

**Safeguarding
Independent
Reviewing Officers
Team
Annual Report
2011/2012**



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1. Foreword

As highlighted by Professor Eileen Munro, ('The Munro Review of Child Protection' February 2011), the underlying principle of an effective child protection system is the welfare and protection of the child. IRO's in Lancashire have independent oversight of the child's case and play a crucial role in the quality assurance of practice. This annual report provides an overview of safeguarding activity and highlights the progress made during 2011/12 in strengthening the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) role within Lancashire. Whilst acknowledging the challenges faced by the service and recognising the areas for development, it also seeks to celebrate achievements and successes in improving outcomes for children in need of protection.

Whilst IRO caseloads are high, good performance has been maintained against national performance indicators, which is a reflection as identified by Ofsted, of child protection cases being well managed. (Inspection of Lancashire's safeguarding and looked after children services, 9th March 2012). The inspection also acknowledged that child protection conferences are chaired effectively and found evidence of good multi-agency work, ensuring child protection plans are progressed.

This annual report provides evidence of effective IRO challenge, ensuring risk is appropriately managed and positive outcomes achieved for children and young people. Feedback from parents and carers provides an insight into the child and family's journey and will be used to further improve practice. The importance of the child and families participation in child protection processes is recognised and revised child protection conference documentation has been piloted in one District. Feedback from children and families was very positive, with information being deemed to be more accessible and easier to understand. Consideration is now being given to the roll out of the pilot documentation across the county. Information leaflets explaining the child protection system have also been revised and launched promoting participation.

A review of the IRO Service has been completed looking at how services can be streamlined to improve the child's journey and minimise changes of IRO. Lancashire is committed to continuous improvement and alongside three other local authorities regionally is part of a Best Practice Network looking at how IRO services can be improved. This will provide a strong foundation to further develop the IRO Service in Lancashire.

2. Purpose of the Annual Report

In March 2010 the Department for Children, Schools & Families (Now Department for Education), published 'The IRO Handbook – statutory guidance for independent reviewing officers and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked after children'.

The guidance places a responsibility on the manager of the Independent Reviewing Officers for children who are looked after to produce an annual report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Board. Whilst there isn't a requirement to produce an annual report in relation to safeguarding, ensuring that children and young people

are safe and effectively protected from physical and emotional harm and neglect is a priority within Lancashire's Children & Young People's Plan.

This is the second safeguarding annual report reviewing the work and findings of the Safeguarding IRO's during the period from the 1st April 2011 to the 31st March 2012. It provides statistical information regarding performance and more qualitative information from the IRO's in relation to themes and trends. It highlights areas of good practice and identifies key challenges and priorities for further development during 2012/13. The report has been approved by the Directorate Leadership Team (DLT) and will be shared with the Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), the Children's Trust and the Corporate Parenting Board. It will also be made available to the public.

3. The Legal Framework

Lancashire has had an Independent Reviewing Officer service in place since 1999, responsible for chairing looked after children reviews, child protection conferences and a range of specialist strategy meetings, including allegations against people working with children, suspected cases of fabricated/induced illness, child sexual exploitation, children looked after missing from care, children looked after who display sexually harmful behaviour towards other children and cases of serious self harm of children who are looked after. Prior to their role being established these meetings were chaired by the team managers responsible for the child's case.

The role of the Safeguarding IRO is governed primarily by 'The Children Act' (1989), 'The Children Act' (2004) and Government Guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (2010). They also work in accordance with 'Lancashire's Safeguarding Children Procedures' (Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board).

4. The role of the Safeguarding IRO in Lancashire

Following the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 Lancashire Children's Services made the decision to separate the IRO Team creating the specialist roles of Children Looked After (CLA) IRO and Safeguarding IRO to ensure a robust approach to both the review of care plans for children who are looked after and child protection plans for children in need of protection. Respective IROs in each service have therefore been able to focus and develop their knowledge and skills base.

However, changes introduced by the IRO Handbook and feedback from children and families within the Munro Review of Child Protection have highlighted the importance of continuity of professional relationships and a single care planning process. Over the last 12 months there have also been changes in service needs, (reflecting a decrease in the number of children subject to a child protection plan and an increase in the number of children looked after). This has impacted on IRO capacity, particularly within the CLA IRO team as identified by Ofsted in their recent inspection of Lancashire's safeguarding and looked after children services. Following a review of the IRO Service a decision has therefore been made to combine the roles once

more in order to ensure continuity of IRO for the child throughout their journey of involvement with Children's Services and more equitable caseloads.

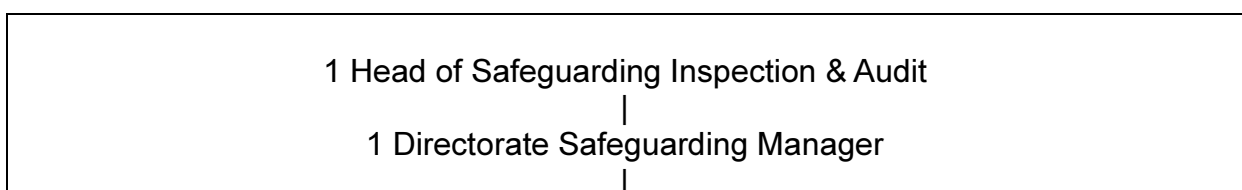
4.1 Overview of the Safeguarding IRO functions:

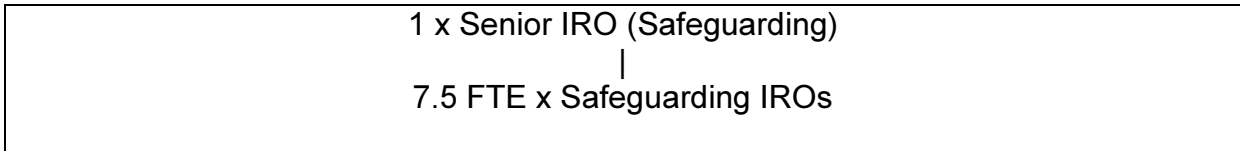
The key role of the Safeguarding IRO is:

- To undertake the local authorities responsibilities in respect of the chairing, management and administration of child protection conferences, in accordance with *'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (2010)*.
- To undertake the local authority's responsibilities in the chairing of strategy meetings in relation to looked after children, fabricated/induced illness, child sexual exploitation and allegations against people working with children. These are undertaken in accordance with the Lancashire Safeguarding Children Procedures (LSCB) and the Lancashire Children's Social Care Procedures.
- To maintain high standards at child protection conferences and strategy meetings, ensuring that the meeting is focused on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child.
- To maintain and promote a high level of participation/involvement of children/young people and parents/carers in child protection conferences and to ensure that the voice of the child is heard and given due consideration.
- To provide robust scrutiny and challenge to Children's Social Care in relation to its function and performance ensuring improved outcomes for children and young people.
- To quality assure decision making in respect of S47 enquiries where it is deemed that a child has suffered significant harm and a decision has been made not to convene an initial child protection conference.
- To provide advice on safeguarding issues to practitioners within Children's Social Care and other agencies as necessary. In particular regarding the implementation of safeguarding procedures and to contribute to developments arising from changes in legislation and government guidance.

5. The Safeguarding IRO Team

5.1 Team Structure





The team is managed by a Senior IRO (Safeguarding). The team is part of the Directorate's Safeguarding Unit which also includes the Children Looked After IRO's, Schools Safeguarding, the Local Authority Designated Officer and Child Employment & Entertainment Team.

The Safeguarding Unit is based within the Safeguarding, Inspection & Audit Service which sits within the Specialist Services arm of the Directorate. It is independent of the line management structure of the district social work teams therefore retaining the independence of the IRO's.

The team consists of 2 male and 5.5 female workers. They are all white British, with English as their first language. Given that Lancashire has a large number of black and minority ethnic families, it is recognised that the team is not truly representative of the needs of the community which it serves. However, equal opportunities policies are upheld as part of the recruitment and selection process and there is always a BME panel member where this is required. In a recent recruitment campaign a post had been offered to a BME candidate, however they subsequently turned down the offer to take up an alternative post in Lancashire Children's Social Care.

5.2 Post Qualifying Experience

All IROs in Lancashire are required to have a minimum of five years post qualifying experience and in fact all have in excess of ten years experience. They have all worked in statutory child care settings and several have previous management experience.

The table below details the level of post qualifying experience and length of service as IRO's in Lancashire:

Name	Year of qualification	Year began as IRO	Year began as Senior IRO
Senior IRO	1983	N/A	2011
IRO 1	1995	2004	
IRO 2	1988	2000	
IRO 3	1995	2001	
IRO 4	1999	2010	
IRO 5	1996	2011	
IRO 6	1982	2011	
IRO 7	2000	2011	
IRO 8 (Part-time)	2004	2011	

5.3 Staff Recruitment and Retention Issues

During this twelve month review period the team has been through a period of significant change with 3.5 FTE new IRO's and a Senior IRO being recruited to the team, (the latter in May 2011). Vacancies had arisen for a variety of reasons including growth (part-time vacancy), for personal reasons, and dissatisfaction with the outcome of job evaluation and the Equal Pay Review. Although the IRO's submitted an appeal in respect of their grading this had an unsuccessful outcome.

As an interim measure pending staff taking up these positions 1.5 FTE agency IROs were appointed to increase capacity within the team. Another manager in the Safeguarding Unit also assisted by chairing child protection conferences at this time. By July 2011 the team was fully staffed. Three appointments were internal from within Lancashire County Council and the Senior IRO and one IRO were recruited externally.

The team remained fully staffed until 31st December 2011, when a long standing member of staff retired. Recruitment to this post has been unsuccessful. Offers were made to two candidates who didn't take up the position as they were successful in applications for other posts at a higher salary grade; one with a neighboring authority and one for a Senior Practitioner post within Lancashire Children's Social Care. Both cited the unsuccessful outcome of the IRO EPR appeal as the reason for this.

Following the outcome of job evaluation in Lancashire, IRO's are now paid at the higher end of the social work salary scale. There is concern that this may impact on the ability to recruit experienced candidates to vacancies within the team.

Staff vacancies have impacted on the team's capacity and had led to staff accruing a significant amount of time off in lieu in order to ensure that the service fulfills its statutory requirements in relation to child protection conferences. This position was only tenable in the short term and following approval of a business case by the Director of Specialist Services, 1.5 FTE agency IROs were employed to increase capacity and maintain performance within the team.

In recognition of the capacity issues within the IRO Service, in January 2012 the Directorate Leadership Team (DLT) approved the creation of two additional temporary IRO posts for a period of twelve months. This was in the context of the increasing number of looked after children and IRO caseloads having risen to between 120 and 130. (The IRO Handbook recommends 50 – 70). The posts were temporary, with the aim, in line with Lancashire's Children & Young People's Plan, of reducing the number of children looked after. This will be achieved by ensuring families receive appropriate support at an earlier stage which builds their resilience and prevents the need for children to become looked after by the local authority. This work is evident within the 'Working Together with Families' approach which has already been successful in supporting some children within Lancashire's residential homes to return to the care of their families.

In line with the County Council's HR policies it was agreed that the posts would be ring fenced to staff in the residential service whose jobs were at risk in the residential restructure in order to retain experienced staff. However, difficulties arose in recruiting to these posts due to the differential salary grade and the fact that the posts were temporary.

In March 2012, DLT approved a further request to establish two permanent IRO posts given the additional demands on the IRO Service arising from short breaks, remands and the rise in the number of foster carer's. (The latter are reviewed by the two Fostering IRO's within the team). The additional posts and the amalgamation of the two IRO teams will reduce IRO caseloads.

At the time of writing this report the IRO Service has 2.5 FTE permanent and 2.5 FTE temporary vacancies. Recruitment continues to present major challenges. 2 FTE agency IRO's are currently supporting the Safeguarding IRO Team and secondment opportunities from other services within the Directorate are also being explored.

5.4 Caseloads

The number of children subject to a child protection plan in Lancashire during the year 2011 – 12 ranged from 679 at its highest (August 2011) to 547 at its lowest (March 2012).

Caseloads within the team have varied between 85 and 119 children and young people. This is considerably higher than the recommended caseload size of 50 - 70 in the IRO Handbook (although this guidance is in relation to IRO's for Children Looked After). This is commensurate with the regional and national position, where many local authorities have been unable to achieve caseloads consistent with the handbook. Whilst the child protection conference considers all children within the household which reduces the number of meetings in comparison to the CLA IRO's, these meetings can be large and complex in nature.

A staff vacancy since January 2012 has impacted on IRO caseloads as the team has chaired additional meetings, often necessitating additional travel time across the county. This has reduced the time available for administrative tasks including the sign off of conference and strategy meeting minutes, meaning that performance against timescales for the distribution of these documents has dropped in latter months. This fall in performance has also been a result of work pressures in a number of District based business support teams who distribute minutes. The use of new IT technology is being explored to support the efficient use of IRO time.

There is an expectation that IRO's complete a quality assurance form following each child protection conference. Due to capacity issues within the team this has not been possible. IRO's have therefore prioritised cases requiring escalation where concerns have been identified regarding the progression of the child protection plan. IRO capacity issues are being addressed as outlined above.

6. Performance Information & Safeguarding Activity

During 2011/12 854 initial child protection conferences were held; 2,067 review child protection conferences and 1,078 strategy meetings.

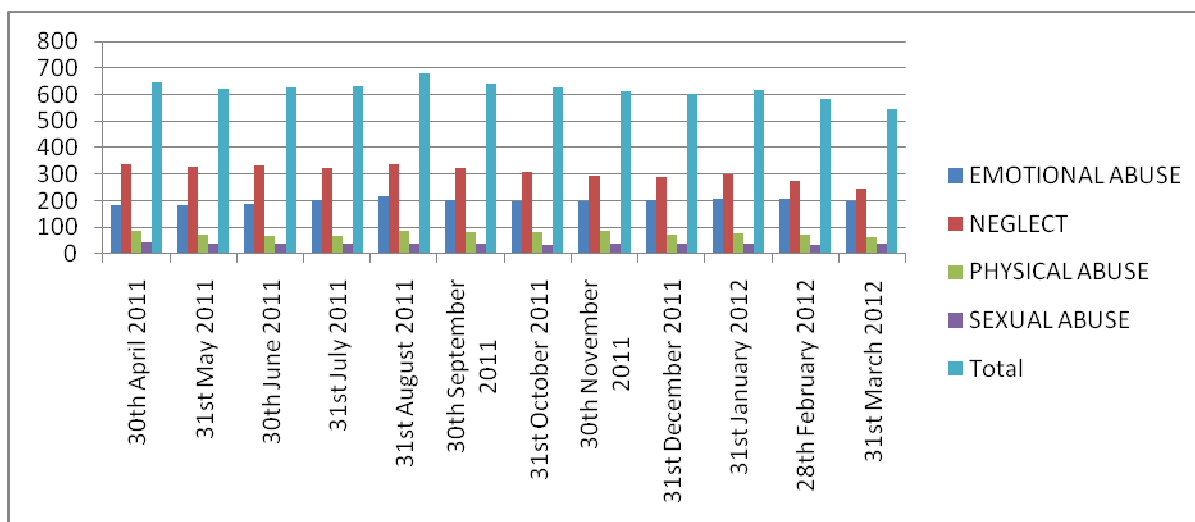
6.1 Child Protection Plans

At the end of March 2012, there were 547 children subject to a child protection plan, a decrease of 126 from the 31st March 2011. This figure equates to 22.36 children per 10,000 of the under 18 population and is below the national average equivalent rate of 35.50 (in 2009/10). Comments made by Ofsted during an inspection of Lancashire's safeguarding and looked after children services in January 2012 may account for this. The report (published on the 9th March 2012) concluded that the Council's child protection service is very well managed. Good performance management and quality assurance systems were said to be in place at both strategic and operational levels. The inspection also highlighted that good multi-agency work ensures child protection plans are progressed effectively. Early intervention and preventative services were also deemed to be good. Services were said to be targeted effectively, for example through children's centres, reaching high numbers of the most deprived children and families in the diverse communities of Lancashire.

6.2 Child Protection Plans by Category of Abuse

The table below gives a breakdown of child protection plans during 2011/12 by category of abuse. This highlights the continuing high prevalence of neglect cases which accounted for more than 45% of all child protection plans. Neglect was also the primary concern in 54% of child protection plans lasting 2 years or more. (See details later in this report). This mirrors national trends.

Number of CP plans at the report end date	30th April 2011	31st May 2011	30th June 2011	31st July 2011	31st August 2011	30th September 2011	31st October 2011	30th November 2011	31st December 2011	31st January 2012	28th February 2012	31st March 2012
EMOTIONAL ABUSE	185	184	187	203	216	200	198	196	200	205	207	199
NEGLECT	338	326	333	325	338	324	310	294	289	297	274	245
PHYSICAL ABUSE	84	73	69	68	86	83	83	85	74	76	70	63
SEXUAL ABUSE	41	40	39	37	39	36	34	36	38	37	32	40
Total	648	623	628	633	679	643	625	611	601	615	583	547



6.3 Performance against National Indicators

Good performance has been maintained against national child protection performance indicators, which is a reflection, as identified by Ofsted, of child protection cases being well managed.

6.3.1 NI 67: Percentage of Review Child Protection Conferences held within timescale

98.90% of children subject to a child protection plan were reviewed within the required timescale. It is acknowledged that there has been a slight drop in performance which is below the target of 100%. However, performance is still in line with the national average (2010/11: 97.1%). The 1.1% of cases where reviews were held beyond the requisite timescale involved ten children. In three conferences (involving four children) this was due to human error. In case 1 (one child) the review was held four days beyond the due date, in case 2 (a sibling group of two) the review was held fifteen days beyond the due date and in case 3 (one child) the review was nine days beyond the due date. In the remaining six cases, the conference had to be rearranged. This decision was made for a variety of reasons including: the absence of a social worker's report; the absence of the family's social worker and the IRO's car breaking down rendering them unable to get to the conference venue; the need for additional information to inform the conference decision in relation to the continuation of the child protection plan and confusion in relation to the conference venue meaning the conference wasn't quorate. In all of these cases the conference was reconvened within 28 days and oversight of the child protection plan was maintained through regular child protection visits and monthly core group meetings.

To address the drop in performance a recovery plan was implemented including a requirement that review child protection conferences are held at a maximum of five month intervals (previously six) from the second review onwards. This then allows a month for the occasions when a conference has to be adjourned for legitimate reasons. For example, to facilitate the families participation, to ensure the conference is quorate or where significant reports/information has not been available. Monthly reports of conference adjournments are now used to monitor the frequency and reason why conferences are adjourned.

6.3.2 NI64: Percentage of children ceasing to be the subject of a Child Protection Plan during the 12 month period who had been subject of a Child Protection Plan for 2 years or more

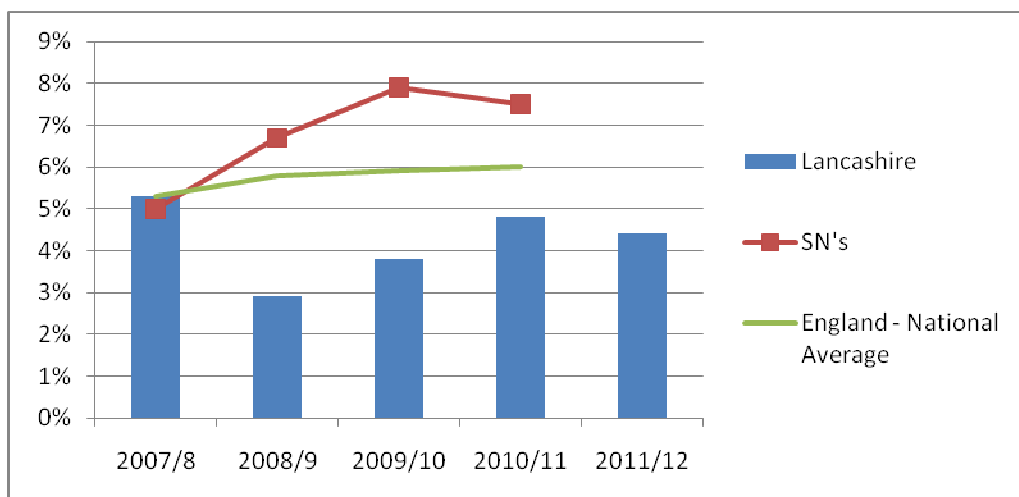
As detailed in the table below the proportion of children with a child protection plan for more than two years has decreased slightly from 4.8% (2010/11) to 4.4% (2011/12) and performance remains well within the top national banding (0<10) for this indicator.

Performance has varied across the nine district teams with the percentage of children ceasing to be subject of a child protection plan after two years ranging from 1.35% in the Lancaster district to 6.82% in South Ribble. It is difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions from this variation apart from saying in the latter that this only represented one case due to the low overall number of children subject to child protection plans in that district. More meaningful may be the figures in the Burnley and Pendle districts where the percentage ceasing to be subject to child protection plans over two years duration were 6.54% and 6.56% respectively. These two districts have seen a rise in long term neglect cases moving into legal proceedings and therefore resulting in the child protection plan being ceased.

It is also important to note that this slight decrease on an already very low figure is perhaps a reflection of the fact that child protection cases are well managed and IROs together with District Managers and Team Managers regularly review all children who have been subject to a child protection plan over twelve months.

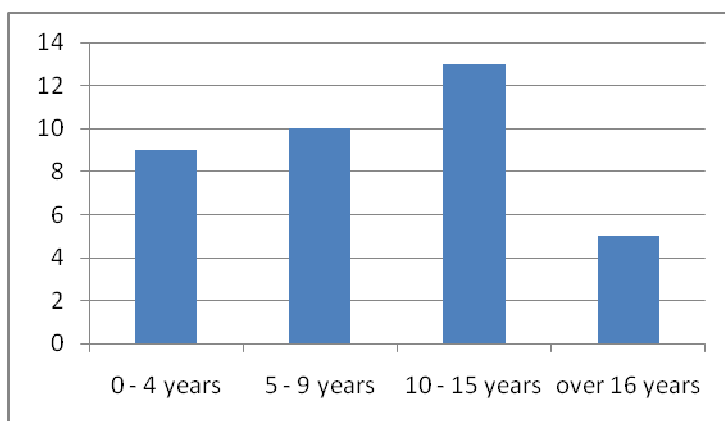
Where progress is not being made to significantly improve the life chances of the child, cases are progressed into proceedings. Where significant improvement has been made the appropriate decision is made to cease the child protection plan. In these circumstances cases are appropriately deescalated to child in need to ensure continuation of support for the family.

	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Lancashire	5.3%	2.9%	3.8%	4.8%	4.4%
SN's	5.0%	6.7%	7.9%	7.5%	
England - National Average	5.3%	5.8%	5.9%	6.0%	



The age breakdown of this cohort is detailed below:

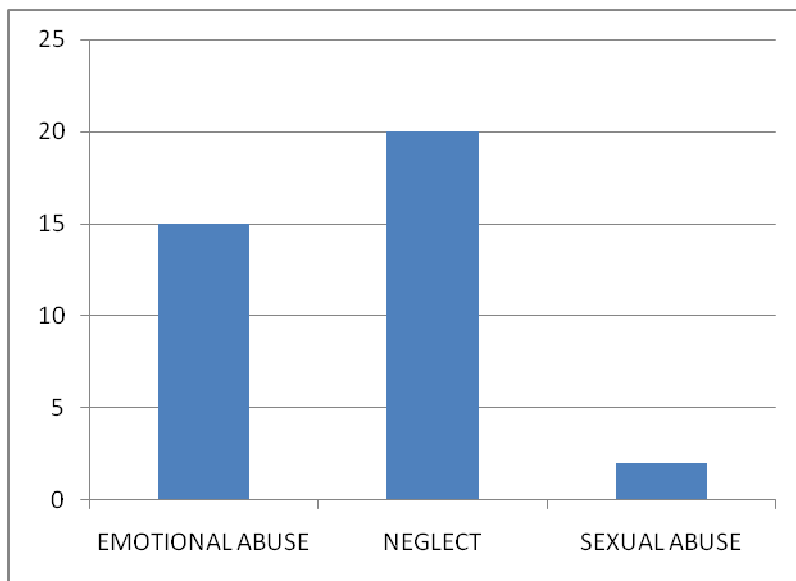
0 - 4 years	9
5 - 9 years	10
10 - 15 years	13
over 16 years	5
Grand Total	37



There is a relatively even spread across the age bandings 0-4, 5-9 and 10-15, with only 5 young people over the age of 16. The average age of the children in this cohort is 8 years old.

The category of abuse for this cohort is detailed below:

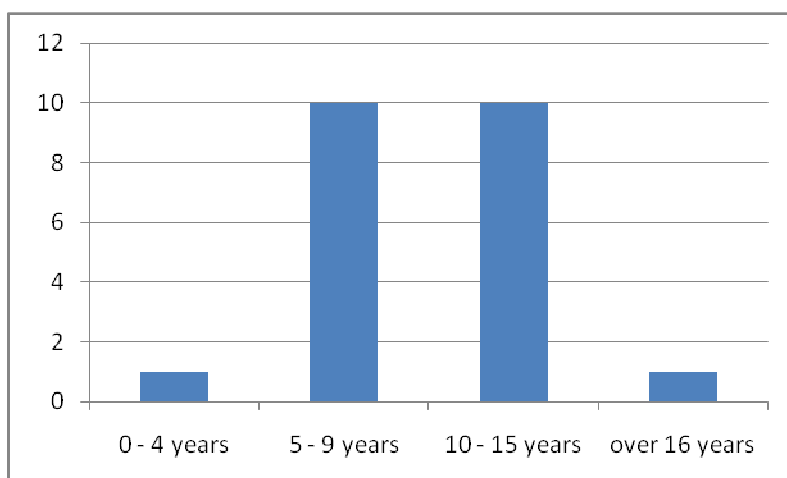
EMOTIONAL ABUSE	15
NEGLECT	20
SEXUAL ABUSE	2
Grand Total	37



Over 50% of this cohort was on a child protection plan under the abuse category of neglect. All but one of this cohort was of a white British ethnic origin and one child was categorised as 'other dual heritage' ethnicity.

It is also important to consider the number and proportion of current child protection plans over 2 years in duration. (As opposed to NI 64 which only considers child protection plans which have ceased). This identified 22 children in this cohort. (Out of a total of 547 children who were subject to a child protection plan as at the 31/03/2012). This equates to 4% of all child protection plans. It is interesting to note that the majority of children in this cohort were between the ages of 5 – 15 years.

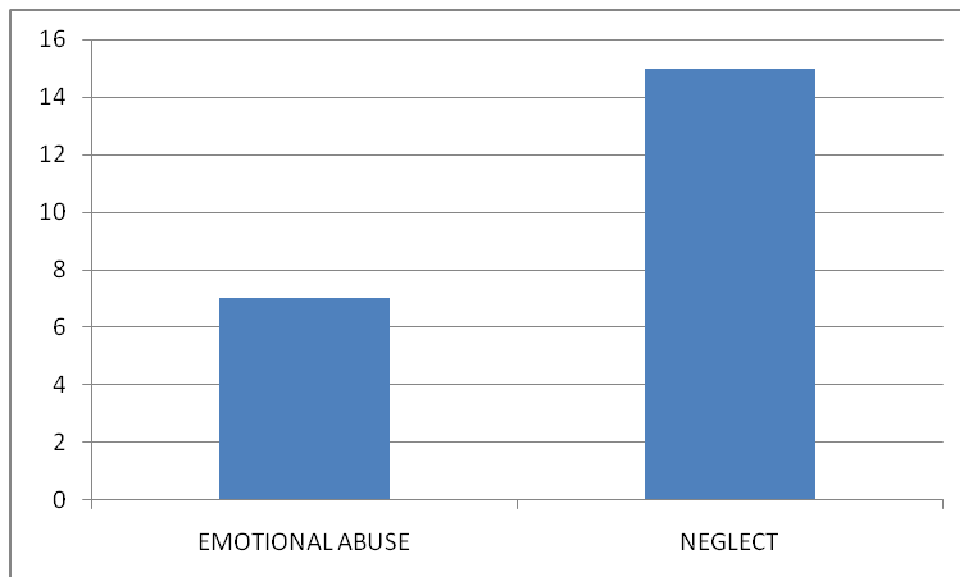
0 - 4 years	1
5 - 9 years	10
10 - 15 years	10
over 16 years	1
Grand Total	22



The ethnicity of the 22 in the cohort is predominantly white British with 13 of the children falling into this category, with 5 children classified as 'white and Asian'.

The category of abuse was as follows:

	Total
EMOTIONAL ABUSE	7
NEGLECT	15
Grand Total	22



This indicator provides a broader and perhaps more meaningful picture of the duration of child protection plans across Lancashire.

6.3.3 NI65 Re-Registrations: Percentage of children who become subject of a Child Protection Plan at anytime during the year who had previously been subject of a Child Protection Plan regardless of how long ago

NI 65 illustrates the percentage of children who became subject to a child protection plan in the last twelve months who had previously been the subject of a child protection plan, regardless of how long ago that was. The target for 2011/12 was 13% and nationally good performance is deemed to be between 10 – 15%. During 2011/12 there was a significant decrease in the number of children becoming subject to a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time. This shows a decrease from 13.7% in 2010/11 to 10.8 % in 2011/12. It is of note that this is nearly 2% below our statistical neighbour authorities at 12.5% and the England average of 13.1%.

IROs have been mindful of not ceasing a plan too early due to the 'rule of optimism'. The IRO's have been increasingly rigorous during the course of this year in recommending that a case should be progressed into proceedings where there is long term neglect with no sustained improvement despite significant interventions with the family. In these cases there has often been a short period of improvement resulting in a request for the child protection plan to be ceased, only to see a further deterioration and the child being referred back into the child protection system. ('Revolving door syndrome').

The IRO team has also identified concern around the lack of outcome focused child protection plans that lack realistic targets and timescales. (See priority area for 2012/13).

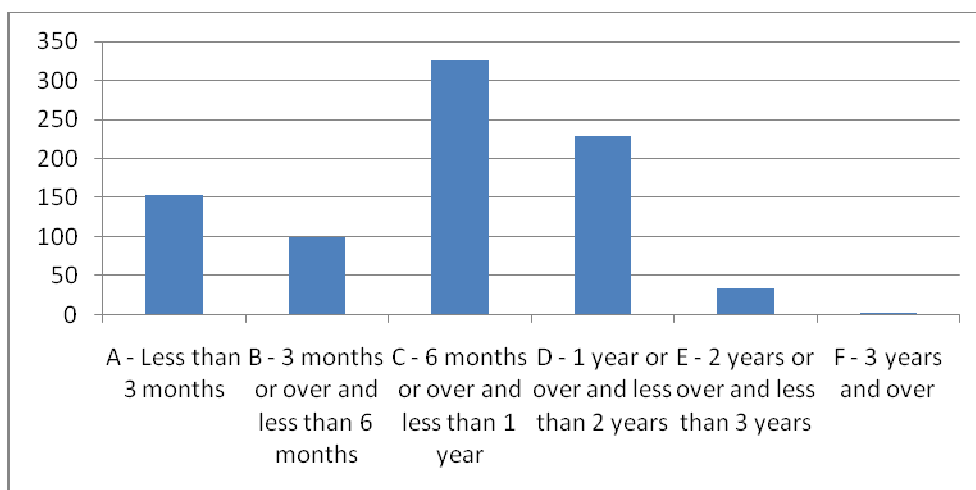
Although this indicator is useful in showing the level of repeat child protection plans, it would be more meaningful to consider other factors such as:

- The length of time from the previous plan being ceased to the most recent plan commencing;
- The length of time the child previously spent on a child protection plan;
- The reason for the previous plan(s) and the reason for the current plan
- Whether the second or subsequent plan is due to the child moving across local authority boundaries as this may artificially increase the number of repeat plans.

The table below details Lancashire's performance in respect of these 3 National Indicators:

Indicator	2010/11	2011/12	2011/12 Target	England Average 2010/11
NI 64 Child protection plans lasting 2 years or more	4.80%	4.40%	4.4%	6.00%
NI 65 Percentage of children becoming the subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time	13.70%	10.80%	12.00%	13.1%
NI 67 Percentage of child protection cases reviewed within required timescales	100%	98.90%	100%	97.10%

Duration of CPPs ceasing in the 12 months to 31 st March 2012	Total	Percentage of Total
A - Less than 3 months	153	18%
B - 3 months or over and less than 6 months	99	12%
C - 6 months or over and less than 1 year	326	39%
D - 1 year or over and less than 2 years	229	27%
E - 2 years or over and less than 3 years	34	4%
F - 3 years and over	3	0%
Grand Total	844	



68.5% (578) of all child protection plans that ceased in Lancashire in the 12 month period to 31st March 2012 were less than 1 year in duration, with just over a quarter (27.1% - 229 child protection plans) over 1 year but less than 2 years. The duration of child protection plans that ceased in the same period across the districts was fairly evenly spread, with the exception of Ribble Valley where 55.6% of child protection plans ceased were less than 1 year duration. However, this only involved 5 children out of a cohort of 12 child protection plans ceased during this time period.

6.3.4 Children Subject to a Child Protection Plan who were are also a Child Looked After

On 31st March 2012, there were 39 children who were subject to a Child Protection Plan whilst also being looked after by the authority. Of these children, 24 were subject to Interim Care Orders and 17 were accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. The table below gives a breakdown of placement type:

Placements of CYP who are subject to a CP plan and are also looked after by the authority	Total
Foster placement with relative or friend (in LA)	1
Placed with own parents or other persons with parental authority (in LA)	7
Placement with other foster carer (in LA)	28
Placement with other foster carer (outside LA)	3
Grand Total	39

A number of actions have been taken in response to these findings:

- More robust quality assurance mechanisms have been established:
 - District Managers and IROs now receive monthly lists of all child protection plans over 12 months in duration, child protection plans for a second or subsequent period and details of all Children Looked After who are also subject to a child protection plan, to review the cases;
 - The IRO's are reviewing the children who have been made subject to a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time within the last 12 months.

- The Directorate has undertaken a detailed review of neglect cases using a safeguarding quality assurance framework to evaluate practice and to inform the development of a multi-agency strategy for neglect. Neglect has been identified as a significant safeguarding issue and is a factor in 45% of children and young people subject to child protection plans.

7. Quality Assurance

Whilst performance indicators are an essential source of information and help to benchmark performance, as highlighted by the Munro review, it cannot be treated as a straightforward measure of good or bad practice. Consideration must also be given to the quality and effectiveness of the help given to children and families.

The IRO's are independent of service delivery and have an important quality assurance role within Lancashire.

7.1 Evidence of IRO Challenge

The IRO role is well embedded in Lancashire. The following case examples illustrate the effectiveness of the IRO in challenging practice and the positive outcomes this has achieved for children:

Case Example 1:

The IRO challenged gaps in the pre-birth assessment and the decision for the baby to remain at home on an Interim Care Order subject to a home placement agreement. This was escalated to District Manager level and agreement reached that the case would be contested in court with a view to seeking removal of the baby at birth.

Case Example 2:

The IRO challenged a proposal to cease the child protection plan involving three children with complex health needs when there was evidence of poor engagement by parents, considerable concerns in respect of the children's health, development and safety and the assessment was incomplete. The IRO was instrumental in providing advice, formulating the child protection plan and tracking the progress between conferences to ensure that each agency was completing their part of the plan to prevent drift. The IRO was able to ensure the conferences remained child focused and that the implications of the safeguarding concerns for each child were fully considered.

Case Example 3:

The IRO challenged practice where there was a delay in a case being brought to conference. This followed concern regarding the frequency of domestic abuse incidents over a 12 month period. There were also continuing concerns regarding drug and alcohol misuse and evidence of the impact to the children. The IRO closely monitored the implementation of the child protection plan and the management of risk to the children who now live with their extended family.

7.2 Themes Arising from IRO Quality Assurance

As chairperson of the child protection conference, the IRO has responsibility for ensuring the child protection plan is progressed. As part of the IRO's quality assurance role, a quality assurance form should be completed after every child protection conference.

The purpose of the quality assurance form is to ensure compliance against statutory requirements as well as being a problem resolution mechanism for escalating and resolving any practice concerns. The form ensures that where outstanding tasks are identified, they are promptly relayed to the social worker and team manager in order for issues to be addressed without delay. If not resolved at this level the concern is escalated further using the line management structure and ultimately to director level if necessary. The form is also used to identify and reinforce good practice which is equally important for staff development.

In 2011, two IROs worked with the manager to develop a new quality assurance form that had a more qualitative focus in capturing information that would inform improvements in practice as opposed to reporting on compliance and quantitative data.

Consultation took place with District Managers and Team Managers and the new form was introduced in January 2012. Between the 1 January 2012 and the 31 March 2012 174 quality assurance forms were completed by the IROs. This a completion rate of 22.3% of the total number of child protection conferences held during this period. This was due to the team covering a full time vacancy and so holding higher caseloads and spending more time travelling to meeting venues. During this period there was agreement that IRO's would prioritise those cases where there were concerns about practice or the quality/ timeliness of child protection plans that required escalation to Team Managers for action.

The following practice themes have been identified:

- S47 core assessments are completed in all cases leading to an initial child protection conference;
- However, where there has been a change in the child's circumstances and the core assessment needs updating this isn't completed in a significant number of cases which can lead to a loss of focus and drift, particularly in cases where neglect is the predominant feature;
- In the majority of cases initial child protection conferences are held within 15 working days;
- The quality of reports completed by social worker's for child protection conferences has improved, although in many cases the analysis of the information is inadequate and focuses on factual information rather than an analysis of the impact on the child. Training on assessment skills is being delivered to address this;
- The quality of child protection plans in many cases is still poor. They are not outcome focused in the majority of cases. (This was an issue highlighted by Ofsted in their inspection of safeguarding and children looked after in January 2012). See priority Action for 2012-13;
- There is still evidence that in a significant number of cases the social worker hasn't shared their report with the parent/carer 48 hours in advance of the

review conference. (Out of 174 quality assurance forms completed the parents had seen the report in only 50 cases. Therefore 71% hadn't seen them in a timely manner);

- In the majority of cases monthly core group meetings have been held;
- In the majority of districts child protection visits were completed within timescale;
- The participation of children and young people in child protection conferences is not evident in a significant number of cases, even in the ten plus age range. (Out of 174 quality assurance forms, only five children aged over ten years had participated in the conference). It is recognised that this is an issue which requires further action and is a priority action for the IRO Team during 2012-13. It is important however, to recognise that there are different ways that a child/young person can contribute to the process. It may not in many cases be appropriate for them to attend and hear information that is sensitive or confidential to their parents and may be distressing to the young person. Various mediums will be considered including for example, letters/ texts, IT systems to allow them to record their thoughts and the use of pictures for younger children;
- In respect of participation the most critical issue is that children and young people are engaged in the child protection process by their social worker and that they understand why they are subject of an initial child protection conference or a child protection plan. The Safeguarding IRO's need to ensure through their quality assurance responsibilities that this is happening and that children/young people are 'given a voice' to communicate their views or concerns and what they need from agencies to make them feel safe and ensure their quality of life and life chances are enhanced;
- The participation of parents/carer's is evident in the majority of conferences. Out of 174 quality assurance forms completed parents had attended in 160 conferences (92%);
- However the quality of parents contributions during child protection conferences and meaningful engagement in the process is still of concern. In many conferences parents are still often passive bystanders rather than being actively engaged in the process. This will be addressed as a priority during 2012-13;
- There is evidence that in the majority of cases a copy of the child protection plan has been given to the person with parental responsibility for the child. (There were only a few cases where the answer to this question was no).

The quality assurance forms identify many examples of good practice across the county, for example in the quality of work undertaken as part of the child protection plan, the child centred focus of the work, sensitivity shown to the parents and positive engagement with families.

7.3 Feedback from Parents and Carers

Parents/carers are asked to complete a questionnaire following every child protection conference to give feedback about their experience of the process. 161 responses were received in the year April 2011 to the end of March 2012. This represents an 5.5% return on the 2,921 conferences held during 2011/12. The table below gives a breakdown of numbers received for both initial and review child

protection conferences for each month. This reveals no particular pattern in respect of the numbers of questionnaires completed for either initial or reviews and by month.

Months 2011 - 2012	Numbers of Parent/Carer Questionnaires Initial CPC	Numbers of Parent/Carer Questionnaires Review CPC
April	9	6
May	9	5
June	5	12
July	5	14
August	8	3
September	3	8
October	4	17
November	4	9
December	3	7
January	7	2
February	6	4
March	2	8
Total	66	95

7.4 Themes from Parent/Carer Feedback Questionnaires

- Most parents/carers said they had the opportunity to meet with the IRO prior to the start of the meeting;
- The majority stated they had received the social worker's report 48 hours before the conference. However, it should be noted that at conferences themselves, the majority of parents report a very different picture with many stating that their social worker has not shared their report with them. This may indicate that the 5.5% returns received are completed by parents/carers who are largely happy with the child protection conference and therefore is not representative of all parents involved in the conference process;
- The vast majority indicate that parents/carers felt prepared for the conference by the IRO and believe the meetings were chaired in a clear and respectful manner;
- Most of the parents/carers felt they were given the opportunity to express their views in respect of the concerns raised at the conference;
- The majority felt able to share and discuss their views in the meeting;
- There are some comments which indicate that parents find the nature of the conference process to be stressful;
- Most parents/carers indicated they felt clear about what needed to change to make their child safe;

- Most parents/carers said that the appeals process had been explained to them, although a couple said they were not clear what this meant;
- The majority said they had been given the opportunity to speak to the chairperson at the end of the conference.

7.5 Parent Participation/Involvement in Child Protection Conferences

Within team meetings the IRO's have discussed their own observations of the child protection conference process and believe that in the majority of meetings parents play a passive role where most 'air time' is given to professionals sharing information. Consideration has been given to how conferences could be more interactive with parents/carers being able to significantly contribute and engage in the process as opposed to being observers.

With this in mind consideration is being given to the use of the strengthening families model which has been used in a number of authorities including West Berkshire and Oxfordshire. This model is more interactive utilising a white board where the chair notes the concerns raised by professionals and also encourages the families to report the concerns/issues as they see them.

It was planned late last year that a number of the team would visit the authorities using this model in the spring of 2012. Due to capacity issues detailed earlier in this report that was not possible. We plan to undertake these visits in the autumn if we have been able to achieve full staffing by this time. If we believe this model is achieving greater participation and engagement of parents in the process and thereby achieving better outcomes for children, the approach will be piloted in Lancashire.

A suite of information leaflets have been developed explaining the child protection process and purpose of the child protection conference. This includes information promoting the participation of parents/carers.

7.6 Participation of Children and Young People in the Child Protection Conference Process

At present it is only in the minority of child protection conferences that older children or young people attend and make a verbal contribution.

It is recognised that not all children would want to attend the child protection conference and in some circumstances this may not be beneficial or appropriate. To promote understanding of the importance of participation information leaflets have been developed for children and young people which explains the child protection conference and the varied forms which participation can take.

The IRO Team is mindful of research findings that have paid particular heed to the outcome of the Munro review of child protection where the importance of listening to 'the voice of the child' and being mindful of 'the child's journey' is highlighted.

Audits by the IRO Team have identified the absence of 'the child's voice' on many occasions both during the Section 47 enquiry process leading to an initial child

protection conference and between conferences whether it be in recording of Core Group minutes or in home visits.

Clearly there are many ways of ensuring children and young people can participate in the child protection conference process and this does not have to mean attendance at the meeting. The Safeguarding IRO Team will be leading district based training in relation to participation with Social Workers and Team Managers this autumn. (See priorities for 2012/13).

7.7 Audit

7.7.1 Child Protection Plans

In October 2011 the Senior IRO completed an audit of cases where the child had been made subject to a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time within twelve months of the previous plan being ceased. The following findings were reported:

- There was insufficient time for changes/improvements to be consolidated;
- The 'rule of optimism' had prevailed at the conference leading to the child protection plan being ceased prematurely;

The Senior IRO also completed an audit of cases where children had been subject of child protection plans for more than two years. The main findings of this audit included:

- Some child protection plans lacked clarity in terms of targets or timescales. This meant that in some cases there was no evidence at review conferences of targets being met or progress being made;
- Also certain assessments/interventions agreed had not been undertaken therefore progress could not be measured;
- Sometimes certain professionals had not provided necessary information. For example, risk assessments not provided by Probation in relation to the risk presented by a male partner in relation to offending behaviour. This included the risk of physical violence and history of sexual offending;

To strengthen the quality assurance role of the IRO Team a programme of audit activity has been agreed with the Directorate Safeguarding Manager to be undertaken by the Senior IRO in 2012/13.

7.7.2 Conference Decision Sheets

The Mobile Minute Taking Service has improved performance in relation to the distribution of the conference decision sheet within 24 hours. Within the last 12 months conference documentation has been distributed to professionals using secure email which has improved efficiency and timeliness. Going forward, the service hopes to produce management information reports to more accurately report on performance. Two factors have impacted on performance timescales including delays by the IRO in returning the decision sheet for distribution and the minute taker being off work due to annual leave or sickness.

7.7.3 Audit Tool

In May 2011 the Directorate launched revised recording standards and a new file audit tool. The file audit framework was also updated and became operational in July 2011. A central audit team supports and strengthens the Directorate's audit process and an audit calendar identifies the agreed audit priorities for the year.

7.7.4 Internal Audit

In February 2012 the Internal Audit Service commenced an audit of the IRO Service. The objective of the audit was to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of the controls in place over the key risks affecting the Children Looked After and Safeguarding Independent Reviewing Officers in relation to IRO caseloads and resources, compliance with statutory requirements and the efficiency of IRO working practices. Findings from the report will be considered by the senior management team and will be used to further improve the service.

7.7.5 Multi-agency Mock Inspections

In conjunction with the LSCB, the Directorate has agreed that as part of its continuous improvement programme and in preparation for future inspections that it will undertake a series of unannounced mock inspections. The inspections which will commence in autumn 2012 will follow the Ofsted framework for the inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children. Their purpose being to evaluate the quality of services being provided to children, young people and their families; to assist preparation for the inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children; to identify good practice and areas of vulnerability; to learn lessons from the process which can assist staff in preparation for the inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children and to look for evidence of how services to children, young people and their families have a positive impact and result in good outcomes for children and young people. The mock inspections will include observations of frontline practice including child protection conferences and strategy meetings.

8. Evidence of Good Practice

In addition to the good practice examples identified within the quality assurance forms and parent/carer questionnaires, a number of service developments have taken place which it is hoped will strengthen our approach to safeguarding and improve outcomes for children and young people.

8.1 District/IRO Cluster Meetings

Quarterly meetings are held between the IRO's (Children Looked After and Safeguarding) and District and Team Managers in three cluster group footprints across the county. Each of the three Cluster meetings is chaired by one of the three Senior IROs in order to provide continuity. The meetings provide a forum to share themes arising from the quality assurance forms and parent/carer questionnaires, information on performance and problem resolution, learning from serious case reviews, training and information in respect of any new developments. Going forward the aim is to produce an IRO quarterly quality assurance report to formalise the reporting process and to assist in the preparation of the annual report. The cluster meetings have been particularly effective in improving communication between the

IRO's and Team Managers and promoting a greater understanding of respective roles.

8.2 Review of Child Protection Business Processes

The Directorate in partnership with the LSCB has undertaken a review of its child protection business processes. The revised child protection documents were piloted in the Pendle district during the period from July to the end of December 2011. (This included the conference invite, the initial and review child protection conference agendas, a standardised agency report template, the child protection conference decision sheet, revised core group agenda and core group notes template and core group report to the review child protection conference).

Feedback from the pilot has been very positive. A continuous theme from parents/carers was that the reports are easier to read and follow as they are more succinct and are less confusing. Parents have found it easier to understand the views of agencies and reported that their views were also clearly recorded. They compared the core group report to the previous Social Worker's report and not knowing where to start due to the volume of pages. As the content of the report is discussed in the core group there were no surprises. Similarly a fourteen year old young person provided feedback that she found the multi-agency core group report 'easier to understand in one report' and that she didn't 'want a report from everyone'. That she does "not have to listen to everyone" and that the documents helped to avoid the repetition of information.

Agency feedback was also positive, reducing the duplication of information, providing a stronger focus on the child and ensuring information was effectively shared between agencies. The IRO also made a number of positive observations:

- That the duration of the review conference had been reduced and the documents provided greater clarity regarding the information requirements for a review conference.
- The multi-agency report is more unified and the information provides a better picture of what is happening.
- It was also felt the documentation supports a clear analysis of risk.
- The process supported multi-agency attendance at core groups.

Consideration is now being given to the integration of the pilot documentation within Lancashire's electronic social care record with a view to then rolling out the pilot across the county. As Lancashire is in the process of procuring a new IT solution for the integrated children's system, consideration is also being given to the configuration of the documents within this system. The development of a document portal will also ensure the more efficient and timely sharing of reports and information for the child protection conference. This will also create significant cost savings.

8.3 Mobile Minute Taking Service

A dedicated minute taking service has been developed to improve the quality of recording of child protection conferences and strategy meetings. During the last year this service has been introduced in all districts except Lancaster. To promote the participation of children and families a number of new conference venues have been identified by the Safeguarding IRO Service and the Mobile Minute Taking Service

working together. These venues have included Children's Centres, Child and Parenting Support Service (CaPSS) buildings and schools. As current office accommodation is often unsuitable for conferences this is an essential service. The service will be fully operational following the conclusion of the disaggregation of the administrative support service in 2013.

8.4 Child Protection Information Leaflets

The information leaflets for children/young people and parents/carers explaining the child protection system have been revised and launched. Separate leaflets have been developed for parents/carers and children/young people, the latter targeted at different age groups. The leaflets provide a useful tool for practitioners to use when explaining the child protection system to children and families and will promote their engagement in the conference process.

9. Priorities for 2012/13

9.1 Implementation of new IRO Structure

IRO capacity was identified as a concern by Ofsted in their recent inspection of Lancashire's safeguarding and looked after children services (Report 9th March 2012). Whilst this issue had already been recognised and DLT had approved additional IRO posts, a decision was made to undertake a review of the IRO Service to further consider how capacity issues could be addressed. The review concluded that the two IRO Teams should be combined to ensure continuity of IRO for children and more equitable caseloads across the service.

The implementation of the new IRO structure has commenced and will be fully operational from the 1st January 2013. This is supported by a training and development plan, including opportunities for IRO shadowing to build confidence and expertise of the team in all areas of the work. Recruitment to the remaining IRO vacancies is crucial as part of this process in order to reduce IRO caseloads and increase capacity.

9.2 Neglect

Neglect has been identified as a significant safeguarding issue within Lancashire. As detailed in this report it accounts for 45% of child protection plans and is a factor in over 50% of plans lasting two or more years. The devastating impact of long term neglect on children's health and development has also been highlighted by IRO's in the cases they've escalated using the quality assurance form. In order to address this, the Head of Children's Social Care introduced more robust quality assurance mechanisms requiring District Managers and IRO's to review all neglect cases to ensure that appropriate and timely action was being taken to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. The court judgement Re E was also reissued to district teams highlighting the importance of chronologies.

The Directorate's Audit Team has undertaken a detailed audit of neglect using a safeguarding quality assurance framework. This approach triangulated information from case file audits (68 case files), interviews with children and parents/carers,

focus groups with staff, a staff questionnaire and a literature review. The audit provides significant insights into how services can be improved and will inform the development of a neglect strategy. The findings will be shared with the IRO Service to look at learning in relation to their role.

9.3 Participation in Child Protection Conferences

The quality assurance forms have identified children and young people's participation in child protection conferences as a continuing area of concern. In only a very limited number of cases was an advocate used on behalf of the child to convey their wishes and feelings. A culture needs to be embedded in practice which values the participation of children and young people in child protection conferences and recognises their right to participate in decisions affecting their life. (Taking into consideration their age and understanding).

Research tells us that children and young people are a key source of information about their lives and the impact any problems are having on them. This has been echoed in the Munro review in which children themselves identified the importance of being able to participate in decisions affecting their life. To promote understanding of the importance of participation the IRO Team is going to deliver a series of participation workshops to practitioners and manager's within the district teams during 2012/13.

9.4 Sharing Reports in Advance of Child Protection Conferences

The failure to share conference reports in advance of the conference remains a significant issue as identified by both the IRO's and in the feedback from parents and carers. This impacts on their ability to participate in the conference and is likely to be a contributing factor in the stress levels reported in attending these meetings. Reports to conference (from all professionals) should be shared with the parent/carer 24 hours in advance of an initial child protection conference and at least 48 hours in advance of a review child protection conference.

9.5 Conference Venues

Work has been undertaken during 2011-12 to identify a number of new venues across the county. For example in Preston and Burnley a number of Children's Centres and CaPSS centres have been identified as being more family friendly than district offices. In some districts there has been pressure on venues; for example in Accrington with the closure of the Globe most conferences are being held at the Union Street office. A search is currently underway to identify other appropriate venues, for example using children's centres in the area. In Chorley the CaPPS centre is the only current venue so the Safeguarding IRO service is working with the Team Managers and Mobile Minute Taking Service to identify additional venues.

The suitability of conference facilities is recognised as an important consideration in achieving greater participation within meetings. In particular, having the facility to allow children and parents/carers the opportunity to withdraw from the meeting if required.

9.6 Administration of Child Protection Conferences

The administration of child protection conferences is currently undertaken in each district team involving a significant number of administrative staff as well as social worker's and IRO's in the process. This is an overly complex process and creates inefficiency. A workshop was held in June 2011 to consider how this process could be improved and options to centralise the administration of conferences was considered. It has been agreed to centralise this support by creating a small administrative team which will be responsible for booking initial child protection conferences and strategy meetings. This will free up a significant amount of both IROs and Social Workers time in negotiating times and venues for meetings and will also cut out a significant amount of business support time in the Safeguarding Unit cross referencing IROs calendars with the Mobile Minute Taking Service. Unfortunately, the disaggregation of the county administrative support service has created some delay in progressing this initiative.

9.7 Regional IRO Transformation work

The North West Directors of Children's Services have established a Best Practice Network to support collaborative working and to drive improvements in practice regionally. The Best Practice Network including Lancashire, Salford, Tameside and Wigan has been assigned a Transformation Project looking at the IRO service. The remit of the project, 'IRO Service - Back to First Principles', is to work with representatives from the four authorities and others to put forward ideas for improving the IRO service and to identify/share best practice. A range of issues are being considered including IRO caseloads, training/development opportunities, supervision and management arrangements, quality assurance models and regional standards. This work is being led by a group of aspirant leaders who will produce short, medium and long term proposals and possible aspirations to consider developing an IRO service regionally.

10. Key Challenges for 2012-13

10.1 IRO Capacity

The IRO Handbook suggests a caseload of between 50 to 70 children would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service. (Although this is referenced specifically in relation to the number of looked after children an IRO should have on their caseload). Caseloads for all IRO's in Lancashire are considerably higher than this, Within the Safeguarding IRO Team the average caseload includes between 85 and 119 children subject to a child protection plan. (Although separate conferences are not held in respect of individual children and the number of families this equates to is significantly less). In addition to this each IRO holds a number of cases where they are chairing strategy meetings.

Although the number of children subject to a child protection plan fell during 2011-12, at the time of writing this report the numbers of initial child protection conferences is rising again with a corresponding increase being seen in the number of children subject to a child protection plan. As detailed earlier in this report IRO capacity is being addressed in a number of ways as follows:

- The Directorate's Leadership Team agreed the creation of four additional IRO posts (two permanent and two temporary for twelve months). Whilst recruitment has been successful to the two permanent posts, recruitment to the temporary vacancies and other permanent vacancies in the IRO service is ongoing. Approval of the Chief Executive has been given to advertise the vacancies externally;
- Recruitment to the 5 FTE vacant posts. The posts have been advertised externally for a second time;
- Secondment opportunities from other services within the Directorate are being sought;
- In conjunction with the Business Improvement Team we are exploring new and smarter ways of working, seeking to capitalise on any new IT/business processes which will improve the efficiency of the IRO's in completing and recording CLA reviews;
- The Internal Audit Service was commissioned to undertake a review of the IRO service to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of the systems currently operating within the service and the risks facing the team, including caseloads and resources, compliance with statutory requirements and the efficiency of IRO working practices. The findings will be considered by the senior management team and will be used to further improve the service;
- A management review of the IRO service has also been undertaken. This identified the need to amalgamate the two IRO teams to ensure continuity of IRO for the child but also to ensure more equitable caseloads. The process of bringing the teams together is underway. A training/development plan is in place including team development days and work shadowing opportunities to build staff confidence and expertise. There is already some crossover of work between the two teams but the new structure will be fully implemented by January 2013;
- Latterly, consideration is being given to how other services within the Specialist Services arm of the Directorate can support the IRO Service.

It is vital that we are able to recruit and retain an experienced IRO service if caseloads are to be reduced and the IRO's supported in fulfilling their critical quality assurance function. This will ensure that IRO's have time to prepare properly for meetings, therefore improving the quality of the meeting and achieving the best outcome for the child. It will also ensure that practice is robustly challenged where appropriate and good practice shared.

10.2 Quality Assurance

The IRO's are in a unique position, independent from service delivery and with oversight of practice across the nine Children's Social Care districts. However, in the past there has been an over emphasis on their role in relation to compliance and performance timescales. Whilst recognising the importance of a timely response to the needs of children and families, the IRO quality assurance role needs to be more focussed on the quality of the work undertaken by CSC and partner agencies as part of the child protection plan and the effectiveness of the help being given to children and families. This change in emphasis was highlighted by Professor Eileen Munro in the national review of child protection published in May 2011.

There is evidence that IRO's in Lancashire are more robustly challenging practice and escalating concerns to Team and District Managers. To support the Safeguarding IRO's in this role and to ensure consistency of practice across the IRO service, the Problem Resolution Protocol is being extended within the child protection arena. This will formalise the escalation process where there is a failure to implement the child protection plan within appropriate timescales. This will be piloted from the 1st December 2012 with a view to being fully operational from the 1st February 2013.

The Safeguarding IROs quality assurance role needs to ensure that social workers assessments are robust, that they analyse and identify the needs within the family and that the child protection plans that result from these assessments are realistic and outcome focused. This was an area for development identified by Ofsted in their inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services. It is also important that parents are fully engaged in the process and the voice of children and young people is heard if we are to significantly improve their lives as a result of our interventions. The revised conference documentation used within the Pendle pilot has improved the quality of child protection plans, ensuring they are more outcome focussed. To further develop practice training is being commissioned in relation to outcome focussed child protection plans.

11. Conclusion

The experience, commitment and professionalism of the Safeguarding IRO Team is acknowledged. The recent Ofsted inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services made specific reference to the work of the IRO's and to the quality of child protection work in Lancashire. In summary it highlighted that child protection conferences are chaired effectively by officers who are suitably qualified and experienced social workers. Child protection chairs were deemed to be very well managed with regular supervision, provided with good opportunities for reflective learning and their practice is observed routinely to ensure the quality of decision making. Effective multi-agency involvement in planning and assessment was observed at each stage of the child protection process. Child protection cases were deemed to be well managed and good multi-agency work ensures child protection plans are progressed effectively. However, there is no room for complacency and it is recognised that we must strive to further improve the quality of provision and services for safeguarding children and young people in Lancashire.

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October 2012

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