

# **Independent Chairperson Annual Report**

**April 2015-March 2016**

**The Annual Independent Chairperson Report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the effectiveness of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) and Independent Conference Chairs (ICC's) in Shropshire as required by statutory guidance.**

**This report must be presented to the Corporate Parenting Board and the Local Safeguarding Board.**

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## Purpose of Service and Legal Context

The independent chairpersons in Shropshire have specific responsibilities for chairing looked after children statutory reviews and chairing child protection conferences. They have responsibility to ensure that local authority planning for our most vulnerable children in Shropshire, those that are looked after by the local authority and those that are subject to a child protection plan, is outcome focused, timely and informed by the voice of the child.

The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) was strengthened through the introduction of statutory guidance in 2011. The IRO statutory functions are set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and subsequent amended guidance issued by the Department for Education in March 2015 entitled 'Permanence, Long Term Foster Placements and Ceasing to be a Looked After Child'.

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) research 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) in England (March 2014) details information findings regarding the effectiveness of IRO services. Within the conclusion they detail what makes an effective IRO service and consolidate those aspects stating the following;

**'The theme uniting these aspects of the role is the importance of listening to children both at an individual and collective level and making sure that their needs and rights are protected. This is the essence of the 'independence' that is crucial to success; if there is a conflict of interests, the IRO must be on the side of the child'.**

From December 2012 the Looked after Children (LAC) population was extended to include those children placed on remand in secure units or youth offending institutions under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO) arrangements. This Act places a responsibility on Local Authorities to treat all children remanded to custody as LAC up to the age of 18 years with each young person having a remand plan which is the equivalent of a care plan.

Working Together to Safeguard Children (March 2015) sets out the duties and responsibilities for the management of child protection conferences for an ICC.

The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Children Looked After and for challenging drift and delay. The core functions of

the Independent Review Unit (IRU) consists of reviewing care plans and child protection plans for children alongside monitoring the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding responsibilities. This report sets out to evaluate both the impact of the IRO in improving the arrangements for looked after children and the ICC in ensuring effective child protection planning.

## **The Independent Review Unit – including the professional profile of the unit**

The unit has an independent role to ensure that all children who are in the care of the local authority or subject to a child protection plan are receiving the best possible service. Since March 2016 the unit has been managed in the Quality, Performance and Assurance Service with its own management structure and is not situated within the main social work service. This supports the independent function of the chairs and embeds them within the Local Authority Quality and Assurance framework, with a key role in the analysis of inter-agency performance monitoring and quality assurance activity. The IRU Unit provides an independent overview to ensure that the authority is providing good outcomes for children.

Every looked after child or child subject to a child protection plan will have a named IRO/ICC who will monitor their case, and where necessary challenge poor practice and escalate individual cases to senior managers.

The IRU is responsible for the following functions;

- Convening and chairing of child protection conferences
- Convening and chairing of statutory review for looked after children
- Carrying out the LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) functions
- For maintaining an oversight of cases between review meetings
- Provide scrutiny and oversight of the child's plan
- Quality Assuring reports coming to meetings, plans and activity between meetings
- Promote stability for children
- For the implementation of the dispute resolution process (Rag Rating) to identify good practice and to identify poor aspects of practice and delays in planning

In addition the unit also has responsibility for participation of children and young people, sending out consultation booklets, ensuring participation at meetings, either by attendance or through an advocate and speaking to children and young people prior to statutory review meetings.

The IRO's/ICC's will also ensure that parents contribute positively to child protection conferences and statutory reviews by ensuring that reports are shared with parents prior to meetings and by ensuring the parents are appropriately supported in meetings and that their voice is heard. The IRO's/ICC's will ensure that parents/carers understand the situation and what is expected of them.

As part of the monitoring role, the IRO has a duty to monitor the Local Authority functions as a Corporate Parent and to identify poor practice. ICC's also have a responsibility to ensure that children are safeguarded and that action is taken to reduce the risks for that child and to identify poor practice. A Dispute Resolution Process called the Rag Rating Process commenced in Shropshire in November 2015. Following each Statutory Review Meeting or Child Protection Conference a Rag Rating form is completed and sent to the responsible Team Manager who will then respond to the issues raised. Cases are rag rated green, amber or red. A monthly report is produced reporting on the rag ratings for that month and themes around practice identified and areas of improved practice highlighted.

Responsibility for the unit lies with the Head of Quality, Performance and Assurance who is also the Principle Social Worker and who reports directly to the Director of Children's Services.

The dual functions of the unit are split across the unit with dedicated child protection conference chairs and IRO's.

The IRU is staffed by;

- 2 full time IRO's
- 1 part time IRO (30 hours)
- 2 full time ICC's
- 1 part time ICC (20 hours)
- 1 LADO
- 1 part time Admin Services Coordinator
- 2.5 Minute Takers

- 3 part time administrators
- 1 full time administrator

The unit currently has one 30 hour vacant post and one part time ICC on maternity leave. At the time of writing this report these positions are being covered by one experienced agency chair who is undertaking both statutory reviews and child protection conferences.

The team comprises of 1 male worker and 5 female workers. All are White British. The ethnicity of our chairperson's reflect the majority of our looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan but do not reflect the ethnicity of all children. Our IRO's and ICC's have considerable years' of experience in children's services. Our longest serving IROS's have provided long term continuity for many of our looked after children. The grading of the independent chairs is equivalent to Team Managers of social work teams to ensure they have the required level of status to challenge as appropriate.

LAC as at 31/03/16 by Ethnic Origin	Percentage
White British	90.5%
Mixed - other	2.1%
White - Other	2.1%
Mixed - White/Black Carib	1.1%
Asian / Brit - Bangladeshi	0.7%
Black / Brit - Caribbean	0.7%
Mixed - White/ Black African	0.7%
Other ethnic group	0.7%
Asian / Brit -Other Asian	0.4%
Black / Brit - African	0.4%
Gypsy/Roma	0.4%
Mixed - White/Asian	0.4%

CPP as at 31/03/16 by Ethnic Origin	Percentage
White British	81.2%
White - Other	4.9%
Mixed - White/Asian	2.6%
Mixed - White/ Black African	2.3%
Gypsy/Roma	1.9%
Information not yet obtained	1.5%
Asian / Brit -Other Asian	1.1%
Black / Brit - African	1.1%
Mixed - other	1.1%

Mixed - White/Black Carib	1.1%
Traveller or Irish Heritage	0.8%
Not Known-use only if ethnicity cannot be obtained	0.4%

One of the key challenges for the IRU is the caseload size of our chairs. The IRO Handbook recommends a caseload size of 50-70 looked after children. At the time of writing this report the average IRO caseload for a full time IRO is 95 children and for ICC's is 106 children. The caseload size of our IRO's is kept under constant review and discussed in monthly supervision. At this current time the caseload size of IRO's and ICC's are too high.

The number of children alone does not indicate the full extent of the workload for each IRO/ICC, whilst not exhaustive some of the other responsibilities include case tracking, dispute resolution, seeing the child between reviews, travelling to out of area placements, Managing large family groups, chairing meetings for children with a disability and managing complex cases concerning unaccompanied asylum seeking children also needs to be taken into account.

On average each month 73 statutory review meetings take place and 49 child protection conferences take place.

### **Activities undertaken during 2015-2016**

- **Split the independent chairing functions between the chairs so that they have specific roles and responsibilities**
- **Introduced a dispute resolution process**
- **Supported two members of staff to complete an IRO post qualification at Birmingham University**
- **Moved the IRU into the Quality, Performance and Assurance Service**
- **Developed the quality assurance role of the independent chairs**
- **Continued to deliver training to Shropshire Safeguarding Children Board**
- **Contributed to the new Children's Services induction programme**
- **Completion of exit interviews for children and young people when they move placements or leave care**

### **Quantitative Information – Looked After Children Population**

## Key Messages

The Looked after Children population has reduced from **310** in March 2015 to **283** in March 2016

83 children have entered the care system in the last 12 months

A total of 882 Statutory Reviews were held in the year

The majority of children and young people who entered the care system were aged 10 – 14 years.

There were 90% of statutory reviews held within timescale

28 children left the care system through a return home to parents

The numbers of looked after children have reduced during the course of 2015-2016.

	Apr-15	May-15	Jun-15	Jul-15	Aug-15	Sep-15	Oct-15	Nov-15	Dec-15	Jan-16	Feb-16	Mar-16
LAC at Month End	311	313	308	306	307	308	309	304	299	298	290	283

A total of 83 children became looked after in 2015/2016 compared to 136 children in 2014/2015.

The number of these 83 children placed at a distance in excess of 20+ plus miles outside of the local authority is 6.

	Under 20 Miles		Over 20 Miles		Unknown
	In	Out	In	Out	
Number	52	4	14	6	7
Percentage	63%	5%	17%	7%	8%

The age profile of the 83 children and young people entering care as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016

Age on Starting to be Looked After	Number	Percentage
Under 1	15	18%
1 to 4	16	19%
5 to 9	11	13%
10 to 14	21	25%
15	12	14%
16+	8	10%

## Looked after Children Permanency Outcomes

Shropshire's Looked After Children Strategy which sets out how we will manage children and young people entering the care system and how we will meet the needs of children in local authority care. The strategy recognises the wide range and complexity of needs presented by individual children and importantly their parents. It acknowledges the research that tells us that children achieve better outcomes when cared for in their family and local communities where it is safe to do so but where children are removed the importance of timely permanency planning is a priority.

The outcomes sought by the LAC strategy are not simply to reduce the number of children received into local authority care but to:

1. Reduce the number of children received into local authority care via Section 20 i.e. family breakdown / voluntary request, where timely and effective early help could have prevented the need for Local Authority care.
2. Increase the number of children who achieve permanency outside of local authority care in order to ensure these children can move forward leading 'normal' family lives without long term intervention of the local authority.
3. To increase the number of children who are placed locally in Shropshire maximising potential to achieve stability in their school and health provision and connections with community and family where this is appropriate.
4. Reduce the duration of time children spend in local authority care, achieving permanency as soon as possible.



5. Reduce the number of children re-entering the care system by supporting sustained rehabilitation to parental care where it is safe to do so.

Throughout the year a total of 110 children ceased to be looked after compared to 94 ceasing to be looked after in 2014/2015.

During 2015/2016 the majority of children have achieved permanency through adoption (23 children), special guardianship order (14 children) or return home to parents (28 children).

Looked After Children Ceased Reason	Total
Planned return to live at home	28
Child turned 18, living with former foster carer	26
Adopted - application unopposed	23
Moved to indep living - formal advice / support	8
Special guardianship order made to former f/c	6
Special guardianship order made to carers not former f/c	6
Left to live with person with no parental resp	4
Residence Order	2
Special Guardianship Order	2
Unplanned return to live at home	2
Care Ceased for Another Reason	2
Over 17 not Indep Living or transition to Adult SS	1

Age on Ceasing to be Looked After	Number	Percentage
Under 1	7	6%
1 to 4	26	24%
5 to 9	15	14%
10 to 14	12	11%
15	6	5%
16+	44	40%

The attached information shows that Shropshire are utilising the full range of legal orders available to enable children to achieve permanency where they cannot return to the care of their parents. In 2015/2016 16 more children left the care system during the course of the 12 months then in 2014/2015. This is in the context of Shropshire accommodating 53 less children during this

period. This highlights the local authority's position of only looking after those children that should be in the care of the local authority.

Permanence decisions are vital to ensure best outcomes for our looked after children. Timely permanency decisions are achieved through good quality assessments, care planning and reviewing of children's circumstances.

## Care Plan Reviews

LAC Statutory Reviews 2015/16	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	Total
Total Reviews	66	82	75	88	74	72	91	61	84	72	50	67	<b>882</b>
Total Held in Timescale	65	76	47	88	42	72	89	55	82	70	47	62	<b>795</b>
% Held in Timescale	98%	93%	63%	100%	57%	100%	98%	90%	98%	97%	94%	93%	<b>90%</b>

During the course of 2015/2016 90% of our statutory reviews took place within timescales. This overall percentage has been effected by only 57% of Statutory Review Meetings taking place in timescales in August 2015. This could have been down to either the social worker, child and/or carers being away on holiday and the meetings having to be rearranged outside of timescales. This is not acceptable and efforts need to be made to ensure that this doesn't happen again in 2016.

Number of care plan reviews held in;

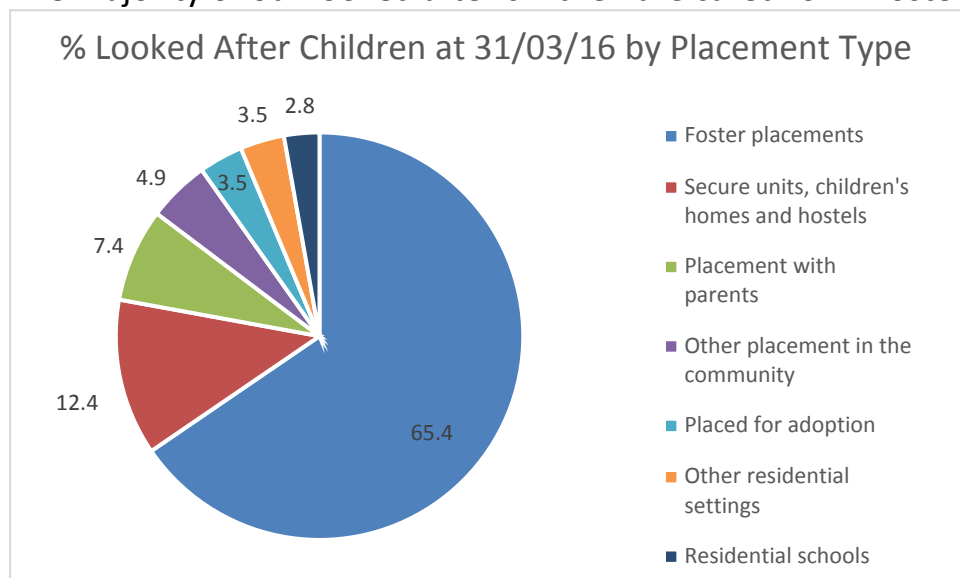
LAC Statutory Reviews in:	Total Reviews	Total Held in Timescale	%
2015/16	882	795	90%
2014/15	988	941	95%
2013/14	792	774	98%

We are seeing a deteriorating picture in relation to the timeliness of statutory reviews which needs to be addressed as a matter of priority in 2016/2017.

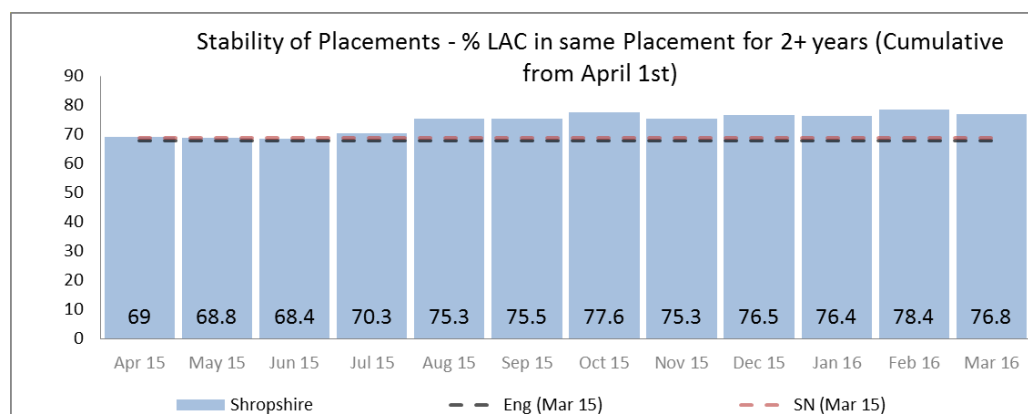
## Placement Stability

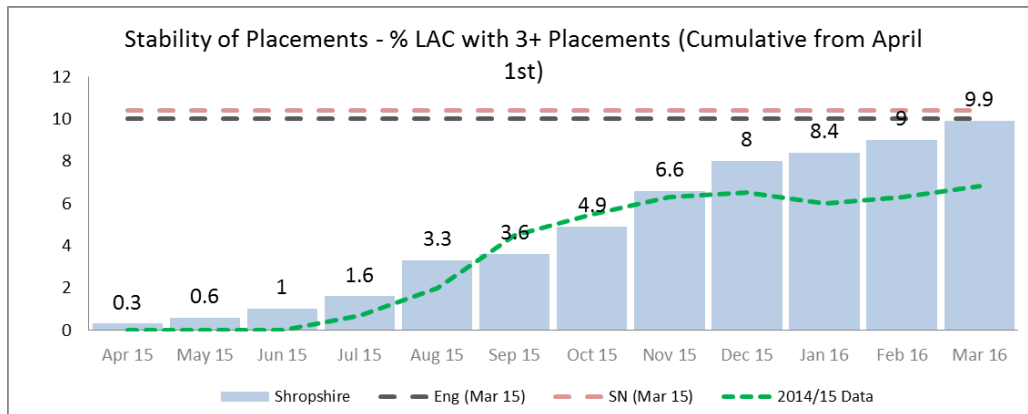
The stability of our looked after children is very important to enable them to form relationships, offer stability in education and for them to feel stable and safe.

The majority of our looked after children are cared for in foster placements.



The stability of placements is generally good in Shropshire. The following chart relates to children under 16 who have been looked after continuously for 2.5 years but who were in the same placement for 2 years. The table shows that we continue to improve in this area and our performance exceeds that of our statistical neighbours and the whole of England.





Although our performance in this area has declined over the past 12 months we are still in line with our statistical neighbours and England as a whole. It is important that we understand the reason behind this increase in placement moves for our looked after children.

## Quantitative Information – Child Protection Population and the ICC

### Key Messages

At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016 there were **267** children subject of a child protection plan which is an increase from 263 in 2014/2015.

A total of 286 initial child protection conferences were held within the year

A total of 299 review child protection conferences were held within the year

A total of 88% of initial child protection conferences held within 15 working days

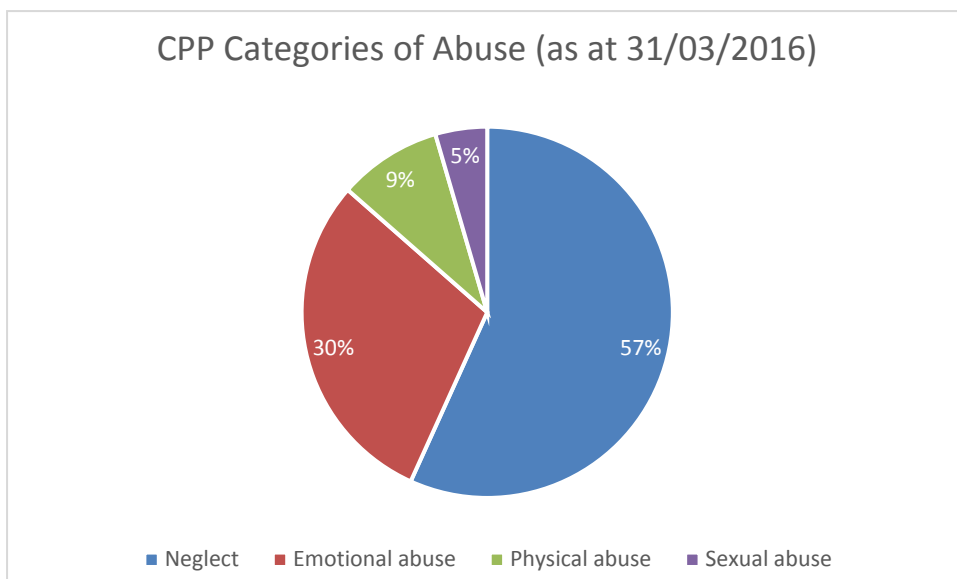
The majority of children were subject to a child protection plan under the category of neglect.

Initial CP Conference Outcomes 2015/16	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Change of Category							4			3			<b>7</b>
Child becomes subject to a Child Protection Plan	10	35	24	26	16	17	32	14	25	22	32	14	<b>267</b>
Child Died						1							<b>1</b>
Child not made subject to a Plan	1		1	1	3	2	1	1			1		<b>11</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>286</b>

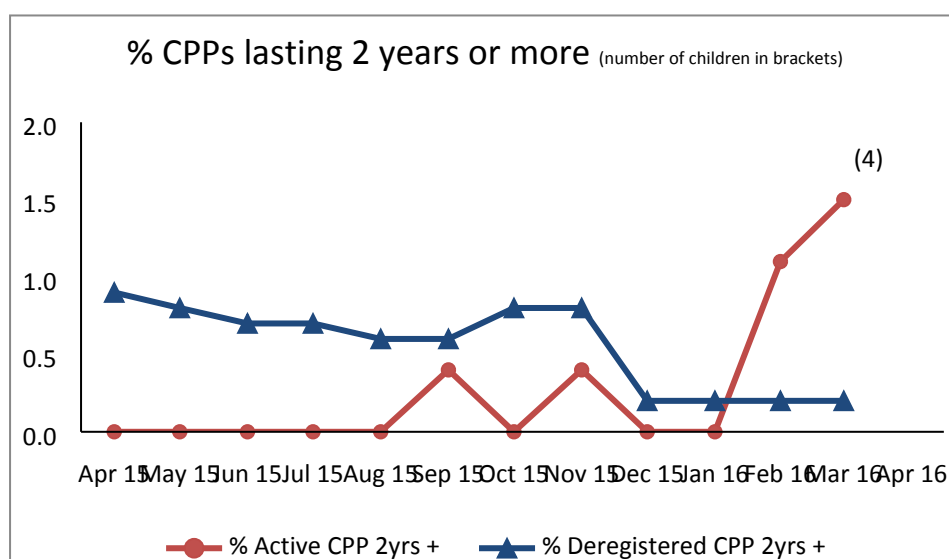
CP Review Conferences 2015/16	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Total Reviews	11	13	17	31	15	26	26	36	30	36	38	20	299
Total Held in Timescale	8	13	17	31	15	26	26	36	30	36	38	20	296
% Held in Timescale	73%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%

The timeliness of our initial child protection conferences at 88% is an area of concern and needs to be an area of focus in 2016/2017. Children being presented at initial child protection conference are very often our most vulnerable children and it is important that they are presented to initial child protection conferences in a timely manner so that a child protection plan can be formulated.

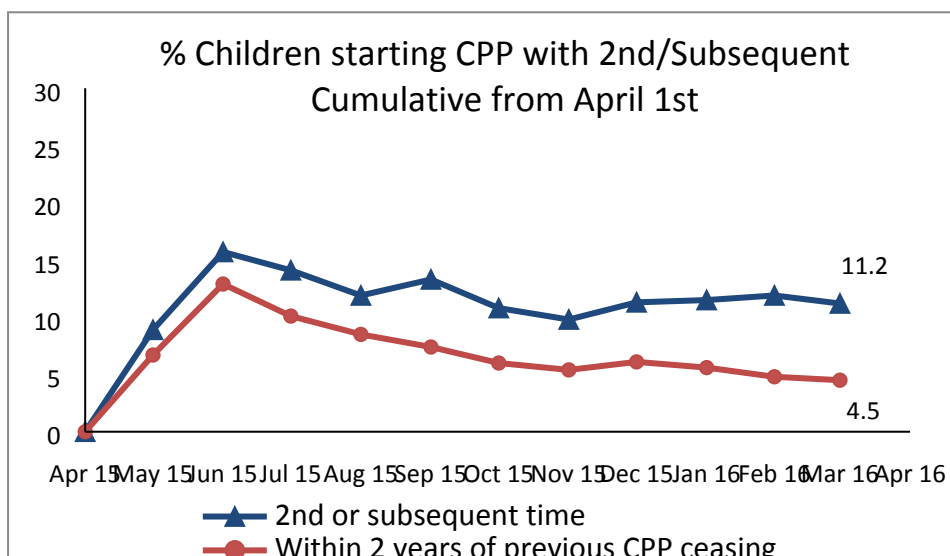
It is pleasing that 99% of our review child protection conferences are taking place within timescales.



Neglect continues to be the area of abuse that is most prevalent in Shropshire. This is an area of work that is key to all agencies looking to support all families, not just those subject to a child protection plan and neglect is a priority area of focus for Shropshire Safeguarding Children Board.



Whilst March 2016 saw a slight increase in the number of children subject to a child protection plan for 2 years or more we only actually have 4 children out of this current cohort of children with a child protection plan. Focused work is being undertaken on children who are subject to a child protection plan for 9 months or more to consider whether the case should progress into Public Law Outline or care proceedings.



This figure has remained relatively stable during 2015/2016 and we have seen a decrease since 2014/2015. This area has been subject of a Shropshire Safeguarding Children Board multi-agency audit which found that decision making concerning these children to be appropriate. What we need to ensure is that when stepping down cases that there is a clear Early Help plan in place to prevent children's situations deteriorating again requiring a further child protection plan.

## Qualitative Information – IRO and ICC

### Children's Participation

In line with the IRO handbook there has been considerable improvements of Social Workers preparing and sharing reports with parents, carers and other professionals prior to meetings.

There continues to be a high level of Participation by young people in their reviews. This has always been the case in Shropshire as this was a culture and expectation set out as part of the development of the IRO Unit.

Children's participation can take place at several levels e.g. through personal attendance in an effective and meaningful manner, holding meetings in 2 parts, through completion of consultation documents, through separate

meetings or conversations with IRO's, use of advocacy service. Shropshire IRO's seek to ensure that all young people are seen as part of their review process. There are times when it is difficult to engage with young people. Some have profound disabilities, these children are visited separately and are involved as much as possible and some young people, although very rare, simply refuse to participate.

## **Case File Audits**

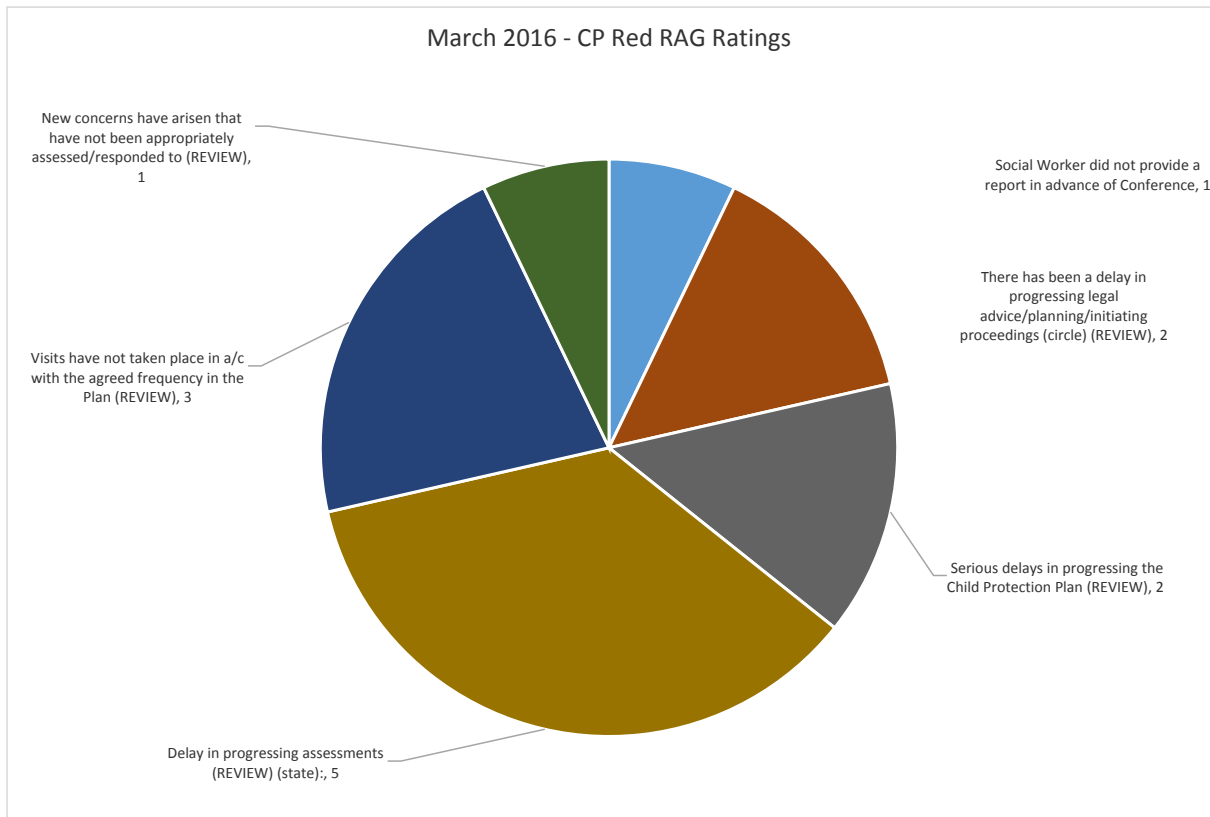
The IRO's and ICC form part of the quality assurance framework and undertake regular case file audits. The IRO's and ICC's routinely read case files and have an overview of quality. This additional quality assurance role needs to be evidenced on case files and learning passed onto the relevant social worker and Team Manager.

## **Dispute Resolution Process**

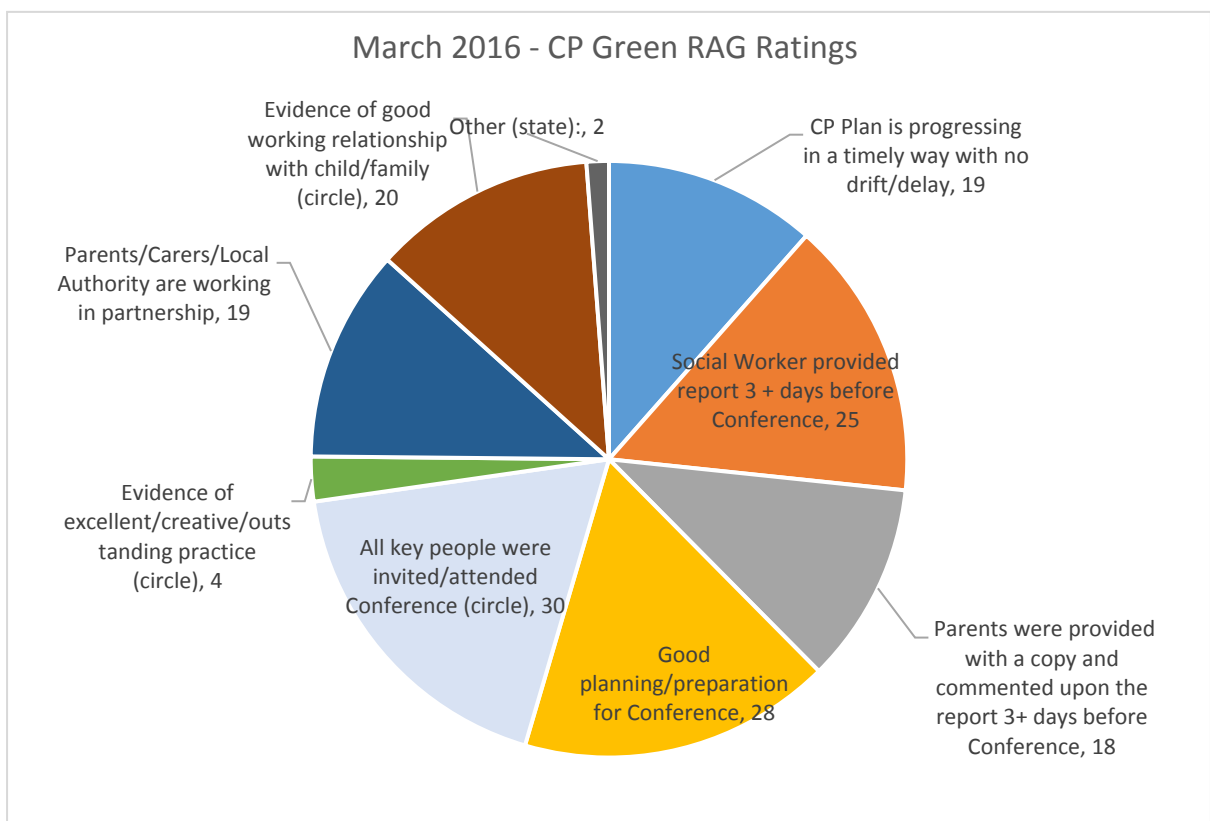
The Rag Rating system was introduced in November 2015. During the 5 months of implementation there have been noticeable improvements in practice particularly in relation to child protection conferences. We are now seeing fewer cases where there is evidence of drift and delay and more cases are being proactively worked in between conference meetings with an increasing number of cases being rag rated green.

In March 2016 there were 9 red rag rated child protection conferences. Reasons for the red rags are set out below. The biggest area of concern resulting in cases being red ragged relates to outstanding assessments. This has been a system and process matter whereby although social workers were writing a Child Protection Conference Report this was not being recognised as an updating assessment. This matter has now been addressed and we should continue to see a decrease in red ragged cases.

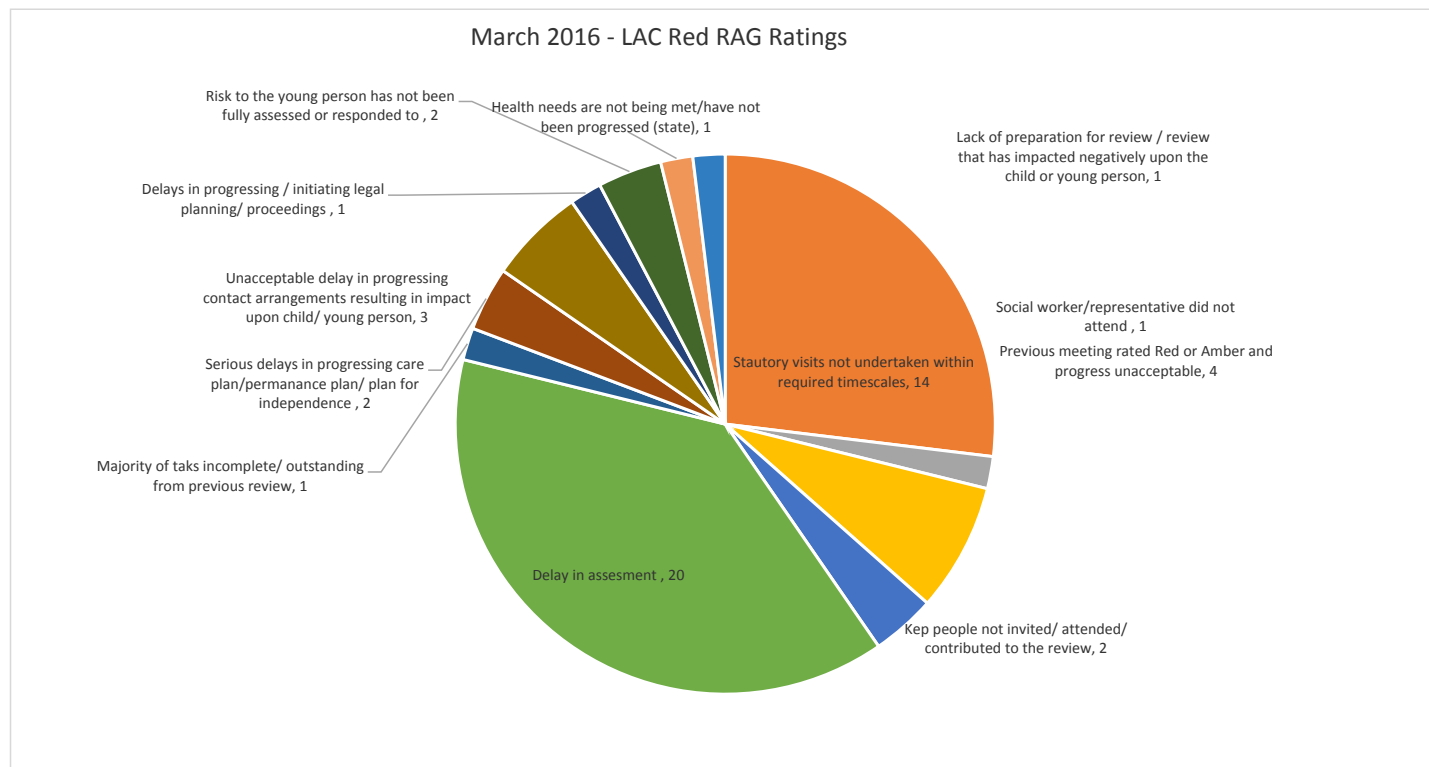




In March 2016 there were 19 green rag rated child protection conferences. Reasons for the green rags were as follows;

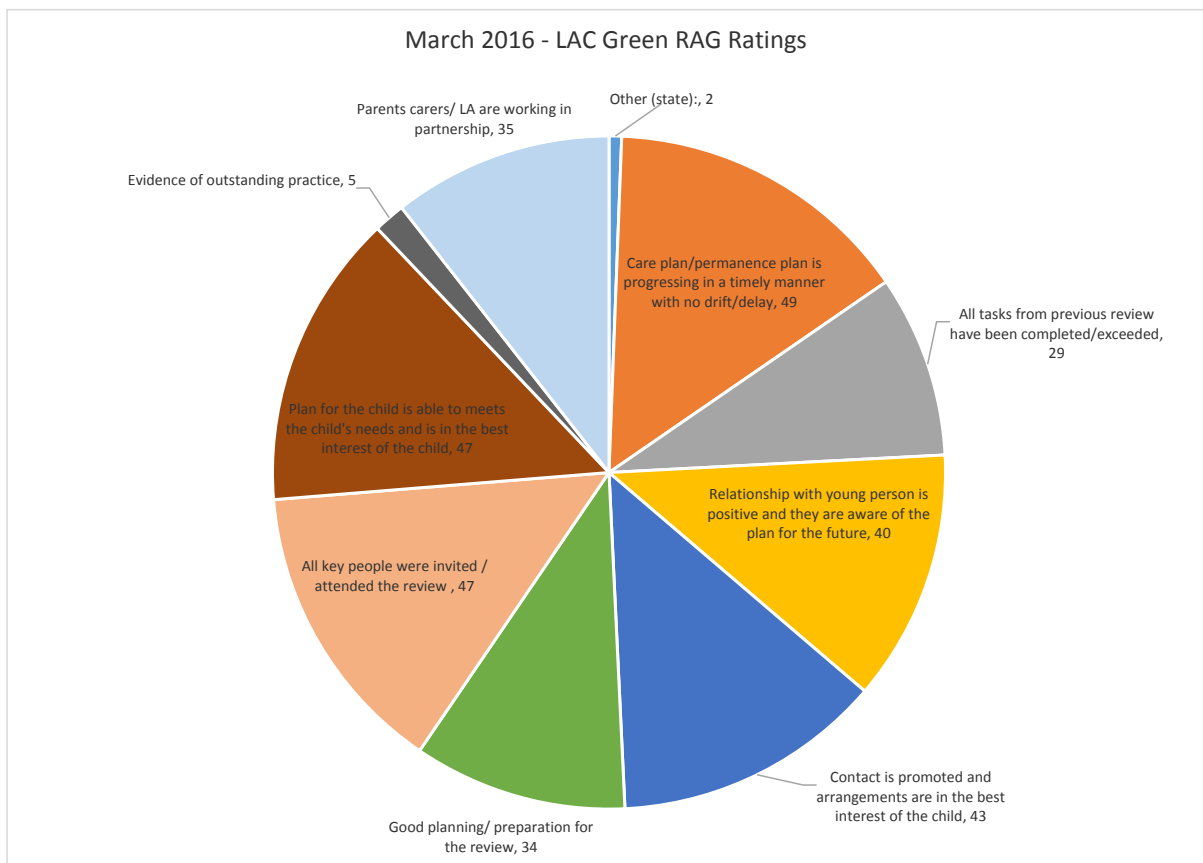


In relation to statutory review meetings in March 2016 28 were red ragged. Reasons for the red rag were as follows;



The two key areas for LAC cases being red ragged relate to outstanding assessments and children not being seen within statutory timescales. These issues are being addressed by the social work teams as a priority area. As caseloads decrease in line with the changes to structures we should see an improving picture in relation to these areas and the number of cases being red ragged.

In March 2016 28 statutory review meetings were rag rated green for the following reason;



We will be looking to review and develop the rag rating process during the course of 2016/2017.

## Priorities for 2016/2017

- Consider how we evidence the added value that the IRO's and ICC's make to improving outcomes for children
- Consider what qualitative information is collated by IRU.
- Develop quality Assurance role of the chairs
- Ensure that children contribute to meetings in the most appropriate way and the child's views are evidenced
- Ensure the child's voice is heard and used to inform decision making. This needs to be evidenced in meeting minutes
- Increase the use of child advocates as appropriate.
- Ensure the chair maintains oversight of the case in between meetings and raises any issues outside of formal meetings if there appears to be

any delay in progressing plans. Such oversight to be evidenced on the child's case file.

- Undertake direct observations of the chairs whilst chairing meetings – to include views of service users and social worker
- Develop mechanism's so that the IRO's have opportunity to express their views directly to the DCS
- Continue to implement and make use of the rag rating report to evidence improvements in practice.
- Reports to be produced on a monthly basis setting out practice issues and where improvements have been made
- Develop practice standards for the IRO's/ICC
- Review caseload sizes and capacity within the IRU
- Review recommendations and minutes of meetings to ensure they are focused and proportionate to the needs of the child
- Embed bi monthly group reflective supervision
- Raise the profile of IRO's across Children's Services.
- Review performance data collated from IRU Team
- Introduce and develop IRO specialisms and champions of specific areas of practice
- To develop service user feedback form to be completed by IRO/Conference chair

**Colleen Male**

**Head of Quality, Performance and Assurance**