of her childhood so that she didn’t need to look after herself anymore.

Throughout the meeting the IRO ensured that R had the opportunity to comment on information shared by professionals and that she was able to express her views. When asked about her wishes for the future R paused, and that the IRO asked if she would like the IRO to share the discussion we had before the meeting, she agreed to this and then added details herself.

When discussing risk and a risk statement, R was able to say her greatest fear was that her mum would be hurt or killed when drinking and she would not be able to stop it.

Outcome

R was a confident and capable child who with a little support and encouragement was able to present her views and wishes directly to professionals working with her and her mother.
R was accommodated shortly after the meeting with her mother’s agreement.

The risk statement and plan agreed at conference were based on R’s expressed views and fears as well as her wishes for the future and she was empowered to continue to participate in all her future LAC reviews and agreed the agenda for each meeting with the IRO beforehand.
Appendix 5 - Case example – IRO

Background

The 6 Y children had been subject to a Child Protection Plan for over 18 months. The children had a wide range of needs including complex health issues. Concerns had developed for some months prior to the initial conference and centred on the mother’s ability to meet her children’s needs, particularly in relation to their health and development. Professionals were conscious that the challenge of caring for 6 children as a single parent was considerable and had sought to provide a range of supports.

Professionals were satisfied that whilst there were ongoing concerns the children were not at immediate risk of harm and that with support the children were safe at home. This fact had encouraged decisions to maintain support in order to prevent the children becoming looked after. However, after 10 months on a CP plan it was clear that the case was in danger of drifting. Insufficient change was being achieved and concern began to mount that the children’s lived experience was not at a good enough standard and that this was likely to remain for the long term.

IRO Intervention

There was a change of IRO in time for the 18 month review at which time the duration and efficacy of the plan was to be addressed. Using the Sign of Safety approach the initial IRO working with the mother and professionals had established an effective trajectory within the protection plan. This focused on the need to clarify parenting capacity and mother’s ability to make necessary changes to her parenting and the children’s home environment. It was acknowledged that the range of supports were not sustainable nor sufficient to meet the long term needs of the children.

The new IRO was able to evaluate the assessment work undertaken and during the conference helped professionals identify how the extensive supports put in place had hidden the depth and complexity of the mother’s own needs and abilities. A new trajectory was developed which allowed the core group, including mother, to consider what might happen if the extensive support package was reduced. From leading an open discussion the IRO was able to identify the shared concerns of professionals both about the ongoing needs of the children but also their anxiety about escalating the plan to involve the possible accommodation of the children by the Local Authority.

Outcome

The conference concluded that it was not in the children’s best interests to continue to try to support them at home through the child protection plan. The IRO met with the social worker and team manager to discuss the outcome of the review and to advocate that the children needed to become looked after and consideration given to establishing permanency plans outside the immediate family.
Soon after the conference the 4 youngest children were accommodated and legal proceeding are ongoing. The two oldest children remain at home with specific support plans. They had shown a high degree of opposition to becoming looked after and it was agreed that the plan to accommodate the older children would not be in their best interests.
## CSSU Delivery Plan 2015/16

### Guide to Status Colour Code

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<th>Colour</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<td>Action on track and progressing to plan, no problems that will impact on schedule.</td>
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<td>Red</td>
<td>Major problems and issues threatening the action, behind schedule and not expected to recover.</td>
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<td>Some problems and or delays with the action but expected to recover.</td>
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<td>Complete</td>
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### Priority

1. **Effectiveness of CSSU role - including oversight of cases, leading to robust plans and avoidance of unnecessary delay.**

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<td>Demonstrate through audit and review that appropriate IRO oversight of LAC &amp; CP cases is taking place, identifying any drift or delay and ensuring plans are outcome focused.</td>
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<td>Ensure all IROs are recording their activity on Care First and ensure this is monitored and collated to support service improvement and development.</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU and IRO Team</td>
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<td>Review of CSSU staffing for 15/16</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU</td>
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<td>Identify through audit, review and performance management systems issues that pose a risk to the effectiveness of safeguarding processes and to establish strategies to reduce incidence and impact such as multi-agency engagement, rescheduled meetings/core group preparation.</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU</td>
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<td>Establish a process to support and strengthen communication between IROs and Team Managers</td>
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<td>Develop a system to identify and address cases which are not progressing, to reduce drift and delay</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU/CSC TM</td>
<td>Within current resources</td>
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<td>Develop a consultation / feedback process for children and families involved in the CP / LAC process</td>
<td>IRO Lead</td>
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<td>Strengthen IRO visibility in the pre proceeding and legal proceedings processes, to ensure oversight is maintained.</td>
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<td>Develop the skills and knowledge of the IRO team around children remanded to custody / involved with Youth Offending Team</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU / Service Manager Young People's Services</td>
<td>Within current resources</td>
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### 2. Children’s Voices influence planning for their future – ensuring the voices of children continue to inform all aspects of planning and decision making, but also service improvement

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<td>IROs to link with Voices for Choices to raise awareness of the IRO role through the LAC newsletter</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU/Quality Standards Manger</td>
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<td>IROs to ensure that C&amp;YP are always consulted on the venue of and attendance at LAC Reviews and given the opportunity to meet separately with their IRO and supported in attending their Child Protection Conferences.</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU</td>
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<td>IROs to promote advocacy support for LARs and Service Manager to consider an ‘opt out’ model for advocacy support for young people involved in the CP process.</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU/IROs</td>
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<td>IRO service to apply for Investing in Children membership, identifying any improvements as part of the process.</td>
<td>Investing in Children Team/Service Manager CSSU and IRO Team</td>
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### 3. Management oversight of IRO/LADO – to provide assurance of the quality of the IRO/LADO service taking prompt action to rectify any poor performance.

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<td>Revise the current CP and LAC data collection processes to better evidence the role of the IRO, and gather information about effectiveness of the CP and LAC process, such as:</td>
<td>Quality Standards Officer Service Manager CSSU</td>
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<td>Reporting to NSCB on a quarterly basis data gathered through revision of data collection processes</td>
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<td>Review LADO data collection systems to ensure sufficient data is collected to aid service reporting and development</td>
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<td>Review implementation of Signs of Safety in conferences and supporting processes and identify areas for improvement.</td>
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<td>Review disruption meetings process / procedure and ensure it supports ongoing learning and development / evidence of impact</td>
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<td>Review the Decision Making Conference process and procedure to ensure it supports effective decision making and supports the IROs oversight of LAC cases</td>
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<td>Review the Foster Carer Review process to ensure it is more collaborative, robust and that the impact of reviews can be evidenced</td>
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<td>Review the implementation of the CAFCASS protocol to ensure it is working effectively and that IROs are maintaining oversight of legal proceedings.</td>
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<td>Ensure the LAR procedure supports parental involvement in LARs and that parents are involved outside the meeting when necessary</td>
<td>IRO Lead</td>
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<td>5. Training, development and Learning – so that CSSU staff continuously improve and develop and evidenced based approach to their work</td>
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<td>Identify / establish training programmes that will support and enhance IRO / LADO ability to fulfil their responsibilities, including bespoke SoS training.</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU</td>
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<td>Establish a rolling staff development programme including peer observation / group supervision and input into audits/Appreciative Inquiries (AI) and other learning reviews, to support service improvement and consistency of approach</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU</td>
<td>Within current resources</td>
<td>30/11/15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Support IROs in taking part in regional developments / networks to benefit from shared learning and development</td>
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<td>Ensure data analysis / service user feedback is used to inform training, learning and service improvement.</td>
<td>Service Manager CSSU/Quality Standards Officer</td>
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## 6. Ensuring the CSSU’s work informs and is informed by strategic plans and relevant operational groups and process - enabling CSSU staff to contribute and respond to the wider agenda

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<th>Priority</th>
<th>Action / Activity</th>
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<th>Cost / Resources</th>
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<th>Comment on progress / outcome achieved</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strengthen CSSU engagement in NSCB subgroups</td>
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<td>Strengthen IRO engagement with CPAC</td>
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<td>Ensure IROs are supporting / responding to decisions made at RMG / MALAP and Placement and Resource Panel.</td>
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<td>Ensure the IRO/LADO role is understood through improved publicity and communication</td>
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