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# Bath & North East Somerset Council

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## Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021

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<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Introduction and purpose of the annual report	3
2. Reporting period	3
3. Legal, statutory and national context of the IRO role	3
4. Bath and North East Somerset as Corporate Parent	4
5. Bath and North East Somerset Council IRO Service	5
6. IRO service during Covid-19	6
7. South West Regional IRO group	7
8. IRO caseloads and service performance	8
9. Profile of children and young people in care	11
10. Children placed at distance from Bath	15
11. Unaccompanied, Asylum Seeking and Trafficked Children	19
12. Child focused reviews, participation and feedback	20
13. Children and Young Peoples Feedback	21
14. Dispute resolution and escalation	22
15. Impact of IRO's	24
16. Quality Assurance by IRO	25
17. Areas for development within IRO service	25
18. Areas of focus for 2021-2022	26

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

- 1.1 This report is produced 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 Independent Reviewing Officers (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 children in care 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
  - use of the issue's resolution protocol,
  - areas for development over the course of 2021-2022.
- 1.4 Following presentation to the Health and Wellbeing 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 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. 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 children in care.
- 3.3 The Care Planning, Placement and Care Review (England) Regulation 2010 apply specifically to children who are in the care of 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:

- 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 All Officers and Councillors of Bath and North East Somerset have a duty to ensure that the needs of children in care are being met and that children grow up feeling loved, cared for, feel safe and have the same opportunities as their peers. There should be a commitment from all members of the council to advocate for the needs of children in care, promote and provide opportunities that allow children to develop and grow and to overcome the adverse experiences they may have experienced in their life before coming into care. *Local Authorities that have a strong corporate parenting ethos recognise that the care system is not just about keeping children safe, but also to promote their recovery, resilience, and wellbeing* (Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers, Feb 2018).

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. The Act sets out that a Local Authority must in relation to children who are looked after, and care experienced (relevant and former relevant).

- a) Act in the best interests, and promote their physical and mental health and well-being,
- b) Encourage them to express their views, wishes and feelings,
- c) Consider the views, wishes and feelings
- d) Help these children gain access to, and make best use of services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners
- e) Have high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes,
- f) Ensure children are safe, have stability within their home, relationships, education, or work,
- g) Prepare children for adulthood and independence.

4.3 In Bath and North East Somerset, the Corporate Parenting Group (CPG) is open to all Councillors, as upon election they take on the role of Corporate Parent. Councillors have a duty to take an interest in the wellbeing and development of children in care and children with care experience and have the same aspirations for these children as they would for their own. The CPG must ensure they have a comprehensive overview as to the progress of children in the care of the Local Authority, scrutinising the quality, effectiveness and performance of the services provided. The manager of the IRO service and Director for Education and Safeguarding attend CPG and provide updates on matters related to children in care.

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

### 5.1 IRO Service Structure:



5.2 The IRO service continues to sit under the Director for Education and Safeguarding, who reports to the Director of Children’s Services and Education (DCS). 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. 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.

5.3 In December 2020 a permanent IRO left the service, recruiting to this vacancy has been a significant challenge and as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 there had been no successful appointment, it is not entirely clear as to the reason for the difficulties with recruitment. It is imperative that the IRO service has sufficient capacity to ensure robust oversight and review of children in care and the service could not carry a vacancy and meet its functions and responsibilities, fortunately interim arrangements have been possible whilst permanent recruitment continues.

5.4 As shown above, the IRO service includes five Independent Chairs, this role has been in place since 2017 and incorporates the role of IRO, CP chair and

Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO). The Independent Chairs role was created to ensure sufficient capacity across the entire service whilst also allowing for greater continuity i.e. children subject to a child protection plan who are placed in care can remain allocated to the same Independent Chair, meaning children and their families are not having to retell their story and experiences. The current vacancy of IRO was changed to role of Independent Chair and following review was increased from 22.5 hours to a 30-hour post to create much needed capacity within the service.

5.5 The IRO service continues to have excellent administrative support which is a fundamental aspect to service delivery and development.

## **6. IRO Service during Covid-19**

6.1 This has been an extraordinary year because of Covid-19. IRO's have successfully maintained contact with children, young people, their carers, and family throughout this reporting period although this has for the most part been by zoom, text message, WhatsApp, email, and telephone calls. In March 2020, the IRO Service had to consider how it would continue to meet its statutory duties and responsibilities whilst abiding by national restrictions.

6.2 Overview of service delivery between March 2020 – April 2021:

### March 2020:

Child in care reviews held by conference call or telephone discussions where it was not deemed safe or appropriate to hold in person at the child's placement. The decision as to how a child's review was held was agreed jointly by IRO and child's social worker. IRO's continued to have contact with all children allocated to them using skype, telephone calls, email, text messages and letter. IRO's maintained robust oversight of children identified as particularly vulnerable given their level of need, location of placement and placement setting and IRO's were asked to consider holding more frequent reviews for these children. It was agreed IRO's would be able to visit children in person at their discretion.

Manager of IRO Service and Heads of Service for Safeguarding Outcomes and Care Outcomes agreed to meet weekly to consider the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on service delivery, to review necessary processes and protocols for children in care, identify and detail any incidents where changes may be required to processes and highlight children identified as more vulnerable or at risk.

### April 2020:

The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 came into effect as of 24<sup>th</sup> April 2020. This set out provisions for local authorities to make changes to some of their statutory duties were deemed necessary. Within Bath and North East Somerset, it was agreed there would be no changes to the frequency of reviews or visits to children in care unless necessary. Inevitably however, with the significant risks associated with

Covid-19 it was agreed that IRO's would not visit children in person but would maintain contact and hold reviews virtually.

The IRO service introduced weekly team meetings to provide opportunity to consider needs of children in care and how these were continuing to be met given impact of Covid-19. Team meetings allowed for identification of any themes or concerns related to children in care which in turn could be fed back to children's social care by the manager of the IRO service.

#### June 2020

Weekly meetings between Manager of IRO Service and Heads of Service for Safeguarding Outcomes and Care Outcomes ceased and replaced by Multi-Agency Meetings led by Children's Social Care. These considered service delivery by statutory partners and third sector providing opportunity to consider needs of community and any specific areas of concern and the impact of these on children, young people, and their families.

IRO team meetings moved to fortnightly.

#### July 2020:

With the easing of government restrictions (04/07/2020) IRO's given agreement to resume direct contact with children in care where it was deemed necessary, the overall decision for this being led by the allocated IRO but influenced by the child's age, their wishes and feelings, level of need and stability of where they lived. IRO's undertook a risk assessment prior to all visits to promote the safety of all involved. Guidance issued to all IRO's and shared with children's social care.

#### October 2020:

IRO's issued with iphones to support greater communication with children in care.

#### November 2020:

With increasing rates of Covid-19 and further national restrictions the IRO service resumed virtual contact with children, young people, their carers, and family unless it was entirely necessary to visit in person. IRO manager was informed where direct visits or meetings were necessary.

#### January – March 2021

With further national restrictions and increasing rates of Covid-19, all child in care reviews and visits to children continued to be held virtually.

## **7.South West Regional IRO group**

7.1 The south west regional group has continued throughout Covid-19 with all meetings being held virtually. It was agreed in May 2020 that these meetings would be held at a higher frequency so there could be opportunity to consider how IRO services across the region were delivering services and to provide support across the region at what has been an incredibly challenging time.

7.2 On the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2020 the first South West Regional IRO Practitioners Group (SWIRO) was held virtually, the decision was made to proceed with this event despite the pandemic as it was recognised that IRO's would benefit from having an opportunity to come together to reflect on the past nine months and to share knowledge and learning from across the region. The event was deemed to have been a success with all IRO's from Bath and North East Somerset attending. The intention is for two practitioner events to be held every year with the next planned for September 2021.

## 8. IRO Caseloads and Services Performance

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

	March 2021	March 2020	March 2019	March 2018	March 2017
No. Children In Care	<b>181</b>	181	192	168	160
Average IRO Caseload for FTE	<b>53</b>	53	47	62	60
CLA start	<b>52</b>	75	96	73	85
CLA end	<b>53</b>	86	81	62	68
% increase of children in care from previous year	<b>0%</b>	-5.8%	+14.2%	+5%	+1.2%

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

8.1 As the above data shows, the number of children and young people in care in this reporting period has remained the same as last year, of the 53 children leaving care, the reasons were reaching the age of 18 (18), returning to live with parent/s (9 – although two of these children returned to care), being placed with relative or other person under Special Guardianship Order (10) and being placed for adoption (16).

Table 2: Reason for leaving care

Reason for leaving care	20/21	19/20
Turned 18	34%	31%
Returned to parent/s	17%	33%
Placed under SGO	19%	17%
Adoption	30%	15%
Other	0%	4%

8.2 The number of children leaving care to return living with their parent/s has decreased by 16% in this reporting period. The manager of the IRO service has been part of a working group looking at the introduction of the NSPCC's reunification framework in Bath and North East Somerset as to date there has been no defined process around reunification within the local authority. Research highlights that when children leave care in an unplanned way this can result in further breakdowns and disruption for the child and their family. Whilst the IRO service do not want to see children in care experience uncertainty as to what their future care arrangement involves, it is important that reunification is considered for children who can be safely brought up by their family and where children express this is their wish. The IRO service will play a significant role in reviewing any plans for reunification and will ensure changes in care are informed by assessment and in line with the child and their families wishes and feelings.

8.3 Whilst there appears to have been a significant increase in the percentage of children placed for adoption in this reporting period a number of these children will have been placed with their adopters in the last reporting period with the Adoption Order then being granted in 2020-2021. The IRO service have seen an increase in the amount of time children are with their adopters before an application is made for the Adoption Order, this is often related to the complexity of the child's needs and everyone involved needing to be confident that the time is right to pursue an Adoption Order. IRO's continually review the plans for children until the Adoption Order is granted.

Table 3: No. of children and young people allocated to an IRO during 2020/2021.

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Average IRO Caseload for FTE	54	55	54	54

*Figures taken from IRO Service Case Tracker*

8.4 The IRO handbook states that a full-time IRO should aim to have between 50-70 children allocated at any one time, within the IRO service the IRO manager seeks to ensure IRO's have children allocated to them that reflects their expertise and capacity. Whilst the average number of children allocated remains well within that defined by the IRO handbook, this does not take into consideration the needs of the child, the size of sibling groups, where the child lives and the extent to which an IRO may need to be involved with a child.

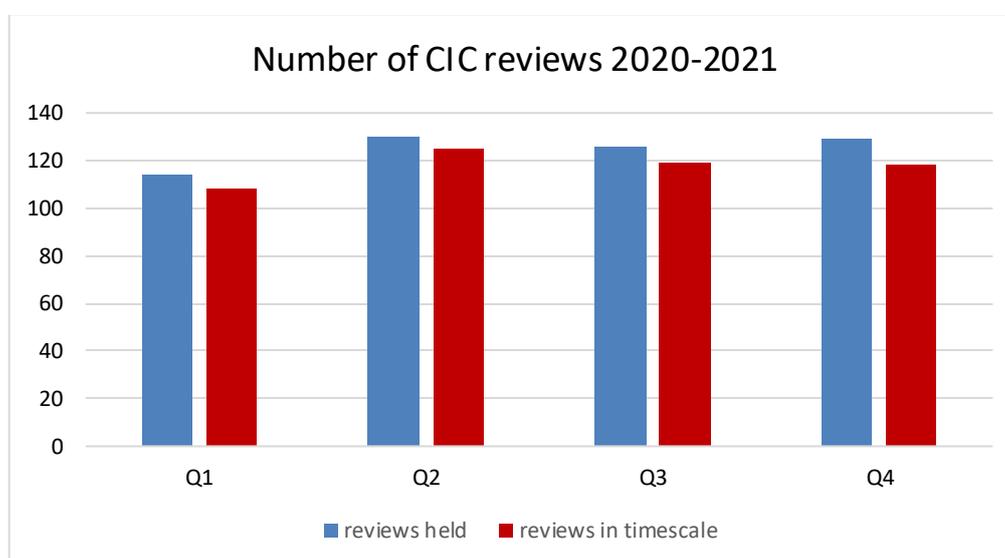
Table 4: Number of Child in Care Reviews over five-year period

	March 2021	March 2020	March 2019	March 2018	March 2017
Children In Care allocated to IRO	181	181	192	168	160
Total Reviews held	501	528	454	461	404

Figures taken from Children's Services data

8.5 The IRO Service chaired a total of 502 child in care review meetings in 2020-2021, a decrease of 27 reviews from the previous year, this is despite the number of children in care remaining the same. The number of reviews held in a year is dependent on how many children entered care in a 12 month period and remained in care, the complexity of a child's needs, how swiftly permanence is achieved and whether a child's placement is stable.

Graph 1: Timeliness of child in care reviews



Figures taken from Children's Social Care data

8.6 Between the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 and the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 of the 501 reviews held only 29 (6%) were out of statutory timescale. The IRO service has shown consistently high performance in this area of practice year upon year. Where a child's review is not held within timescale this can be due to availability of carer, child, IRO or changes in placement meaning the review is postponed and held once child has moved. In instances where a review cannot be held in time, the IRO will have reviewed the child's record and had some contact with the allocated social worker.

8.7 The table below shows an overview of the number of children in care in three local authorities that are statistical neighbours of Bath and North East Somerset, this confirms that the performance of the IRO service in terms of review timeliness is strong.

	Bath & North East Somerset	Gloucestershire	South Gloucestershire	Devon
Total CIC population	181	789	223	812
No of CIC reviews	499	2225	636	2125
Timeliness of CIC reviews	94%	100%	93%	76%

8.8 The IRO handbook sets out that *‘the full written record of the review, including the decisions, should be distributed within 20 working days of the completion of the review’* (Para. 3.69). At the start of Q3 the IRO manager began to track the timeliness in which records of reviews were completed by the IRO in order to monitor performance in this area. In Q3 only 46% of reviews were sent within 20 working days, with 29% taking 31+ days, the IRO manager having identified the need for improvement in this area of practice set IRO’s a target to reduce the number of reviews being sent over a 31-day period and increase the overall number of records sent in time. At the end of Q4, 57% of review records were sent within 20 working days and the number of records sent beyond 30 working days had fallen to 15%. The IRO manager would like to see at least 85% of review records being sent within the statutory timescale in the coming year.

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

### Gender:

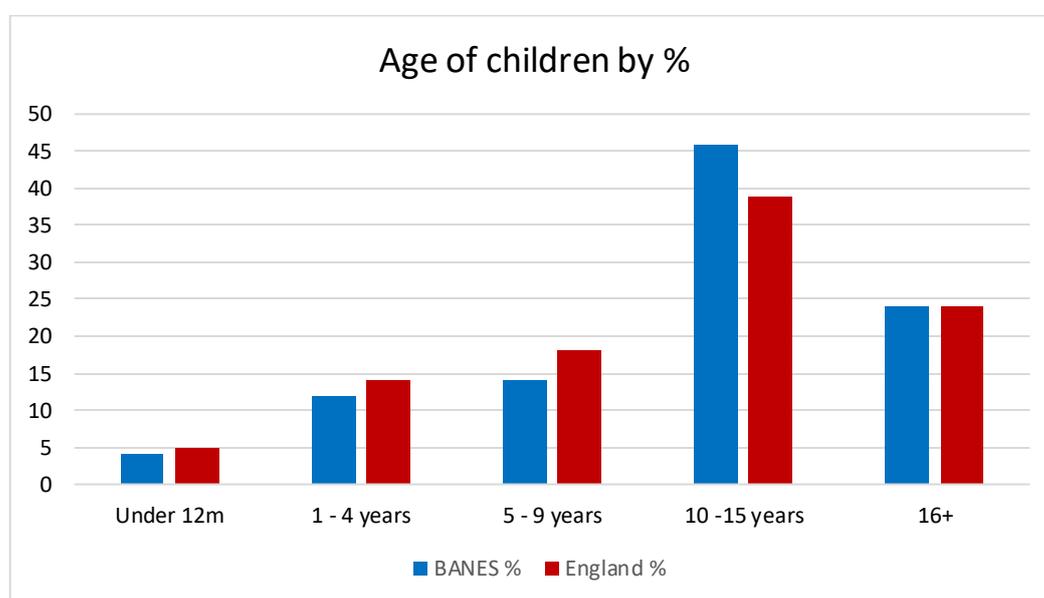
9.1 In December 2020 the Government produced its annual statistics of looked after children in England up to the period ending 31/03/2020. This showed that across England 56% of children in care were male and 44% female, this was the same as the year ending 2020. The gender breakdown in Bath and North East Somerset has again remained in line with previous years, with 51% of children in care being male and 49% female.

	Bath & North East Somerset	Gloucestershire	South Gloucestershire	Devon
Gender of CIC	92 M (51%) 89 F (49%)	433 M (55%) 356 F (45%)	97 M (43%) 126 F (57%)	465 M (57%) 347 F (43%)
England	56% Male 44% Female			

9.2 As the above data shows the gender breakdown of children in care within Bath and North East Somerset is on par with three of the five statistical neighbours.

### Graph 2: Children by age as of 31st March 2021

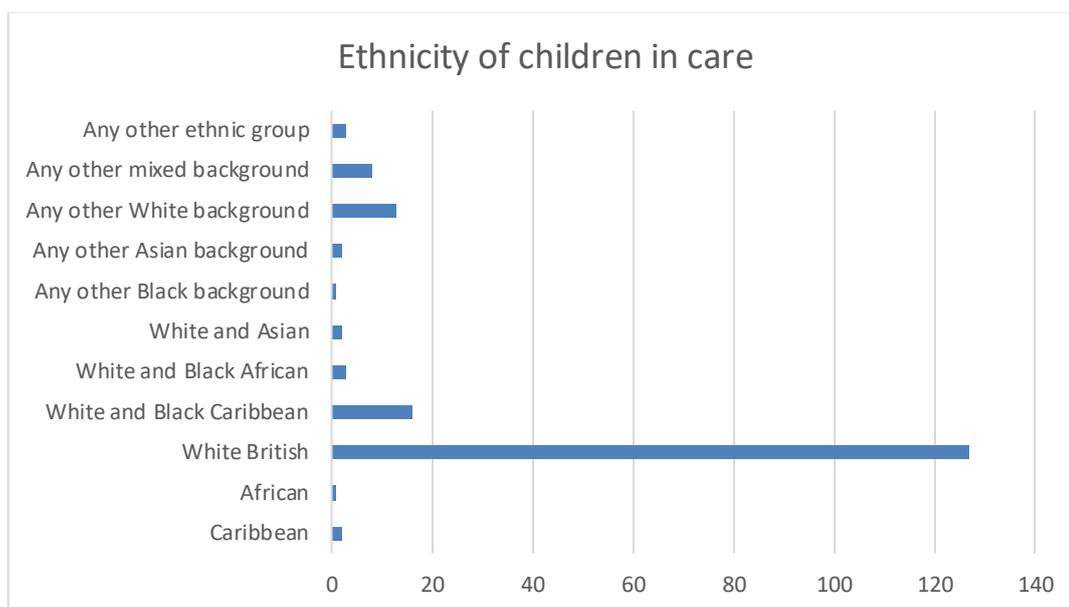
9.3 As of the 31/03/2021 there were seven children in care under the age of 12 months, 21 children aged between 1 and 4, 26 children aged between 5-9, 83 children aged between 10-15 and 44 children 16 years or over. The IRO service would expect to see children under five having a final care plan that allows them to remain within their family or being given the opportunity to become part of another family through adoption.



*Figures taken from Children's Social Care data and Gov.UK*

9.4 The above graph shows the percentage of children per age group in the care of Bath and North East Somerset compared with the age of children across England as of 31/03/2020. The number of children in care aged between 10-15 is higher in Bath and North East Somerset when compared to the rates across England. In reviewing the 83 children in care aged between 10-15 at the end of this reporting period only 11 of these children entered care in the preceding 12 months.

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



Figures taken from Children's Services Data

9.5 70% of children in care are White British, which is in line with England at 74. The cultural needs of children in care is an area that the IRO service carefully considers, seeking assurances that children can continue to observe and participate in their traditional celebrations, that they have opportunity to converse in their first language / mother tongue, are placed in communities where they feel connected and have primary care givers who are proactive in promoting and supporting the child's cultural needs.

9.6 The IRO service has identified that whilst consideration of a child's cultural needs is considered when assessments are undertaken and placements are being explored, this area of need for a child could be further strengthened by those in children's social care going beyond just thinking about a child's race and what they or their family celebrate as part of their culture.

**Table 5: Legal status of Children and Young People in Care**

Age category at report start date	Interim Care Order	Full Care Order	Placement order granted	Single period of accommodation under Section 20	Total
Under 12m	6	0	0	1	7
1- 4 years	7	3	9	2	21
5 - 9 years	6	19	1	0	26
10 - 15 years	10	62	0	11	83
16+ years	0	18	0	26	44
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>181</b>

Figures taken from Children's Social Care Data

- 9.7 Of the 181 children in care in this reporting period, 56% (102) were subject to a full Care Order of which 8% (8) were placed with their parent/s at home. The making of a Care Order on the basis that a child remains in the care of their parents should only be made in exceptional circumstances. IRO's are expected to scrutinise and keep care plans for children subject to a Care Order and placed with parents under close review, should an IRO have concerns about plans for children placed at home drifting they are expected to raise these with the social work team and consider use of the dispute resolution protocol where concerns remain. All children placed with their parents must comply with the statutory regulations for placement at home and IRO's are responsible for ensuring such compliance. In this reporting period there was no use of the dispute resolution protocol related to children placed with their parents, although IRO's have been heavily involved in reviewing the care plans for these children .
- 9.8 There has been much scrutiny and judicial guidance around the use of Section 20 for children in care after a number of critical judgements against local authorities' misuse of section 20, following instances where children were in care for long periods without the local authority seeking to instigate care proceedings. Whilst there is no defined timeframe in which a child can be in the care of a local authority under section 20, local authorities are required to ensure its use does not breach the rights of the child or their parents under article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). In March 2021 the Public Law Working Group (PLWG) issued best practice guidance around the use of section 20, which includes the need for greater oversight and scrutiny by senior managers within local authorities and regular review as to the use of section 20 within the child in care review process. Within Bath and North East Somerset, IRO's will consider at every child in care review the current and proposed care plan for a child, where a child is accommodated with agreement of their parents, the IRO will seek to ensure the parents understand the legality of such arrangement and their rights to revoke this at any time. In this reporting period there have been no formal escalations about the use of Section 20, albeit some instances where IRO's have maintained close review as to how plans for these children have progressed. The use of section 20 for young children is unusual and rarely used, the above data shows in this reporting period there was one child aged under 12 months old accommodated, the local authority did however instigate care proceedings in respect of this child, but records do not appear to have been appropriately updated.
- 9.9 At the end of this reporting period, 6% (10) of children in care were subject to a Placement Order, a 9% decrease from last year. However, the number of children under the age of four where decisions about their long-term care plan remained undetermined was higher at 7% compared to last year where only 4% of children were subject to an Interim Care Order and of an age where adoption may have been the final care plan for them.

**Table 6: Children placed in care with a disability**

Age category at report start date	Interim Care Order	Full Care Order	Placement order granted	Single period of accommodation under Section 20	Total
Under 12m	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
1- 4 years	0	1	0	0	<b>1</b>
5 - 9 years	0	3	0	0	<b>3</b>
10 - 15 years	0	14	0	7	<b>21</b>
16+ years	0	3	0	10	<b>13</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>38</b>

9.10 Of the 181 children in care, 38 (21%) children have a disability. Within Bath and North East Somerset when a child comes to the attention of children’s social care due to the areas of need and support a family have for a child with a disability, they will be referred to the Disabled Children’s Team (DCT) who offer support to children who have a diagnosed substantial and long lasting/permanent impairment. For children with a disability where the presenting concern relates to issues of safeguarding, these children and their families will be allocated within the Family Support Team (s) and transfer to the child in care team should their long-term care plan be that of local authority care. 50% (19) of children in care with a disability are allocated within DCT, with 37% (7) subject to a full Care Order and the remaining children (12 / 63%) accommodated under Section 20.

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

10.1 Local authorities are expected to place children in accommodation that meets their needs and allows them to live near their family home. Securing sufficient accommodation that meets the needs of looked after children is a vital step in delivering improved outcomes for children, with children needing access to care in the right place and at the right time. There continue to be significant challenges as to the distance in which a child in Bath and North East Somerset is placed either from their family home or from the local authority boundary, with this year seeing 126 (70%) children being placed outside of a 20 mile radius.

Table 7: Type of placement beyond 20 miles

Type of placement	No of Children	%
Family	10	8
Foster Care	73	58
Residential / Children's home	26	21
Residential School	2	1
Mother and Baby	1	1
16+	7	5
Other	2	1
Adoption	5	4

10.2 As the above table shows, 58% of children placed outside of Bath and North East Somerset are placed with foster carers, these carers include carers approved by the local authority as well as carers from independent fostering agencies. The IRO service is aware that there are plans to review the fees and allowances of carers who foster for the local authority, moving to a skills-based fee structure as opposed to fees being based on a child's age. The IRO service welcomes this approach as deems this will bring the local authority more in line with other councils and fostering agencies which in turn it is hoped will contribute to greater recruitment of foster carers.

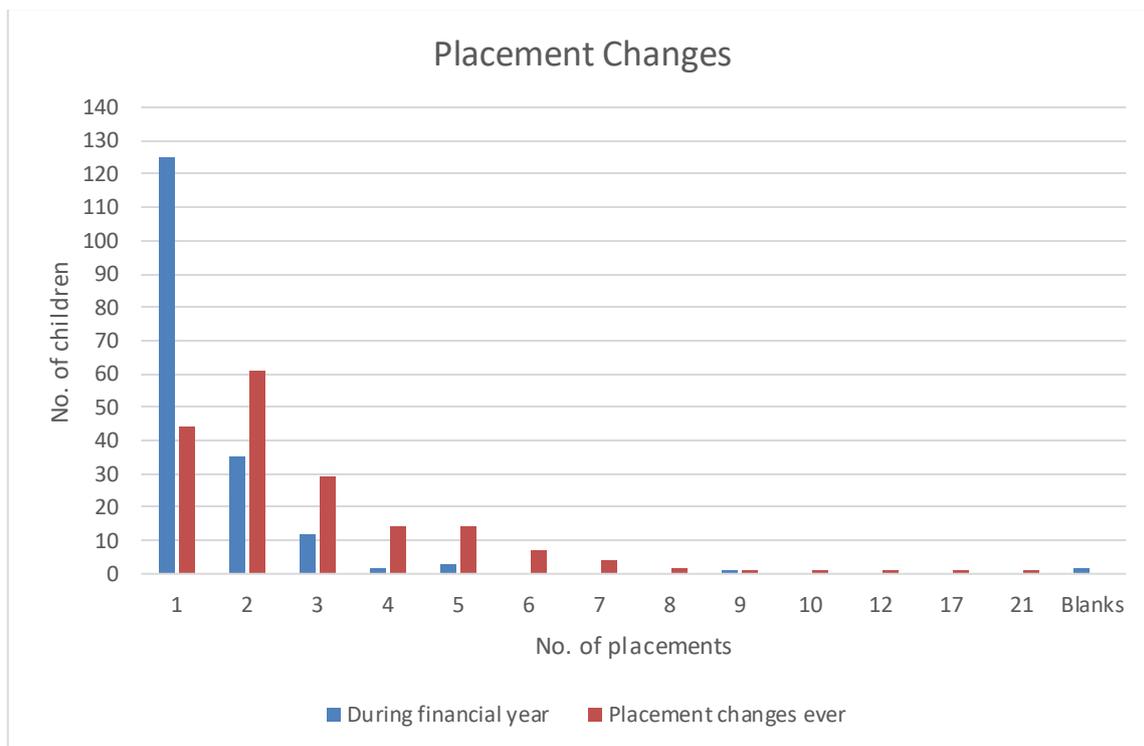
10.3 In April 2020, the IRO manager and Head of Service for Care Outcomes introduced a bi-monthly meeting to review and monitor the use of all unregulated placements, which includes children subject to Reg 24 ADM approval, placements of children with their parents and all children placed in 16+ accommodation with support (including supported lodgings). The meeting considers the current and long-term plans surrounding the child's placement and allows greater assurance that policies and procedures are being followed. The meetings allow opportunity to discuss placement provisions for children and identify any areas that may require further review or consideration. Where issues arise for specific children these will be highlighted with the social work team and the appointed IRO. In this reporting period, nine children were placed in accommodation where they received support, the care plan for these children remained under close review and scrutiny of the IRO as well as being discussed at the bi-monthly meetings.

10.4 The IRO service continue to see an increase in the number of children being placed in residential settings, which is too often linked to the lack of foster placements alongside the needs of children in care increasing in complexity. The IRO service recognise that most often, children placed in residential settings are children who have experienced significant adverse childhood experiences which make it difficult for them to adapt to life with foster carers. Whilst this can often be the most suitable arrangement for a child it is important that this remains under review and where there is evidence to suggest a child has begun to

overcome some of the trauma they have experienced, the IRO service would wish to see an assessment undertaken to inform whether the child's needs could once again be met within a foster family.

10.5 The separation of a baby from their mother should only occur when the child's immediate safety requires it, when assessments have identified significant risks to a baby the care plan will often be for a mother/father and baby to enter a residential setting which promotes the child's safety whilst further assessment is undertaken. Residential settings are usually outside of Bath and North East Somerset and means families are in areas unfamiliar to them and at a distance from the professional network who will have provided intervention and support during pregnancy and the early stages of the baby's life. IRO's believe it would be of significant benefit to families and the local authority if there were in-house parent and baby placements available, this would keep families in their local area, connected to services they are familiar with and allow greater support and oversight by children's social care.

Graph 4: Placement stability



Figures taken from Children's Services Data

10.6 Between 01/04/2020 – 31/03/2021, of the 181 children in care, 69% (125) had one placement, 19% (35) had two, 7% (12) had three and 3% (6) experienced between four and nine placement moves. There are three children where placement data has not been available.

10.7 The child's IRO should be kept informed of any possible disruptions within a child's placement, IRO's would expect to see children's social care convening stability meetings (aka disruption meetings) where there was a risk of placement breakdown. Stability meetings are a source of intervention designed to prevent

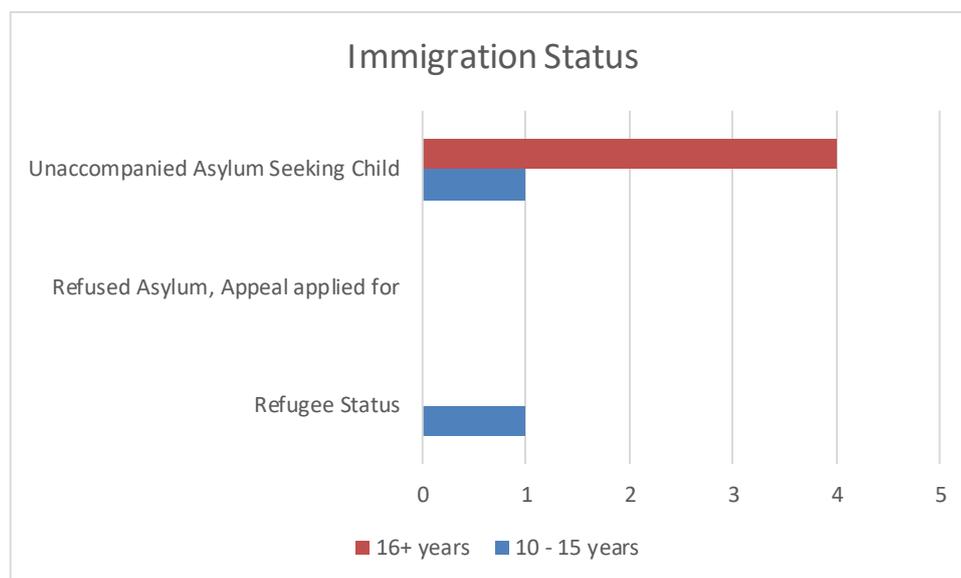
placement breakdown by identifying the difficulties that have arisen and to see whether additional support or action can be taken to remedy the presenting issues. Stability meetings should be chaired by the manager of the family placement team when children are placed with in house carers or the team manager / line manager of the child's social worker where a child is placed with an independent agency foster carer or in a residential setting. IRO's should be invited to attend or contribute to stability meetings. For the majority of children who have faced placement instability in this reporting period the allocated IRO has been kept informed as to the presenting issues and the plans for these children. IRO's have often been a consistent person in a child's life since coming into care and are therefore able to share their knowledge of the child, how they may have experienced previous placement breakdowns and what may strengthen the placement further. The IRO service wish to see more consistent communication by social workers with IRO's where children are at risk of experiencing changes in their care arrangement. There have in this reporting period been instances when children have moved placement without the IRO having been informed that carers have given notice or that a more suitable care arrangement has been found.

10.8 IRO's will seek to hold a child in care review for all children when there are changes in placement, especially where these are unplanned. For some children who have experienced frequent changes in placement the IRO has held reviews at a higher frequency to ensure plans are addressing the child's needs and that sufficient support is being provided to those caring for the child.

10.9 In this reporting period, children's social care introduced a long-term matching panel where children whose care plans involve long term care will be discussed and their placement reviewed. The IRO service was extremely pleased to see the introduction of a process that seeks to provide greater oversight and scrutiny of a child's placement by senior managers. As part of the matching panel the allocated IRO will be asked to provide their view as to the child's needs and suitability of the placement so that these are known and taken into consideration when the panel meet to endorse the placement as being a long-term match.

## 11. Unaccompanied, Asylum Seeking and Trafficked Children:

Graph 5: Immigration status



11.1 The number of young people in the care of Bath and North East Somerset who are unaccompanied and seeking asylum continues to be low accounting for only 3% (6) of the child in care population (1% decrease on last year). Of the six children in care, five are male and their ages range from 14 – 17 years old.

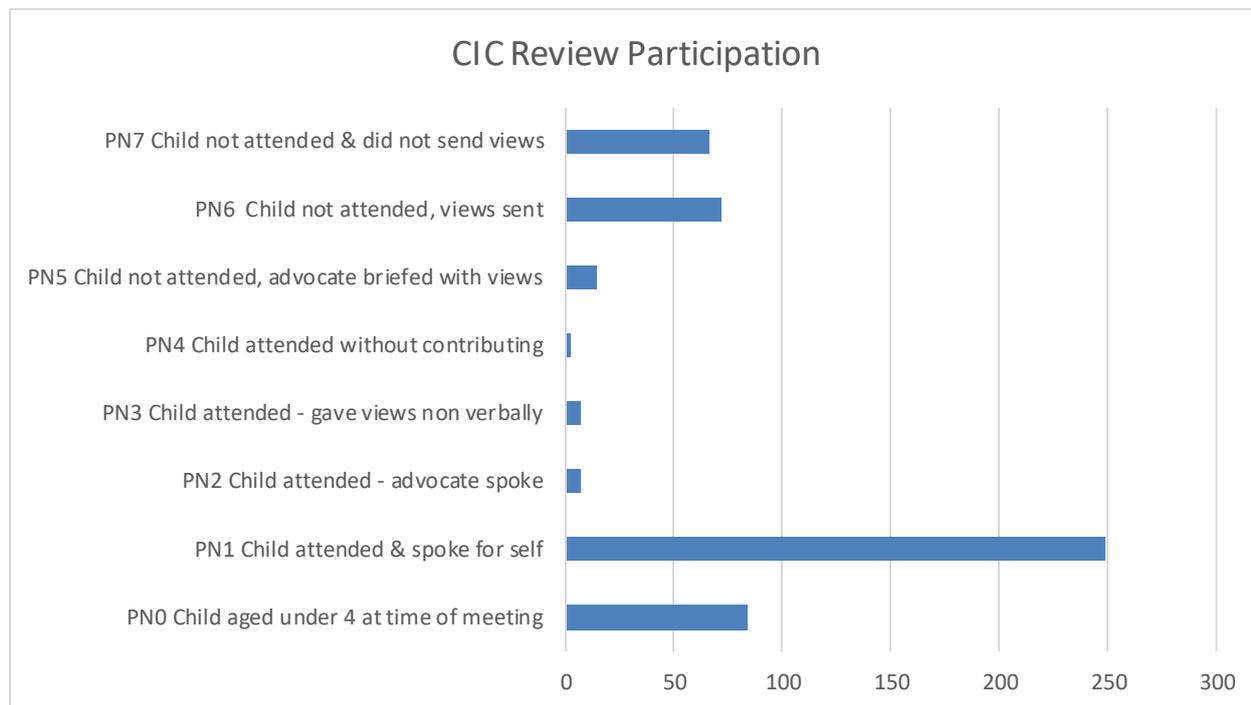
	Bath & North East Somerset	Gloucestershire	South Gloucestershire	Devon
No of UASC	6 (3%)	17 (2%)	6 (2%)	15 (2%)

11.2 Whilst the number of children in care who are unaccompanied or trafficked are significantly small, their needs are not, nor are the experiences the children will have had travelling to this country. Each child requires the professionals working with them and offering support to be sensitive to their experiences and carefully consider their current and long-term needs.

11.3 Within the IRO service, an IRO has become part of a quarterly meeting with children's social care which specifically considers the needs of unaccompanied and trafficked children, taking into consideration their experiences of services from the moment they become known to the Local Authority until they turn 18 and become a care leaver. Having a representative of the IRO service as part of this group enables the IRO service to highlight any identified themes or areas within social work practice that require further development.

## 12. Child focused reviews, participation and feedback

Graph 6: Children and Young People's participation in their review



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

12.1 Despite the challenges of Covid-19 and changes in how child in care reviews have been held in this reporting period, the above data shows that children have continued to be supported to participate in their review. Of the 501 reviews held in this reporting period, 84 were in relation to children aged four years and under, nationally the participation of children that fall into this age group is not recorded. Of the remaining 417 reviews, 249 (59%) reviews saw the child in attendance and able to speak for themselves, 21 (5%) reviews involved the child's advocate who attended and spoke on behalf of the child at the child's request, 79 (19%) reviews the child chose not to attend but their views were obtained and shared at the meeting. There were 66 (15%) reviews held where the child chose not to attend, and their views were not known. In further exploring these reviews there are several reasons for a child's non-attendance, related to their level of need such as communication style, what is happening for the child at the time, the value the child places on the review process and whether they were supported to participate in a way that felt comfortable.

### Participation:

12.2 Despite the changes in practice and the challenges brought by Covid-19 the IRO service have worked closely with social workers and carers to ensure that children have continued to be able to participate in their review. With most reviews having been held virtually IRO's have had to think creatively about how to engage children in their review process, ensuring the child remains involved and central to the meeting. Examples of how IRO's have done this include:

- Children agreed with their IRO they would do a joint quiz, the IRO had some questions to ask as did the children, the social worker and child's advocate were also included. The children's questions were surprisingly harder than the IRO's although this brought laughter and enjoyment for the children and those in attendance. This approach enabled the IRO to ask other questions which contributed to the review process.
- Visiting the child separate to the review, holding the review virtually by video call. Virtual reviews have allowed some parents and key individuals for the child to attend and participate who previously may have found this difficult e.g. Due to employment.
- IRO developed a Harry Potter quiz for a child who is a huge fan, this was undertaken on Zoom and brought fun to the start of the review, helping the child to feel relaxed and more able to engage.
- IRO played a board game using soft toys at start of review, enabled children to engage as they had when review held in person. This approach enabled children to give their view of family time which was an area for consideration at the time.
- IRO's have held scavenger hunts, taking part themselves, this is felt to have brought enjoyment to the child, making them feel central to the purpose of the virtual review and enabling them to feel more at ease and therefore able to participate.

12.3 The IRO service have continued to send consultation forms out to carers, parents, family members and other significant persons ahead of a child's review, these allow the views of those involved in the child's life to be known and subsequently considered as part of the review process.

#### Contact with IRO

12.4 With the risks associated by Covid-19 the IRO service took the decision to significantly reduce direct contact with children, their carers and family as felt that it was more important for children in care to see their social worker and other professionals that offer support and intervention. IRO's however have maintained regular contact with children in care and used alternative ways to communicate with the child and gain their views. IRO's have written letters to children, spoken to them on zoom and facetime, sent text messages and had telephone calls, met up for walks in community spaces near to where the child lives and tried to make the review for the child comfortable and engaging. The IRO manager was able to get agreement for all IRO's to be issued iphones in this reporting period and this has undoubtedly improved communication and contact between children and their IRO.

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

13.1 The IRO service has faced significant challenges in recent years obtaining feedback from children, their carers and family. This year with the challenges brought about by Covid-19 and especially the disruption and uncertainty children have faced because of the pandemic the service has not sought to obtain feedback from children in care about their IRO and the IRO service. However, whilst feedback about the IRO service has not been undertaken, the IRO service

has played a significant role in supporting children to participate in the Bright Spots 'Your life, Your Care' survey led by Coram Voice. IRO's as a trusted adult were fundamental in supporting children aged between 4 – 18 years to complete the survey. The results of the survey will be circulated in October 2021 and the IRO service are keen to understand how children experience being in care, what is going well and what areas they feel need to improve. The IRO manager will work alongside children's social care colleagues to develop a plan in response to the feedback from children in care.

13.2 Feedback from children and young people is a priority area for the IRO service in 2021-2022. The IRO service recognises the need for there to be a clear strategy that sets out how feedback from children, their carers, families, and other professionals will be routinely sought and in turn contribute to the delivery of the IRO service. The service recognises the need to implement systems that allow children to provide feedback using various methods such as online, by text, email, paper or in person. The development and success of a feedback strategy is however dependent on there being a commitment from the Council and all Corporate Parents to provide the funding and technology required to support this area of work.

#### **14. Dispute resolution and escalation:**

14.1 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.

14.2 Within Bath and North East Somerset, IRO's aim to work co-operatively with colleagues in order to achieve the best outcomes for children in care. Where an IRO identifies issues that could compromise the outcomes for a child then it is expected that they will address these directly with the social worker and / or their manager and seek to find a resolution that the IRO agrees with (informal resolution). Where the matter cannot be resolved and is deemed to be sufficiently serious and impacts on the care planning or safeguarding of a child the IRO is expected to utilise the formal issues stage of the Issues Resolution Protocol (2016), informing the IRO manager of the concerns who in turn will seek assurance from the relevant Head of Service. In instances where the formal issues protocol has been unsuccessful, the matter will be escalated to the Director of Children's Services, for their review and final decision.

14.3 As identified in the IRO annual report 2019-2020, understanding the use of the issue's resolution protocol has been an area that has required improvement across the IRO service. In this reporting period the IRO service made changes

to the recording of the Quality Assurance activity that IRO's undertake for all children in which they are allocated. Following work with a senior analyst the IRO manager has been able to develop a data reporting suite launched in October 2020 and which provides an overview as to the number of informal and formal escalations made in a particular period. The data allows for identification as to which child the escalation was regarding and in turn allows the IRO manager to consider any themes. This information is reported to the Specialist Services Contract Monitoring Meeting via a quarterly report.

14.4 In this reporting period there were 75 informal issues raised by IRO's these include:

- *Completion of Social Work report for child's review:* The IRO handbook (Para. 3.9) states that the IRO should be provided with the social workers report *at least three working days before the commencement of the review*. In Bath and North East Somerset, the IRO service expect the report to be completed and made available to the IRO within 48 hours of the review. an IRO's role is compromised when review reports are not completed ahead of the meeting. Unfortunately, in this reporting period the timescales for social work reports being completed has declined. Children's Social Care are currently revising the Quality Standards and Practice Guidance for reports for child in care reviews and the timeliness of these.
- *Care planning:* Should an IRO have concerns about the care planning for a child in care which they have not been able to resolve with the social worker they will seek to address informally. Concerns about care planning can relate to drift and delay, matching of placement to child's need, progress of assessments, transition planning and plans for independence.
- *Passports for children in care:* Whilst travel has been restricted in this reporting period, the IRO service would expect all children in care to have a passport, where a passport application hasn't been made, the IRO has raised this informally with the social work team. Children's Social Care have agreed to produce a policy about the issuing of passports to children in care.
- *Pathway plans:* It is a requirement that all children in care have a needs assessment which informs their pathway plan. The child having a finalised pathway plan within three months of becoming 16. Children who remain in care beyond their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday should have a care plan that incorporates their Pathway Plan. The completion of pathway plans for children in care remains a specific area of focus for the IRO service.
- *Assessments:* This could relate to the progression of a need's assessment, assessments of parents and family members, health assessment, speech and language assessment, assessment to consider provision of short breaks or support for carer.

- *Supervision:* IRO's monitor the frequency of supervision between an allocated social worker and their manager as this provides some assurance that the care plans for children in care are being discussed and scrutinised, and that issues arising are being taken into consideration and actions agreed. Where IRO's identify a lack of evidence of supervision this will be informally raised and documented on the child's record.

14.5 IRO's always seek to resolve issues at the informal stage of the Issues Resolution Protocol, however there are occasions where despite effort the IRO has not been able to find a resolution and they will escalate to the IRO manager in line with the Issues Resolution Protocol. In this reporting period there were only two instances where this was necessary, both of these were resolved and the IRO's position was upheld and informed the plans taken forward by children's social care.

## 15. Impact of IRO's

15.1 IRO's seek to ensure that care planning for children in care is robust, with children's needs being central to decision making and their voices heard. The stability of the IRO service in Bath and North East Somerset means that for many children they have experienced only one IRO who know them, their carers and families well. Children in care often have large professional networks around them that can routinely change resulting in the loss of significant relationships and a part of the child's journey. The consistency and longevity of the IRO role is therefore invaluable to children, their carers and family.

Examples where IRO's have made a difference:

- In the throes of the pandemic IRO concerned about placement not enticing young person to be there. IRO highlighted vulnerabilities and importance of young person having access to things that interest them. IRO having been appointed for a significant period had a good sense of what was needed if child was going to utilise the placement on offer. IRO's suggestions taken forward and this offered greater stability for the young person.
- IRO for a child experiencing significantly high number of placements over very short period of time was able to advocate what they felt the child needed from their next placement and was able to intervene to prevent an inappropriate matching of foster placement. For this child, the IRO had a greater sense of the child's needs and experiences as the social worker had only recently become allocated.
- IRO raised concerns about competing needs of two children placed together. This raised important issues as to how needs of children placed by Bath and North East Somerset can continue to be prioritised when carers change agency and another local authority wish to place other children alongside.
- Young person was resistant to coming into care, IRO was able to provide a view that promoted alternative plan which allowed young person to remain with family friends.
- Child's engagement in meetings identified by IRO, IRO met them ahead of meeting in community, able to talk openly about what matters to them, gain

their understanding as to what child wanted. IRO in turn made recommendations that promoted child's wishes and feelings.

- IRO successfully advocated need for funding to support child in care gaining access to social activity.
- Child in care remained uncertain as to why they could not have remained with their family, IRO managed to get a senior manager to agree to visit child to talk through decisions made and reasons for these. This will undoubtedly assist the child in moving forward.
- Children not attending school due to Covid placing additional pressure on carers, IRO able to advocate impact on placement stability if situation continued, plans made for children to access school part-time. Foster carer sent thanks to IRO.

## 16. Quality Assurance by the IRO

16.1 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.

16.2 The manager of the IRO service continues to provide a quarterly report to Senior Managers in Children's Social Care and the Specialist Services Contract Monitoring Meeting which provides information as to the delivery of child in care reviews, summary of themes identified by IRO's, recommendations made for children 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.

## 17. Areas for development within IRO service

17.1 Each year the IRO service identifies areas of practice that require further development or improvement, updates to the progress of these are set out below.

Area for development/ improvement	Update
Feedback from children, young people, their families, and carers. (outstanding from 2019 – 2021)	This remains an area of focus for development in 2021 – 2022 as was not deemed to be an area of focus for the service because of the challenges brought about by Covid-19. The IRO service would require some commitment from the Council and Corporate Parenting Group to provide some funding and technology to support the development of this area of work.
Children in care will have access to life story work	In October 2020 the IRO Service submitted a report to children's social care with

delivered in an age-appropriate way. (outstanding from 2019 – 2021)	recommendations as to how life story work for children in care within Bath and North East Somerset could be implemented and become embedded in practice. Children’s Social Care continue to work on a policy around the delivery of life story work.
Develop data reports that will enable greater scrutiny of the IRO services performance, use of dispute resolution protocol and identification of any issues and theme affecting children in care.	Completed – the IRO service now has a data set within PowerBi that provides information on Quality Assurance activity and the use of the dispute resolution protocol. A quarterly report is provided to the Director of Children’s Services and Education and the Specialist Services Contract Monitoring Meeting. Recommendations form part of the Service Improvement Plan for Children’s Services.
Ensure children and young people have access to information about their rights and entitlements and what it means to be in care	The IRO service led a working group looking at the information all children in care should have access to consulting with the In Care Council. A report was produced by the IRO service and presented to children’s social care setting out the information children should receive, when they receive it and how, this formed the framework for children’s social care to create a policy about Information Packs for children in care.
Ensure children and young people are actively encouraged to participate in their review.	With the changes in the delivery of child in care reviews, IRO’s have needed to be creative with engaging children in this process. IRO’s will continue to ensure children feel able to participate in their review and share their views, wishes and feelings.

## 18. Areas of focus for IRO Service

18.1 The areas of focus for 2021 – 2022 include;

- Improving the number of child in care review records that are sent within 20 working days of the child’s review, achieving at least an 85% compliance in this area.
- Development and implementation of a feedback strategy for children, their families and carers which considers the child’s experience as a child in care and the input of their IRO.
- IRO’s to have input and oversight of any plans for reunification, consideration of learning where reunification has been successful and unsuccessful.
- Themed audits to be undertaken with these being identified by the themes emerging from the quality assurance activity within the service and the data reports.
- Children with disabilities, greater focus on how children are supported to participate in their review.