
Bath & North East Somerset Council

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT **2018-2019**

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1. Introduction and Purpose of the Annual Report

- 1.1 An annual report of the Independent Reviewing (IRO) Service for Looked After Children is required in accordance with the Children and Young Person's Act 2008 and subsequent statutory guidance published by the Department for Education.
- 1.2 The report is produced in order to provide the Director for Children's Services, the Lead Member for Children and the Corporate Parenting Board with information pertaining to the children and young people that are currently placed in the care of the Local Authority.
- 1.3 The IRO Handbook (2010) provides statutory guidance to all Local Authorities regarding children that are placed in the care of a Local Authority. The guidance seeks to ensure improved outcomes for looked after children in order that they can reach their full potential. Section 7, paragraph 11 sets out that the manager of the IRO Service must provide an annual report on the delivery of the IRO Service which can then be scrutinised by members of the Corporate Parenting Board.
- 1.4 This annual report will provide information as to;
 - the profile of the Local Authorities Looked After Children,
 - the IRO Service structure and development,
 - the inclusion and participation of children, young people and their parents
 - the review and monitoring of individual care plans for Looked After Children,
 - area's for development over the course of 2019-2020.

- 1.1 Following presentation to the Bath and North East Somerset Corporate Parenting Board and the Bath and North East Somerset Local Safeguarding Children's Board, this report will be placed on the Council website as a publically accessible document.

2. Reporting Period

- 2.1 This report covers the period from 1st April 2018 to 31st March 2019. Some of the data sets may vary slightly from those published by Council Children's Services due to minor variations in the timeframe for data capture, and the uploading of data onto various systems.

3. The Legal, Statutory and National Context of the IRO Role

- 3.1 The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Since 2004 all local authorities have been required to appoint an IRO to protect children's interests throughout the care planning process.

- 3.2 The requirement to appoint an IRO arose from concerns that looked after children could drift, with care plans that either did not meet their needs or were not implemented. The IRO Handbook was introduced in 2010 providing statutory guidance for IRO's and setting out the functions of the local authority in terms of case management and review for looked after children.
- 3.3 The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulation 2010 apply specifically to children who are looked after by a local authority. The objective of these Regulations is to improve outcomes for looked after children by improving the quality of the care planning processes. Accompanying these Regulations is the IRO Handbook: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities and Independent Reviewing Officers on Reviewing Arrangements for Looked After Children. Both these Regulations came into effect in April 2011 and provide not only the framework for the work of the Independent Reviewing Service but set out the Local Authorities responsibilities to looked after children.
- 3.4 The statutory duties of the IRO are to:
- Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to looked after children;
 - Participate in any looked after child's review;
 - Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of looked after children are given due consideration by the appropriate authority; and
 - Perform any other function as set out in the regulations.
- 3.5 The National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers (NAIRO) recognises that there continues to be variation in the quality of IRO services across the country. In November 2018, NAIRO prepared an improvement plan for the IRO service which seeks to enhance the effectiveness of the IRO role so as to improve outcomes for children. The improvement plan sets out the measures that *might* be taken at government, local authority or IRO service level and include;
- Consideration to be given to extending the IRO role to care leavers up to the age of 25
 - Strengthen the guidance on IRO involvement in care proceedings placing a duty on IRO's to make their views directly known about the Local Authority care plan to the court, and a duty on the Local Authority to facilitate that information flow
 - The annual IRO report to specifically report on the level of independence provided to IRO's within the local authority and any barriers / threats to their independence
 - The annual IRO report to clearly state the arrangements in place for IRO's to access independent legal advice
 - IRO and IRO Manager training that sets out the importance of children's rights, independence and challenge
 - IRO teams to have close links with Children in Care Councils (including a nominated link person)

4. Local Context – Bath and North East Somerset Council as Corporate Parent

- 4.1 The IRO Service within Bath and North East Somerset operates within the context of the council acting as 'Corporate Parent' for all the children and young people that are placed in the care of the Local Authority. Looking after and protecting children and young people is one of the most important jobs that council's do and it is the council's responsibility to ensure that these children and young people are given the care, support and stability that they deserve.
- 4.2 Being a Corporate Parent means doing everything possible for the children and young people in the Council's care so as to ensure these children and young people get the opportunities that other children who live with their family get. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 Section (1) (1-4) and (2) (1-2) defined for the first time in law the responsibility of Corporate Parents, seeking to ensure that as far as possible, Local Authorities provide secure, nurturing, and positive experiences for looked after children, young people and care leavers.

Corporate Parenting Principles

- (1) A local authority in England must, in carrying out functions in relation to the children and young people mentioned in subsection (2), have regard to the need -
- a) to act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those children and young people;
 - b) to encourage those children and young people to express their view, wishes and feelings;
 - c) to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people;
 - d) to help those children and young people gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners;
 - e) to promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those children and young people;
 - f) for those children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work;
 - g) to prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living;

Local Offer for care leavers

- (1) A local authority in England must publish information about –
- (a) services which the local authority offers for care leavers as a result of its functions under the Children Act 1989;
 - (b) other services which the local authority offers that may assist care leavers in, or in preparing for, adulthood and independent living.
- (2) For the purposes of subsection (1), services which may assist care leavers in, or in preparing for, adulthood and independent living include services relating to-
- a) health and wellbeing;
 - b) relationships;
 - c) education and training;
 - d) employment;
 - e) accommodation;
 - f) participation in society

5. The Bath and North East Somerset Council IRO Service

- 5.1 The IRO Service within Bath and North East Somerset sits under the Director for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance and is part of a wider team that includes the Child Protection (CP) Service which is responsible for the oversight and monitoring of children who are deemed to be at risk and subject to a child protection plan. The position of the IRO Service within the Council Structure enables there to be a high level of independence, with no IRO having had any involvement in the production and preparation of plans for children placed in the care of the local authority, including no management responsibility of the child / young person's case as well as no control over the resources allocated to a child, young person or their family.
- 5.2 In November 2018 a new manager was appointed for the IRO and CP Service following the departure of the previous post holder who had been in this role since 2016. The Manager has extensive experience in working as a social worker and manager within children's services and therefore brings to the role a wealth of knowledge about the journey of our children who have been unable to remain in the care of their families, an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the legal processes surrounding looked after children and the importance of children receiving care that promotes their needs, prepares them for adulthood and most importantly enables them to recover from their early childhood experiences.
- 5.3 The IRO Service has had changes in staffing personnel over the preceding year, with three new permanent IRO's having being appointed within the Service to replace the departure of colleagues who have left to pursue other opportunities.
- 5.4 In the year 2017/18 in response to the increasing number of children coming into local authority care alongside the rise and fall of children subject to a child protection plan the Independent Chair role was introduced. This incorporates the role of the IRO, the CP chair and gives provisions for the role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) to also be undertaken by those in this post. The flexibility of the role means that there is sufficient capacity within the IRO Service so as to ensure that all looked after children have an IRO appointed in a timely way when coming into care and the monitoring and review of children's care plans and needs is not adversely affected as a result of the pressures faced by the growing numbers of children and young people in the care of the local authority.
- 5.5 The Service now comprises of seven IRO's, all of whom are permanent members of staff with Bath and North East Somerset Council. Of these seven, two are IRO's posts and the remaining five are Independent Chairs. All posts are part-time but provide a full time equivalent of four, albeit due to long-term sickness one post has been vacant since July 2018. During the last 12 months there has been no reliance on agency staff within the IRO Service.
- 5.6 The IRO's / Independent Chairs are all experienced social work practitioners and have had management and supervisory experience within their previous roles working with children, young people and their families. The role requires an

enhanced check with the Disclosure and Barring Service and registration with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the regulatory body for those practicing within social work roles.

- 5.7 All IRO's have access to independent legal advice upon request through a reciprocal arrangement with Bristol City Council legal team. During the preceding year there has been reason to seek input from Bristol on one occasion when the IRO was in disagreement with the final care plan being proposed for two siblings. Legal advice on this occasion however did not progress as following the use of the Dispute Resolution Protocol, the social work team changed their care plan and this was endorsed by the IRO.
- 5.8 All IRO's are able to register as members of the National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers (NAIRO), and are encouraged to participate in the South West Regional IRO Practitioners Group (SWIRO) where they can access peer support and contribute to sector led improvement opportunities.
- 5.9 All IRO's have access to training opportunities which are relevant to their role and areas of interest.
- 5.10 The Manager of the IRO Service is responsible for appointing an IRO to a child once notification is received from Children's Services that the child is looked after. In terms of allocation, a weighting system was introduced in 2017/2018 which enables the Manager of the Service to consider not only the numbers of children allocated to an IRO but also the level of complexity being managed, with particular focus on the child and young person's age, their level of need, whether care proceedings are ongoing, the anticipated permanence plan and travel commitments to see the child / young person. The weighting system assists the Manager in ensuring that the IRO can effectively and sufficiently fulfil their role to all the looked after children in which they are allocated.
- 5.11 Each IRO receives monthly supervision from the Manager of the Service, which allows there to be reflection, consideration of drift and delay, guidance and advice and performance management. Team meetings are held on a monthly basis and it is the intention that there will be two service development days in the year 2019-2020 to review the child's journey through the service and recent themes identified for looked after children and young people.
- 5.12 The Service has continued to have a full-time administrative post which offers support to the IRO's, however as a result of the growing population of looked after children and young people there is a need to increase the amount of administrative support available in the Service.

6. IRO Caseloads and Services Performance

Table 1: Total Number of Children in Care over five year period

	March 2019	March 2018	March 2017	March 2016	March 2015
No. Children In Care	192	168	160	158	141
Average IRO Caseload for FTE	47	62	60	N/A	N/A
% increase of children in care from previous year	14.2%	5%	1.2%	12.05%	N/A

Figures taken from IRO Service Case Tracker

6.1 Table 1 shows that there has been an increase over the last five years of the number of children that are looked after by the local authority, with the least increase (1.2%) being between 01/04/2016 – 31/03/17 and the greatest increase being between 01/04/18 – 31/03/19.

Table 1.1: No. of children and young people allocated to an IRO during 2018/2019.

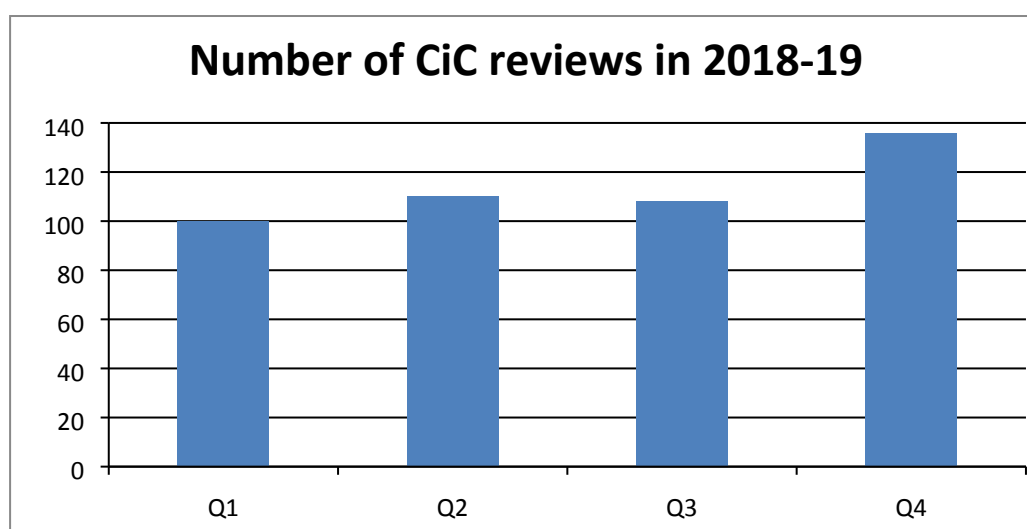
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Average IRO Caseload for FTE	63	63	55	47

Figures taken from IRO Service Case Tracker

6.2 Whilst there has been an increase in the child in care population it has been possible to reduce the average caseload for the IRO's as a result of the Independent Chair role. The role of the Independent Chair can be altered to accommodate the growing demands on the IRO Service. In January 2019 following the successful appointment of a full-time Independent Chair, it was possible to increase the capacity of the IRO Service by making approximately 60% of this person's role specific to looked after children. This increase in service capacity therefore contributed towards the decrease in the IRO's caseload as seen at the end of Q4.

- 6.3 The IRO Handbook suggests that for a full-time IRO it would be good practice for their caseload to consist of 50-70 looked after children, in Bath and North East Somerset IRO service however the complexity of the children's circumstances are also very much considered when decisions made as to whom is appointed as the child or young person's IRO. The IRO Manager is now responsible for the identification and allocation of an IRO for a looked after child, in making the decision to allocate an IRO the Manager will consider the child's age, size of the sibling group, whether there are legal proceedings, the location of the child's placement and the expertise that may be needed in order to appropriately monitor the care planning processes.
- 6.4 A caseload monitoring system introduced approximately 18 months ago captures the complexity of the children and young people allocated to an IRO through the use of a scoring system. In supervision the IRO and their Manager will review the number of children and young people allocated and give each a score to represent the level of need the child may have and the level of involvement and time the IRO may need to provide. This allows the IRO Manager to hold a good understanding as to the workload of each IRO so that when children and young people enter care they are appointed an IRO who has the capacity and ability to provide an effective service.
- 6.5 The IRO is often the most consistent relationship (after a child's primary carer) for a child and young person who is looked after. Nationally children's services are struggling to recruit social workers and teams working with children who are looked after can experience high staff turnover, which inevitably results in changes of social workers for looked after children. The IRO role for children and young people in such circumstances is therefore even more valuable as it can prevent the needs of children being overlooked, decisions being forgotten and the journey of children and young people being lost.

Table 2: Number of Children in Care Reviews



Figures taken from Children's Services data report (NI66)

- 6.6 Within the reporting period the IRO Service has chaired a total of 454 review child in care meetings for children and young people, this is only a 1.5%

increase on the previous financial year. Given there has been a 14% increase in the number of children and young people becoming looked after this year, this small increase could therefore be related to;

- Children and young people facing less disruption and therefore not requiring additional review meetings, and
- Sibling groups remaining together reducing the number of reviews required.

Table 2.1: No. of CIC reviews held for the last five years

	Mar-15	Mar-16	Mar-17	Mar-18	Mar-19
Children In Care allocated to IRO	141	158	160	168	192
Total Reviews held	403	398	404	461	454

Figures taken from Children's Services Data Report (NI66)

6.7 As the above data demonstrates, the IRO Service continues to face high levels of demand, a child or young person's child in care review is only one part of an IRO's role. In order to provide a high quality service to the children and young people allocated to them the IRO is also expected to regularly consult with the adults around the child and young person (including family members and professionals), read all salient documents that influence the final care plan or changes in care plan, maintain contact with the child and young person, (which can take place in many ways such as by telephone, through sending letters and face to face meetings), comply with quality assurance processes, routinely monitor progress of a child and young person's care plan so as to promptly address drift and poor practice. The IRO Service works incredibly hard in order to provide children and young people with a high quality service.

Table 2.2: Timeliness of child in care reviews for children and young people

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
% on time 2018/2019	84.7	84.7	83.5	82.1
Target	87%			

Figures taken from Children's Services Data (NI66 Local)

6.8 Whilst there continues to be a high percentage of children and young people who have their review held on time the data shows that overall there has been a continued decrease in timeliness in each quarter of this reporting period.

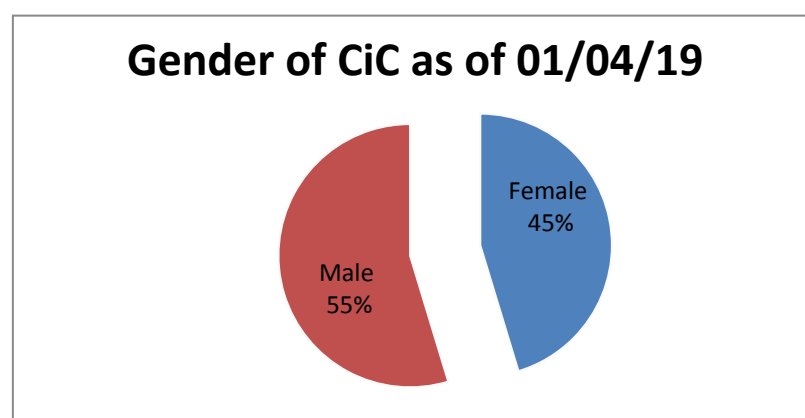
Although capacity within the service improved, between November and March two IRO's left the Service and one required an unexpected period of leave.

- 6.9 Given the large numbers of children and young people in care when there are vacancies within the Service it can be a challenge to ensure reviews are held as scheduled, the Service strives to ensure all children and young people's care plans are reviewed within the statutory timescale but where changes of IRO arise this is not always possible. The timeliness of reviews is an area that will be closely monitored in the coming year and will form part of the Quality Assurance tool that IRO's complete following a child or young person's review.

7. Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Bath and North East Somerset:

- 7.1 The gender breakdown remains stable in relation to previous years and reflects the national picture at the end of March 2018 where it was found that just over half of looked after children are male at 56% and 44% are female. (DofE Main Report: Children Looked After in England including adoption 2017 to 2018, pub. 15/11/18). At the end of this reporting period, there were 87 (45%) females and 105 (55%) males accommodated by the Local Authority.

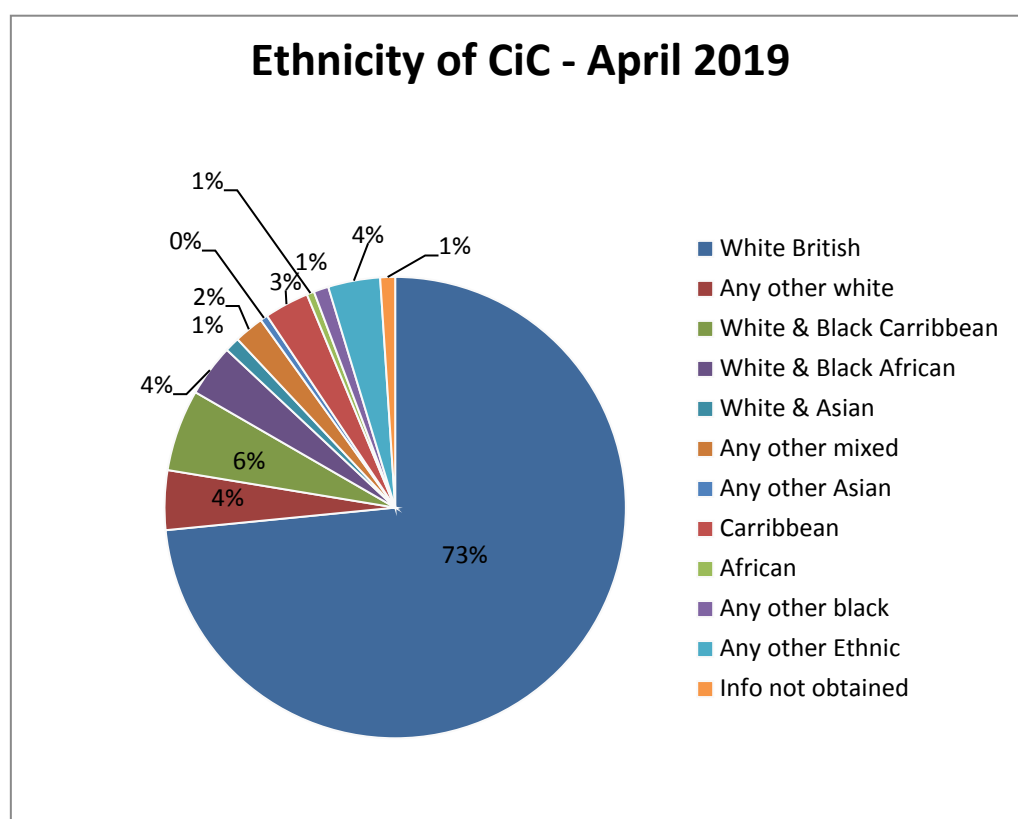
Graph 1: Gender breakdown of looked after children and young people



Taken from CLA snapshot

- 7.2 The ethnicity of children and young people in care has remained fairly static with 73.4% (141) of the cohort of children and young people in care being White British, in the previous reporting year this figure was 75%.

Graph 2: Percentage of Children in Care by Ethnicity at financial year end



Figures taken from CLA snapshot

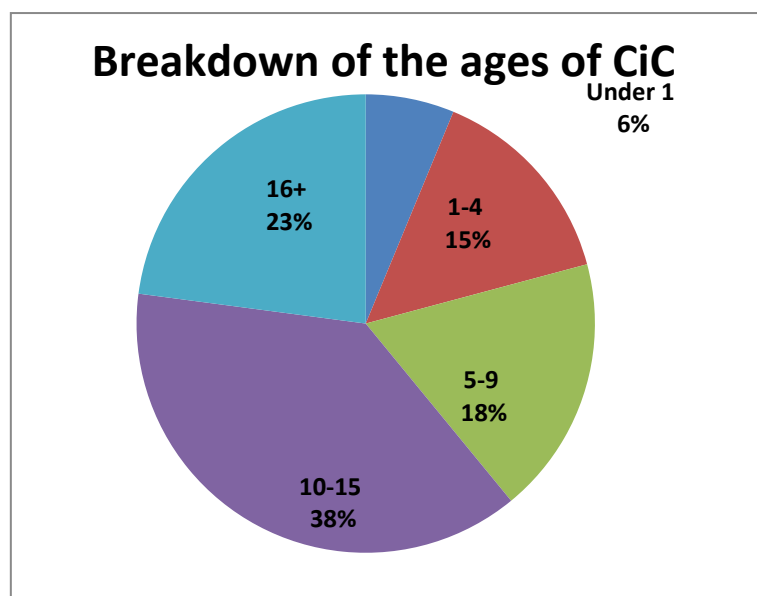
Table 3: Numbers of children looked after by ethnicity

Ethnicity	No.	7.3 This data shows that whilst the majority of children and young people looked after by the Local Authority are largely White British and White any other, there are 41 children and young people from Black Minority Ethnic Groups. As a Local Authority that is predominately White British, it is important that the cultural needs of the children and young people looked after are taken into consideration when identifying placements and the services on offer.
White British	141	
Any other White	8	
White & Black Caribbean	11	
White & Black African	7	
White & Asian	2	
Any other mixed	4	
Any other Asian	1	
Caribbean	6	
African	1	
Any other Black	2	

Any other Ethnic	7	
Info not obtained	2	

Figures taken from CLA snapshot

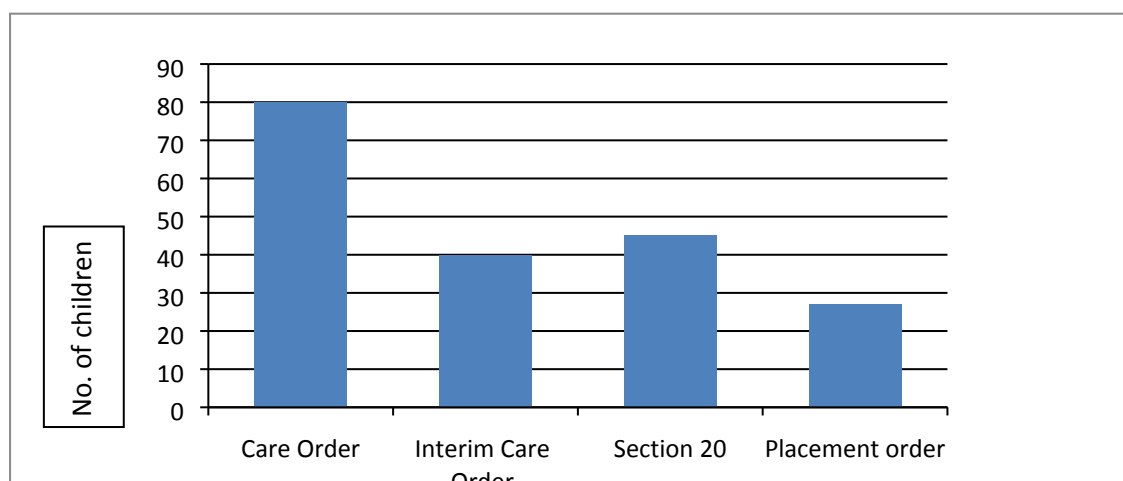
Graph 3: Number of children by age on 31st March 2019



Figures taken from CLA snapshot

7.4 At the end of 2018/2019, 73 (38.02%) children and young people aged between 10-15 years old and 44 (22.91%) young people aged 16-18 years old were in the care of Bath and North East Somerset Council. If the Permanence Plan for these children were for them to remain as looked after children for the rest of their childhood, 117 children/young people will remain the responsibility of the Local Authority and in turn require ongoing involvement from an IRO. If these numbers were to continue Dion this trajectory in coming years there may be a need to consider increasing capacity within the Independent Reviewing Service.

Table 4: Legal status of Children and Young People in Care



Figures taken from CLA snapshot

- 7.5 This data provides a breakdown of the legal status for children and young people under the age of 18 in care. This data shows that there has been a significant increase in the number of children made subject to a Care Order with 80 children this year in comparison to 40 last year. The number of children made subject to Interim Care Orders has also increased with there being 40 children and young people in this year compared to only 12 children in the previous year.
- 7.6 Care proceedings have concluded this year with 27 children having a final care plan of adoption and therefore being made subject to a Placement Order. This is the highest number of Placement Orders being granted to the Local Authority over the last five years with this figure having been four in 2014/15, eight in 2015/16, seven in 2016/17 and 2017/18, 14.
- 7.7 The use of Section 20 for children and young people has remained consistent over the last five years with 32 – 45 children and young people being in care under voluntary agreement.

Children placed at distance from Bath

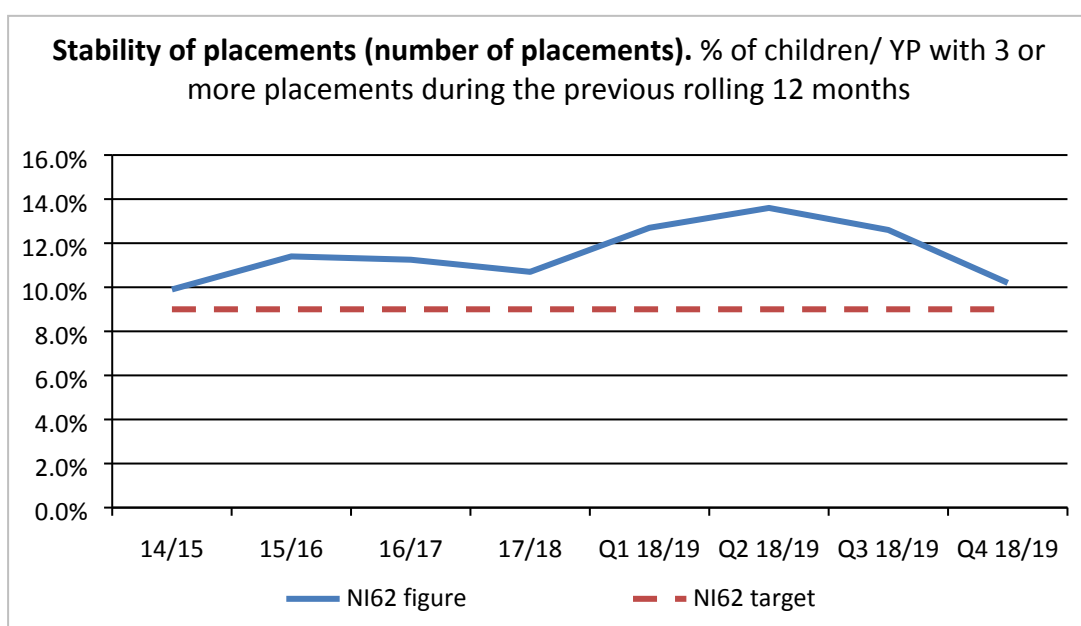
- 7.8 To ensure children and young people in the care of the local authority remain connected to their local community, family and friends, and to limit the level of disruption in a child/young person's life, local authorities should always first try to place a child or young person in care within the geographical area of their family home. The challenge however is ensuring that the identified carers have the appropriate skills to meet the child and young person's needs and that any risks of being within relative proximity to their family can be managed.
- 7.9 In Bath and North East Somerset a large percentage of looked after children are placed within the boundary of the local authority or within a 20 mile radius. Where this is not possible placements are largely found in neighbouring local authorities such as Bristol, Somerset, Wiltshire and South Gloucestershire. For some children and young people there has been a need for them to be placed further afield such as Hampshire, Telford, London, Kent, Barnstable and Leeds to name a few. The decision for these children to be placed so far away has ultimately been a result of the local authority being unable to identify carers that can meet the day to day needs of the child/young person or as a result of the child/young person requiring specialist support not readily accessible in the local area. The Independent Review of Foster Care (DfE, February 2018, Narey, M. and Owers, M.) identified that where shortages of placement occurred this was down to geography and the availability of carers who can look after children who are likely to have experienced significant trauma and abuse. Too often it was found that when children and young people were matched to carers who were not equipped to meet the child's needs, disruption and a further move for the child was likely.
- 7.10 All IRO's in Bath and North East Somerset closely monitor and review the placement identified for a child and young person and where children are placed at significant distance from their local community the IRO will explore the reason for this and the impact on the child or young person. Where an IRO identifies concerns about a placement this will be discussed directly with the social worker

and their manager. Where there is difference of view as to whether the placement is the right one, the IRO will utilise the dispute resolution protocol and pass any concerns held to the manager of the Independent Reviewing Service, who in turn will discuss with the relevant Heads of Service. In this reporting period there has been no use of the dispute resolution process related to a child or young person's location of placement.

7.11 In order to further monitor the placement of children and young people, IRO's in their monthly supervision review placements for children out of county. This enables identification of any themes that have led to children and young people being placed at a significant distance whilst also supporting discussion about whether the needs of the child and young person are being adequately met by the Local Authority.

7.12 IRO's maintain contact with all children and young people placed out of area, with all child in care reviews being held for the child/young person in their placement and with the participation of the child and young person. The IRO will speak directly with the child on their own, if they are in agreement, so as to capture directly from the child their wishes and feelings. Across the South West region there has been some discussion about the role of the IRO for children and young people who are residing out of county and whether a reciprocal arrangement can be made which would enable an IRO in the local authority were the child is placed to become appointed. There are no intentions for this arrangement to be implemented within Bath and North East Somerset as it is felt that the children and young people out of area are often the most vulnerable and require the consistency of one IRO.

Graph 4: Percentage of Children and Young people having 3 or more placement moves within 12 month period.



Figures taken from Children's Services Data (NI62 Local)

7.13 Placement stability is a key requirement for all children and young people in care. In previous year's placement stability within Bath and North East Somerset was an area the Independent Reviewing Service had raised with children's services as an area of concern. It is reassuring to see that the number of children experiencing 3+ placement moves in a 12 month period has continued to decrease. The Manager of the Independent Reviewing Service has been invited by the Head of Service for Care Outcomes to be part of a working group to consider a process within Bath and North East Somerset Children's Services around the matching and placement of children and young people in long-term care. This is welcomed by the service as the matching of long-term placements has been an area all IRO's have expressed their concerns about in previous years.

Unaccompanied and Asylum Seeking Children and Trafficked Children:

7.14 Bath and North East Somerset continue to have a small cohort of young people (6) who have arrived in this country unaccompanied and seeking asylum or who have been trafficked. For some, if not all of these young people they will have experienced exploitation or persecution, and had a traumatic and fearful journey to the United Kingdom. Whilst the numbers of these young people are small in comparison to the rest of the child in care population they are undoubtedly some of the most vulnerable young people that the Local Authority will be providing help and care to.

7.15 The needs of these young people are complex and IRO's have continued to build upon their knowledge and understanding of some of the processes these young people will face, with immigration being a constant feature in all the child in care reviews. The use of interpreters is always offered and all young people have the minutes of their child in care reviews translated should this be in line with their wishes.

7.16 The identification of a home and family for these young people continues to be a challenge and IRO's therefore monitor and keep close oversight of the matching of a placement and its suitability.

8. Child Focused Reviews, Participation and Feedback

Table 5: Children and Young People's participation in their review

Participation code	Number of Reviews	Percentage (%)
PN1 - Attends - participates verbally	274	76.5
PN2 - Attends - participates through advocate	3	0.8
PN3 - Attends - conveys view non verbally	10	2.8
PN4 - Attends - no contribution	5	1.4
PN5 - Does not attend - Advocate only	8	2.2
PN6 - Does not attend - facilitative medium	34	9.5
PN7 - Does not attend - no form of participation	24	6.7
Total with Participation Code	358	
Total Reviews	454	

Figures taken from Children's Services Data (NI66 Local)

Participation:

8.1 All children and young people should be able to speak with their social worker ahead of their child in care review to talk about who they would like to attend their meeting and where they would like for the meeting to be held. It is expected that children, young people and their parents will be present at the review if deemed appropriate and in the best interests of the child. All IRO's promote the participation of children and young people in their review and consider how best meetings can be held to facilitate children and young people's attendance. Where it is not deemed appropriate for a child or young person to be present for their review due to their age, level of understanding or emotional wellbeing the IRO will ensure that the child's wishes and feelings are considered in the review and inform the decisions reached and recommendations made. All children will have contact with their IRO prior to their review and where this may not be deemed appropriate immediately following.

8.2 Within the current reporting period out of 454 reviews, 358 included participation of the child / young person. As the data demonstrates this does not always involve the child being physically present at the review and verbally

contributing but includes participation through the attendance of an advocate and other persons within the child / young person's network. The participation of children under four years old differ as a result of their age, nationally children who are looked after between birth and their fourth birthday are deemed not to have participated in their review. For this reporting period there were 94 reviews held where children were under four years old, the IRO's will however had contact with these children, observing them with their carer in the environment in which they live.

Children and Young Peoples Feedback:

- 8.3 Following Child in Care reviews, the IRO Service encourages young people to complete feedback forms to identify areas for improvement and development so as to shape service delivery. All feedback is sent through to the IRO responsible and shared with the Manager of the Service. Unfortunately the response from children and young people in this area is low with only 13 feedback forms having been received in this reporting period, the ages of the children/young people that have responded have varied to some degree but largely feedback has been received from young people aged 13 years and over.
- 8.4 Whilst the feedback obtained in this reporting period is low and does not reflect the cohort of children and young people that are in care, the feedback that has been received is extremely positive
- 8.5 The current method in obtaining feedback from children and young people is through the completion of a questionnaire The approach taken to obtaining children and young people's feedback is an area that the service intends to review in 2019/20 with it being recognised that alternative methods of feedback are necessary if the service is going to capture the experiences of the children and young people it is responsible to.

Table 6: Children and Young Peoples feedback about reviews

Question Asked	Response		
Where you sent a consultation form?	71% - Yes		
Did you fill it in?	73% - Yes (of those that received it)		
Did you foster carer or social worker ask your views	95% - Yes		
Did you think the review talked about the right things?	100% - Yes		
Did you say what you wanted to?	95% - Yes		
Did you feel your views were listened to?	100% - Yes		
Was anyone missing you would have like to be there?	81% Yes	15% would have liked a family member to also attend. 4% would have liked another professional invited.	
What do you think about the time it took?	Too short	About right	Too long
	5%	90%	5%
Was any one there you didn't think should be there?	0%		
How good is the IRO at listening? (where 1 is terrible, and 10 is really good)	1-3 (not every good)	4-6 (OK)	7-10 (Really good)
	0%	10%	90%
Do you plan to take part in your next review?	81%		

8.6 Foster Carers Feedback: The IRO Service additionally seeks feedback from foster carers, asking them their views of the review, and their perspective of the child or young persons involvement:

Table 7: Feedback from foster carers themselves (54):

Receive a consultation form		81% Yes	
Did you complete the consultation form? (if received)		84% Yes	
Was the place and time of the meeting convenient?		96% Yes	
Were you able to share your views in the meeting?		96% Yes	
Did you feel the meeting focused on Child's needs and plans		96% Yes	
	Too Short	Just about right	Too Long
What do you think about the length of the meeting?	4%	96%	0%

8.7 Only 54 foster carers provided feedback following the child in care review which is a disappointing figure given there have been 454 reviews in this reporting period. Whilst the responses have been limited the feedback given is very encouraging in terms of the child in care review with those foster carers that replied stating that they felt able to participate and the meeting focused on the child's needs and care plan.

8.8 Consultation forms should be sent to all foster carers ahead of each child in care review. Some reviews for children and young people have been arranged at short notice between the social worker and the IRO, this has led to the administrator of the service not being informed and in turn being unable to send the consultation forms ahead of the meeting.

Table 8: Parents Feedback (4):

Did you receive a consultation form		50% Yes	
Did you complete the consultation form? (if received)		100% Yes	
Was the place and time of the meeting convenient?		75% Yes	
Were you able to share your views in the meeting?		100% Yes	
Did you feel the meeting focused on Child's needs and plans		75% Yes	
	Too Short	Just about right	Too Long
Length of meeting		100%	

8.9 In this reporting period only four parents provided feedback about their child's review. A parent never loses parental responsibility when their child is placed in local authority care under Section 20, an Interim Care Order or Care Order and as such they should regularly have the opportunity to share their views on the care being provided to their child and the progress in which their child is making. IRO's seek to consult all parents and obtain their views and this is done in a variety of ways; telephone, face to face or with the parent attending part of the child in care review. In order to consider parents involvement and satisfaction obtaining parental feedback will need to be an area that is considered further in the following year.

9. Dispute resolution and escalation:

9.1 The IRO Handbook (March 2010) sets out that one of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process (Para 6.1). Whilst IRO's are expected to establish positive working relationships with social workers of the children for whom they are responsible this should not prevent the IRO from addressing any concerns they may identify for a child in respect of their placement, care plan, resources available and poor performance. In working with a child or young person the IRO will need to be satisfied that their care plan reflects their needs and that the actions within it are consistent with the Local Authority's legal responsibilities towards them as children or young people in care.

9.2 IRO's within Bath and North East Somerset can maintain regular contact with children's social workers as a direct consequence of social work teams and IRO's having access to the same office. The working environment means that IRO's can often have discussions with social worker face to face and obtain regular updates on the progress of the children and young people in care, a particular strength when IRO's start to identify areas of concern for specific children and young people. As well as being able to have regular contact with social workers, the IRO's are also familiar with the managers of the child in care team and are able to approach them directly about specific children as and when deemed necessary.

9.3 All local authorities are expected to have in place a formal process for the IRO to raise concerns and in November 2013 the Issues Resolution Protocol for Children and Young People in Care within Bath and North East Somerset was devised. This Protocol provides clarity as to what is expected of an IRO when they consider the action or inaction of Children's Social Care to be affecting outcomes for children and young people. Whilst the Protocol is primarily in place to support the IRO and the quality assurance aspect of care outcomes for children in care, there may also be times when Council Children's Social Care use it to raise concerns about an IRO, their recommendations or action they have taken. In this reporting period Children's Social Care have not had the need to use the protocol in this way.

9.4 The Dispute and Resolutions Protocol has two stages classified as Informal and Formal;

Informal Issues Resolution – IRO's will routinely feedback to social workers and team managers about individual cases and any areas for concern. The IRO will contact the Social Workers Line Manager to clearly identify the nature of the issue and recommend action to resolve the problem. These will be recorded, as appropriate, on the child's file as an IRO case contact or an informal issue depending on the issue and whether it was quickly resolved or needed to be noted as an informal issue.

Formal Issues Resolution – The majority of issues will be resolved within the above process. Where this is not the case or the issues are sufficiently serious and impacts on the care planning or safeguarding of a child or young person the IRO will initiate the formal process.

9.5 Currently there is no data report available that can collate how many informal and formal issues are raised by an IRO in any given year, however all IRO's are expected to inform their Manager in supervision of any issues that have required the use of the informal and formal stages of the dispute and resolutions Protocol. In order to be able to identify themes and patterns in respect of care planning for children there needs to be a data report built which reports directly from Liquidlogic Children's System (LCS). The Manager of the Service has identified this as being one of the key areas for development in the coming year (2019/20) and will be working with the Business Intelligence Manager within the Council and the Service Designer for LCS so this data can be captured.

- 9.6 Where an IRO deems the issues they have raised to have not been satisfactorily resolved the IRO will submit a quality assurance escalation form to their Manager (who is also the appointed Deputy Lead for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance) who in turn will liaise with the Head of Service for Safeguarding Outcomes or Care Outcomes, depending on which service area has case responsibility for said child or young person. As part of the Protocol, issues that reach this stage require a resolution within 24 hours.
- 9.7 The majority of issues that IRO's identify are resolved during the informal and formal stages of the Protocol, with very few reaching the need for head of service input. There is currently no data around the number of issues that reached the need for Head of Service input for the first eight months of this reporting year, however since November 2018 there have been three instances involving four children where the IRO has not been satisfied that the issues raised had been suitably addressed and in line with the protocol these have been escalated to head of service for resolution. The issues in these instances were related to the suitability of foster carers and the Local Authority's final care plan, all three issues managed to be resolved at this stage with changes being made to the final care plan (which was in line with the IRO's view) and additional intervention being identified for foster carers (which the IRO's endorsed).

Quality Assurance by the IRO

- 9.8 In September 2018 the Independent Reviewing Service introduced a Quality Assurance (QA) form that the IRO completes ahead of or immediately following a child in care review. Once completed the form is sent to the social worker and their manager within five working days of the child in care review and with the recommendations made at the review. It is the aspiration of the service that managers within children's services will discuss the content of the form with the child's social worker, addressing any areas where practice needs to be improved.
- 9.9 The introduction of the QA form was to enable the service to look at compliance of the statutory duties children's services are responsible for fulfilling. The data gained from this quality assurance activity will in the coming year form part of a quarterly report that is prepared by the Manager of the service and distributed to the Director of Children's Services, the Director of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, Heads of Service and the Lead Commissioner for Children's Services. It is hoped that this quarterly report will be discussed within social work teams and influence and shape the services being provided to children and young people.
- 9.10 Table 8 below provides an overview of the data obtained from the QA form. The data highlights that at its lowest 73% of children were seen in timescale between their reviews and a large proportion of children were seen by their social worker between their reviews. The child's voice features strongly with 88-100% of case files having evidence of this when reviewed by the IRO. Management oversight was evident in 80-95% of the child's case file although there was less evidence of supervision.

Table 8: % of children who at the time of their review had evidence on file of statutory compliance.

CiC QA	Sep-18	Oct-18	Nov-18	Dec-18	Jan-19	Feb-19	Mar-19
Visits in timescale	74	78	68	100	100	87	75
Child seen by Social Worker	97	97	78	100	100	93	93
Evidence of Childs voice on file	88	91	91	92	100	96	82
Management oversight	88	95	81	92	80	83	88
Case supervision	64	70	65	85	65	46	68
PEP in timescales	82	74	66	64	83	56	72
Timely Health Assessment	79	74	71	84	86	72	79
Active Care Plan	75	71	87	91	77	74	78
Report available 48hrs before review	45	43	65	75	92	86	65
Up to date Assessment	49	71	65	91	88	57	58
Advocacy for Review	17	15	16	13	20	14	24
Clarity for Permanence	84	74	80	93	83	76	82

9.11 Off the Record is the advocacy service available to all children and young people in care and the data collated from the QA form highlights that there are significant numbers of children and young people not having advocacy in attendance at their child in care review, the reason for this could be related to the child's young age or a result of the child or young person choosing not to have an advocate present. This area will require further exploration with Off the Record and the Independent Reviewing Service so as to be confident that all children and young people are being told about advocacy and have this offered to them.

Liaison with Children's Services

9.12 In January 2019 it was agreed that monthly meetings with the Director of Children's Services would no longer take place and instead there would be greater liaison between Heads of Service and the Deputy Lead for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance through the reintroduction of bi-monthly meetings. These meetings were established so as to ensure effective communication and collaboration between Children's Services and the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. The meetings are used to look at key themes and issues that have arisen for children subject to a child protection plan and for children and young people looked after by the local authority. The meetings allow opportunity to consider the systems and practices in place for those children who are looked after or who are in need of help and protection. It was agreed that specific issues related to specific children will be discussed outside of the meeting so as to ensure there is no delay in resolving these. The chair of the meeting is the Deputy Lead for Safeguarding and Quality assurance and whilst the Director of

Children's Services does not attend they receive all records of the meeting and as such are privy to the identified issues, themes and areas of practice discussed.

10. Audit of Emotional Health needs of Looked After Children in Bath and North East Somerset:

- 10.1 In October 2018 an audit was undertaken by the IRO Service which specifically looked at the emotional health needs of looked after children in Bath and North East Somerset. This audit was commissioned in response to the IRO Annual Report dated 2017/18 which was presented at the Scrutiny Panel in July 2018. The theme highlighted was the gap in therapeutic services for children and young people in care. The audit focused on the emotional health needs of children and young people looked after as well as their access to life story work.
- 10.2 Research suggests that almost 50% of looked after children and young people have diagnosable mental health issues and over 65% have special educational needs. The prevalence of these difficulties is related to negative experiences in their past, as well as attachment difficulties and long-term effects of exposure to toxins whilst in utero. These experiences have an impact on a child and young person's health and wellbeing in its widest sense.
- 10.3 Corporate Parenting responsibilities include having a duty under Section 20 (3) of the Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children and young people they look after and should include the promotion of a child's physical, emotional and mental health. It is known that almost 75% of mental health issues emerge by the age of 18 years for children and young in the population.
- 10.4 Young People in care have had a profound experience of loss, separation, abuse and / or neglect. Placement changes for children and young people will exacerbate these feeling and experiences, their past may be lost and for some forgotten. Life story work can help children and young people have an understanding as to their past, make sense of their present and develop a clear sense of identity for their future. If denied the opportunity to have life story work undertaken with them, children may grow up holding themselves responsible for the decisions that were made. Life story work is therefore an attempt to dispel fantasy and give back to these children / young people some realistic sense of their past.
- 10.5 The audit found that children and young people were accessing a wide range of services in order to have their emotional health needs met with the majority of looked after children (81) being in receipt of services to meet their emotional needs. Of the remaining 43 children that were included in the audit, 26 were not receiving any input from services and 17 had declined. Life story work was in place or had been started for 69 of the children however there were 60 children where there was no evidence of any life story work.

10.6 Recommendations of the audit;

- That Bath and North East Somerset draw up minimum standards of good practice and guidance for social worker and supervisors in planning and delivering life story work – a working group will be established in the coming year with a cross section of staff from Children's Services and an IRO. The working group will be led by the Manager of the Independent Reviewing Service and it is envisaged that there will be practice guidance in place towards the end of 2019 alongside a tool kit that practitioners and their managers can use to deliver life story work.
- Life story work should be tracked by managers and IRO's to ensure that it is progressed and put in place for all children and young people in care – the inclusion of life story work in audits and recommendations of child in care reviews will enable greater scrutiny of the delivery of this work.
- Further exploration to be undertaken to establish the reason some children are not receiving a service in terms of their emotional health needs whilst others are receiving a very good service – a multi-agency working group has been established with representatives from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), Children's Services and the Manager of the Independent Reviewing Service. This group seeks to ensure effective multi-agency working so as to meet the emotional health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families.
- The data from Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to be analysed so as to establish patterns, strengths or short falls for looked after children and young people - outstanding.

11 Next Steps for the IRO Service 2019-2020:

- 11.1 The Independent Reviewing Service over the coming 12 months will be focusing on a child / young person's journey through the service. It is hoped that this will lead to improvements in the experience of children and young people who use the service and in turn lead to greater participation and feedback from children, young people, their carers and family.
- 11.2 The IRO Team Plan for 2019/2020 identifies a number of key development areas:
- Promotion of the role and responsibilities of an IRO for those working in Council Children's Services.
 - Identification of children and young people in high risk groups for experiencing placement instability
 - Identification of support being provided to stabilise placements.
 - Understanding and knowledge of the use of unregulated placements.
 - Participation of children and young people in the child in care review process
 - Feedback from children, young people, their families and carers in order to shape and influence practice and service delivery
 - Children and young people will have access to life story work delivered in an age appropriate way

- Continue to focus on improving the quality of pathway planning for 16 – 18 year olds.
- Continue to focus on improving the number of 16-18 year olds who are engaged in education, employment or training
- Availability of data that enables identification of themes and patterns for children and young people in care, which in turn can direct practice changes and improvements.

12 Summary

12.1 This year has resulted in an increase in capacity across the service through further appointments in the Independent Chair role. Whilst the numbers of children and young people in care continue to rise the service has worked extremely hard to ensure that every child and young person has an appointed IRO who can monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to looked after children.

12.2 IRO's know their children well and are a strong voice when issues arise within the care planning process. Reviews for children are held and for the majority in timescale.

12.3 The IRO service is committed to progressing and developing the service in order that children and young people continue to receive a high quality service for which their needs are the primary focus.