

Independent Reviewing Officers

Annual Report Children Looked After & Safeguarding

April 2012 – March 2013

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1. Foreword

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) has a critical and unique role, having independent oversight of the child's case, with responsibility for ensuring that the child's welfare and interests are protected throughout the child protection and care planning process. They have a crucial role to quality assure practice.

Although a challenging year for the IRO service, the report highlights the contribution made by IROs in improving outcomes for children looked after and those in need of protection. A review of the service has been completed and the service restructured, bringing together all IRO functions within one team consistent with the 'Munro Review of Child Protection', (February 2011), ensuring continuity of IRO for children and families. Although IRO caseloads remain high, there is evidence of effective challenge and resolution of issues to prevent drift in care planning, using both formal and informal resolution processes. Good practice is evident in facilitating the participation of children looked after in their reviews, using creative techniques, particularly where children have communication difficulties.

The quality assurance functions within the service have been strengthened through the introduction of new IRO case file auditing arrangements and feedback from parents/carers has been used to make changes to the way child protection conferences are undertaken. However, it is recognised that opportunities need to be made available for children and young people to provide feedback in relation to the IRO service.

IRO caseloads are now more equitable across the service and despite them remaining above the recommended caseload for IROs (70 cases maximum), good performance has been maintained.

Following an inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services in 2012, Ofsted reported that 'Lancashire County Council have high aspirations for young people to achieve well and reach their full potential. Independent Reviewing Officers give high priority to encouraging looked after children, parents and carers to contribute to care planning and reviews.' Feedback gathered from children and families throughout the year evidence that this practice has continued.

2. Purpose of the annual report

'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' (2010), places a responsibility on the manager of the IROs 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 provide information in relation to safeguarding, IROs within Lancashire also fulfill an important safeguarding function, chairing child protection conferences and a range of strategy meetings. This information is therefore included within the report.

This is the third IRO annual report completed by the IRO service in Lancashire. It provides a review of the work and findings of the IROs during the period from the 1st April 2012 to the 31st March 2013.

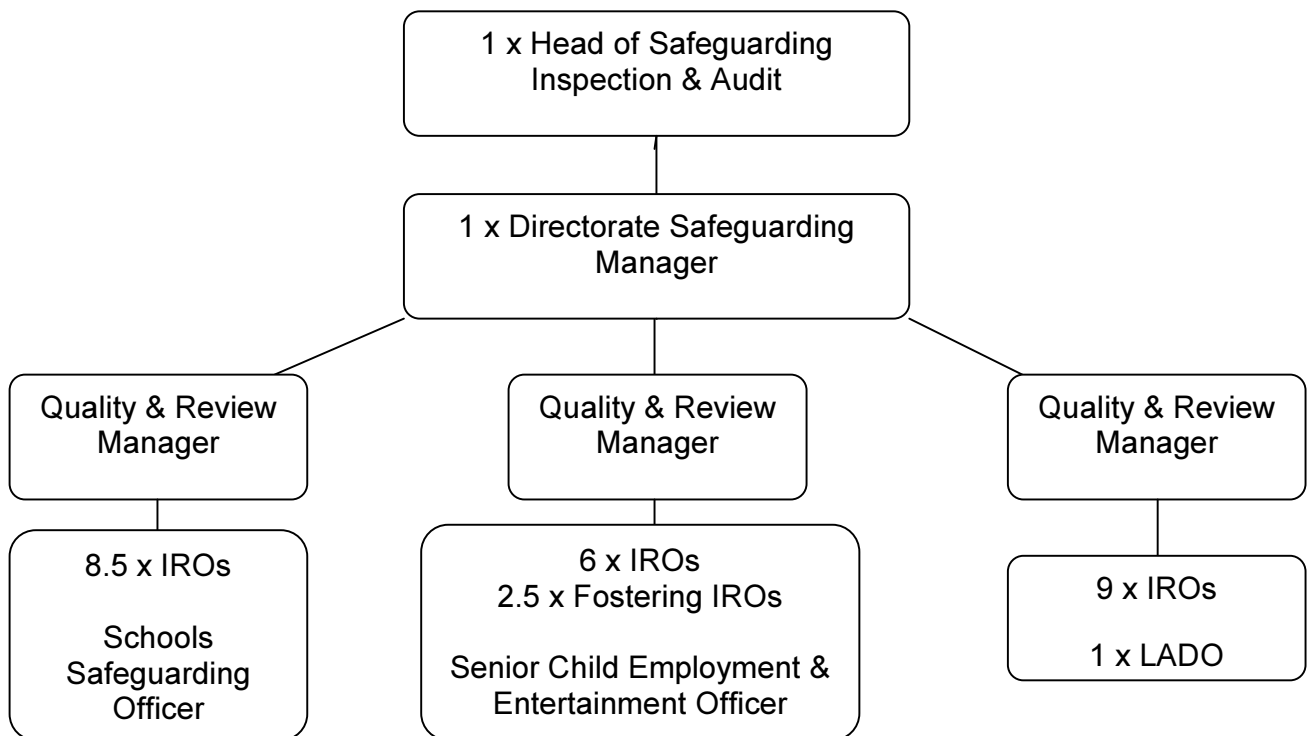
The report provides statistical information regarding performance and more qualitative information from the IROs in relation to themes and trends. It highlights areas of good practice and identifies key challenges and priorities for further development during 2013/14. The report will be presented to the Directorate Senior Leadership Team (DLT), the Corporate Parenting Board and the Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).

3. The IRO service

Lancashire has had an IRO service 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 missing from home or care, children looked after who display sexually harmful behavior towards other children and cases of serious self harm of children who are looked after.

3.1 Team structure

IROs are located 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 IROs.



The staffing complement for the service includes 23.5 FTE IROs and 2.5 Fostering IROs. The team consists of 5 male and 21 female IROs. The majority of the team is white British, with English as their first language. Three members of the team are from a black and minority ethnic background. 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. All of the IROs have undertaken equality and diversity training to ensure equality of approach with all sectors of society.

3.2 Post qualifying experience

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

A detailed table of the level of post qualifying experience and length of service as IRO managers and IROs in Lancashire can be found in appendix 1.

3.3 Restructure of the IRO service

The annual report for 2011/12 proposed the implementation of a new IRO structure, combining the IRO roles for children looked after and safeguarding, promoting continuity of IRO for the child throughout their journey of involvement with children's services and to ensure more equitable caseloads across the IRO service.

In August 2012 a training plan was developed in order to progress the merger of the teams and ensure IROs had the necessary skills to undertake their new functions. This included training delivered from the pool of knowledge already in the service and by colleagues in other parts of the Directorate. For example, in relation to transition and adoption. Training for 'Experienced Child Protection Chairs' was commissioned externally. Feedback from the less experienced IROs particularly, confirmed they had found this beneficial. Shadowing opportunities across the team was mandatory and completed by all in order to learn processes and have 'live' experience of the different meetings IROs chair.

In December 2012 the first phase of the amalgamation commenced with the Safeguarding IROs retaining any children subject to child protection plans who subsequently became looked after. The Children Looked After IROs also became responsible for chairing strategy meetings in respect of children looked after.

By the 7th January 2013 the teams had fully merged and were operating as one service. A duty system and a centralised referral point for all initial child protection conference requests was established for allocation purposes.

A review was also undertaken of the management structure within the Safeguarding, Inspection & Audit Service and a decision made to reduce the number of Tier 5 manager posts from four to three, in order to increase IRO capacity through the creation of an additional IRO post.

3.4 Staff recruitment and retention issues

During 2012/13 the IRO service has faced further challenges in relation to the recruitment and retention of staff. Two IRO managers were absent from work due to long term sickness leaving one IRO manager. A manager from within the Safeguarding Inspection and Audit Service therefore assisted with the management of the IRO team and the Directorate Safeguarding Manager also undertook some IRO supervision.

One of the managers subsequently tendered their resignation and did not return to their post.

During 2012/13 four IROs also had long term sickness absence. This presented challenges in terms of maintaining service delivery and consistency of IRO for children and young people. However, it is to the credit of the team that in spite of these challenges, combined with an increase in the number of children looked after and those subject to a child protection plan, good performance has been maintained, reflecting a high level of commitment to the children and families of Lancashire.

In 2012 DLT approved the establishment of four additional IRO posts (two permanent and two temporary) given the additional demands on the service. There have been four separate recruitment attempts in 2012/13 to recruit to IRO vacancies:

- In May 2012, one full-time equivalent (FTE) permanent post was filled from within the residential service.
- In August 2012, 1.5 FTE permanent posts were filled. One of these was an external candidate and one was internal.
- In October 2012, 2.5 FTE permanent posts were filled. Two of these were external candidates and one was internal. Unfortunately, one offer of appointment had to be withdrawn due to unsatisfactory references. A full time secondment was also secured along with a part time secondment to the fostering IRO function of the service.
- In January 2013, three FTE permanent posts were filled. Two of these were internal appointments and one was external.

Agency staff have been used since August 2012 to assist in the management of IRO vacancies pending recruitment to permanent posts. At the time of writing this report the IRO service has the following vacant posts:

- 1 x temporary part-time post as a result of IRO maternity leave (until September 2013).
- 1 x temporary part time IRO.

In the last six months additional hours have been agreed with a number of the part-time IROs to assist the service, meaning that the actual vacancy position is now is 0.9FTE posts. This will reduce to 0.6 FTE posts as another part-time IRO has agreed to work additional hours from late summer 2013.

A further recruitment campaign is being undertaken due to one IRO and one Fostering IRO submitting their notice of intention to retire. Both of these IROs will have left the service by the 31st August 2013.

One of the IRO managers has also secured alternative employment in a neighbouring authority (in order to work closer to home) and will also leave the Directorate by the end of August 2013.

3.5 Caseloads

Prior to the amalgamation of the service caseloads on the Children Looked After Team ranged from 100 to 137. Caseloads on the Safeguarding IRO Team ranged from 79 to 171 throughout the year. The latter was due to an increase in children subject to a child protection plan in one district. Cases were reallocated to ensure greater equitability.

The number of looked after children in Lancashire during 2012/13 has ranged from 1,345 at its lowest to 1,482 at its highest.

The table below indicates the number of looked after children during 2012/13 and shows a rise over the course of the year.

APR 12	MAY 12	JUN 12	JUL 12	AUG 12	SEP 12	OCT 12	NOV 12	DEC 12	JAN 13	FEB 13	MAR 13
1345	1349	1362	1380	1401	1412	1440	1450	1461	1462	1479	1482

At year end the total number of Children looked After has increased by 11.26% compared with the previous year.

The number of children subject to a child protection plan in Lancashire during 2012/13 has ranged from 518 at its lowest to 878 at its highest.

The tables below indicate the number of children subject to a child protection plan in 2012/13 and show a rise over the course of the year.

APR 12	MAY 12	JUN 12	JUL 12	AUG 12	SEP 12	OCT 12	NOV 12	DEC 12	JAN 13	FEB 13	MAR 13
518	540	549	587	644	700	719	781	802	831	862	878

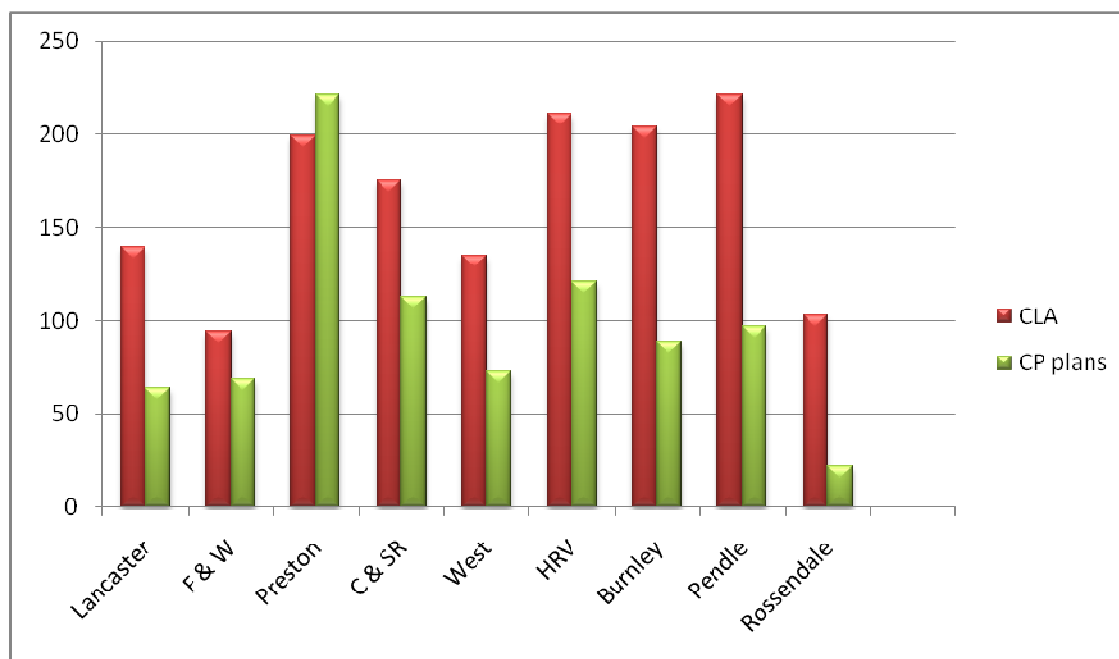
Children subject to a child protection plan per 10,000 population in 2012/13:

	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Lancashire	20.30	26.17	26.94	27.26	22.36	36.10
SN's	25.60	32.36	33.53	38.95	34.6	
England - National Average	26.50	31.0	35.50	38.30	37.80	

The year ending 31st March 2013 shows a 60.5% rise in the number of children subject to a child protection plan compared with the previous year. Given this significant increase a piece of research was commissioned from the Directorate's Performance Team to aid understanding of the data and the implications for practice. The key findings were as follows:

- There were 'spikes' of activity in May, July, October, November 2012 and January 2013.
- Prior to Christmas 2012 the increases were most noticeably seen in Burnley, Lancaster and Preston. From January 2013 these districts appear to have stabilised and further increases in the county rate have largely been attributable to increases in Chorley, South Ribble, Hyndburn and Wyre which have generated an additional 88 cases between them.
- The number of child protection plans shows some correlation with deprivation indices, with the most deprived districts reporting a higher number of child protection plans per 10,000 population and vice versa.
- Preston's rate appears unusually high even when taking deprivation into account.
- A comparison of child protection cases in Preston, Burnley and Lancaster has revealed that the children who became subject to plans in Preston during 2012 tended to be older and were more likely to have had several previous referrals. This would appear to support the hypothesis that the increase in child protection plans was due to a lowering of the threshold for statutory intervention.

The chart below indicates the number of children looked after and children subject to a child protection plan by district for March 2013.



District	No of CLA	No of CP plans	Total
Lancaster	140	66	206
Fylde & Wyre	94	69	163
Preston	199	221	420
Chorley & SR	175	113	288
West	135	124	355
Hyndburn & RV	211	124	335
Burnley	204	89	293
Pendle	221	97	318
Rossendale	103	29	132
TOTAL	1482	878	2360

There is a combined total of 2,360 children looked after and children subject to a child protection plan. If fully staffed caseloads would be approximately 100. However, with the current 0.90 FTE vacancy, the average IRO caseload is 105. This is still above the IRO handbook recommendation for an IRO to be able to carry out their duties and responsibilities in their entirety, but is an improved position to that reported in last year's annual report. Staff sickness has impacted on IRO capacity where IROs have provided cover for additional meetings in order to maintain a service to children and families. This work is not reflected in caseloads but is evident in workload and diary commitments.

4. Performance

4.1 Number of meetings

The rise in the number of children looked after and children subject to a child protection plan has resulted in a significant increase in the number of meetings chaired by an IRO, particularly the number of child protection conferences. This has a direct impact on IRO capacity.

Numbers of CLA Reviews		
2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013
2,862	3,731	4,080

This increase of reviews equates to 9.35% more meetings than the previous year.

Numbers of Initial Child Protection Conferences		
2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013
	854	1387

This increase in initial child protection conferences equates to 61.57% more meetings than the previous year.

Numbers of Review Child Protection Conferences		
2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013
	2,067	2,374

This increase in review child protection conferences equates to 14.85% more meetings than the previous year.

Numbers of Strategy Meetings chaired by an IRO		
2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013
	202	222

This increase in strategy meetings equates to 9.9% more meetings than the previous year.

4.2 Performance relating to children looked after

4.2.1 Legal status of children looked after

The table below provides a breakdown of the legal status of children looked after as at the 31st March 2013.

District	Interim Care Order	Care Order	Sec 20 Accommodated	Remand	EPO/PPO	Placement orders	Total
Lancaster	24	55	25		1	35	140
Fylde & Wyre	19	47	23			5	94
Preston	39	97	21	6		36	199
Chorley & SR	30	93	26		1	25	175
West	22	75	30			8	135
Hyndburn & RV	62	93	31			25	211
Burnley	65	90	21	1		27	204
Pendle	52	101	23		2	43	221
Rossendale	10	58	25			10	103
TOTAL	323	709	225	7	4	214	1482

47.8% of the children looked after population is subject to a Care Order. This group of children are predominantly in long term fostering or residential placements, although some children may be placed at home with a parent under a home placement agreement.

15.1% of children are accommodated by agreement under section 20 of The Children Act 1989. These children are usually between the ages of 10 and 18 and have been accommodated due to family relationship breakdowns or due to an illness or disability of either a parent or child. There are a small number of children who will be accommodated with the consent of their parents whilst Children's Social Care secures a legal order through the courts. There are an even smaller number of children in this group where they have lost both parents and have no other family members able to care for them.

14% of children are subject to a Placement Order and have a plan of adoption. 32.7% are placed with their adoptive families. There are a small number of children subject to a Placement Order where their care plan is no longer adoption. Regular audits evidence that these children are all in the process of having their legal status changed in accordance with their care plan.

Out of the total number of children looked after, 1,154 are looked after due to abuse or neglect. Other categories of need include family dysfunction, family in acute stress and child or parent has an illness or disability.

4.2.2 Placements of children looked after

Of the 1,482 children that are looked after by Lancashire County Council, 63.7% (942 children) are placed within local authority placements. The remaining 36.3% (540 children) are placed with carers approved by an agency.

The majority of children are placed within either an adoptive or foster family. (1,123 children which equates to 75.8%). Of those children placed in an agency placement, 75% are placed with a foster carer.

A much smaller number of children are placed within residential settings. 3.6% (53 children) live within a Lancashire County Council children's residential unit and 4.6% (68 children) live in a residential home provided by an agency.

16% (238 children/young people) live in other settings, for example, supported living as they prepare to leave care. Also included in this particular group of children are remanded young people, young people in very specialist placements due to specific needs such as mental health related issues and there is 1 young person currently on a Section 25 welfare Secure Order and is placed in a secure unit.

4.2.3 Placement stability

The percentage of children looked after having 3 or more placements during the past 12 months is low at 8.7%. (A low percentage is an indicator of good performance. In 2011/12: statistical neighbours: 10.6% and England average: 11%). The percentage of looked after children who were living in the same placement for at least 2 years is 73.4%, which represents an improvement of 1.7% on performance in the previous year.

4.2.4 Age and gender breakdown of children looked after

The table below provides a breakdown of the gender and ages of children looked after as at the 31st March 2013.

Age group	Female	Male	Unborn	TOTAL
Under 1	60	54	1	115
1 to under 5	139	184		323
5 to under 10	148	165		313
10 to under 16	211	286		497
16 to under 18	109	125		234
County Total	667	814	1	1482

4.2.5 Participation (PAF 63)

Performance in relation to participation remains high with the majority of looked after children in Lancashire either attending or contributing to their review. Although the table below shows a dip in performance in 2012/13, this has to be set in the context of a higher number of children in this cohort over the age of 4 years than in the previous year. In 2012/13 there were just 56 children who either chose not to contribute or were unable to contribute to their review. (1,006 out of 1,062 children and young people over four years of age actually contributed).

Participation of children looked after in their review:

2008/9	90.3%
2009/10	89.7%
2010/11	97.4%
2011/12	96.2%
2012/13	94.7%

4.2.6 Reviews held within timescale (NI66)

Performance in relation to the number of children and young people having their care plans reviewed within statutory timescales has decreased by 1.2% in 2012/13. Out of the cohort of 1,360 children, 68 reviews were held outside of the timescale. This has to be set in the context of a rise in the care population which equates to an 11.26% increase in comparison to the previous year and this in turn equates to a 9.35% increase in the number of CLA reviews compared to the previous year.

Percentage of reviews held within timescale:

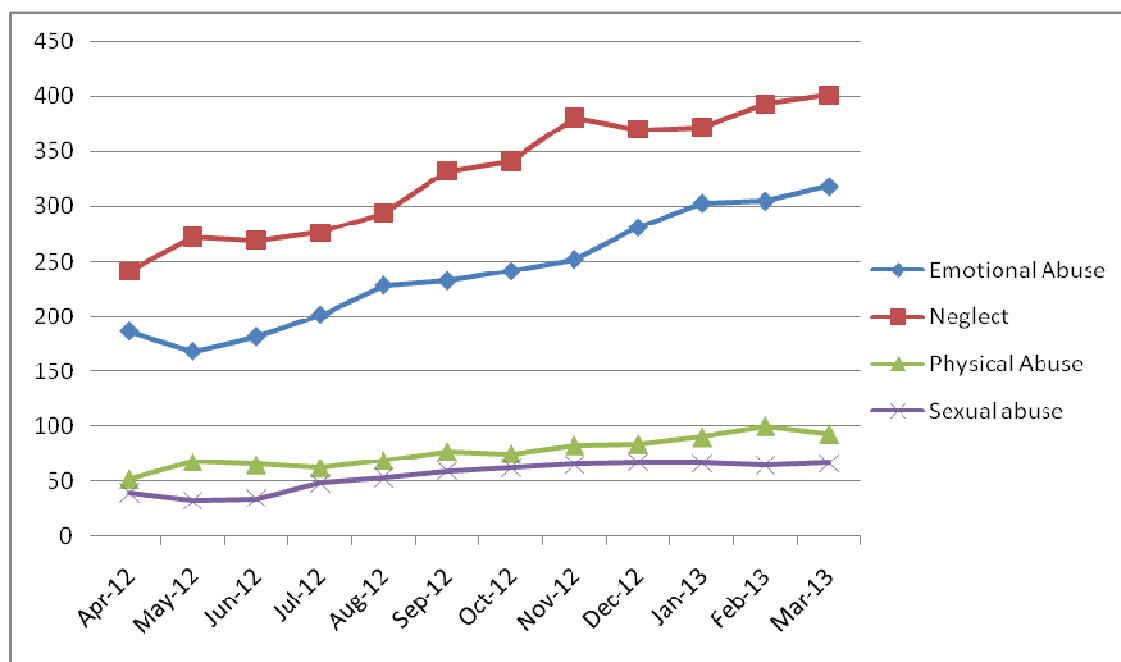
2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
79.6%	86%	95.7%	95.6%	97.8%	96.2%	95%

4.3 Performance relating to safeguarding

4.3.1 Child protection plans by category of abuse

The table below gives a breakdown of child protection plans during 2012/13 by category of abuse. This highlights the continuing high prevalence of neglect cases. Neglect accounts for 45.67% of child protection plans in Lancashire with the second largest category being emotional abuse at 36.2%. Neglect remains a priority for the LSCB and Directorate and a considerable amount of research has been undertaken in Lancashire, identifying the characteristics of neglect, defining good outcomes and aiding our understanding of the experiences of children and families. This work informed the development of a neglect strategy (approved by the LSCB in April 2013) which sets out Lancashire's approach in tackling neglect.

Number of CP plans at the report end date	30th April 2012	31st May 2012	30th June 2012	31st July 2012	31st August 2012	30th September 2012	31st October 2012	30th November 2012	31st December 2012	31st January 2013	28th February 2013	31st March 2013
EMOTIONAL ABUSE	186	168	181	201	228	232	241	252	281	303	305	318
NEGLECT	241	272	269	276	294	332	341	381	370	372	393	401
PHYSICAL ABUSE	52	68	65	62	69	77	75	83	84	90	100	93
SEXUAL ABUSE	39	32	34	48	53	59	62	65	67	66	64	66
Total	518	540	549	587	644	700	719	781	802	831	862	878



4.3.2 Child protection plans by age

The table below provides a breakdown of children subject to a child protection plan by age as at the 31st March 2013.

District	Under 1	1 to 4years	5 to 9 years	10 to 15 years	16 and over	Total
Lancaster	8	29	15	14	0	66
Fylde & Wyre	12	21	20	14	2	69
Preston	34	70	53	59	5	221
Chorley & SR	14	38	32	27	2	113
West	10	17	23	21	2	73
Hyndburn & RV	19	39	29	30	4	121
Burnley	13	35	23	14	2	89
Pendle	10	31	24	28	4	97
Rossendale	6	7	12	4	0	29
TOTAL	126	287	233	211	21	878

Whilst there has been a rise in the number of children subject to a child protection plan overall, the table below identifies the increase by age categories. Although the 16 plus category shows the largest increase, this was actually only an increase from 12 to 21 children.

Under 1	1 to 4years	5 to 9 years	10 to 15 years	16 and over
41% increase	68% increase	59% increase	62% increase	75% increase

4.3.3 NI 67: Percentage of review child protection conferences held within timescale

	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Lancashire	100%	99.6%	100%	100%	98.90%	96.5%
SN's	99.8%	99.7%	97.1%	96.4	98%	
England - National Average	99.4%	99.1%	96.8%	97.1%	96.7%	

96.5%% 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 within the top band for this indicator. The 3.5% of cases where reviews were held beyond the requisite timescale involved twenty children. In seven conferences (involving sixteen children) this was due to the adjournment of the conference. Conferences were adjourned for a number of reasons. For example, a parent needed an advocate; a child was in hospital with the parent in attendance and invite letters to one of the conferences involving six children were incorrect. This meant attendees arrived late and there was insufficient time to hold

the meeting which had to be rearranged. The reconvened conference was held within 20 working days. However, this fell outside of the original review timescale. The other conferences held out of time were due to delays by another local authority in arranging a child protection transfer conference following the relocation of the family and in one case the review was late due to human error with the conference being arranged out of time.

This has been addressed by the management team and IROs have been reminded that they must book review conferences with five months rather than six months, thus giving time to reconvene within timescale should there be a need for an adjournment. Adjournments are now being monitored on a monthly basis to monitor the frequency of this. Tighter control measures have also been put in place requiring that IROs and Social Worker's seek the permission of their manager for authorisation to change a review date.

4.3.4 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 subject to a child protection plan for more than two years has decreased significantly from 4.4% (2011/12) to 2.6% (2012/13) and performance remains well within the top national banding (0<10) for this indicator.

	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Lancashire	5.3%	2.9%	3.8%	4.8%	4.4%	2.6%
SN's	5.0%	6.7%	7.9%	7.5%	6.0%	
England - National Average	5.3%	5.8%	5.9%	6.0%	5.6%	

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 2.33% in the Lancaster district to 16.67% in Ribble Valley. It is difficult, however to draw any meaningful conclusions from this variation as the latter district has the fewest number of child protection plans and therefore this percentage reflects a very small numerical change.

This decrease on an already very low figure is perhaps a reflection of the fact that child protection cases are well managed (as highlighted by Ofsted in the inspection of safeguarding and looked after children, 2012) and IROs together with District Senior

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.

This indicator relates to children who have ceased to be on a child protection plan. It is perhaps more helpful to consider the actual duration of time on a plan and this is detailed below.

4.3.5 Duration of child protection plans

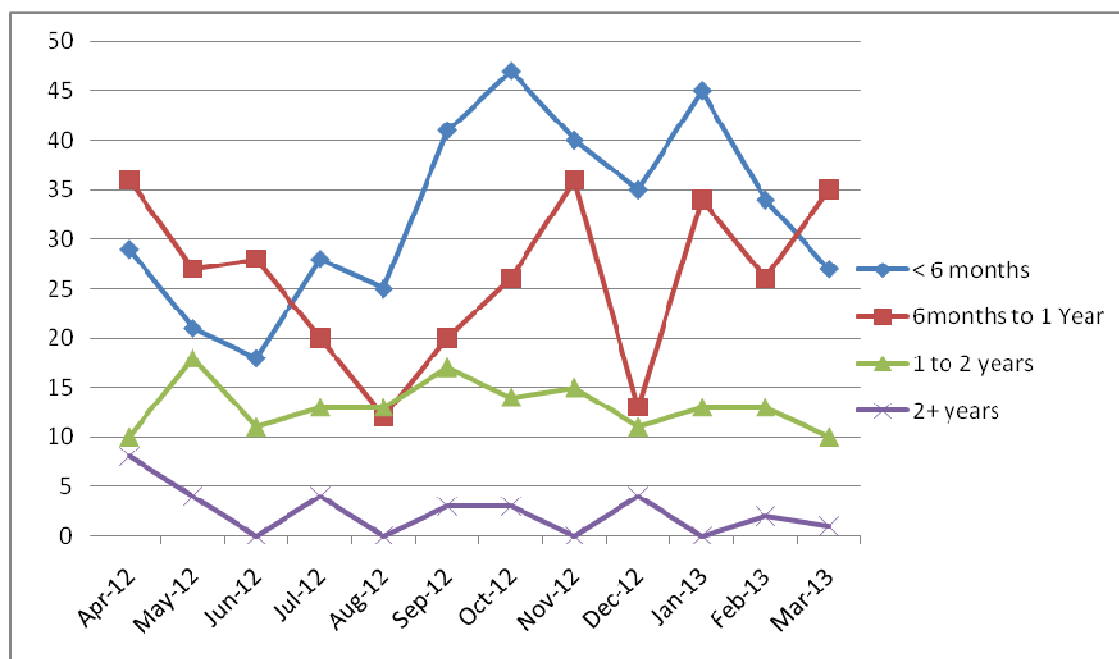
In understanding the increase in children subject to a child protection plan, consideration also needs to be given to the duration of those plans.

The below table details the number of child protection plans ceased per month during 2012/13 and the duration of the plan upon cessation.

	APR 12	MAY 12	JUN 12	JUL 12	AUG 12	SEP 12	OCT 12	NOV 12	DEC 12	JAN 13	FEB 13	MAR 13
< 6 Months	29	21	18	28	25	41	47	40	35	45	34	27
6 months to 1 year	36	27	28	20	12	20	26	36	13	34	26	35
1 to 2 years	10	18	11	13	13	17	14	15	11	13	13	10
2+ years	8	4	0	4	0	3	3	0	4	0	2	1
Total	83	70	57	65	50	81	90	91	63	92	75	73

The following table details the above information as a percentage:

	APR 12	MAY 12	JUN 12	JUL 12	AUG 12	SEP 12	OCT 12	NOV 12	DEC 12	JAN 13	FEB 13	MAR 13
< 6 Months	34.9	30.0	31.6	43.1	50.0	50.6	52.2	44.0	55.6	48.9	45.3	37.0
6 months to 1 year	78.3	68.6	80.7	73.8	74.0	75.3	81.1	83.5	76.2	85.9	80.0	84.9
1 to 2 years	21.7	31.4	19.3	26.2	26.0	24.7	18.9	16.5	23.8	14.1	20.0	15.1
2+ years	9.6	5.7	0.0	6.2	0.0	3.7	3.3	0.0	6.3	0.0	2.7	1.4



During the year 2012-13 a child protection plan was ceased in respect of 890 children. On average 74 child protection plans were ceased per month (range 50-91). In 43.8% of the plans ceased (involving 390 children) the child had been subject of a child protection plan for less than six months. In practice terms this means the plan ended at the first review approximately ten weeks after the conference decision that a child required safeguarding through a formal child protection plan.

Given that a child protection intervention is a costly process, both in terms of the financial and human costs, it is a concern that in a significant number of cases the decision to implement a child protection plan had changed by the first review.

The following scenarios may account for this:

- On the basis of a more in-depth assessment agencies felt that the risk was manageable outside of the formal child protection process. This may suggest that the threshold for children entering the child protection system is too low requiring further analysis;
- The plan ended because the child had become looked after, suggesting that more detailed assessment highlighted a need to safeguard a child outside of the family. This may suggest that the child protection intervention came too late and/or was not able to preserve the child safely within their family;
- The plan ended optimistically before meaningful and lasting change was achieved;

- The plan ended as the child moved out of Lancashire and case responsibility transferred to the receiving authority.

If the third factor was significant this would be evident in a high rate of re-registrations, and particularly re-registrations within one year of the plan being ceased. However, this is not the case, which indicates that decisions to end child protection plans are taken safely.

To consider the influence of the first two factors requires some understanding of what happens to children when the child protection plan ends and why the decision to end the plan was made.

Of the total number of plans ceased in the year (890, regardless of duration) 24.25% (291 children) were looked after at the time the plan ended. This means that one in four children ceasing to be subject of a child protection plan will become looked after. Further audit work will be undertaken in order to gain more insight into the duration of child protection plans and in particular those that have ended in less than six months. This analysis will be shared with District Senior Managers for consideration of further actions.

4.3.6 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. Good performance has been maintained against this indicator with performance above target being achieved. (Nationally good performance is deemed to be between 10 – 15%. Target for 2012/13: 13%, actual performance: 12.3%).

	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Lancashire (internal data)	14%	12.6%	13.3%	13.7%	10.8%	12.3%
DFE definition ¹					17.8%	16.7%
SN's	13.3%	13.0%	15.0%	12.5%	15.6%	
England - National Average	13.6%	13.5%	13.4%	13.3%	13.8%	

¹ Following the submission of this report it was identified that Lancashire internal data on re-registrations does not include children previously subject of plans in another Local Authority area whereas the updated DFE national indicator definition does so. The updated data return has therefore been added.

4.3.7 Children Subject to a child protection plan who are also a child looked after

On the 31st March 2013, there were 49 children who were subject to a child protection plan whilst also being looked after by the authority. Of these children, 19 were subject to Interim Care Orders, 29 were accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 and one young person was remanded.

The merger of the IRO service should minimise this duplication. Children who are subject to a child protection plan who then become looked after have their review child protection conference brought forward within the 20 day timescale for the first child looked after review and the meetings are held consecutively. This reduces the need for children to be subject to a dual process. It will only be in exceptional circumstances that a child needs to be subject to a child protection plan whilst also being looked after. For example, when the plan is for a child to return home very quickly.

5. Quality assurance

5.1 Themes arising from IRO quality assurance

The IROs are required to complete a quality assurance check following each child looked after review and child protection conference. Although due to capacity issues this hasn't been achieved, with IROs prioritising those cases requiring escalation. In 2012 the IRO checklist was amended to include more qualitative information and is used to identify good practice and any deficits which need to be addressed. The IRO managers regularly audit the checklists to identify any trends and share the findings in the District/IRO Cluster Meetings. (A quarterly meeting between the IROs and operational managers).

In 2012/2013, 2,648 quality assurance checklists were completed in respect of CLA reviews and child protection conferences. This is a decrease in the number completed in 2011/12. However, this needs to be set in the context of a rise in the care population and the number of children subject to a child protection plan and the increasing workload this places on the IRO Team.

The importance of quality assurance continues to be reinforced by the IRO managers as it is considered an integral part of the IRO role. The following practice themes have been identified by the IROs:

5.1.1 Preparation for reviews/conferences

There is evidence that reports are completed by Social Workers prior to a CLA review or Child Protection Conference taking place in a high number of cases. However, there is also evidence that reports are not shared with children and their families within the required timescales prior to the meeting on most occasions. (Three days prior to a CLA review, one day for an Initial Child Protection Conference and two days for a Review Child Protection Conference). This means that children and families may not be adequately prepared for meetings and meetings may be of a longer duration to ensure everyone has had the opportunity to read the reports. It is the IROs responsibility, as defined by the IRO Handbook, to ensure that children and parents are appropriately prepared for meetings and the IRO can adjourn the meeting to allow more preparation time. There are a number of adjournments that have taken place in 2012/13 for this reason in both CLA reviews and conferences. In these circumstances the IRO reconvenes the meeting within a maximum of 20 working days.

95% of children and young people are recorded as being consulted and prepared prior to their children looked after reviews.

5.1.2 Review recommendations

There is evidence that the recommendations from children looked after reviews are completed by the IRO within the five working day timescale in a high number of cases, approximately 85%. However, it is acknowledged that due to capacity issues the full review report is not completed and distributed within the requisite 15 working days. This is currently achieved in approximately 55% of cases.

The completion of review recommendations is evident in a high number of cases. IROs are undertaking midpoint review checks to track the progress of recommendations between reviews. This ensures the timely completion of review recommendations and means that outcomes for children and young people will improve as the care plan is progressed.

5.1.3 Appropriate legal status and care plans for children and young people

In 99% of the quality assurance checklists completed the child/young person is reported to have an appropriate legal status. The remaining 1% includes children who are accommodated under S20 of the Children Act 1989, but the need to initiate care proceedings has been identified and a small number of children subject to a Placement Order where the plan is no longer adoption. Quarterly audits of these cases ensure timely applications are made to the court seeking revocation of the order.

There are approximately 2% of children who have an inappropriate legal status where this is incorrectly recorded on their electronic case record. Care plans for CLA are recorded as being appropriate in a high number of cases but approximately 6% are not recorded correctly. Recording issues are highlighted by the IRO to ensure the case record is corrected.

The quality assurance checklists highlight that IROs are receiving court reports and legal orders in only 67% of cases subject to court proceedings. IRO managers continue to notify the legal department upon the allocation of an IRO to a child and IROs follow up with the legal department where they have not received documents. A meeting will be arranged with legal services to identify any barriers that are preventing a consistent provision of court reports across the service.

5.1.4 The provision of life story books

The IROs have reported through their quality assurance role delays in the completion of life story books in respect of children placed for adoption. Where necessary this has been addressed through the formal problem resolution process.

The adoption service has responded to the issues raised by the IROs, with the resolution that funding has been allocated from the recently acquired Adoption Improvement Grant to support two additional social workers for a time limited period to complete outstanding work within the service, including life story work.

In the longer term the development of a Central Care Proceedings Team (also funded by the Adoption Reform Grant) will ensure that material for life story work is collated from an early stage. The development of the Central Care Proceedings Team will also facilitate swifter adoption care planning and placement in the future and achieve additional capacity to complement the Children Awaiting Adoption Team function.

5.1.5 Multi-agency attendance at child protection conferences

There is evidence of good multi agency attendance at child protection conferences and continuing good multi agency work with children who are made subject to a child protection plan. It is noted that some attendance by agencies at core groups isn't as consistent as it should be and attendance at subsequent review conferences can be less than at initial conferences.

Following a Serious Case Review recommendation an audit was commissioned of the participation of schools in conferences and core groups with the following key findings:

The participation of 15 primary and 21 secondary schools was audited and this included two special schools and one independent school.

The audit highlighted some good examples of schools participation, evidenced in meeting notes, where school's reports are child focused and schools have demonstrated a clear understanding of complex cases along with empathy for the child or young person themselves. There is further evidence that information has been

shared and discussed widely within the meeting in addition to evidence that school representatives have asked appropriate questions, sometimes regarding child protection processes or in considering the impact of the child protection plan.

Nearly all schools were consistently represented by the named core group member. For primary schools this was usually the Head or Deputy Head Teacher and for secondary schools this was the Head/Deputy Head Teacher, the Designated Senior Person, Special Educational Needs Coordinator or a key worker. For example, Pastoral Care or a Family Support Worker.

Following a recommendation from the audit, the Schools Safeguarding Officer is now involved in addressing any non attendance or non participation issues in conferences directly with the schools involved.

5.2 Themes arising from parent/carers questionnaires

Parents and carers are asked to provide feedback of their experience of Lancashire's child protection processes at two key points; after the initial child protection conference and following the review conference. 39 questionnaires were returned for initial conferences and 57 were completed following the review. The following themes have been identified:

5.2.1 Initial child protection conferences

In a high proportion of cases (92% of respondents), the parent/carers advised that they understood why a child protection conference had been held and they had met with the IRO prior to the start of the conference so their role and the conduct of the meeting had been explained to them. Interestingly only 69% indicated they had been given the opportunity to speak to the IRO at the end of the meeting. This is an area for development within the service.

The majority of respondents (90%) felt they had been able to express their views. However, a small number of responses highlighted the complexity of reports and the difficulty remembering everything when several agency reports are discussed. As a result of this some parents/carers felt that they were not able to contribute as fully as they would have wanted to.

Compounding this was that some parents/carers reported it was hard to remember who everybody was at the conference due to the high level of anxiety at the start of the meeting. This has been addressed and name plates are now used in conferences. Whilst the majority of respondents (85%) knew who would be attending, some hadn't felt prepared by the social worker and were also unsure about the relevance of some professionals attending.

38% of respondents reported that they don't receive conference reports 24 hours before the meeting. This was the main criticism in feedback from the questionnaires. Several comments state that reports had only been received upon their arrival ten, fifteen or sixty minutes prior to the meeting. Other comments relate to specific reports that were missing from the conference pack; the most common missing report was the police report. However, this is most likely due to the confidential nature of this information.

Sensitivity of information was another issue identified by parents/carers. Whilst it was understood that information would be shared with other agencies, some respondents hadn't recognised the level of information that would be discussed within the conference and questioned whether all attendees should be privy to that information.

74% of respondents reported that the conference appeals process had been explained to them, although in some cases this had only been discussed briefly. Written information is always available at the conference explaining the appeals process. IROs will be reminded to make reference to this during the introduction to the meeting.

The anxiety and distress experienced by some parents/carers attending initial child protection conferences is acknowledged, although some comments highlighted the focus was rightly on the child and although at times difficult, they understood the need for this. In terms of suggestions to improve services, the need for empathy and to be treated with dignity and respect was identified. Other comments included the need for more time to read reports, the need for the right professionals to be in attendance, listening to the views of parents as well as children, the need for better communication and having a list of professionals in attendance.

5.2.2 Review child protection conferences

Feedback from the questionnaires highlights that in a high proportion of cases (95%) monthly core groups are taking place and parents are invited to attend in almost all cases. The majority of responses (95%) indicate that parents/carers are able to express their views and feel listened to. One response commented that they felt scared of giving their opinion as they didn't feel listened to. This reinforces the need for awareness of perceived power imbalances between parents/carers and professionals.

In a significant number of cases (35%) respondents again identified that reports are not shared in the requisite timescales (48 hours) before the review conference. This was the main criticism in feedback from the questionnaires.

Parents/carers report that they meet with the IRO prior to conference in a high number of cases and all the comments were positive about the chairperson, many referring to their kind nature, empathy and understanding of the parents' situation. They also reported feeling supported by the IRO. Responses confirmed that parents/carers feel

able to share their views in the review and feel listened to. This suggests that they feel more able to share their views in the review child protection conference, probably because they are more familiar with the process and feel less anxious.

Feedback highlights the critical role of the IRO in terms of whether the process has been a good or bad experience for parents/carers. From the comments received it is evident that a good chairperson makes participants feel listened to, supported and important in what is for most a stressful situation.

Likewise, the comments highlight the importance of good professional relationships and how professionals can empower families in child protection to make positive changes in their child's lives. The emphasis being on the people in the process rather than process itself.

Within the questionnaire parents/carers are asked to share any comments about the process and their experience. Feedback centres on the feelings of the parent/carers at the end of a complex process, and are largely expected: '*Stressful*', '*It's hard*', '*rollercoaster of emotions*'. However, positive statements were also made about their journey and the outcomes for their family: '*finally got me and my children's life back to normal*', '*changed my life to a better one*', '*very beneficial*', '*an eye opener*'.

5.3 Problem resolution

One of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. The Problem Resolution Protocol provides a formal process for the IRO to raise concerns when informal attempts to resolve the issue have failed.

Currently this process is used in respect of the IRO duties in relation to children looked after. However, the process has been developed to replicate this process in the child protection arena.

Starred recommendations by district: 2010/11 2011/12 2012/13

LANCASTER DISTRICT	4	2	3
FYLDE & WYRE DISTRICT	0	1	1
PRESTON DISTRICT	4	2	0
CHORLEY & SOUTH RIBBLE DISTRICT	2	7	6
WEST LANCASHIRE DISTRICT	1	2	1

HYNDBURN & RIBBLE VALLEY DISTRICT	1	4	1
BURNLEY DISTRICT	4	4	0
PENDLE DISTRICT	2	1	0
ROSSENDALE DISTRICT	2	2	1
SPECIALIST SERVICES (located outside of districts)	N/A	N/A	10
TOTAL	20	25	23

There were 23 starred recommendations in 2012/2013. Of these, one was referred to Cafcass, which is the highest stage in the resolution process. At the time of writing this report, one remains a live issue and is at stage 5. Two were resolved at stage 4 of the Problem Resolution Protocol and the remaining 19 were resolved at stage 2.

There is evidence that most starred recommendations are being resolved in a timely manner, within the 20 working days defined by the IRO Handbook. Some that haven't been resolved within that timescale are due to timescales being renegotiated in the best interests of the child.

Starred recommendations were made for a variety of reasons. For example, challenge in respect of long term placements not being identified in a timely manner; review documents, care plans, personal education plans (PEPs) and pathway plans not being completed; challenges regarding proposed changes of placement which weren't considered to be in the child's best interests and contact plans which the IRO felt were not safeguarding the child.

There has been a reduction in starred recommendations made this year. In 2011/12 the percentage of starred recommendations made in relation to the number of reviews held was 0.7%. In 2012/13 this had reduced to 0.5%. IROs are completing midpoint review checks and escalating issues informally at an earlier stage. IROs are also monitoring review recommendations more closely, therefore reducing the opportunity for delay.

The dispute resolution process is firmly embedded in practice and has achieved positive outcomes for children looked after as illustrated in the following examples:

Case Example 1:

A young child placed with foster carers who had made it known to the social worker that they would not be able to offer a permanent placement. The IRO made a starred recommendation that searches for a permanent placement needed to be intensified following delay in this being progressed. Tight timescales were set to identify an in-house placement before agency placements were to be considered. The outcome of this was that a long term placement was identified within one month of this recommendation.

Case Example 2:

Two children placed in a long term foster placement. Referrals had been made to Child & Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS) on two occasions in order to progress an assessment. Consultation had taken place with SCAYT+ (Supporting Carers of Children and Young People Together) and this assessment was felt to be vital for care planning and placement stability. Both referrals were rejected by CAMHS. This starred recommendation was for CAMHS to carry out an assessment. This was progressed by the district team in conjunction with SCAYT+ within the 20 day timescale for resolution and the ultimate outcome was that CAMHS accepted the referral for assessment within two weeks of the third referral.

Case Example 3:

During a review for three young children the IRO became concerned about the level of supervision that was in place for contact sessions between the children and their parents. The IRO identified risks that the children were exposed to during these sessions and made a starred recommendation that contact be urgently reviewed. This was carried out by the team manager within the one week timescale and supervision of the sessions was increased.

5.4 IRO challenge

There is also evidence of the effectiveness of IROs in challenging practice without the need for recourse to formal problem resolution processes:

Case Example 1:

The IRO raised concerns about a young child placed at home with parents on an Interim Care Order. The local authority care plan put before the court was to remove the child but the judge would not allow this and ordered that the child remained in the care of the parents. The IRO and CSC continued to be concerned about this arrangement and the IRO clearly recorded these views in the review document which was made available to the court. The IRO challenged evidence of the parent's engagement with the plan at reviews and recommended that the home placement agreement be reviewed by the responsible manager and for this to be presented to the court. The outcome was that the child was removed and placed in foster care. As this was a young child the care plan is now adoption. Information was received by CSC that the parents were expecting another baby and plans were put in place for a pre birth child protection conference. This identified no changes to the family circumstances and therefore care

proceedings were initiated at birth and plans made for an immediate removal. The long term plan is for both siblings to be placed together in an adoptive placement.

Case Example 2:

In this case three siblings are placed at home on Care Orders under a home placement agreement and the mother is expecting her fourth child. There is a history of domestic abuse. The decision of the social work team responsible for the older children had been to discharge the Care Orders. However, a recent incident of domestic abuse had been reported by the police and this plan had therefore been put in abeyance to allow a further period of assessment. The IRO challenged the decision by CSC not to hold a pre birth child protection conference. (It had been proposed to manage the case under a child in need plan). The IRO felt this plan was not sufficiently robust to manage the risk given the particular vulnerability of a new born baby. The IRO raised this with the manager of the team and it was agreed that an initial child protection conference would be held.

Case Example 3:

The IRO challenged the timing of a planned move of a child looked after to live with their sibling, as it was felt this was being rushed following a previous breakdown of a placement where they had lived together. The IRO requested that the original bridging plan was implemented so that all involved ensured that this was the right plan for the children and that it was given every chance of success. The IRO requested a planning meeting and also discussed their views with the Guardian. The IRO also visited both children to ascertain their direct wishes in relation to the bridging. The outcome was that the original timescales for the move were reinstated with the agreement of both children.

6. Evidence of good practice

6.1 Participation

The proportion of children and young people participating in their review remains high and participation continues to be encouraged in creative ways. The use of person centred approaches within the review process continues to be promoted throughout the team. Training in relation to person centred approaches continued to be delivered during the year. There is evidence of good practice in district teams in promoting creative mechanisms for participation as illustrated in the following examples:

Case Example 1:

The Social Worker has on several occasions completed direct work with children to help them participate in their children looked after reviews. This has particularly helped younger children and children who are shy or have a degree of learning needs.

Before the review the Social Worker writes down with the child their views of positives and negatives. Positives and negatives were represented by symbols. One child drew a football pitch. Positives were shown through goals scored, negatives through own goals scored. The child asked the IRO to be the referee of the football match and had to show a parent a red card because they had missed a contact. Another child used a pirate ship and represented positives and negatives through treasure chests and skull and cross bone flags.

This method would not suit all children but is an imaginative way to help some children who find it difficult to communicate, to participate in their review in a meaningful way.

Case Example 2:

A young person and his family had praised the review process for supporting them through a difficult time in relation to transition planning. This young person had always had a person centred review following a difficult initial review held in a traditional way. The review *'kept everyone on track and was an opportunity to share positives collectively when sometimes it was difficult to see progress on a daily basis.'*

Case Example 3:

Two young people complete a story board for every review that is either on the wall or in the middle of the room on a table so that all professionals can read their views and see what is important to them throughout the meeting. They design these themselves and choose what they want to share. This is a good way for professionals to be reminded that children and young people should be at the centre of planning and reviews.

6.2 Concurrent planning

The IRO service has been kept up to date on the progress of the concurrent planning project and in particular when carers are about to be approved under this scheme. This has enabled IROs to identify any children on their caseload, particularly unborn babies, who would meet the criteria for a concurrent placement. The placements that have been made have all been identified by the IRO service in the initial stages and the IRO has been involved in progression of the plan. This achieves a positive outcome for very young children, reducing delay and the number of placement moves.

6.3 Pilot of revised child protection process

The 2011/12 annual report referenced a pilot of revised child protection documents and processes in the Pendle District. Observations of child protection conferences and feedback from families continues to evidence the positive impact this has made to practice. This is particularly evident through the use of the final core group report which has eliminated the need for parents/carers to read several different agency reports. The importance of this has been raised in the feedback from the parent/carer

questionnaires. This also ensures a greater proportion of conference time is focused on discussions in relation to the child protection plan.

It remains the intention to implement the revised documentation across the county and it has therefore been incorporated in the service specification for the replacement IT solution for the Children's Social Care Record which will be launched in January 2014. It had been hoped that changes could be made to the current IT system but the cost of doing this is prohibitive. In the interim period it has been agreed to use documents from the pilot which are not part of the current electronic record.

The IRO in this district also delivered two training sessions to support improvements in practice, including outcome focused child protection plans and thresholds. This was offered to social workers, managers, parenting support workers and representatives from health.

6.4 Education awards for children looked after

IROs have nominated children and young people for education awards for some years now but in 2012/13 changes were introduced to improve the process and particularly the timeliness of the child/young person receiving their award. IROs are now assigned a number of vouchers each month and can give these out at the child's review. The criteria for awards has also been reviewed and is now more clearly defined, requiring that the child/young person has met a target as identified in their PEP. Positive feedback has been received from children and young people who like the fact that they are instantly rewarded for their hard work.

7. Service development

7.1 Administration of child protection conferences

An internal audit review of the service highlighted that there was no audit trail to the allocation process for initial child protection conferences as the IRO was contacted directly by the district team to arrange a conference.

An IRO duty system was introduced in January 2013 and a centralised referral process implemented. This provides a clear audit trail of the allocation process.

The development of a centralised booking service for initial child protection conferences was identified as a priority in the annual report for 2011/12. This has been progressed and an appointment made to the post within the Mobile Minute Taking Service. The service will deliver efficiencies, freeing up a significant amount of time spent by IROs, Social Workers and Business Support staff in negotiating conference arrangements. It will also ensure conferences are arranged in a timelier manner, maximising the notice period and allowing more preparation time for families and professionals.

7.2 Quality assurance

Following a recent review of the case file audit tools used within Children's Social Care, the quality assurance checklist has been replaced by an IRO audit tool. This tool provides more qualitative information and is focused on the impact of interventions and the outcomes for the child, requiring the IRO to assess the quality of the work undertaken with the child/family. As the form is completed electronically, the data can be more easily collated to capture trends and themes. The audit tools will be a part of the new electronic recording system which will assist IROs in their completion as they are only using one system. The findings will be shared at quarterly cluster meetings between the districts and IRO service.

Managers at all levels within the Safeguarding, Inspection & Audit Service are required to undertake case file audits and an audit calendar has been agreed for the IRO managers who will complete 12 audits per month. Themed audits will be completed across a range of practice areas, including pre-birth conferences, pathway planning, child protection plans over two years and children with a care plan of adoption. Work shadowing is also used to facilitate direct observations of practice and learning. This has included IROs shadowing their peers and senior manager's observing conferences and CLA reviews. Work shadowing will be extended to include the IROs managers in undertaking practice observations.

7.3 Continuous improvement

The service continues to strive to make improvements which will achieve positive outcomes for children and young people. Staff development is key to this. Legal training for IROs has been commissioned to ensure IROs fully understand their role and responsibilities and when to challenge. This will be helpful for all IROs but will be of particular value to new IROs in the team. This training will also involve solicitors from legal services and representatives from Children's Social Care.

A new way of recording CLA review reports has been implemented to ensure that all review recommendations from the previous review have been implemented and consideration given to the impact on the child. This should also assist IROs in determining the need for a starred recommendation.

Quarterly audits are undertaken to ensure timely action is taken to seek the revocation of Placement Orders where the care plan is no longer adoption. The current position is much improved with all cases now being progressed and applications made to the court for a more appropriate order.

7.4 Outcome focused child protection plans

The Ofsted inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services identified that whilst child protection cases are well managed, reports for conferences, child protection plans and core groups were insufficiently outcome focused. During 2012/13 training was

commissioned in order to address this. As detailed above, changes are also being made to child protection documentation including a revised conference decision sheet and child protection plan which explicitly record outcomes for the child.

8. Challenges

8.1 IRO capacity

IRO capacity remains a significant challenge as caseloads are consistently higher than that recommended in the IRO Handbook. It is noted that caseloads are now equitable across the service but the number of children looked after and children subject to a child protection plan increased significantly during 2012/13. The number of meetings chaired by the IRO Service has exceeded 8,000 and this has had a significant impact on capacity.

IRO capacity has been addressed in the following ways:

- Recruitment to the additional posts agreed by the Directorate Leadership Team in early 2012 has been successful with the exception of one part-time temporary post. This did however, necessitate four separate recruitment attempts.
- Recruitment is underway to the vacancies arising from staff retiring in summer 2013;
- Recruitment is underway for the IRO manager's post created due to the resignation of the current post holder;
- Secondment opportunities from other services within the Directorate have been utilised;
- Agency staff have been used within the service to ensure statutory responsibilities have been met.

It is vital that we are able to recruit and retain an experienced IRO Service if caseloads are to be reduced and the IROs supported in fulfilling their critical quality assurance function. This will ensure that IROs 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.

8.2 Quality assurance

The IROs are in a unique position, independent from service delivery and with oversight of practice across Children's Social Care. However, in the past there has been an over emphasis on their role in relation to compliance and performance timescales.

Development work within the IRO service has focused on the IRO responsibilities within the IRO Handbook and the importance of the IRO challenge role. IROs need to ensure

that Social Workers assessments are robust, that they analyse and identify the needs of the child and that care plans and child protection plans that result from these assessments are realistic and outcome focused.

There is evidence that IROs in Lancashire are monitoring the implementation of the child's care plan in between reviews and are more robustly challenging practice, escalating concerns to Team and Senior Managers. However, to support IROs in fulfilling this responsibility caseloads need to reduce.

9. Priorities for 2013/14

9.1 Embed new structure

Now the service is fully operational in its new structure and systems have been implemented to support the new ways of working, the priority for this year is to develop the service and the IROs working within it. The team training and development plan is being reviewed to ensure the IROs continue to feel supported and develop in their new roles.

9.2 Develop a quarterly quality assurance report

A quarterly quality assurance report will be developed to capture themes from case file audits completed within the IRO Service, performance information, issues arising through the problem resolution process and learning from Serious Case Reviews. It is hoped that the report will provide a useful reporting and feedback mechanism to district teams.

9.3 NCB research

Lancashire is currently participating in a piece of research led by the National Children's Bureau (NCB), exploring the role and effectiveness of the IRO service. The research has received the support of the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) Research Group.

The study incorporates a national survey of IROs, IRO Managers and DCS's (now completed), an analysis of costs, and qualitative case studies in four local authorities. The NCB also met with a focus group of IROs and Social Workers, completed semi-structured interviews with stakeholders and looked after children and have undertaken an analysis of recent care plans, reviews and case notes.

The study will consider the following areas:

- Ways in which IROs and Social Workers work together;
- How IROs support the care planning process;
- The impact of the IRO service on individual cases and overall services for looked after children.

Lancashire will consider how the findings can be used to further improve its IRO service.

9.4 Reduce delay in care proceedings

The Family Justice Council has reviewed the timescales in relation to the duration of care proceedings in the family courts. The revised timescale has been reduced from 40 to 26 weeks. The emphasis for the local authority is firmly placed on pre proceedings work, ensuring that the timescale can be met once before the court. The IRO service has been involved in the development of the Directorate's pre proceedings protocol, ensuring the review process and its function in monitoring the care plan and preventing delay is implemented at the earliest opportunity.

A central care proceedings team has been established in the county in an effort to further reduce delay in care proceedings; in particular for those children with a plan of adoption. An IRO manager is represented on the steering group to ensure a collaborative approach to this initiative with CSC.

As part of their quality assurance role, IROs will continue to escalate concerns about delay to Childrens Social Care managers and their own line manager and if necessary commence the formal problem resolution process by making a starred recommendation.

9.5 Improve service user feedback

A priority this year is to increase the feedback from children and families in respect of their experience of services and their views regarding the IRO role. The proportion of completed parent/carers questionnaires is not representative of the number of conferences taking place and efforts will be made to improve this during 2013/14.

A method of consulting children and young people will be developed as part of the review process. This will provide children and young people with an opportunity to share their views about their meetings or the child protection conference, the process and their IRO in order to inform improvements in practice.

9.6 Access to independent legal advice

The IRO Handbook requires that IROs have access to independent legal advice. This is currently spot purchased from a private law firm which can be costly. Legal services are exploring the feasibility of establishing reciprocal arrangements with another local authority.

10. Conclusion

The IRO service is an experienced team and whilst retaining its independence and challenge, has developed strong collaborative working relationships, particularly with colleagues in CSC. The team has risen to the challenges of the last twelve months, evidencing a strong commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people. The new service structure provides a strong foundation upon which to deliver improvements in practice, promoting continuity of IRO and improved efficiency.

The quality assurance function of the IRO service has been strengthened through the new case file auditing arrangements. Whilst feedback from parents/carers has already been used to improve practice within the child protection arena, the views of children and young people will be sought to inform developments within the IRO service and improve service delivery.

Jude Brown	Senior IRO
Mark Hudson	Senior IRO
Paul McIntyre	Schools Safeguarding Coordinator

June 2013

Appendix 1**Post qualifying experience table****IRO Managers**

Name	Year of Qualification	Year began as an IRO	Year began as an IRO manager
IRO Manager 1	2000	2005	2009
IRO Manager 2	1982	1999	2010
IRO Manager 3	1999	N/A	2011

IROs

Name	Year of qualification	Year began as IRO
IRO 1	1985	1999
IRO 2	1986	1999
IRO 3	1989	1999
IRO 4	2003	2009
IRO 5	1988	2009
IRO 6	1993	2009
IRO 7	2003	2009
IRO 8	2005	2010
IRO 9	2004	2010
IRO 10	2007	2012
IRO 11	1988	2011
IRO 12	2000	2012

IRO 13	2001	2013
IRO 14	2006	2013
IRO 15	2005	2013
IRO 16	2006	2013
IRO 17	1995	2004
IRO 18	1995	2001
IRO 19	1996	2011
IRO 20	1982	2011
IRO 21	2000	2011
IRO 22	2004	2011
IRO 23	1988	2012
IRO 24	2007	2012
<u>Fostering IROs:</u>		
FIRO 1	2000	2007
FIRO 2	1998	2013
FIRO 3	1980	2009