WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Independent Reviewing Officers

Annual Report

2022 to 2023

The Contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Children in Care

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Governance and sign off		
Meeting	**Date of meeting**	**Actions or outcome**
Children's Departmental Leadership Team		
Corporate Parenting Board		

Report completed by:

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Date of this report: June 2023

Date of next report: June 2024

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	Executive summary
1.	**Purpose of this Annual Report:** This Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report (2022-23) provides quantitative and qualitative information about the profile and quality of corporate parenting for children in care (CIC) in Wokingham and the impact of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service. It highlights what the IRO service is worried about, what is working well and what needs to improve.
2.	**Children in Care profile and activity - 2022-23** • At the end of the year there were 136 children which is the same as the end of March 2022. This is a rate of 33 per 10,000. • Across the year there were a total of 198 children who were in the care of Wokingham. • 114 children came into care compared to 93 last year. • 65 children left care compared to 58 the previous year. • The gender split of the cohort at the end of March 23 was 74% male and 26% female. This compares to 63% male and 37% female in March 22. There has been a higher level of males compared to females for the past three years, but this is imbalance is now more pronounced. This is likely to be linked to our higher number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), who all are male. • 44% of children were accommodated under section 20 at the end of March 2022 • The numbers of UASC in our care has continued an upward trend, increasing to 40 in March 2023 from 26 in March 2022. • 40% of children in care were accommodated under section 20 at the end of March 2023 This is only a 1% increase from March 2022. The difference is that UASC represent 71% of the children accommodated under section 20 in March 2023 compared to 47% in 2022. The numbers of children accommodated under section 20 has increased because of the higher number of UASC, but the numbers of children locally accommodated under section 20 has significantly declined overall. Last year 29 children were accommodated under section 20 who were not UASC, this year it is only 15 at the end of March 2023. • 10 children were subject to Placement Orders at the end of March 2023 compared to 15 in March 2022. • 27 children who were in care were also subject to child protection plans across the year. This is normally only for a short period of time when children become subject to care proceedings. At the end of March 2022, six children were subject to dual plans. Two children because they were at risk of exploitation, one because of concerns within her family home where she visits, and two who are very young and in unique situations where the borough is about to issue for care proceedings.
3.	**Impact of the IRO Service:** **Being a consistent person in the child's journey through care:** In Wokingham we have an experienced and stable team of IROs with many children having had the same CP Chair and/or IRO throughout their care journey (sometimes for four to five years). Throughout 2022-23, the IRO service has continued to adapt, and it is now an expectation that all children and young people will have the opportunity to attend meetings face-to-face should

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they wish to, whilst maintaining the option for other attendees to access the meeting in a hybrid format, should that be required.

In the recent ILACS Wokingham Children's Services received a rating of good for children in care. The inspection team commented on the IRO role specifically, stating that:

"Children benefit from regular IRO oversight, and their plans and progress are regularly monitored. When children's needs are not being met or concerns arise, IROs successfully achieve a resolution for the child, most often through informal escalation. Children are encouraged to attend their reviews and are consulted by their IROs before reviews so that they can ask questions, share their views and talk about how their review will be carried out. After reviews, child-friendly letters are written to children, explaining the outcome and why decisions have been made."

Maintaining timely reviews:

Timeliness for reviews has decreased this year to 95.4% compared to 98% last year. Although this is disappointing, there remain some questions over the validity of the data that has been obtained, and an initial review of this has highlighted some inaccuracies in recording (which if corrected could improve our overall performance measures). Further work is therefore required before a conclusion can be made.435 reviews were completed in the year 2022-23 which is higher than last year (338). Given that the size of our children in care cohort has remained stable, further scrutiny is required to consider what has led to this increase in the number of reviews. There has for example been an increase in the number of children who have had 3 or more placement moves in 12 months (6.6% from 4%) which is likely to be linked to the complexity of cases across our cohort and may be a driver in terms of the number of reviews required. An increase in the complexity of court proceedings and changes of care plans within this process.

Providing oversight and challenge: The IROs are continuing to provide formal challenge but have been able to deal with most issues informally. There has been a reduction in the number of formal challenges made in the last year, with 73 recorded this year compared to 87 last year. There is evidence on the files of numerous IRO oversight case notes, with a total of 975 case notes recorded in total for the year. They represent a huge variety of oversight, including points raised around:

- Wishes and feelings
- Education issues
- Review of final care plans
- Participation with parents
- Informal challenges

The growth in the use of informal challenge (as opposed to using the formal Mosaic step) is felt in part to reflect the positive relationships that the IRO service has continued to maintain with frontline managers, who also represent a stable cohort. Wokingham is a small authority, but one of its strengths is a that the senior leadership team value the role of the IRO. The service practice standards are in the process of being updated and as part of this there will be

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	changes to the dispute process to provide clarity for both IRO and Managers in using informal and formal challenge. **Promoting child's voice and participation:** IROs have continued to place the voice of the child first at reviews, supporting children and young people to share their wishes and feelings or using an advocate to be their voice. Reviews are held in different parts when required, to ensure they are child focused while also enabling the participation of birth parents and carers. **Signposting to Advocacy and Independent Visitors (IVs):** The Children's Advocate has completed 219 contacts with children in care to participate in their reviews or share concerns and wishes and feelings. Wokingham continues to have a contract with the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) to provide an independent visiting service for children in care. Sixteen children in care have been matched with independent visitors through NYAS, a service which helps them build relationships, develop independence, try new activities, or share things they like doing. This remains the same number as last year. When reflecting on the overall outcomes of the independent visiting service across the year, it has sometimes been apparent that matches have not worked out, and on occasion it has been more of a challenge to identify the right match for some children. **Highlighting broader issues which affect children in care:** The IRO service uses performance data and quarterly reports to highlight issues that they are noticing for all children in care. One prominent theme, for example, has been the emergence of a small but growing cohort of children who are placed in unregistered placements, due to them having highly complex and multiple needs.
4.	**The key strategic priorities of the IRO service in 2022-23 are:** ❖ **To consistently provide good quality reviews for children in care and build on the positive feedback from the ILACS for children in care.** An important part of this will be to increase the level of preparation for reviews (pre-meetings and midway reviews). This will ensure strong oversight of the child's care plan. This is also likely to prevent drift. Minutes are written to the child and a letter is now written to the child post the review, which was positively highlighted within the recent ILACS. Building on these positive findings from Ofsted, we now want to undertake work to assure ourselves that these letters are being safely received and read by children, and to ensure that they are having the desired impact. ❖ **To raise awareness about and promote the role of the IRO**. This will include work to promote awareness about the purpose of care planning and reviews to children, parents, carers, social workers, and other agency colleagues. We will also reinstate the quarterly training sessions to support the understanding of the importance of reviews and what is expected from frontline teams. ❖ **To demonstrate the effectiveness of the IRO service** with clear examples of what difference it is making by seeing children and overseeing the review process. The ILACS highlighted good oversight of cases by the IRO service. What we need to focus on moving forward is continued consistency around the use of pre-meetings and the embedding of midway reviews.

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	❖ **To consider the outcomes of the Independent Social Care review and the Government's subsequent "*Stable Homes Built on Love*" response in February 2023 -** There are likely to be changes to standards of care, regulations, and guidance for children in care. It will be important for the IRO service to be aware of these changes and consider the impact on their decision making and the children and young people they work with.
5.	**The areas of practice we plan to focus on in the coming year are:** **1.** Making best use of pre-review contacts with children, by sharing the agenda, and checking they have received their reports and know their care plan. **2.** . Making best use of pre-review contacts with children by sharing the agenda; checking they have received their reports and know their care plan; and encouraging children to attend their reviews face to face. **3.** Improving the timeliness of administrative tasks, for example CIC review decisions and reports being sent out within timescales and recording all oversight and challenge on Mosaic. **4.** For the IRO service to review the performance indicators relating to children in care and any messages from audits and raise challenges through quarterly reports if they identify an area of concern. **5.** To provide quarterly inductions to new social workers and half day training on care planning every six months to promote understanding about care planning regulations, the role of the IRO and the purpose of child in care reviews. **6.** To embed pre-meetings and midway reviews and increase the use of the dispute process outside of case notes.
6.	**Author's key recommendations** That this report is shared with the Corporate Parenting Board and the Independent Scrutiny and Impact Group of the Berkshire West Safeguarding Partnership and that any learning is incorporated in the Quality Assurance Activity for 2023-24.

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1. Introduction

1.1. All Officers and Councillors in Wokingham have a duty to ensure that the needs of children in care are being met and that children grow up feeling loved, cared for, feel safe and have the same opportunities as their peers. There should be a commitment from all members of the council to advocate for the needs of children in care, promote and provide opportunities that allow children to develop and grow and to overcome the adverse experiences they may have experienced in their life before coming into care.

1.2. This Annual Report provides quantitative and qualitative information about the Independent Reviewing Officer Service in Wokingham and the quality of corporate parenting for children in care (CIC) in the borough during the period 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023. It highlights what the IRO service is worried about, what is working well and identifies areas for improvement.

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1.3. The highlights of the report will be discussed with the Children in Care Council and the key findings will be presented to the Children's Services Senior Management Team, the Quality Assurance Board, the Corporate Parenting Board and the Berkshire West Safeguarding Children's Partnership, Independent Scrutiny and Impact Group.

2. Purpose of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service and the legal context

2.1. The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer was established by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, s.118 (amended s.26 of the Children Act 1989) with the responsibility of reviewing placements and plans for children in care.

2.2. The IRO has a crucial role to play in ensuring that the local authority fulfils its responsibilities as a 'corporate parent' for all the children that it looks after. The IRO should ensure that the child is offered stable care that is sensitive and appropriate to everyone's personal needs so that the child is able to flourish and achieve. The plan for each child must demonstrate how the services provided have fully taken account of the child's wishes and feelings.

2.3. The IRO Handbook (2010) sets out two clear and separate aspects to the IRO role;

- chairing the child's review and
- monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.

In exercising both parts of this role, the IRO must ensure that the child's current wishes and feelings have been established and considered.

2.4. Service structure

The IRO service is managed by the Service Manager of the Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Team who reports to the Assistant Director, Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Standards (QASS) within Children's Services. The team is structurally located outside of the direct line management of children's social care. The staffing structure is set out below. This arrangement provides;

- Capacity for chairing both child protection conferences and child in care statutory reviews , including sufficient capacity to cover any periods of unexpected leave and sickness within the team.
- Continuity for children receiving services in the child protection arena who then come into the care system.
- Independence from the line management of children's social care cases.
- Capacity to manage the administrative processes and to work to statutory timescales.

2.5. Staffing Establishment on 31 March 2023

Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Team	Administration Team
1x Service Manager (full time)	1 Team leader

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4x Full time equivalent Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) / Child Protection Chairs (CPC)	2 Children in care administrators
1x Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) / Child Protection Chair (3 days)	

2.6. All the IROs have significantly more than the five years' post qualification experience as required under Regulation 46 (The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations) (2010). The IRO service has remained stable with no changes of staff this year. All the IROs are experienced and passionate about their role, and they provide a consistent IRO presence for children at their reviews. The team consists of all white British females. Although the team members are from different parts of the UK and have different life experiences, we are conscious of the unique differences of our child in care population. Diversity remains an important issue for every child in care and the increase in UASC has required further knowledge development. The team is currently undertaking a programme of systemic training, and as part of this learning we have been using the social graces model[1] John Burnham to help us to reflect on our own background, experience, and unique identity and how we can better understand the unique identity of the children we work with in our day-to-day work.

2.7. The IROs are supported by the administrative team, who organise review meetings and circulate decisions and reports. The Administration Team Leader manages the administrators, oversees the administrative activity, and monitors the internal performance of the team.

2.8. IROs receive monthly one to one supervision and participate in WBC's performance review system, which is an opportunity to highlight good practice, performance, identify any learning needs and development opportunities. The IROs from the West of Berkshire authorities meet periodically to share good practice and liaise with colleagues from CAFCASS and the joint legal team. The IRO manager attends the Southeast Regional IRO Managers' Partnership (SEIROMP) and the Berkshire Managers Meeting (which also includes a liaison meeting with a representative from the joint legal team and the CAFCASS Berkshire manager).

2.9. The IROs have benefited from the specialist training programme on trauma informed practice and systemic training. The training has helped them to be aware of signs of trauma and how to respond when children become dysregulated or withdrawn within reviews – as well as how to avoid further exclusion at school or from carers giving notice. They have also attended IRO learning sets with an external facilitator which have covered topics relevant to the role, such as themes from the National Panel Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews. The IROs in Wokingham are part of the SEIROMP Community of Practice which is a community of IROs across the SE region with a common goal to create positive change that ultimately improves the lives of children and young people in care. The IROs have also received specialist training from Coram regarding UASC to develop their understanding of legal requirements and develop skills around working with this vulnerable group of young people.

2.10. All children in care are allocated an IRO when the team is informed that they are in care. It is the intention that the IRO allocated at this point will be as consistent as possible throughout the time the child is in care. Where children had previously been on a child protection plan,

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their CP chair becomes their IRO. The IRO Handbook recommends that caseloads for IROs should be between 50 and 70 children in care. Caseloads have remained stable and within recommended guidelines.

2.11. Access to independent legal advice is a requirement of the statutory guidance. Arrangements are in place for IROs to have access to impartial independent legal advice through a representative from the joint legal team, which does not work directly within Wokingham.

3. Profile of Children in Care - Statistical data for 2021-22

3.1. Number of Children in Care

At the end of the year 2022-23, Wokingham Borough Council had 136 children in its care, which equates to a rate of 33 per 10,000. This is the same number as the end of the previous year. The numbers have however ranged from 130-142 across the year. In comparison to our statistical neighbours, we remain far lower, with the average rate for these authorities being 47.10 per 10,000.

Table A: Number of children in care and rates per 10,000

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
2022/23 Numbers	135	130	135	138	138	140	144	144	140	142	139	136
2022/23 Rate per 10,000	32.7	31.5	32.7	33.4	33.4	33.9	34.9	34.9	33.9	34.4	33.7	33

Rates per 10,000 are used as a method of benchmarking local authorities' children in care against other authorities which have similar characteristics – known as statistical neighbours. Figures are expressed as a ratio and are calculated by dividing the local authority's actual numbers by its total child population estimate, sourced from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). According to the Wokingham end of year report there has been a gradual increase in the number of children in care. This is likely in part due to the increase in the number of UASC.

3.2 Ages of children coming into care

The table below shows the spread of ages of children coming into care, with the biggest group being between 10-15 years old. This is in line with our largest cohort of children subject to a CP plan. It is also in line with the Office of National Statistics data, which indicates that Wokingham has had an 18% increase in children aged under 15 in the last ten years. Last year the largest group was children aged 16-17. The numbers of under-fives remain static in comparison to last year with only a small increase in the overall numbers.

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Table B: Ages of Children coming into Care (at the point they came into care)

	Jul-Sep 21	Oct-Dec 21	Jan-Mar 22	Apr-Jun 22	July-Sep 22	Oct-Dec 22	Jan-Mar 23
Total	19	23	33	13	20	14	18
Age under 1	4	1	1	2	2	1	2
Age 1 – 4	1	4	4	1	1	0	1
Age 5 – 9	5	4	5	3	1	0	4
Age 10 – 15	3	8	8	3	8	10	11
Age 16 – 17	6	6	15	4	8	2	0
Age 18 +	0	0	0	0	0	1	0

3.3 Legal Status of children coming into care

Table C: Legal Status on coming into care (all children at the point they came into care)

	Apr-June 21	Jul-Sep 21	Oct-Dec 21	Jan-Mar 22	Apr-Jun 22	Jul-Sept 22	Oct-Dec 22	Jan-Mar 23
Total	**18**	**19**	**23**	**33**	**13**	**20**	**14**	**20**
Interim Care Order	5	11	1	6	3	5	3	7
Care Order					1	0	0	0
Police Protection	1	0	4	1	1	0	0	0
Section 20	11	8	17	26	8	15	11	13
Emergency Protection Order	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Remanded to LA accommodation	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Short Breaks	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

During 2022-23, 18 children came into care as the result of an application to the court for an Interim Care Order. This is a slight decrease from 23 in 2021-22. 47 children came into care through a voluntary arrangement under Section 20 compared to 55 last year. 28 of those children were UASC. Last year UASC did not represent the largest proportion of section 20 however this year they represent the largest proportion of children in the section 20 cohort. There was a slightly smaller number of ICO this year, 18 versus 23.

4. Profile of Children in Care

4.1. Legal Status of children in care

Most children are subject to Care Orders, which reflects that they are in permanent long-term arrangements. There has been an increase in the number of children accommodated under Section 20, but when looking at this figure as a percentage of the total cohort, the proportion of children being accommodated in this way is comparable to last year (16% and 17%).

Most of our children in care are accommodated under section 20, with a higher percentage of those being UASC than in previous years. Alongside the increase in UASC numbers, this may also

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reflect a broader change in practice around the use of section 20 nationally, following the publication of the *Public Law Working Group - Best Practice Guidance on Section 20* (2021), which emphasised the positives of its use "when deployed appropriately", and shifted views around its usage.

There has been a decrease in placement orders this year from 13% in March 2022 to 7% in March 2023. It would be useful to reflect on the outcomes of care proceedings to identify what the final care plans were and whether courts agreed with our recommendations, to identify trends and any issues that were raised.

Table D: Legal Status of all children in care on 31 March 2023

Legal Status	Mar 23	
Total	**136**	
C1 – Interim Care Order	38	28%
C2 – Full Care Order	32	24%
E1 – Placement Order granted	10	7%
J1 – Remanded to Local Authority Accommodation or to Youth Detention Accommodation	0	0%
V2 – Single Care of accommodation under Section 20	56	41%
V4 – Accommodated under agreed short term breaks	0	0%

4.2. Gender of children in care at end of year

Table E: End of quarter snapshot of gender of children in care

Gender	Jun-22		Sept-22		Dec -22		Mar 23	
Male	89	66%	97	69%	103	74%	101	74%
Female	46	34%	43	31%	37	26%	35	26%

The children in care population in Wokingham continues to consist of higher numbers of boys than girls, a pattern which has remained consistent throughout 2022-23. However, the split is now far more distinct and notable, which is in part due to the increasing numbers of UASCs represented in our cohort, who are currently all males.

4.3. Ethnicity of children in care

Figure 1: Ethnic breakdown of children in care March 2023

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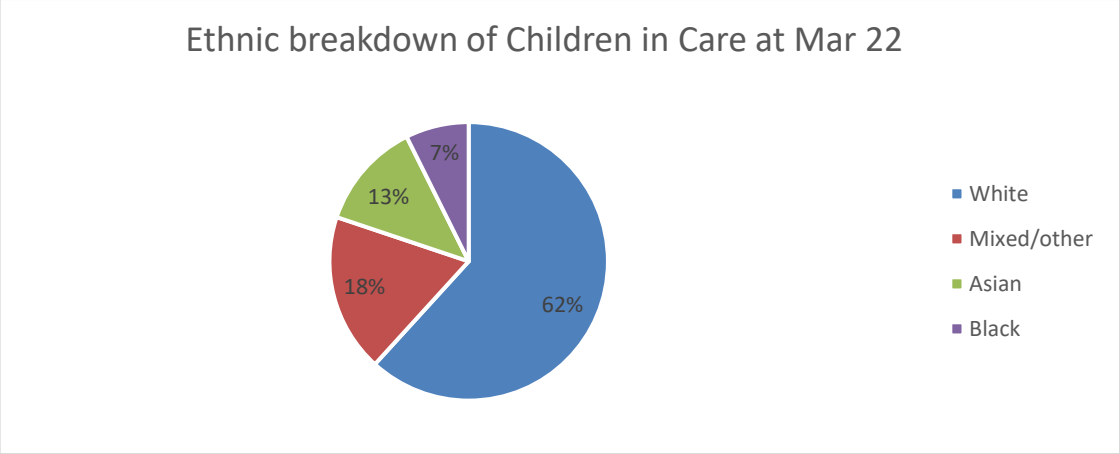

The chart above shows the ethnic breakdown of children in care in Wokingham at the end of March 2022. A slightly higher percentage of white British children when compared to last year. The percentage of Black children is in line with last year, but there is an increase in Asian children (7% to 13%), as well as a slight increase in those described as mixed/other (from 17% to 18%). These figures include the higher number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in care at the end of the year. The table below shows a higher percentage of Black, Asian, and mixed/other children in care compared with the local child population. There is also some disparity with the ethnic breakdown of children on CP plans, with 2% being Black British compared to 7% in care and 5% being Asian compared to 13% in care. This may require further exploration or audit in the coming year.

The ethnic breakdown of the children in care in Wokingham at the end of March 2023 showed 49% of children in care are White, which has reduced since last year. We have a higher number of Mixed/Other and Asian young people since last year. There is a difference between children in care and those children subject to a CP plan, 75% of children are White, 10% Mixed/Other, 7% Asian and 6% are Black. We have a much larger cohort of UASC and this is likely to have contributed to the change in make-up of the children in care profile.

Table F: Ethnic Breakdown of all children in Wokingham

	Ethnic breakdown of children in Wokingham as a whole	Ethnic breakdown of the children in care Mar-23
White	82.4%	49%
Mixed/other	6.25%	22%
Asian	9.73%	17%
Black	1.63%	11%

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4.4. Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers in Care

Table G: Unaccompanied Asylum seekers in care - month end snapshot

	Q1 2021			Q2 2021			Q3 2021			Q4 2022		
	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
No	7	8	11	14	14	13	12	14	15	15	17	26

	Q1 2022			Q2 2022			Q3 2022			Q4 2022		
	Apr	Mar	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
No	27	26	27	28	28	32	35	38	41	40	41	40

The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in care in Wokingham increased significantly in the second half of 2022-23, to 41 at the end of December 2022 and then to 40 by the end of March. Those who came into our care prior to December were spontaneous arrivals or came via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) on a voluntary basis as and when we had capacity. In February 2022, the NTS became mandatory for Wokingham and our number of 'transfer in' UASC's increased, and this has continued to be the case in 2023. In addition, in November 2021, an asylum hotel opened in Wokingham for adults and families.

We have only had one UASC child who was aged 14 this year. There was a concern last year that we had several much younger UASC children entering our care, and that this trend may continue. We must be mindful that all the UASC children have had different upbringings and levels of education in their home country, but have all experienced insecurity, loss, and trauma. IROs report that although these children's homelife, family connections and journey to this country is explored in the reviews, often young people are reluctant to open up until they feel safe and feel they can trust authority figures. Some young people have been able to identify some family in the UK once they have felt more settled.

Now that Wokingham has a significant cohort of UASC children, IROs have been working to improve their knowledge and expertise in this area of practice. As part of this, the IRO team have attended training which has highlighted common issues experienced by these children, including exploitation, the emotional turmoil of past trauma and the future uncertainty of not being given leave to remain. The team also have regular updates from the Children's Advocate who is trained in age assessments and attends the first review for all UASC children to check their rights and that all legal options are being considered. The Ofsted focused visit in April 2022 challenged the effectiveness of our service in meeting the emotional needs of UASC children in care. In the recent ILACS it was noted that progress had been made, with the inspection team noting that "***Their social, religious and cultural needs are carefully considered, as is the impact of trauma in their country of origin or during their journey to this country."*** It is positive that the additional training and experience has led to improvements.

Case example:
In one review, the IRO tried to understand whether one unaccompanied young person was experiencing any struggles with his emotional wellbeing. This young person's father had

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been murdered and he was fearful for his life. He was separated from his mother and younger brothers, and it is known that he was initially quite withdrawn within his foster home. During the reviewing process we have seen this young person become happier and more relaxed and benefit from the consistent care that he has been given.

4.5. Children in receipt of a series of short breaks

Table H: Number of children in receipt of short breaks who are in Children in Care

	Apr Jun 22	Jul-Sep 22	Oct-Dec 22	Jan - Mar 23
LAC in receipt of short breaks	0	0	0	1

Some children with complex health needs or significant disabilities who live with their families but are in receipt of packages of overnight care have looked after status under section 20(4) of the Children Act (1989). When the short breaks last more than 75 nights, an Independent Reviewing Officer is assigned to them, and they are reviewed on the same frequency as other children in care. During the year, one child had short breaks (children who receive respite for more than 75 nights) which is low when compared to previous years and statistical neighbours. The QAST manager has explored this with colleagues in social care and the reasons behind the low numbers appear to be that some children are being accommodated or moving to residential settings (and as such are no longer needing short breaks) and secondly there is a gap in resource for respite beds - so although children are having respite, they are typically not reaching the 75 nights. This has not changed in 2022-23 with only one young person being subject to short breaks again this year.

4.6. Children in care on child protection plans

Table I: Children in Care on a Child Protection Plan

	Apr-Jun 20	Jul-Sept 20	Oct-Dec 20	Jan-Mar 21
Total	**10**	**2**	**10**	**18**
	Apr-Jun 21	**Jul-Sept 21**	**Oct-Dec 21**	**Jan-Mar 22**
Total	**12**	**9**	**12**	**22**
	Apr-Jun 22	**Jul-Sept 22**	**Oct-Dec 22**	**Jan-Mar 23**
Total	**14**	**11**	**3**	**6**

At the end of year 2022-2023, there were 27 children in total who had been subject to a dual plan over the space of the year. There were 6 children still subject to dual plans at the end of March 2023. There are varying reasons for this, however most children are subject to a dual plan for a very short period due to the cross over between care proceedings and the child protection process.

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There were 3 children who were accommodated under section 20 subject to a child protection plan. Two were subject to a plan due to harm outside the home and exploitation concerns and one due to other child protection concerns within their home where they visit. Three are younger children and are currently in the process of having care proceedings issued.
These figures are far lower than last year when there were 22 children on dual plans at the end of the year.

Children leaving care and the reasons for doing so

Table J: Children Leaving Care and Reasons for doing so.

	Apr-Jun 22	**Jul-Sep 22**	**Oct-Dec 22**	**Jan-Mar 23**
	14	**15**	**14**	**22**
Adopted	0	2	0	2
Return to parents, planned	0	1	3	7
Return to parents, unplanned	0	1	0	0
Reached the age of 18	6	6	7	13
Special Guardianship orders granted	2	3	1	0
Ceased for other reasons	6 CAO	2 CAO	2 CAO, 1 18+ at age assessment	-

The IROs have a role in monitoring the journey of children to permanence (which can be a range of options from adoption to return home to parents). The table above shows that most children left care due to becoming 18 (32). Last year 33 children left care and achieved permanence in a planned way due to having Special Guardianship Orders with friends and family carers; being adopted or returning home to parents in a planned way, compared to 28 children this year.

21 ceased to be in care due to becoming 18, but 33 children left care and achieved permanence in a planned way due to having Special Guardianship Orders with friends and family carers; being adopted or returning home to parents in a planned way. The table below shows that a lower number of children will leave care due to reaching 18, there is a larger number of children projected to leave care over the next two years. This can be difficult to predict as we may have older children who enter care who then turn 18.

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Table K: Projection of children Leaving Care within 2 years

	Mar '23	Mar '24	Mar '25
No of Children to reach age of 18 expected to leave care	22	22	11

5. Children Missing from Care

Table L- Looked after Children Missing from Care

	Apr-Jun 21	Jul-Sept 21	Oct-Dec 21	Jan-Feb 22
Total	2	3	14	10
	Apr-Jun 22	**Jul-Sept 22**	**Oct-Dec 22**	**Jan- Mar 23**
Total	8	9	14	9

There has been an increase in the number of missing episodes for children in care from 29-40. Whilst this represents a small number, these children represent the most vulnerable children, so it is important that we have sufficient oversight of what is happening. This will fit into the wider harm outside the home (HOTH) agenda for children in care which this report comments on below within the service action plan.

6. Impact of IRO Service- Chairing the Child's Review

6.1 Timeliness of Child's Reviews

A child's first review must take place within 20 working days of them coming into care. The second review must take place no later than three months (91 days) after the first review, with all subsequent reviews then needing to take place no more than six months (183 days) apart. Timeliness for reviews has decreased this year to 95.4% compared to 98% last year. (I do question the data and additional scrutiny is underway). Initial insights highlight some errors which if corrected could improve the data. 435 reviews were completed in the year 2022-23 which is higher than last year (338). It requires further scrutiny to consider what has led to this increase in numbers of reviews. There has for example been an increase in the number of children who have had 3 or more placement moves in 12 months (6.6% from 4%). It is likely the number of reviews is linked to complexity of cases in care proceedings and an increase in the number children moving 3 or more times across the year.

There were two periods of long-term sickness in 2022-23 and this has affected the timeliness of some reviews, but as stated above it is likely that there are also some errors dragging the data down. The Assistant Director of Quality Assurance and Safeguarding had highlighted concerns with management around the rearranging of reviews, and because of this we have reviewed how this is monitored within the team. This is closely monitored by the children in care admin who support the team.

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Table M: Children in care Reviews in timescale

2022/23		
No. Reviews	**No. in timescale**	**% in timescale**
435	410	94%

6.2 Supporting the Participation of children in their reviews

One role of the independent reviewing officer is to ensure that children in care actively participate in their reviews and the planning for their futures. Children need to know that their views are valued and heard and IROs need to give children the opportunity to communicate with them in advance of the review. The IROs have been creative in their approach to contacts and visits with children. The number of children attending with an advocate to help communicate their views increased again this year and this is something which should be explored with both the advocate and the IRO to see if there could have been a way to engage those young people more positively in their meetings. According to the quality assurance forms, 255 children attended their reviews in comparison to 113 last year. This is a significant improvement.

Table N: Children's Participation in their reviews

		Jan-Mar 22		Apr-Jun 22		Jul-Sept 22		Oct-Dec 2022		Jan – Mar 2023	
Participation	**Participation Codes**	**92**		**93**		**105**		**96***		**122**	
Child under 4 at time of review	PN0	15	16%	17	18%	13	12%	15	16%	12	10%
Child attends and speaks for themselves	PN1	30	33%	41	44%	43	41%	49	51%	67	55%
Child attends and an advocate speaks for them	PN2	7	8%	2	2%	3	3%	3	3%	9	7%
Child attends and conveys his or her view symbolically (non-verbally)	PN3	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her	PN4	1	1%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

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Child does not attend but an advocate speaks for them	PN5	18	20%	16	17%	18	17%	14	15%	11	9%
Child does not attend but conveys feelings by facilitative medium	PN6	21	23%	12	13%	27	26%	13	14%	23	19%
Child does not attend and views are not conveyed	PN7	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%	0	0%	0	0%

Practice example:
IROs have been creative in how they support children to participate, a small number have chaired their own review; some IROs have uploaded photographs on to the children's files of direct work they have completed with children. Some have baked cakes or used toys and games to develop relationships with children. Feedback to OFSTED from children and young people was that they knew their IRO and that they were able to talk about their experiences of the time they spend with them.

6.3 Consulting with children, parents and carers:

Consultation documents provide children and parents and carers with an opportunity to give their views in advance of the meeting and help them to participate, particularly in circumstances where it may not be possible for them to attend. IROs are also communicating with young people via text and WhatsApp where appropriate, but feel the best approach is to meet children in person wherever it is possible to do so, to ascertain their views face to face. For some this has been achieved by meeting at a café, baking cakes, cooking a meal, completing direct work around their wishes and feelings, artwork or kicking a football in the garden – all of which have allowed children to talk. They also speak to the parents and carers in advance of reviews. This helps ensure that children and parents are comfortable accessing a virtual meeting and provides an opportunity to discuss how they wish to participate. Improving consultation with parents and children using a range of technology/paper methods for consulting with children and young people will continue to be explored in the coming year.

6.4 Reviewing the Child's Care Plan

The IRO handbook states that;
The IRO should be provided with or have access to any relevant reports/plans or background information, including the current care plan, the report from the social worker (which should be available at least three working days before the commencement of the review), the current health plan or medical assessment report and the current personal education plan (PEP).

The social worker's report for the review is the document which provides an overview and updated assessment of the child's needs. Following the feedback from the recent Ofsted focused visit, the social worker report for reviews was updated and as a result information for reviews is now more analytical.

The Health Assessments are completed and uploaded on Mosaic for the IRO to view. The IROs are aware that there have been issues with the Initial Health Assessments (IHAs) for Wokingham being

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completed within the 20-day timescale but were reassured that many were close to the 20-day target. Action is being undertaken to improve the situation, including a monthly meeting between the provider, Berkshire Health Care Trust, and operational meetings with service managers. This is despite the looked after nurse intervening. It is important to understand children's health care needs as soon as possible after they come into care, because often children will have experienced neglect or trauma and we urgently need to understand what actions we need to take in response. Such health issues can worsen and progress into adulthood if not supported now. This is an area which still needs to be improved upon as the timeliness for health assessments has not increased this year. IROs therefore need to use pre-meetings before reviews to highlight these issues. This will form part of our action plan.

The health of children in care is of course vital to their wellbeing. The percentage of children in Wokingham having health checks in comparison to our statistical neighbours is high based on the 2022 data from the DfE (Wokingham 98% in comparison to 87.5% across statistical neighbours). However, what we need to improve upon is the timeliness of these checks. There have also been challenges for our children placed out of county.

The review process also considers the child's educational needs, progress, and development and whether any actions need to be taken or are likely to become necessary before the next review, in order to ensure that the child's educational needs are met and not neglected. Personal Education Plans (PEPs) are completed by schools with input from the Virtual School. The IRO will review the current PEP in advance of the review and liaise with the social worker and Virtual School if there are any issues. IROs have access to the E-PEP recording system.

The IRO service feels assured that children in care are well supported by colleagues in the Virtual School and by child in care health colleagues who have built up relationships with children in care over time. There are also online resources for children in care on the BHFT website; https://www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/6955 and the KOOTH app. The Child in Care Nurse attends the Children in Care Council and the annual Oakwood CIC fun day.

The IROs feel that children in care have good support from the Virtual School and when there are issue arising at school the Virtual School (VS) can be a point of contact. Members of the VS attend reviews on a regular basis and the VS employs a Level 6 Careers Guidance qualified Post 16 Officer, who holds all Year 12 and 13 children in Care and Care Leavers. The Post-16 Officer also attends the Year 11 PEPs to offer advice, guidance and transition support and has a lead for supporting UASCs. Extra ESOL tuition has been offered to all UASCs and has assisted many other post-16 learners access 1:1 tuition in variety of subjects. The service prioritises English and Maths tuition where a young person has not yet achieved their GCSE grade 4 and has also provided A Level tuition in various subjects to support more able students. The Virtual School has also appointed a new worker to focus on supporting UASC young people in education and this has been helpful. The team have been very creative in identifying additional learning opportunities for this vulnerable cohort of young people.

6.5 Supporting children in care to have access to an Independent Visitor

One of the roles of the IRO in reviews is to talk to children about having an Independent Visitor. Wokingham continues to have a contract with the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) to

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provide an independent visiting service for children in care. Sixteen children in care have been matched with independent visitors through NYAS, a service which helps them build relationships, develop independence, try new activities, or share things they like doing. In terms of the volume of matches across the year, this remains the same number as last year. When reflecting on the year overall, it has been evident that some matches have not worked out, and that for some children it has been more of a challenge to identify the right match. The co-ordinator for our area also left earlier in the year (but we now have a dedicated coordinator). These matches are felt to be very positive for the young people and they gain a huge amount from having someone independent who they know is there for them.

7 Impact of IRO Service – Oversight and challenge between reviews

7.1 IRO oversight and Challenge

The IROs are continuing to provide formal challenge but have been able to deal with most issues informally. There has been a reduction in the number of formal challenges in the last year, with 73 recorded this year, down from 87 last year. There is evidence of numerous IRO oversight case notes on children's files, with 975 case notes recorded in total for the year, representing a huge variety of oversight. Last year there were 525 IRO case notes, so this level of oversight has almost doubled. Oversights have raised issues in relation to:

- Wishes and feelings
- Education issues
- Review of final care plans
- Participation with parents
- Informal challenges

Whilst there is more evidence of informal challenge as opposed to using the step on Mosaic, it is felt in part that this is because the IRO service continues to maintain positive relationships with frontline managers who also represent a stable cohort. Wokingham is a small authority, but one of its strengths is a transparent senior leadership team who value the role of the IRO. The service practice standards are in the process of being updated and as part of this there will be changes to the dispute process to provide clarity for both IRO and Managers in using both the informal and formal challenge.

IROs continue to be routinely invited to Permanency Planning Meetings and Placement Stability Meetings, which helps them keep informed of the care planning process and possible moves for children in care. They feel that this activity has helped them keep an overview and be aware of the rationale behind care plans.

IROs have also held early reviews when needed and have maintained their involvement post-18 and post-adoption to ensure actions such as life story work have been completed. IROs are also having pre-meetings with social workers (which is a requirement in the IRO handbook) and midway reviews on some cases when they are required (which is not a requirement but is recognised as good practice).

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Table O: Reasons for challenges 2022-23

Types of issues raised	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Missing / incomplete / poor standard documentation	14	13	9	1
Statutory visits not being done within timescales	5	0	1	0
No social worker or assistant team manager / team manager attend CIC review	2	0	3	0
Care plan not sent to IRO for comments	1	0	0	0
Significant issues with placement	6	2	1	0
Care Plan/permanency plan 'drifting' (timescales not met etc.)	10	6	6	6
IRO not notified of significant events in time	2	11	2	2
Decisions not carried out (1 or more carried forward due to lack of action)	6	0	1	0
Education needs not being met	4	0	0	0
Health needs not met	1	2	0	0
Other (inc. contact issues safeguarding concerns)	4	8	8	2
Accommodation provision		1	0	0
Total	**55**	**43**	**31**	**11**

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7.2 Themes identified in challenges:

The most common challenges over the course of the year have related to missing or poor documentation, reports not being completed on time/not being provided to meetings, or IROs not being informed of significant events such as placement moves or court decisions. In such cases, the challenge may not directly impact on the child but is designed to highlight the issue to managers with a view to improving practice. The remainder of challenges were made in response to issues that would potentially have a direct impact on the child and their care plan progressing. These included concerns around placement issues, contact arrangements, education and health needs not being met and the care plan drifting.

Table P - IRO Challenge Examples

Impact of IRO challenges - case examples		
Issue	**IRO intervention and challenge**	**Resolution - impact on child**
Issues with Education: SEN plan not being progressed quickly enough.	IRO emailed the SEN manager to raise concerns as to why the young persons case had not yet been at SEN panel	SEN agreed to place the young persons case to panel at an earlier date so that their plan could be agreed and education moved forward.
Timeliness of reports: IRO raised concerns around social worker not completing their report within timescales for the review	IRO passed the issue directly to the manager to discuss with the social worker.	By raising this the IRO was also alerted to significant changes to the care plan. The child was about to move but the IRO had not been alerted. This resulted in better care planning and a new review date for the move.
Placement stability: IRO raised a challenge about the risk of placement breakdown for a young person following an IRO contact. Issues had developed with the carer about house rules and access to devices which were designed to keep the young person safe. Young person had gone to stay with a family member and did not want to return to placement.	IRO requested that SW team consider an urgent referral to the Compass Team to complete some mediation to prevent placement breakdown.	Compass team became involved, some useful work was done with the young person and carers, resulting in the young person going back to the foster placement. The IRO followed up with the Compass team about the progress and was satisfied with the plan to support the young person and the matter was resolved.
Placement stability/care plan/wishes and feelings: The	The IRO raised a formal challenge with the FPT	IRO reflection re process - Reflecting I wonder whether

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IRO wanted to raise significant issues about the placement – and about plans to move other children into the foster placement with other children already there (during court proceedings). There were also concerns about the decision making and matching by the Family Placement Team and that the IRO and children's SW had not been consulted and the children's views not sought.	manager – the response was that the	there needs to be a more formal process for seeking children's views independently when considering moving new children into a settled placement, the match even for a short period of time is so important. IRO asked for a conversation with service manager to feed back her thoughts on this – dispute closed off.

7.3 Compliments and good practice:

Areas of good practice have been identified by the IROs and passed back to the individual workers and their managers. They are recorded in the compliments log. In addition, the IROs have received some positive feedback in 2022-23.

Compliments from father via a professional:

Just wanted to log a compliment from (child's name)'s father during my feedback call with him. He was very complimentary about the IROs work with the family and advocating for his needs. Father said that the IRO had been really helpful in ensuring staff to communicated clearly and in lay man's terms, especially around his health needs and this made a big difference to him in understand what was happening and what was needed. More than once he said that things improved because of the work that the IRO put in.

Compliment from professional :

I just wanted to say thank you for delivering a child focused review, which you managed very well! The review included children, but it was very well structured, whereby each child had a chance to share their views. You confirm what they shared with the Social Worker to ensure their wishes and feelings were clearly and truthfully represented. It was very important and good learn from them about their health, education, leisure, lived experience and you made them relaxed thus an interactive meeting focusing on the important people as you kept telling them it is your meeting.

You managed the sensitive issue of the children's long- term care plans, and why their parents opted for their children to remain in care. Again, this was skilly handled, which gave one of the siblings to ask his parents who were reluctant to tell their children why they are to remain in Local Authority's care; that can our parents tell us why they don't want to care for us. This was very important for this child, and he felt content when his parents gave their reasons. Well done I believe this made this child feel vindicated.

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Thank you, so much XXX for chairing such as a difficult and sensitive meeting, which ended up being fun and enjoyable for the children, as you kept reminding them it is their meeting which I believe made them feel valued and respected.

9. Emerging themes in 2022-23

Several themes have emerged across 2022-23, which present both challenges and opportunities. These are summarised in the table below, along with a summary of what we are doing - or plan to do - in response.

Theme	**What is being done in response**
There was a significant increase in the percentage of children in care who were Accommodated under S20 – 71% of these were UASC compared with 47% the previous year. The use of Section 20 overall needs to continue to be monitored. It is an appropriate tool to support children and families under certain circumstances but needs close monitoring.	IROs are monitoring legal status in reviews and in relation to permanence. For most older UASCs S20 is appropriate and younger UASCs are now subject to Care Orders. We will monitor this percentage and will undertake an audit of S20 cases if required.
10 children were subject to Placement Orders at the end of the year compared to 16 in March 2021. Most of these children have experienced neglect and trauma and their behaviour can be very dysregulated and difficult to manage.	We need to continue to be mindful of the outcomes for permanency within care proceedings and be clear about what the next steps are for these children. We work closely with ATV who have a high level of expertise around working with children being placed for adoption.
There have been some issues with the performance/timeliness of initial health assessments and the notifications to health that children are in care, which is being monitored.	This is being monitored by the ISIG and the CPB, and IROs are checking that health assessments have been set up prior to the first review. IROs will also check completion dates at each review. Overall, the team is satisfied that children are having IHAs and have noted the action to improve timescales. Timeliness has reduced again (very slightly this year), but it is a worrying trend, and we need to continue to challenge this as a service.
There has been a significant increase in the number of UASC children in care in 2022	The Children's Advocate has attended all first reviews for UASCs. The IROs are working to

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from 26 to 40 – with a range of educational, care and emotional needs. In 2022, the DFE said that nationally there had been a 34% increase in the number of UASC, so this is likely to continue to be a trend.	increase their knowledge and expertise in this area - the team have completed training with Coram and have increased their awareness of emotional needs of UASC, as well as specific issues to consider around those UASC who are at higher risk of going missing or being trafficked.
HOTH (harm outside the home) The numbers of missing episodes for children and young people increased from 29 last year to 40 this year. For IROs, being aware of and monitoring the reasons for these episodes - alongside any implications for safety planning - is key.	Currently we are in the process of considering a process which will run alongside the CIC reviewing process to manage those looked after children who are at high risk of exploitation. This will streamline the current way of managing HOTH, whilst making sure that those children most at risk of exploitation have the right plans in place. It may be that we need to strengthen the IRO reports to be more inclusive of HOTH and safety issues for children in care to evidence that oversight within the reviews.
Complexity, length of care proceedings, and permanency	At the area Quality Assurance Service Managers meeting it was reported that the complexity of care proceedings has increased across the region. The length of time that proceedings are taking has also increased (52% of our cases had gone over the recommended 26 week timescale, according to our joint legal team in May 2023). As a service we need to challenge the reasons for these delays and make sure that we are aware of any significant issues within the court process.

10. Conclusion

In 2022-2023, the IRO service has continued to adapt in terms of the ways it has managed cases in the post-COVID 19 era. As part of this, the team have continued to use a variety of ways to engage children and young people and obtain their views, as well as engage with the network around them. As a service the complexity of cases both across children in care and children on a CP plan continues to be high. We have had a huge increase in the number of UASC and have had to develop our skills in managing this vulnerable group of young people. Care proceedings are taking longer, and we need to be mindful of the reasons for this and how these impact on the permanency for children. We are encouraged by the positive feedback that the Service received from the recent ILACS inspection in relation to the experiences and progress of children in care from, and how the inspection report also noted

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that the IRO service has good oversight of their cases with child friendly letters written to children. Moving forward this year we want to make sure that our timeliness for reviews is more consistent with previous years and want to be clearer that the data from this year is correct. We also want to improve the consistency of the oversight provided, and how we record challenges. Last year we continued to benefit from a fully permanent and stable team and will aim for this to continue in 2023-24.

11. The key strategic priorities of the IRO service in 2022-23

- To consistently provide good quality reviews for children in care and build on the positive feedback from the ILACS for children in care. An important part of this will be to increase the level of preparation for reviews (pre-meetings and midway reviews). This will ensure strong oversight of the child's care plan, and is also likely to prevent drift. Minutes are written to the child and a letter is now written to the child following the review. This was positively highlighted within the recent ILACS. We want to be clear that these important pieces of work are being received by children.
- To raise awareness about and promote the role of the IRO. This will include work to promote awareness about the purpose of care planning and reviews to children, parents, carers, social workers, and other agency colleagues. To reinstate the use of quarterly training sessions to support the understanding of the importance of reviews and what is expected from frontline teams.
- To demonstrate the effectiveness of the IRO service with clear examples of what difference it is making by seeing children and overseeing the review process. The ILACS findings highlighted good oversight of cases by the IRO service. What we need to focus on moving forward is continued consistency around the use of pre- meetings and embed midway reviews.
- To consider the outcomes of the Independent Social Care review and the Government's response "Stable Homes Built on Love" response in February 2023 - there are potentially important changes which could be made to the regulations, standards of care and guidance for children in care which will be vital for the IRO to understand and be aware of.

12. The areas of development we plan to focus on in the coming year

Action	Target date/monitoring process:
1. For IROs to continue to embed the practice of writing to the child following each review and providing a summary in an age-appropriate format explaining their plan and	We now have a list of every child who receives their letter, and we will be

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	what decisions the review agreed (which is posted to the child). The physical letter will help contribute to life story work.	able to monitor how many children. We want to seek feedback from children regarding whether they have received their letters and whether they have been supported to read their minutes
2.	Making best use of pre-review contacts with children, sharing the agenda and checking they have received their reports and know their care plan.	Prior to each review
3.	Improving the timeliness of administrative tasks, for example CIC review decisions and reports being sent out within timescales and recording all oversight and challenge on Mosaic.	Weekly report sent to IROs. Monthly monitoring by QAST Service manager and quarterly reporting
4.	For the IRO service to review the performance indicators relating to children in care and any messages from audits and raise challenges through quarterly reports if they identify an area of concern.	Monthly at team meetings and note any themes in quarterly report.
5.	To provide quarterly inductions to new social workers and half day training on care planning every six months to promote understanding about care planning regulations, the role of the IRO and purpose of child in care reviews.	Quarterly induction and six-monthly training
6.	To improve our quality assurance processes and communication about the IRO service and CIC reviews by refreshing our leaflets, feedback forms and developing an IRO postcard for new children coming into care.	IRO postcard has been completed. These are now being used. Introductory letters with a picture and a profile are being sent out to children and young people when cases are allocated to the IRO. A new leaflet for children coming into care has now been completed in draft.

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