

Children, Education and Skills

Children's Safeguarding Standards Unit

Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report

April 2020 to March 2021



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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 directs that the manager of the IRO service 'should produce an annual report for the scrutiny of members of the corporate parenting board'.
- 1.2 This report covers the period April 2020 to March 2021 and provides data and evaluation relating to the IRO Service in Newcastle.

Purpose of Service and National Context

- 1.3 Effective care planning is essential to achieve the best possible outcomes for children in care. In 2004, the role of 'Independent Reviewing Officer' (IRO) was established to monitor the way that local authorities implement plans for children in care and to ensure that the child's wishes and feelings are fully considered. In April 2011, new government regulations and statutory guidance about care planning came into force, which strengthened the IRO's role and provided detailed guidance in the 'IRO Handbook'. The responsibility of the IRO changed from the management of the 'Child in Care Review' process to a wider role with responsibility for monitoring looked after children's cases.
- 1.4 Newcastle City Council also applies the role of the IRO to all children with active Child Protection Plans. The role of IRO was also applied to some children with Child in Need Plans, however, this process ended in August 2020.

2. Role and Function of the Unit

- 2.1 By providing independent oversight of children's cases, IROs endeavour to ensure that all children receive high quality consistent care and safeguards in response to need, abuse and neglect.
- 2.2 Whilst this report focusses on the role of the Independent Reviewing Officers it is useful to clarify the wider role of the CSSU. The unit is responsible for the following statutory functions:
 - The convening and chairing of all child protection conferences
 - The convening and chairing of all reviews for children in care
 - The convening and chairing of reviews for some children in need (up to August 2020)
 - The convening and chairing of reviews for children placed for adoption
 - The convening and chairing of Secure Accommodation Reviews
 - The provision of independent oversight of all CP and Children in Care (CIC) cases and some CIN cases between reviews and conferences
 - The convening and chairing of reviews of Foster Carers
 - Monitoring and reviewing all Private Fostering Arrangements

- The convening and chairing of Assessment, Intervention and Moving On (AIM2) meetings
- Chairing disruption meetings
- Contributing to single and multi-agency training
- Oversight of Mind of My Own (MOMO) and arrangements for Young People's Advocacy and Independent Visitors.

3. Staff Structure and Profile

3.1 Responsibility for the activity and development of the Unit lies with the Service Manager for the Children's Safeguarding Standards Unit, who reports to the Principal Advisor for Children's Social Care. In June 2020 a new IRO Team Manager was appointed, who provides line management support to 10 IROs and supports the development of the IRO Service. The IRO Team Manager reports to the Service Manager for the Children's Standards Unit.

3.2 The current staffing structure includes:

- Service Manager, Children's Safeguarding Standards Unit
- IRO Team Manager (appointed June 2020)
- 14.5 FTE Independent Reviewing Officers

3.3 We have the following specialist roles:

- One IRO provides a dedicated review / oversight service to children placed for adoption
- One IRO undertakes reviews of all children subject to Private Fostering Arrangements
- Three IROs have specialist disability experience.

4. Review of Progress 2020/21

Context

4.1 Our 2019 Focused Visit highlighted two areas where we agreed the need to make progress: the voice of the child and the quality of plans. These featured heavily in the work of the IRO service in 2020/21.

4.2 Following a successful bid to the Department of Education's Strengthening Families – Protecting Children Programme, Newcastle began working with Leeds City Council on our approach to relational and restorative practice from January 2020. The approach is centred on values – how we as professionals view and value the role of families in shaping their own lives, so that families take the lead in addressing the challenges they face. By utilising the families own resources, we can not only reduce the need for statutory involvements in family life, but also help empower families to establish plans to

make changes and support the care of their children, meaning more can stay safely at home. The IRO service has a key role to play in successfully embedding the programme.

- 4.3 In August 2020 the IRO Service benefitted from a detailed peer review. This explored all areas of the IRO service, in terms of structures, resources and practices and provided a detailed action plan to support service improvement. The Peer Review has been the primary driver behind our service development programme since the report was delivered and it will continue to shape our plans across 2021/2022.

Progress against priorities

- 4.4 The following section describes progress against our priorities during the period.

Priority 1 – Voice of the Child

Outcome – The work of all IROs will be informed by a full understanding of the child's lived experience, wishes and feelings. This information will underpin improved outcomes for our children and contribute to the improvement of the service provided by IROs and the CSSU.

- 4.5 The service responded well to the complications of the COVID 19 pandemic and in doing so led to new ways of hearing and responding to the voice of the child. Many children reported positive experiences in engaging with their IRO and with participating in their review via virtual meetings. Many young people were already well versed in the technology and some reported the virtual 'distance' as beneficial, enabling them to feel more relaxed and confident about taking part and sharing their views. Of course, it was particularly difficult for younger children and for those for whom English was not their first language and for some with disabilities and additional communication needs. IROs were mindful of this and endeavoured to support children in sharing their views and shaping their meetings as required.
- 4.6 During the year we strengthened guidance to IROs and other relevant staff across CSC to be more mindful about how children may be involved in their reviews. Where children cannot or choose not to attend reviews, we have seen improved evidence of direct work which brings the voice of the child alive. We have continued to promote the use of Mind of My Own and usage has improved. We also saw improvements in children attending part or all of their child protection meetings and 93% of children in care participating in their reviews.

Priority 2 – People

Outcome – Children and young people will be safeguarded, and their welfare promoted through a robust, highly skilled, reflective effective IRO workforce with robust administrative support, working within a learning culture.

- 4.7 The IRO Team Manager has a particular remit to promote learning and improvement across the service and her appointment has enabled a range of quality assurance processes to be developed. This includes increased use of audit and practice

observations which have found that children continue to be safeguarded and where there are difficulties with aspects of their plans, these are identified and addressed within the child's timescale. The service began to use group supervision, a well-established tool for exploring practice, encouraging the sharing of ideas and developing a more consistent service response.

- 4.8 The service has benefitted from the development of relational and restorative approaches to social work through our work with Leeds City Council. This supports practitioners to reflect on practice and how they involve children and families in the development of plans. This work started during the period under review and was taken further in 2021/22 as relational and restorative approaches became embedded in practice across Newcastle.
- 4.9 A further 4 IROs also took part in the Regional IRO training programme delivered by Edge Hill University. This was alongside the standing training and development opportunities available to staff working for Newcastle City Council.
- 4.10 The Peer Review also supported the service to explore new ways of working to improve outcomes and better manage demand and resources. It has supported change in terms of strengthening focus on priorities and identified new ways of working.

Priority 3 – Practice and Systems

Outcome - Safeguarding children procedures and accompanying information reflect up to date processes, internal arrangements and best practice in order to improve outcomes for our children.

- 4.11 The COVID pandemic required us to adapt quickly and successful systems were established to enable service to continue on a virtual footing. However, the pandemic did not prevent CSSU from pursuing its programme of change and improvement. This has led to improvements in the foster carer review process, improvements to the care planning process for Children in Care and for children on child protection plans.

Priority 4 – Performance Management, Compliance and Quality Assurance

Outcome – Assurance is sought, evidenced and challenged to demonstrate how the IRO service contributes to improved outcomes for our children and young people.

- 4.13 Performance Management has been strengthened significantly through this year with the following activity being undertaken:
- Establishment of an IRO Score Card based on national and local practice issues to inform our improvement journey
 - Monthly 'Practice and Performance Conversations' analysing data and performance information in evaluating the impact of our work
 - Improvement in management oversight, tracking recording is up to date, actions have been taken and plans implemented

- A strengthened approach to independent scrutiny of child protection plans that have lasted for 15 months or more
- Audits of second and subsequent plans identified that professionals can be too simplistic in their approach to working with families who have entrenched issues of drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence and long-term mental illness. However, a follow up audit highlighted improvement with a move to a relational and restorative approach to working with families. The establishment of these family relationships and networks safely reduced the need for statutory intervention and allowed the reality of chronic difficulties to be addressed over time and outside the child protection process.
- Audits also show:
 - Some evidence of Plans that are child focused, engaging families and partners successfully and that are realistic, achievable, and timely
 - Good evidence of IRO engagement and that they are listening to their children, using a variety of methods to do this depending on the needs of the child
- Audits also identified that further work is needed to:
 - Improve consistency and quality of practice around focussed outcomes, with specific actions that provide a clear understanding of what needs to be achieved and within what timescale to minimise the risk of significant harm
 - Highlight the importance of IRO's refreshing themselves with the child's history as this may shape the child's wishes and feelings in the present and the future.

5. Children in Care

5.1 Children in Care activity is measured using the number of children that are 'looked after' by the local authority at the end of the year and the number of children starting and ceasing being looked after during the year. All rates and statistics referred to in this section are taken from data collected internally within Newcastle City Council for 2020-21 and statistics published by the Department for Education for previous years. More detail on the number and make up of Children in Care can be found in Appendix 2.

684
CiC

At 31 March 2021 there were 684 Children in Care in Newcastle, up from 665 at the same time last year.

Of the Children in Care in Newcastle 54% are male and 46% female. 77% are white British (in line with last year) and the highest proportion being 15 years or over.

77%
White British

61%
Full Care
Order

61% were in care under a full Care Order (up from 56% last year), 13% under voluntary 'Section 20' arrangements (down from 16% last year). 17% are under an Interim Care Order (unchanged) and 9% are on a Placement Order (down from 11% last year).

98% of children had their latest review within timescale. In the 6 weeks leading up to 31 March 2021, 89% of children had been seen by their social worker.

98%
Reviews in
time

61%
Abuse/
Neglect

In the second half of 2020-21 61% of children starting to be looked after had a primary need of abuse or neglect. 3% were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

5 of the 108 new Children in Care in this period were entering care for the second or subsequent time.

In the second half of 2020-21 38% of the CYP who left care were subject to a Special Guardianship Order and 14% were adopted. 22% were reunified to their parents or to relatives. This is an unusually high percentage of SGOs and Adoption, and we believe it's been caused in part by developments driven by the COVID-19 pandemic.

38%
SGO

76%
Foster
care

At 31 March, 76% of CiC were in Foster placements and 67% were in in-house foster places.

8.5% had more than 2 placements in 2020-21, but 70% had only one placement. 55% of children looked after continuously for 2.5 years have been in the same placement for 2 years or more.

6. Child Protection

- 6.1 Child Protection activity is measured using the number of children on child protection plans at the end of the year and the number of children starting and ending plans during the year.
- 6.2 All rates and statistics referred to in this section are taken from data collected internally within Newcastle City Council for 2020-21 and statistics published by the Department for Education for previous years. Further details on child protection numbers can be found in Appendix 2.

342
CP Plans

At 31 March 2021 there were 342 children with a CP Plan in Newcastle. This is the down from 586 at the end of 2019-20. 6 of the children had been on plans for more than 2 years.

In the last 6 months of 2020-21 there were 49 new plans per 10,000 children aged under 17, this is a notable reduction over the previous two years (at 124 and 114) and now below our comparator authorities.

49 per
10,000
Starting

73%
White
British

Children on CP Plans in Newcastle are predominantly white British (73%) with the highest proportion being under 2 years old. 18 unborn children were subject to a CP Plan at 31 March 2021.

21% of the children starting a CP Plan in the last six months of 2020-21 had previously been the subject of a CP Plan. This is slightly lower than previous years but is in line with statistical neighbour and national comparators.

21%
Repeat

**Emotional
abuse and
Neglect**

80% of children are placed on CP Plans due to emotional abuse and/or neglect and this is reflective of similar trends across England.

At 31 March 2021 85% of children had been seen in the last 4 weeks. 47% of children had been seen alone.

85%
visited

3%
2+ years

Of the children that ceased to be the subject of a CP Plan during the last six months of 2020-21 4% ended after a period of 2 years or more. The majority of CP Plans lasted between 6 and 24 months. 14% of plans ended after less than 3 months.

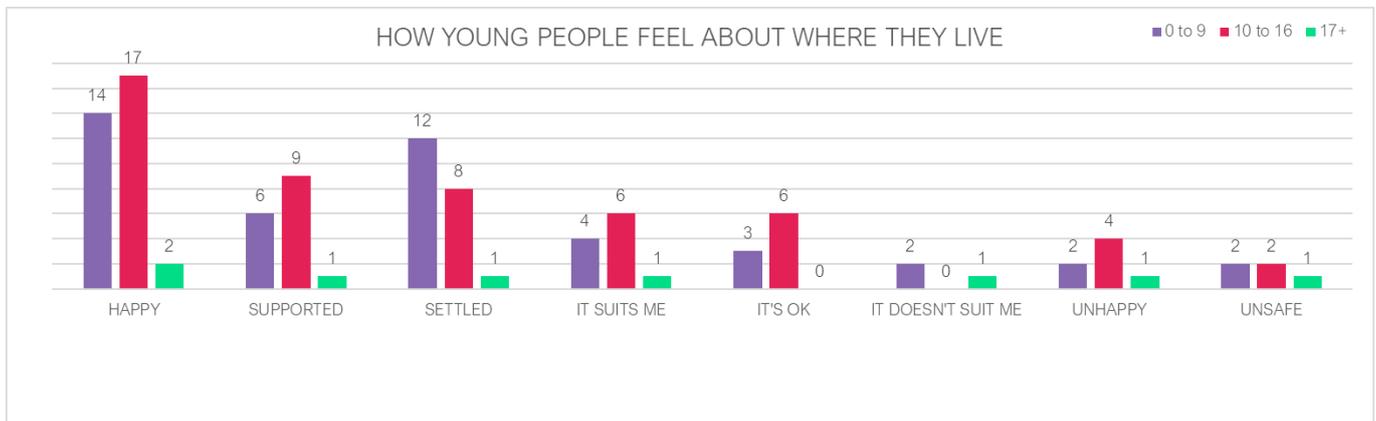
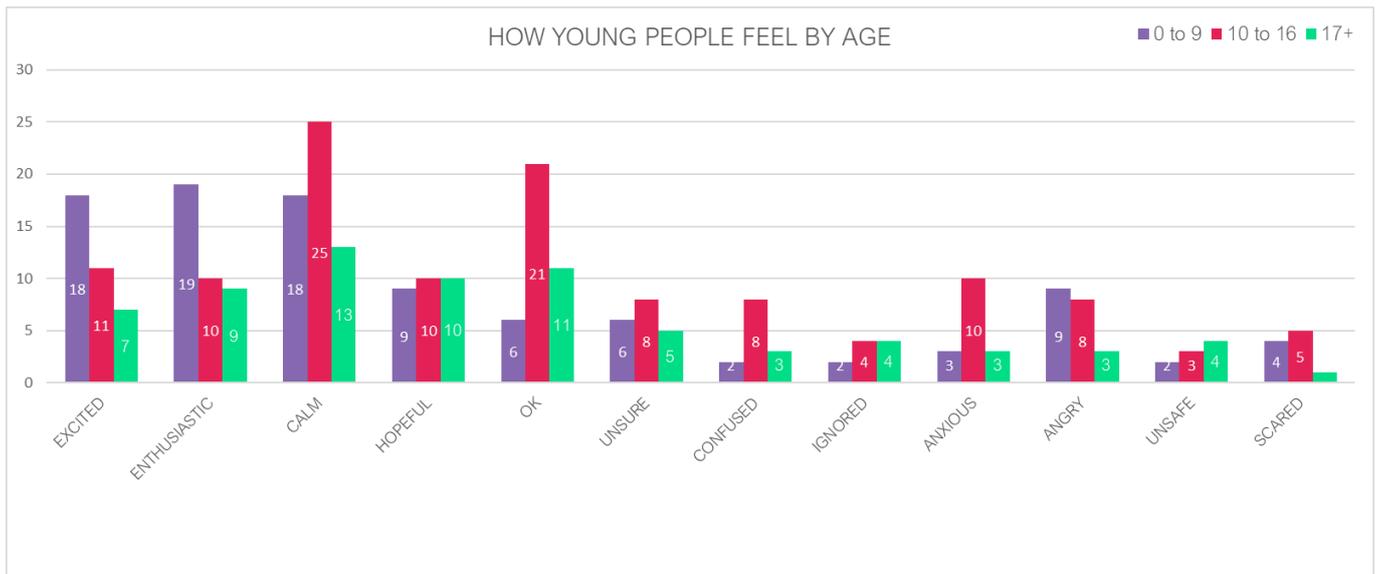
7. Child's Voice

Advocacy

- 7.1 IROs have a specific responsibility to ensure looked after children are aware of their right to access advocacy services. This is an issue that must be addressed at every looked after and child protection review. In Newcastle advocacy is available to all children active to Children's Social Care and as such is considered in Child in Need Reviews chaired by IROs.
- 7.2 Advocacy can play an important role in ensuring the child's voice is heard and that their complaints or concerns are addressed within a reasonable timescale. Newcastle remains the highest user of advocacy services across the sub-regional contract area, but service take up fell to 76 referrals within the year. There was a marked downturn in referrals during the lock down period, at a time when there was perhaps an even greater need to ensure the voice of children is captured. Advice and guidance were provided to ensure all relevant staff and IROs in particular were promoting the use of advocacy. The Advocacy provider, NYAS has visited the IRO team and all social work teams to ensure the role is fully understood. There has also been increased awareness of advocacy services shared with our Special Educational Needs services and Early Help Services to help embed its use across the Children, Education and Skills Directorate.

Mind of My Own (MOMO)

- 7.3 All children active to Children's Social Care (CSC) are supported to use the Mind of My Own participation app. All CSC staff can also access 'workers' accounts' through which they can help younger children or others with additional needs to use MOMO to register their views and send messages to nominated people, including their IROs. MOMO enables children to share their views at a time of their choosing. The tool can also be used to support children in the assessment, planning and review processes. Children can express their views about what they wish, some examples of data collected is shown below for the period April 2020 to March 2021.



7.4 Most of the statements received have been positive and reflect the children’s satisfaction with their care arrangements. Where concerns have been identified this has been shared with relevant staff to ensure any issues can be explored and resolved.

7.5 There is a MOMO Steering Group which focusses on ensuring the service is used by as many children as possible to help staff use the system effectively with children, to support participation in the assessment, planning and review processes and to ensure the voice of the child and their lived experience is captured, understood and used.

Independent Visitors

7.6 This is a service provided to Children in Care intended to provide opportunities for positive activities but also for the young people to make positive relationships and develop their social skills. Children and young people can be matched with independent visitors for the duration of their childhood, meaning the relationship can last several years.

7.7 Whilst the number of children and young people taking up the service is low, practitioners are confident that those that require the service have been referred. At the year-end

there were 17 young people matched, with a further 4 waiting to be matched. Newcastle has the highest number of matches in the sub regional arrangement (involving 6 north east authorities). This will remain a key area of focus for IROs within their review and oversight functions.

Children’s involvement in their reviews

- 7.8 Reviews are an important opportunity for Children in Care to have their say about the care that they receive. During 2020-21 98% of reviews happened in the statutory timescales and 93% of children participated in their review in some way.
- 7.9 During 2020-21, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, more reviews were held virtually, but this led to increased active participation by children in their reviews. In Performance and Practice Conversations IROs reported that children told them that they felt more comfortable in this environment. IROs reflected that they were moving into an environment where children were already comfortable even though it was new to the professionals

8. Challenge and Escalation

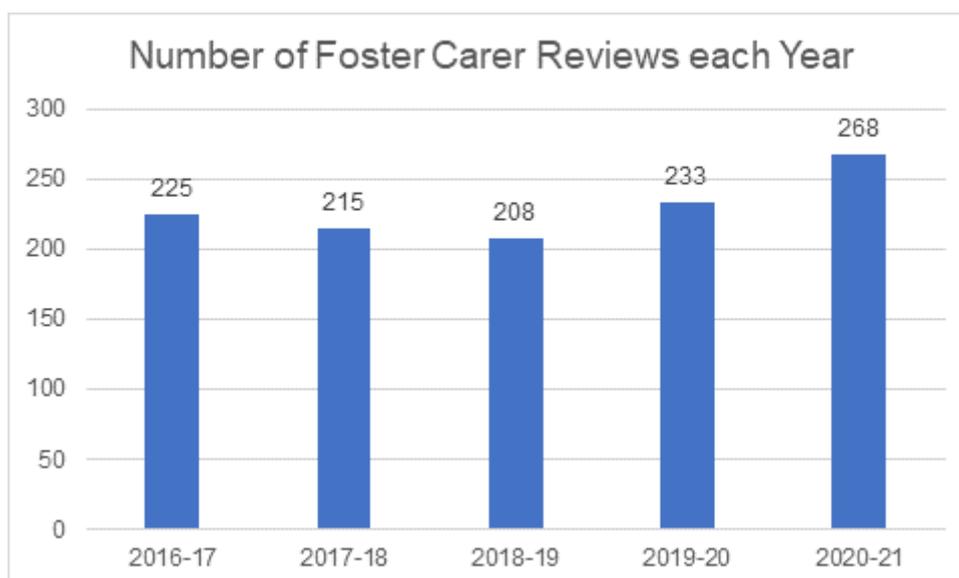
- 8.1 Challenge and escalation are key aspects of the IROs role. Whilst the aim is always to work closely with the social worker and others there are times when it is expected IROs will highlight issues and concerns and escalate these to managers. This is typically where there is drift or delay or a disagreement about a child’s plan.
- 8.2 The data below provides an indication of actions IROs took to raise concerns using the formal Case Discussion and Escalation Process (formally known as DRP). However, most challenge takes place in the form of informal case discussions. IROs work closely with social workers and team managers and are engaged in regular discussion about children’s plans and it is through these discussions that any differences of opinion are resolved.

Reason for CDEP forms starting each month							
Starting Month	1. Assessment	2. Care Planning	3. Drift / Delay	4. Non allocation	5. Meeting stood down	6. Absence of Childs	Total
APR-2020	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
JUN-2020	0	0	2	0	0	0	2
JUL-2020	0	2	4	0	0	0	6
AUG-2020	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
SEP-2020	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
OCT-2020	1	0	1	0	1	0	3
NOV-2020	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
JAN-2021	0	1	2	0	0	0	3
FEB-2021	1	1	2	0	0	0	4
MAR-2021	1	0	1	0	0	0	2

- 8.3 The data shows that the number of CDEP varies, along with the reason. The main area for challenge is drift and delay. This might encompass delay in achieving key tasks around a child’s plan or in completing tasks to enable a review meeting to proceed within the child’s timescale. The system requires notified managers to respond within 5 working days and if the matter is not resolved it is escalated to the next person in the line management arrangement.
- 8.4 In most cases areas of dispute are clarified at an early stage and resolution is achieved. It is rare for escalations to go above Service Manager level and in almost all cases, disputes are resolved by the sharing of information and clarifying rationale for actions taken. Where there is delay in responding to the CDEP process this is escalated to the Service Manager for CSSU who will address it with colleagues in Social Care.

9. Other areas of CSSU activity

Foster Carer Reviews



- 9.1 The above table shows the number of foster carer reviews completed for each of the last 5 years. All foster carers should receive at least one review per year, and this informs decisions regarding their fitness to continue to foster. Almost all the reviews for 2020/21 were positive with any issues raised with fostering services and addressed. A small number of issues were identified, such as those identified through the LADO process.

10. Private Fostering

- 10.1 Numbers of private fostering arrangements have been low in Newcastle, as they have nationally. Two private fostering arrangements were assessed during 2020/21. The process was overseen by the nominated IRO for Private Fostering and the assessments

and plans were completed as required. The reviews indicated that the arrangements were robust and suitable to meet the children's needs.

- 10.2 There has been continued work to raise awareness and understanding of private fostering across the city. This includes discussion with schools, health visitors and social workers to ensure they understand the expectations in place to notify the local authority of private fostering arrangements in place. Information is available on the Newcastle Safeguarding Children Partnership (NSCP) website and leaflets have been shared across all relevant agencies.
- 10.3 NSCP and CSSU updated its guidance and shared this across the partnership. The Partnership continues to offer training on private fostering. This will continue to be monitored and reviewed in order to build upon the improvement achieved over the last year.

11. Summary

11.1 2020/21 has seen:

- Work to roll out relational and restorative practice with a particular emphasis on the IRO service. E.g. Child Protection Conferences are now being ran to reflect our focus on relationships and working restoratively with families. The meetings start now by focusing on the child and family's strengths, and the IRO's will encourage all services to carefully consider what they feel the risks to the child are, as opposed to practitioner worries.
- A significant reduction in the number of children with a child protection plan. This change reflects carefully considered changes in practice put in place to address the high numbers of child protection plans in Newcastle in recent years.
- The number of children in care over the period has increased from 665 on 31st March 2020 to 684 by 31 March 2021. These figures indicate that the level of support provided to vulnerable children and families has remained high and responsive to need.
- A continued emphasis on learning as we benefitted from a robust independent review – we are already working differently as a result.
- The adoption of new ways of working at pace in response to the pandemic. The IRO service responded well as demonstrated by the high levels of Children in Care involved in their reviews.

12. Priorities

Given progress through 2020/21 and based on a clear understanding of need we will continue to focus on the following four priorities in 2021/22:

→ **Priority 1 - Voice of the Child**

Outcome - The work of all IROs will be informed by a full understanding of the child's lived experience, wishes and feelings. This information will underpin improved outcomes for our children and contribute to the improvement of the service provided by IROs and the CSSU.

→ **Priority 2 – People**

Outcome – Children and young people will be safeguarded, and their welfare promoted through a robust, highly skilled, reflective, effective IRO workforce with robust admin support working within a learning culture.

→ **Priority 3 – Practice and Systems**

Outcome - Safeguarding children procedures and accompanying information reflect up to date processes, internal arrangements and best practice in order to improve outcomes for our children.

→ **Priority 4 – Performance Management, Compliance and Quality Assurance**

Outcome – Assurance is sought, evidenced and challenged to demonstrate how the IRO service contributes to improved outcomes for our children and young people.