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# Bath & North East Somerset Council

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## Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT 2019-2020

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**Date: September 2020**

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## **1. Introduction and Purpose of the Annual Report**

- 1.1 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.
- 1.2 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.
- 1.3 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 children in care,
  - area's for development over the course of 2020-2021.
- 1.4 Following presentation to the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Quality and Performance Group of the Bath Community Safety and Safeguarding Partnership and the Corporate Parenting Board, this report will be placed on the Council website as a publicly accessible document.

## **2. Reporting Period**

- 2.1 This report covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. 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 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 children in care by improving the quality of the care planning processes.

3.4 IROs are required to oversee and scrutinise the Care Plan devised for every child or young person placed in the care of the Local Authority. The IRO will ensure that everyone who is involved in the child or young person's life fulfils the responsibilities placed upon them.

3.5 IRO's are expected to ensure that;

- Review meetings are held for all children and young people who are being cared for by the Local Authority,
- The views and wishes of children and young people in care are heard and considered when decisions are being made about them,
- Children and young people understand their care plan and any changes to this,
- The Local Authority is a good corporate parent to all children and young people in care by ensuring they get the same opportunities, support, love and care that other children living within their families receive.

#### **4. Bath and North East Somerset Council as Corporate Parent**

4.1 Being a Corporate Parent means doing everything possible for the children and young people in the care of Bath and North East Somerset Council ensuring that these children and young people get the same opportunities as other children who have remained living within their families.

4.2 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.

4.3 In order to thrive, children and young people require care that consistently meets their needs. In February 2018 the Department for Education (DfE) produced statutory guidance for local authorities which sets out the seven corporate parenting principles, with the intention that these provide all children in care as far as possible, secure, nurturing and positive experiences.

##### The Principles

- To act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing, of children and young people in care,
- To encourage children and young people in care to express their views, wishes and feelings,
- To consider the views, wishes and feelings of the children and young people in care,
- To help children and young people in the care of the local authority to gain access to, and make the best use of, services,

- To promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for all children and young people in care,
- To ensure children and young people in care are safe, have stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and
- To prepare children and young people in care for adulthood and independence.

## **5. The Bath and North East Somerset Council IRO Service**

- 5.1 Following a re-structure at Director Level, the IRO service now sits under the Director for Education, Inclusion and Children's Safeguarding. The change in Directorate has not caused any disruption to the work of the IRO's and has preserved the high level of independence that IRO's in Bath and North East Somerset have.
- 5.2 The IRO Service remains part of the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service which is responsible for the delivery of Child Protection Conferences and the Management of Allegations against a person in a position of trust. In terms of the IRO functions, these are undertaken by two part-time IRO's and four full-time Independent Chairs. Independent Chairs will undertake the role of the IRO, CP Chair and Local Authority Designated Officer. Having a dual role allows for much more flexibility across the service and results in children, their families and carers receiving a timely and responsive service.
- 5.3 The IRO service has been fortunate to gain some additional administrative support this year, this has enabled the service to review some of its processes, consider alternative ways of communicating with carers of children in care and provides much needed support to the IRO's in terms of their work.
- 5.4 All full-time members of the team receive monthly supervision with part-time staff receiving supervision on a six-weekly rotation. Supervision allows opportunity for reflection, consideration of the needs of the children placed in the care of the Local Authority, review of performance, statutory compliance and areas for development / learning.
- 5.5 Team Meetings continue to be held every four to six weeks and in this reporting period there have been two development days which have focused on;
- How to ensure children and young people know their rights and entitlements as children in care;
  - Children and young people having clarity as to the purpose and role of the IRO;
  - Strengthening the child's voice in their review;
  - Ensuring those involved in the care of children and young people contribute to their review;
  - Records being child focused and presented in a way that children and young people can access.

- 5.6 Unfortunately, the South West Regional IRO Practitioners Group (SWIRO) has not taken place in this reporting period, there are however plans to reinstate this

group in late 2020. This will be an opportunity for IRO's across the region to share practice, consider themes affecting children in care and build upon existing knowledge.

5.7 Local Authorities have a duty to provide IRO's with access to independent legal advice (IRO handbook, 2010, Para 6.13). In Bath and North East Somerset, a new reciprocal arrangement has been made with North Somerset Council specifically for the provision of independent legal advice for IRO's. In this reporting period however, there have been no instances where an IRO or the IRO manager has identified a need for such advice.

5.8 All IRO's are required to have an enhanced DBS check, be registered with Social Work for England and are encouraged to be a member of the National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers (NAIRO).

## 6. IRO Caseloads and Services Performance

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

	March 2020	March 2019	March 2018	March 2017	March 2016
No. Children In Care	<b>181</b>	192	168	160	158
Average IRO Caseload for FTE	<b>53</b>	47	62	60	N/A
CLA start	<b>75</b>	96	73	85	52
CLA end	<b>86</b>	81	62	68	14
% increase of children in care from previous year	<b>-5.8%</b>	+14.2%	+5%	+1.2%	12.05%

*Figures taken from Children's Social Care data and IRO Service Case Tracker*

6.1 As the above data shows, the numbers of children and young people in care in this reporting period is fairly static from the previous year, with more children leaving care in the last 12 months than entering which is the first instance in which this has occurred for the last five years.

6.2 When reviewing the reasons for a child or young person leaving care, the top four were due to a young person becoming 18 (20), children returning home (17), a Special Guardianship Order being granted (15) and children being adopted (13).

6.3 All care plans for children and young people are scrutinised and reviewed by their appointed IRO with final care plans requiring the endorsement of the IRO. For young people approaching their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday the IRO will convene a final

child in care review to ensure plans are in place to support the young person as they move into adulthood and that actions agreed at the previous review have been completed or are being progressed. IRO's also use the final review to celebrate the young person's achievements so that they hopefully leave the meeting feeling positive about themselves and the future.

Table 2: No. of children and young people allocated to an IRO during 2019/2020.

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Average IRO Caseload for FTE	41	58	54	53

*Figures taken from IRO Service Case Tracker*

6.4 The appointment of an IRO when a child or young person comes into care is the responsibility of the IRO Service Manager. Allocation will be determined by the existing workload of the IRO, whether the child is already known to an IRO or Independent Chair, the number of children in the family, the location of the child's placement and the complexity of the child's needs and level of care planning required. It is important that IRO's have a workload that is reflective of their capacity and expertise.

6.5 The IRO handbook sets out that a full-time IRO should aim to have 50-70 children allocated at any one time, as the above data shows, in this reporting period IRO's have held an appropriate caseload. It is important that IRO's have enough capacity in order to fulfil their roles and responsibilities and the workload of every IRO is continually reviewed in supervision.

6.6 The IRO service continues to use a caseload monitoring system to identify which children have the most complex of needs and who in turn may require more input and oversight by their IRO.

Table 3: Number of Child in Care Reviews over five year period

	March 2020	March 2019	March 2018	March 2017	March 2016
Children In Care allocated to IRO	181	192	168	160	158
Total Reviews held	528	454	461	404	398

Figures taken from Children's Services data

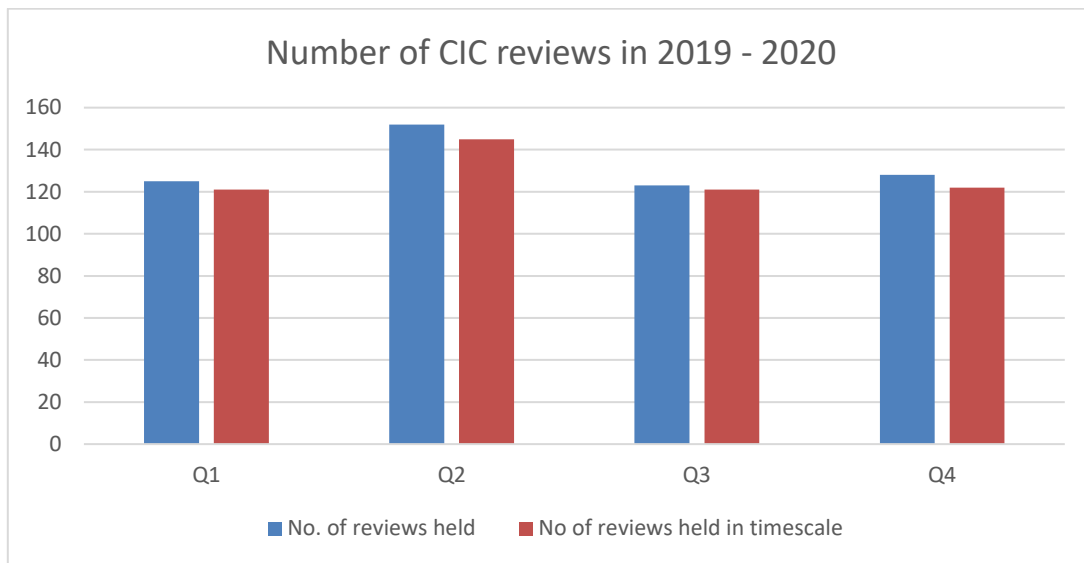
6.7 The IRO Service chaired a total of 528 child in care review meetings in 2019-2020, an increase of 74 from the previous year when the number of children and young people in care was higher. An increase in the number of child in care reviews can raise question as to placement stability, however as discussed later in this report, the stability rate for children in Bath and North East Somerset remains fairly static. There can be a number of reasons as to why children and young people require a review or additional reviews, which whilst not exhaustive include;

- the complexity of a child or young person's needs,
- the court timetable meaning additional reviews are required so that final care plans can be ratified,
- a change in care plan and the IRO needing to review this in order to provide their view,
- a change in placement,
- moving to an adoptive placement

6.8 The IRO service monitors closely the family finding process for children whose care plan is adoption, the IRO handbook suggests that children subject to a Placement Order should have their first review within three months of the Order being granted and thereafter within six months of the last review. IRO's in Bath and North East Somerset often seek to hold reviews for children subject to Placement Orders but not yet placed with adopters every three to four months, a higher level than required, allowing any issues of drift or delay to be identified promptly.



**Graph 1: Timeliness of child in care reviews**



*Figures taken from Children's Social Care data*

6.9 Between the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 and the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 there were only 19 reviews that could not be held in timescale and as such this means that on average across the year 96% of the reviews held were within the appropriate timeframe. This is a significant improvement and is beyond the 87% target set for the service.

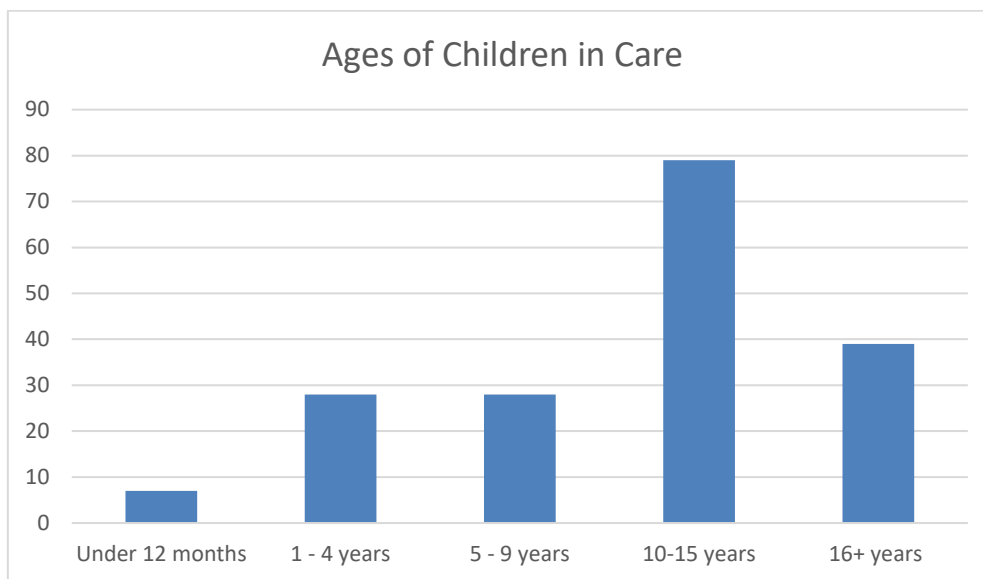
6.10 The manager of the IRO service routinely scrutinises performance data and discusses at every supervision any reviews that are deemed to be overdue or coming up in the next 30 days.

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

### Gender:

7.1 In January 2020 the Department for Education (DfE) produced its annual statistics of looked after children in England up to the period ending 31/03/2019. This showed that 56% of children in care were male, with 44% being female, similar to 2018. In Bath and North East Somerset, the gender breakdown has again remained stable and is in line with the national picture, with males accounting for 54% of the children and young people placed in the care of the local authority and 46% female.

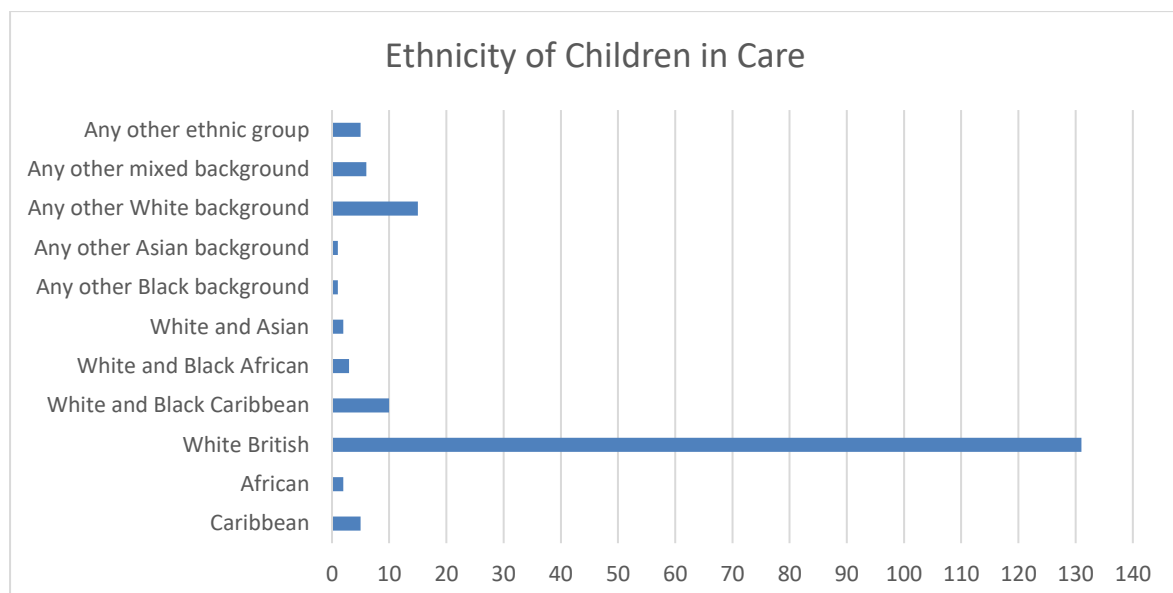
**Graph 2: Number of children by age as of 31st March 2020**



Figures taken from Children's Social Care data

7.2 As of the 31/03/2020 the largest cohort of looked after children were 10-15 year olds who accounted for 44% of the entire number of children and young people in care of the Local Authority. Young people aged between 16-18 were the second largest group accounting for 22%, with children under 12 months old being the smallest at 5%. The ages of children in care has therefore remained on par with last year and mirrors what was seen nationally across England as of 31/03/2019.

**Graph 3: Ethnicity of children and young people in care**



Figures taken from Children's Social Care Data

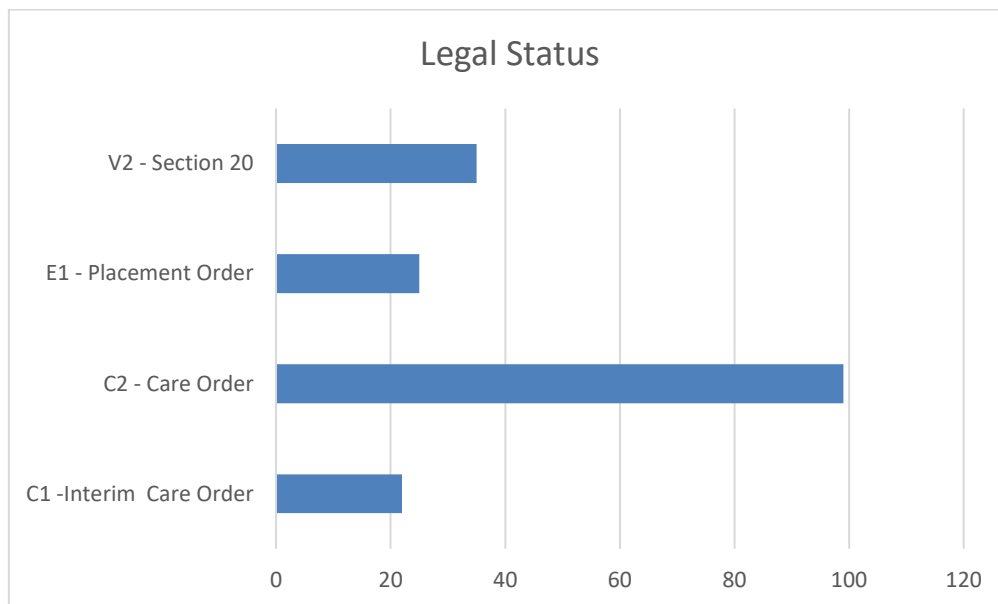
7.3 As the above shows, the majority of children and young people in the care of the Local Authority are White British, accounting for 72% of the entire child in care

population. This is again in line with the picture across England as of 31/03/2019 when 74% of children and young people in care were White British.

7.4 Whilst White British children and young people account for two thirds of the child in care population within Bath and North East Somerset, the Local Authority is responsible for meeting the cultural needs of all the children and young people placed in its care.

7.5 It is vital that a child’s identity is fully considered by those caring for them and working with them, this goes beyond just knowing a child’s ethnicity but understanding their cultural heritage, how they feel in the community they live, providing opportunities to develop knowledge and understanding of their culture, promoting their first language or mother tongue, respecting and allowing a child or young person to participate in traditional ceremonies and celebrations. IRO’s always explore the child and young person’s cultural and identity needs and ensure these are being met and are included in the child’s care plan.

**Graph 4: Legal status of Children and Young People in Care**



Figures taken from Children’s Social Care Data

7.6 Of the 181 children and young people in the care of the Local Authority as of the 31/03/2020, 99 (55%) were subject to a full Care Order, meaning final decisions about their long-term care had been made. 21 (12%) children were subject to an Interim Care Order, meaning these children are yet to know their permanence plan and 25 (14%) children were subject to a Placement Order with the Local Authority therefore having permission to undertake family finding with the view to these children being adopted. The remaining 35 (19%) children were in the care of the Local Authority with the agreement of the child’s parents. These figures are broadly in line with those published by the DfE in January 2020 for the period ending 31/03/2019 which reported that of all the children and young people in care, 75% were subject to a Care Order (including Interim Care Order) and 18% were placed voluntarily. However, the main difference was the number of children subject to a Placement Order which accounted for only 7%. It is positive

that babies and very young children in Bath and North East Somerset when unable to live with their parents or family members have a care plan of adoption.

Table 4: Legal status grouped by age:

Age group	Section 20	Interim Care Order	Care Order	Placement Oder
Under 12mths	1	4	0	2
1 – 4 years	0	3	5	20
5 – 9 years	0	4	20	4
10 – 15 years	12	11	55	1
16 – 18 years	22	0	17	0

Figures taken from Children's Social Care Data

7.7 The above table provides an overview of the legal status of children and young people in care in relation to their age. As the data highlights, there are no children under 12 months old subject to a Care Order which is what would be expected, a child of this age should not have a permanence plan which is long-term foster care as this prevents them from having the opportunity to grow up in a family with a parent. The majority of children aged between 1 – 4 have a care plan of adoption as reflected by the 20 Placement Orders, again this would be an appropriate long-term care plan and one in which the IRO would have formed a view on, there were no final care plans of adoption in this reporting period that were not endorsed by the child's IRO.

7.8 A Placement Order should be considered for all children where it is assessed that this is in their best interests, that they will be able to identify with a new family and where the harm and abuse in which they have experienced will not pose a risk of adoption breakdown. As the above data shows, there are a small number of children who are aged between 5-9 years where a Placement Order was granted at the conclusion of proceedings. IRO's monitor the progress of family finding and would expect within nine months of the Placement Order being granted that children had been matched to or placed with adopters, where this has not proven successful, the IRO will expect the Local Authority to re-consider the care plan. A child in care review should always be held at the point it is decided that a child's long term care plan is foster care, an IRO is expected to escalate any issues of delay in terms of care planning or where Placement Orders have not been revoked. Of the four Placement Orders at the end of this reporting period for children aged between 5-9 all were in the process of being revoked.

### **Children placed at distance from Bath**

7.9 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 the number of carers available locally and ensuring that carers have the appropriate skills to meet the child and young

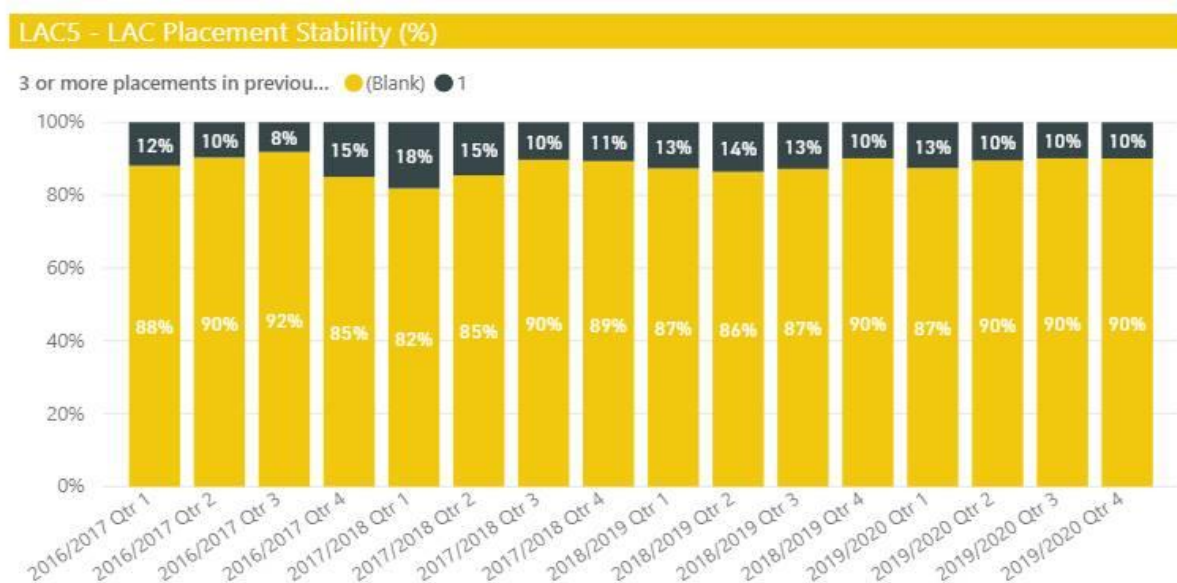
person's needs and that any risks of being within relative proximity to their family can be managed. The recruitment of foster carers for Bath and North East Somerset must continue to be an area of focus, the more carers the Local Authority have available the more opportunity there is for children and young people to be placed within their local area.

7.10 Due to the geographical size of Bath and North East Somerset and the small communities found across the authority it is not always possible for a child to be placed within their local area, in this reporting period 124 (69%) children and young people in care were placed outside the boundary of the local authority or 20 miles away from their family home. In December 2019, the Children's Commissioner published their report 'Pass the parcel – children posted around the care system' which identified that as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017/2018 41% of children and young people in care were living out of area, with 11,352 children and young people living more than 20 miles away from their home. The report highlighted that the number of children living out of the area has risen by 13% since 2014. The report acknowledges there are a number of reasons for children being placed at such distance from their home, but often it was identified that the location of the placement was simply because there was nowhere more suitable for them locally.

7.11 Placement availability for children and young people in Bath and North East Somerset continues to be a challenge. IRO's maintain direct contact with all children and young people despite where they live. IRO's will ensure they visit every child or young person and for children placed at a distance from home will pay particular attention to how the child feels about where they live, how they are being supported to maintain relationships with their family and friends and what provisions are in place for their health and educational needs. Where the young person or child has specific needs requiring input from other agencies such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) the IRO will expect there to be clarity as to the steps being taken to ensure these services are accessible and in place.

7.12 IRO's should always be made aware when there are concerns about the stability of a child or young person's placement and be invited to attend the disruption meeting. In Bath and North East Somerset, whilst there is good liaison between children's social care and a child's IRO, there remain some occasions when IRO's are not notified in a timely way of significant events surrounding a child or young person's placement. Should IRO's be in disagreement with plans surrounding a child's placement they will seek to resolve informally in the first instance with the Team Manager responsible for oversight of the child or young person's care plan, should this prove unsuccessful IRO's will utilise the dispute resolution protocol and pass concerns to the manager of the IRS for liaison with the relevant Head of Service. As per last year, there has been no use of the dispute resolution process related to a child or young person's placement.

Graph 5: Percentage of Children and Young people having 3 or more placement moves within 12 month period.



Figures taken from Children's Services Data

7.13 18 (10%) children and young people in care have experienced three or more placements in this reporting period. As the above graph shows, placement stability has been fairly static over the last five years. Whilst the number of children experiencing 3+ moves over the last 12 months has remained stable, given the importance of all children and young people experiencing placement stability the IRS will be seeking access to data that will provide greater oversight of the total number of moves that children and young people in care experience in a 12 month period.

### **Unaccompanied, Asylum Seeking and Trafficked Children:**

7.14 The number of young people in the care of Bath and North East Somerset who are unaccompanied and seeking asylum remains very low accounting for 4% of the entire child in care population.

7.15 As of the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 there were seven young people in the care of the Local Authority who were seeking Asylum, with three of these young people having arrived over the preceding 12 months. The ages of the young people range from 14 – 17 years old, with five being males and two females. All these young people are residing with foster carers or in supported lodgings in the areas of Croydon, Bristol, Keynsham and Trowbridge.

7.16 For all young people seeking Asylum their journey to the UK will undoubtedly have been one that involved fear and uncertainty, followed by a sense of loss upon arriving in a country and culture unfamiliar to them. Local Authority's are responsible for ensuring the needs of these children and young people are met, that they receive the same opportunities and the professionals surrounding them

have the same aspirations for these children and young people as any other child placed in care.

7.17 Asylum seeking children live with high levels of uncertainty about their future, not knowing whether they will be granted permission to remain indefinitely in the UK. Immigration issues therefore remain a focus for all IRO's, with IRO's seeking assurances that young people have access to the necessary legal advice and are being supported with the immigration process. As young people approach 18 years of age, they cease to be looked after by the local authority, IRO's expect the plans post 18 to be clear at the final child in care review and where there is ambiguity, the IRO will follow this up prior to the young person's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

## 8. Child Focused Reviews, Participation and Feedback

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

Participation code	Number of Reviews	Percentage (%)
PN0 – Under 4 at time of review	124	24%
PN1 - Attends - participates verbally	255	48%
PN2 - Attends - participates through advocate	6	1%
PN3 - Attends - conveys view non verbally	17	3%
PN4 - Attends - no contribution	14	3%
PN5 - Does not attend - Advocate only	14	3%
PN6 - Does not attend - facilitative medium	60	11%
PN7 - Does not attend - no form of participation	38	7%
<b>Total with Participation Code</b>	<b>528</b>	
<b>Total Reviews</b>	<b>528</b>	

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

## **Participation:**

- 8.1 The child in care review is the child's meeting, the social worker should be talking with the child or young person 20 working days before the meeting is due to take place to ascertain who they would like to be present at the review and where they would like their review to be held. The IRO handbook states that the child (if appropriate to their age and understanding) and their parents should be present for the whole review, if it is deemed appropriate and in the best interests of the child (Para 3.17). Where an IRO and the child or young person's social worker agree that a parent and / or the child should not be in attendance the IRO will ensure that they see the child ahead of the review and provide the parents with consultation documents and / or arrange a meeting with them separately.
- 8.2 In this reporting period of the 528 reviews held, 255 reviews saw the child or young person being in attendance and contributing towards the meeting. In this reporting period there were 124 reviews where the child was under four years of age at the time of the review and as such nationally are deemed not to have participated in their review. Children under four are seen by their IRO either ahead of their review or promptly following it, children will always be seen in their placement with their carer and for children able to engage, IRO's will find creative ways in which to do this.
- 8.3 Of the 17 reviews held where the child or young person has attended and conveyed their views non verbally, this will include children with additional needs, children who are unable to communicate verbally and those children and young people who attend in person, complete a consultation form but during the meeting do not verbally contribute.

## **Children and Young Peoples Feedback:**

- 8.4 Feedback from children and young people continues to be a challenge for the service. Following the poor response rate last year from children and young people the manager of the IRS wrote directly to all children and young people aged 11 - 17 years (124), their carers and where appropriate their parents in order to obtain their thoughts on the child in care review meetings and the work of the IRO. The letter highlighted that feedback would help improve the IRS and how the IRO helped them. Children and young people were encouraged to reply by post, email or by telephone, they were also encouraged to speak with their foster carer if they didn't want to respond but wanted their views included in the foster carers feedback.
- 8.5 Out of the 124 letters sent, only 19 children and young people responded. Whilst this small number of children and young people are not representative of the entire children and young people in care, their feedback is important and has been discussed in supervision with every IRO and will be considered in terms of service development. The IRS would welcome support from Children's Social Care, the Corporate Parenting Board, Off the Record (Advocacy Service) and the In Care Council (ICC) to identify alternative ways feedback from children and young people can be obtained.



Table 6: Children and Young Peoples feedback about reviews

Question Asked	Response			
Do you know who your IRO is?	14 – Yes		3 - No	
Have you received a letter from your IRO with their picture and contact details?	6 – Yes		10 - No	
How often do you see your IRO?	Once a Year	Twice a Year	Three times a year	More
	6	7	2	1
Do you speak to your IRO alone?	10 – Yes		5 – No	2 - Sometimes
Does your IRO talk to you about?	Placement	Social Worker	Family / Friends	
	10	10	14	
How well does your IRO listen?	1-3		5-7	
	3		6	
Where you sent a consultation form?	11 - Yes		7 - No	1 - Unsure
Did you fill it in?	11 -Yes		2 – No	1- Unsure
Did your foster carer or social worker ask your views about;	Time and day of review		13 – Yes	4 - No
	Venue		12 – Yes	5 – No
	Who to attend		14 – Yes	3 – No
	Content of discussion		13 -Yes	4 - No
Did you think the review talked about the right things?	15 – Yes		2 – No	
Did you say what you wanted to?	13 – Yes		3 - No	
Did the adults answer your questions?	12 – Yes		1 – No	1- Unsure
Was anyone missing you would have like to be there?	5 - Yes		12 - No	
Was anyone there you didn't want to be there?	1 – Yes		16 - No	
What do you think about the time it took?	Too short		About right	Too long
	1		5	12

8.6 In August 2019, the IRS re-introduced a letter which is sent to all children shortly after coming into care, this tells them who their IRO is, what their job is, how to contact them and includes a photograph. It would appear that not all children are receiving these letters and feedback from the In Care Council is that these letters could be altered to reflect the age of the child receiving them. In the coming year the service will look to review the content of the letters and how these are shared.

8.7 All children and young people in care should have the opportunity to speak with their IRO alone, social workers and carers should be supporting this and advocating to the child or young person what the role of the IRO is. Out of the 19 responses, 10 children and young people stated that they saw their IRO alone, five shared that they didn't and two stated they saw them alone sometimes.

8.8 Children said about their IRO;

- ❖ *'She helped get the SW to do what they need to do'.*
- ❖ *'She got me to speak and see my brother again'.*
- ❖ *'She has talked to my SW about lots of things'.*
- ❖ *'She has taken me out and got me food'.*
- ❖ *'She is there for me'.*
- ❖ *'She listens to me'.*
- ❖ *'She helps me get what I need'.*

8.9 Whilst the number of responses from children was low, there were no negative comments received by a child about their IRO, with the comments above suggesting children and young people value the role of their IRO and have a good relationship with them. The IRS wants all children and young people to feel confident that their IRO listens, can be contacted, relied upon and is there to ensure their needs are being met.

8.10 To form greater links with children and young people in care, an IRO within the service has formed a link with the In Care Council (ICC), this allows opportunity for dialogue between children, young people and the IRS. Currently a piece of work is being undertaken with the ICC about what children want to know when coming into care and how they would like this information to be provided to them. This piece of work was identified by the IRS as being necessary after learning that children were no longer receiving a LAC pack upon entering care. The IRS and Children's Social Care wish for all children and young people coming into care to know their rights and entitlements and have information available to them that helps them understand what is happening, who the people are around them and where they can go for support and advice. Within the LAC pack (Information Pack) the IRS would wish to see included details about the IRS, the role of the IRO and the arrangements surrounding child in care reviews.

8.11 **Feedback from adults:** As set out in 8.3, the IRS sought feedback from carers (124) of children and young people aged between 11 -17 years. Letters were also sent to these children's parents (82). Like the children and young people, the response rate from carers and parents was extremely low with only five parents out of 82 responding and only 29 out of 124 carers responding. Again,

this is extremely disappointing as was a big piece of work for the IRS to undertake, further work needs to be undertaken to strengthen feedback from carers, parents and family members with consideration of using different mediums in which to obtain this feedback.

Table 7: Feedback from foster carers (29) and parents (5):

Question Asked	Response				
	How often do you or the children you care for see the IRO?	Once a Year	Twice a Year	Three times a year	More
	7	15	4	3	
Who would you speak to if you were worried or unhappy with the IRO or review meeting?	SSW	SW	IRO	Manager	Unsure
	10	10	2	3	1
Does the IRO talk with you ahead of the review meeting?	16 – Yes		6 - No		
Do you feel able to share your views?	28 – Yes		1 - No		
Where you sent a consultation form?	25 – Yes		9- No		
Did you complete and return	21 - Yes		7 – No		
What do you think about the consultation form?	Fine		10		
	Needs updating		2		
	Not received		3		
	Waste of time		1		
	Prefer phone call		2		
	Comprehensive		3		
Did you receive the minutes in a timely way?	20 – Yes	11 – No	2 – Sometimes	1 – Not sure	
Did the minutes capture what was discussed?	17 – Yes	0 – No	0 – Sometimes	4 – Haven't received	
What do you think about the time it took?	Too short		About right	Too long	
	0		31	1	

*The above figures vary as not all respondents completed every section of the feedback form.*

8.12 Whilst the feedback above is based on low numbers it does provide some insight into the delivery of the IRS. The manager of the IRS would wish to see all IRO's speak with carers ahead of the child in care review meeting, given some reviews are held at six-monthly intervals it would be nice for carers to have the

opportunity to touch base with the IRO ahead of the meeting, it would also allow opportunity for the carer to raise issues they may not feel so confident in doing within the meeting. This will be an area for ongoing discussion with members of the IRS.

8.13 The IRS sends consultation forms to carers and other significant adults ahead of a child's review, IRO's have reported that more and more carers are feeding back that they would prefer a conversation with the IRO ahead of the review as opposed to having a form to complete. In the coming year the IRS intends to review how consultation with parents, carer and other significant adults takes place.

8.14 Minutes of reviews should be sent within 20 working days of the child in care review, at present there is no mechanism in place that allows for tracking of review minutes. The completion and timeliness of review minutes is discussed in supervision with IRO's and the IRO administrator is expected to keep a tracker of review dates and when minutes are sent. This area of performance requires more stringent reporting and as a result this has been logged with the LiquidLogic design team who have agreed to consider during the next upgrade.

8.15 Feedback from carers and parents about the IRO;

- ❖ ***'Brings the attention of certain matters that may not have been actioned, SW takes IRO role more seriously than other key people around the child'.***
- ❖ ***'Always helps having someone independent, good at holding people accountable if actions not completed'.***
- ❖ ***'The IRO makes it clear we can speak with her about anything'.***
- ❖ ***'Child has a good relationship with IRO, she feels comfortable around her and relaxed enough to talk to her about her thoughts and feelings'.***
- ❖ ***'IRO has good relationship with the children and really wants to get to know them and understand them'.***
- ❖ ***'It is helpful to know the IRO is there to ensure everything is done correctly'.***
- ❖ ***'Very helpful – bring structure and has helped child a lot'.***
- ❖ ***'Ensures oversight, a friendly consistent face over the year, good source of advice and guidance to ourselves and the child's social worker'.***
- ❖ ***'IRO listens, is very understanding, sensitive to child's needs and completes action'.***
- ❖ ***'Very informative and knows the children well'.***

8.16 The feedback above highlights the positive relationships that IRO's in Bath and North East Somerset form with children, young people, their carers and parents and the value that IRO's within Bath and North East Somerset add to children and young people in care.

## 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 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. The protocol was revised in 2016 and is accessible online via the council's procedures manual.
- 9.3 In Bath and North East Somerset, IRO's will regularly have contact with a child's social worker and any issues pertaining to a child's needs or care planning are often resolved informally between the IRO and the Social Worker. There will be occasions however when this is not possible and as such the IRO will look to bring matters involving the child to the attention of the Social Worker's manager or Team Manager. Unfortunately, the child's records too often do not reflect the informal issues that have been raised by an IRO, work is already underway within the service to address this, with exploration as to how and where informal issues can be captured. Within supervision IRO's are expected to alert their manager of all informal issues they have raised.
- 9.4 Where the informal issues remain unresolved and where these are deemed to be sufficiently serious and impact on a child's care plan or safety, the IRO will formally escalate their concerns to the Manager of the IRS so that these can be brought to the attention of the relevant Head of Service for resolution, as per the Issues Resolution Protocol. In this reporting period there were eight occasions where it was deemed necessary to access the formal issues protocol in relation to concerns about;
- levels of risk to a child in care and inadequate safety planning,
  - final care plans being filed with court without the ratification of the IRO,
  - significant delay in care proceedings being issued,
  - assessment not sufficiently addressing risks and vulnerabilities,
  - delay in seeking expert assessment for a child in care impacting on knowing what placement would best suit the child's needs,
  - a child not being seen within the statutory timeframe,
  - IRO deeming care proceedings to be necessary,
  - inadequate educational provision.
- 9.5 With input from Heads of Service and further action being taken to consider the concerns raised by the IRO, seven of the eight formal issues were resolved. One

issue was unsatisfactorily resolved, the decision was taken not to utilise the protocol and escalate to Director level as there were no immediate risks identified in relation to the child and the IRO agreed they would keep close oversight to ensure no further un-necessary delay.

9.6 The Manager of the IRS had wanted to develop a process within Liquidlogic Children's System that would enable prompt identification of both informal and formal use of the Dispute Resolution Protocol. This piece of work was unfortunately delayed due to staffing within the service but is now underway and should be completed towards the end of 2020.

## **10. Quality Assurance by the IRO**

10.1 IRO's are required to maintain close oversight of the care planning for children and young people in care, this means that they must keep oversight of the progress for children in care in between their reviews. Social Workers have a duty to inform a child's IRO of significant changes / events in the child's life and any proposed changes in care plan should be discussed with the IRO before being implemented.

10.2 In Bath and North East Somerset the IRO's routinely review the child's records and seek updates from the child's social worker in between reviews. Children and young people whose needs are more complex or where there are concerns about increased levels of risk or risk of placement breakdown, IRO's will be more vigilant as to how plans for these children and young people are being progressed, with sometimes weekly discussions taking place with the social worker or carer.

10.3 Ahead of every child in care review the IRO will undertake an audit of the child's records. IRO's review whether there is evidence that the child is being seen within statutory timescales or as agreed at last review, that when seen the child or young person's voice is being captured. IRO's expect to see strong evidence of management oversight and supervision in LCS and information pertaining to a child's PEP and health assessment. For young people approaching their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, IRO's expect to see consideration has been given to starting their Pathway Plan and for those beyond 16 expect to see this completed.

10.4 Following the child in care review, the IRO will comment in the audit as to whether the child's care plan is up to date, whether the social worker prepared and provided a report 48 hours before the review, that an assessment of need has been completed in the last two years and whether advocacy has been offered / accessed by the child or young person.

10.5 As a result of the additional administrative support available to the IRS the data from the audits can now be collated and in turn analysed. A quarterly report is now prepared by the manager of the IRS which is presented at the Specialist Services Contract Monitoring Meeting and provides information as to the delivery of child in care reviews, summary of themes identified by IRO's, recommendations made for children and young people in care at their review

and an overview of the escalations / challenges made by IROs. Where practice issues are identified, these form part of Children's Services Improvement Plan.

## **11. Advocacy**

11.1 Advocacy to children and young people in care within Bath and North East Somerset is provided by Off the Record and referred to as Shout Out! This service is available to all children and young people in care from seven years old. Between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019- 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020, Off the Record reported in their end of year report that 31 children accessed advocacy support, with advocates supporting children and young people at 22 child in care reviews. As set out in para 8.9, the IRS want all children and young people to have information provided to them about their entitlement to advocacy and how they can access this, to see whether this increases the number of children accessing the service.

## **12. Liaison with Children's Services**

12.1 To strengthen communication with those working across children's social care and to promote the role and responsibilities of an IRO, each IRO is now linked to a team within children's social care. The IRO is expected to attend a minimum of two team meetings a year, providing opportunity for discussions about each service area and changes that might be considered. The IRO is also available to meet with new Social Workers and Managers as part of their induction so that there is clarity about the expectations of the child's social worker, the processes within Bath and North East Somerset and the arrangements in place to deliver positive child in care reviews.

12.2 The Manager of the IRS in their capacity as Deputy Lead for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance continues to meet regularly with the Head of Service for Safeguarding Outcomes and Care Outcomes to ensure there is effective communication and collaboration between Children's Services and the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. The meeting considers key themes and issues that have arisen for children and young people in care and those subject to a child protection plan.

## **13. Progress as to plans for 2019 - 2020:**

13.1 The IRS identified 10 areas of practice for progress during this reporting period, out of the 10, three remain outstanding and will be carried forward into 202-2021.

### ***Promotion of the role and responsibilities of an IRO for those working in Council Children's Services;***

Completed: Every team within Children's Services has an IRO link with them who is expected to attend as a minimum two team meetings a year and meet all new starters to the team as part of their induction so that the role of the IRO can be considered and processes clarified as to the reviews of children and young people in care.

***Identification of children and young people in high risk groups for experiencing placement instability;***

Completed: IRO's identify children and young people at risk of placement instability and appropriately highlight these in supervision. Children's Social Care are seeking to implement a matching panel for children and young people who require long-term foster care, the aspiration is that this process will ensure the needs of the child / young person can be met by the carer and where levels of need are deemed high there is an appropriate plan of support. The Manager of the IRS has been working with the Head of Service for Care Outcomes to design this process, the implementation has been delayed as a result of Covid-19.

***Identification of support being provided to stabilise placements.***

Completed: IRO's consider what support is needed by the carers to meet the child or young person's needs, IRO's speak with social worker for the child / young person and the supervising social worker where there are concerns about placement stability to consider what additional support can be provided to stabilise the placement.

***Understanding and knowledge of the use of unregulated placements.***

Completed: In supervision, the IRO is required to highlight all children allocated to them that are placed in an unregulated placement. IRO's seek to ensure the needs of the child and young person can be suitably met by the placement and that there are up to date risk assessments in place. Where these are missing IRO's will raise with the social worker and their manager. At the end of this reporting period, the Manager of the IRS and Head of Service for Care Outcomes agreed to meet bi-monthly to review all children and young people in an unregulated placement so additional scrutiny could be given to this group of children / young people.

***Participation of children and young people in the child in care review process;***

Completed: In this reporting period only 7% of children and young people did not participate in their review.

***Feedback from children, young people, their families and carers in order to shape and influence practice and service delivery;***

Outstanding: This is an area that will need to be taken forward for the coming year (2020 – 2021).

***Children and young people will have access to life story work delivered in an age appropriate way;***

Outstanding: Children and Young People in the care of Bath and North East Somerset have access to life story work but this is not always undertaken at the



right time, there are also inconsistencies as to how this is approached with children and young people having different experiences. The IRS is working with Children's Social Care to devise practice guidance for life story work, identify tools that can be used to facilitate this work and where this work can be stored.

***Continue to focus on improving the quality of pathway planning for 16 – 18 year olds;***

Completed and Ongoing: The IRS worked with Council Children's Services to design a review form that is a Pathway Plan review and incorporates the Care Plan. IRO's ensure outstanding Pathway Plans feature in all recommendations made at a child's review, where these remain outstanding the IRO will escalate to team manager.

***Continue to focus on improving the number of 16-18 year olds who are engaged in education, employment or training;***

Ongoing: All children in care reviews for young people approaching their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday explore what plans are in place for post 16.

***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;***

Completed: Quarterly reports were introduced at the end of Q4 which provide an overview of themes and patterns, this report is presented at the Specialist Services Contract Monitoring Meeting, attended by the Director of Children and Young People Specialist Services, the Director of Education, Inclusion and Children's Safeguarding, the Strategic Commissioner Officer, Heads of Service and the Service Development Manager for Children's Social Care.

**12. Next step for the IRO Service 2020-2021:**

12.1 The areas of focus for 2020 – 2021 include;

- Increasing feedback from children, young people, their carers and parents.
- Developing data reports that will enable greater scrutiny of the services performance, use of the dispute resolution protocol and identification of any issues and themes affecting children and young people in care.
- Ensuring children and young people having access to information about their rights and entitlements and what it means to be in care.
- Working in partnership with Children's Social Care to develop and implement practice guidance about life story work.
- Ensuring children and young people are being actively encouraged to participate in their review and those that appear disengaged are focused upon to increase engagement and ensure their voice is heard.