
**Bath & North East
Somerset Council**

Improving People's Lives

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)
ANNUAL REPORT
2021-2022

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Children and Young people.**

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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 provides information on the profile of the children for whom the Local Authority is corporate parent and how the IRO service maintains oversight of the plans for these children. With IRO's monitoring how children's needs are being met and prioritised. The report will highlight where IRO's have offered challenge to the local authority in terms of its duties to children in care and the aspiration and objectives of the IRO service for the year ahead.
- 1.4 Following presentation to the Health and Wellbeing Board, this report will be placed on the Council website as a publicly accessible document and disseminated across children's social care for further consideration.

2. Reporting Period

- 2.1 This report covers the period from 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022. 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 Upon election all Councillors take on the role of 'Corporate Parent' to children in the care of Bath and North East Somerset Council and those young people with care experience. Corporate parents have a duty to take an interest in the wellbeing and development of these children, as if they were their own. Whilst the lead member for children's services has particular responsibilities, the role of corporate parent is carried by all councillors, regardless of their role in the Council (Corporate Parenting: Terms of Reference, Sept 2022).

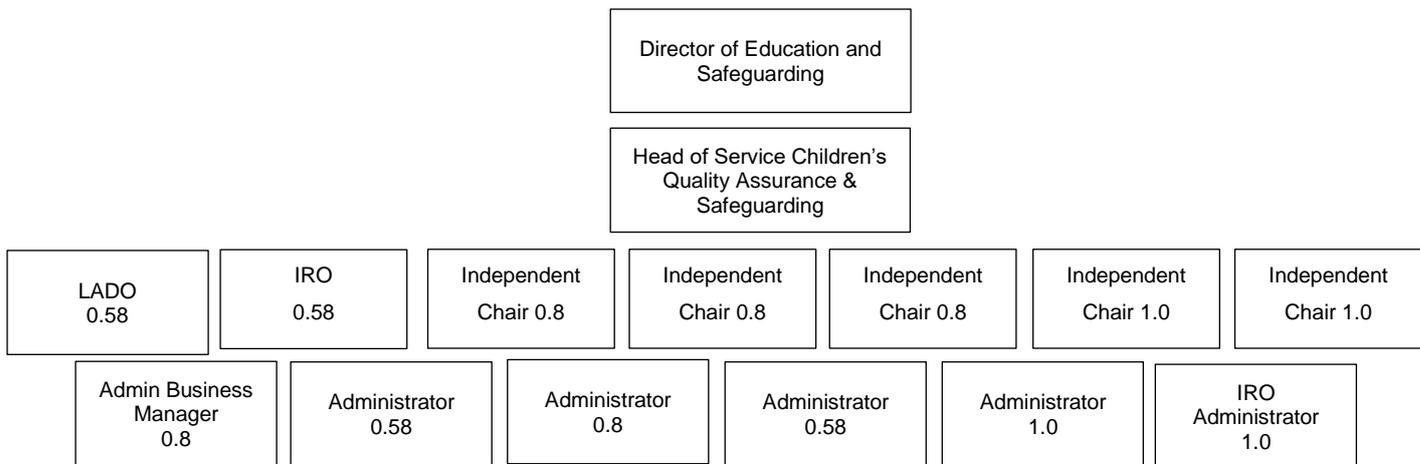
4.3 Within Bath and North East Somerset, the Corporate Parenting Group (CPG) is open to all Councillors and all members of the CPG must ensure they have a comprehensive overview as to the progress of the children in the care of the local authority, scrutinising the quality, effectiveness and performance of the services provided. CPG meetings are held four times a year and the arrangements are intended to ensure all Councillors have the opportunity to attend. As a result of changes in working practices, two meetings a year are held virtually again to support attendance of members. The manager of the IRO Service and Director for Education and Safeguarding attend CPG to support its

members and to bring to life the issues faced, and the progress made by children in care.

4.4 This year, a newsletter has been introduced for Councillors in order to provide information about matters related to children in care and those with care experience (care leavers). The newsletter is led by the Head of Service for Care Outcomes and has the support of the IRO service.

5. The Bath and North East Somerset Council IRO Service

Structure of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service



5.2 The IRO service continues to sit within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance (SQA) Service for Children and Young People which is part of the Education and Safeguarding directorate. The SQA Service has three core areas of business, all of which the Local Authority has a statutory duty to provide, these are;

- The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority. This being a legal requirement under section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. All local authorities are required to appoint an IRO to protect children's interests throughout the care planning process.
- The delivery of Child Protection Conferences, there are statutory timescales in which conferences need to be held and as well as delivering conferences, the service has to review and monitor the progress of all children subject to a child protection plan. The timeliness of conferences and the duration of child protection plans are key areas of performance that form part of statutory returns and regional benchmarking. During inspections of children's social care, Ofsted will scrutinise this area of practice.
- A Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) to deal with allegations of abuse against a person in a position of trust working with children (0-18

years old). The LADO is responsible for ensuring allegations are responded to in a timely way, that where threshold is met an investigation by the employer is carried out and that the welfare of the child is promoted/prioritised. Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018) (Chapter 2, paragraph 4) set out the role of LADO and remains governed by the Local Authorities duties under Section 11 of the Children Act 2004.

- 5.3 In Bath and North East Somerset, the three core areas of business are undertaken by Independent Chairs and an Independent Reviewing Officer. The Independent Chair role is unique to this Local Authority and was created in 2017 to provide greater flexibility and capacity within the service. When the role was created it was with the view that further vacancies within the service would be replaced with this role so as to ensure appropriate capacity within the service given the rise and fall of children subject to a child protection plan. However, in this reporting period, the service has faced continued challenges with the retention and recruitment of IRO's/Independent Chairs, with three vacancies arising and leading to a reliance on agency staff.
- 5.4 As a small service, with responsibility and oversight of approximately 300 children, any vacancy can have a significant impact on service delivery. Given difficulties in attracting suitable applicants, the manager of the IRO service undertook some work with HR to consider the barriers to recruitment across the service. It was identified during this piece of work that other local authorities within Avon and Somerset (Bristol, South Gloucestershire, North Somerset and B&NES) had either dual role within their organisation, incorporating Independent Chair and IRO or have kept these roles separate. The IRO manager was unable to identify any local authority that had a role which incorporated IRO, Independent Chair and LADO. Another factor that was identified through this piece of work related to the pay scale for someone in such a role, with Bath and North East Somerset Council having the lowest pay across the south west.
- 5.5 As a result of the recruitment and retention challenges within the SQA service, the impact upon remaining staff and most importantly the children and young people receiving services, consideration was given to the needs of the service as a whole. In March 2022, agreement was given for a market supplement to be attached to the role of Independent Chair / IRO thus aligning these roles with that of team manager across children's social care and the pay awarded to these roles within other local authorities. Furthermore, the service has also been able to introduce a designated LADO role, meaning there is one person responsible for the management and oversight of allegations. Independent Chairs will still be required to provide adhoc arrangements when necessary but ordinarily their day-to-day work will be overseeing and reviewing plans for children in care and children subject to child protection plans.
- 5.6 Whilst steps taken to strengthen the service and improve recruitment are positive and have led to three posts being permanently recruited to, the IRO service will likely have further difficulties in meeting statutory requirements if the number of children in care continues to rise.

6. Impact on IRO service as result of Covid-19

6.1 Covid-19 created challenges and disruption to all services. The IRO service has since March 2020 had to continually review and adapt working practices to ensure service delivery is safe whilst finding ways to maintain close contact with children, young people, their families, carers and the professionals supporting them. IRO's have worked hard to remain connected to the children allocated to them and found creative ways in which to engage with children and young people despite the restrictions that have at times been placed upon society. Since the summer of 2021, IRO's have returned to seeing children in person, visiting them where they live and spending time with them within their local community. Some children and young people however have expressed a wish for their reviews to continue to be held virtually and where IRO's feel this is appropriate and in the child's best interests they will accommodate this request.

7. South West Regional IRO group

7.1 The south west regional managers group have continued to meet virtually during this period, providing an avenue for managers to share experiences, demands and practice. There have been two practitioner events held (Sept 2021 and April 2022), the event in April saw those with lived experience of social care involvement share their experiences.

8. IRO Caseloads and Services Performance

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

	March 2022	March 2021	March 2020	March 2019	March 2018
No. Children in Care	197	181	181	192	168
Average IRO Caseload for FTE	48.5	53	53	47	62
CLA start	77	52	75	96	73
CLA end	61	53	86	81	62
% Increase of children in care from previous year	+9%	0%	-6%	+14%	+5%

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 increased by 9%, with there being 197 children in care at the year end. Once again, the number of children coming into care was higher than the number of children leaving care.

Table 2: Reason for leaving care

Reason for leaving care	21/22	20/21	19/20
Turned 18	35%	34%	31%
Returned to parent/s	23%	17%	33%
Placed under SGO	23%	19%	17%
Adoption	7%	30%	15%
Other	8%	0%	4%

Figures obtained from Children's Social Care data

- 8.2 The number of children leaving care to return living with their parent/s has increased by 6% on last year and this figure accounts for children who returned in a planned way (8) and those children who returned home in an unplanned way (4). There has been a significant decline in the number of children leaving care due to adoption, in reviewing the final care plans and data for these children, all those under five years of age who ceased to be children in care, were either placed with a family member or connected person under a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) or the plan was for them to return living with their parent/s in the community. There are some instances where the reason for a child leaving care have not been captured accurately within the data and this will be raised with the relevant heads of service in children's social care.
- 8.3 In November 2021 the NSPCC reunification framework was approved and implemented. This framework can be used for all children in care up to the age of 18 for whom a return home is an option. A range of practitioners can identify children and young people as being considered for reunification, such as the child's social worker, social work manager, the IRO or another practitioner working with the child or young person. The child's IRO will be informed when a decision is made to explore reunification and progress a return home assessment, the IRO if not in support of this decision will discuss directly with the child's social worker and social work manager. At the mid-point stage of the assessment (approx. 6 weeks from the start of assessment) there will be a case discussion which will include the child, family, foster carer, supervising social worker, family therapist, connecting family's practitioner and the IRO.
- 8.4 Once the assessment has been completed, should reunification be proposed, the IRO will hold a child in care review to consider the plans surrounding reunification and the support being made available to the child and their family. The IRO will have to be in support of the plan for reunification before this can proceed, should the IRO's views not be aligned with the assessment outcome the IRO would be expected to discuss this with the social work team responsible for the child's care plan. The dispute resolution protocol would be utilised in all instances where an IRO and social work team continue to have opposing views.
- 8.5 At the end of this reporting period, four children were being considered for reunification and were at varying stages of the reunification process, the IRO's for these children will continue to review and ensure the reunification framework is being followed.

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

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Average IRO Caseload for FTE	53	45	46	50

Figures taken from IRO Service Case Tracker

8.6 The manager of the IRO service is responsible for appointing an IRO within five days of a child coming into care. Due to the challenges with recruitment and retention the service has had some difficulty in allocating children based on their needs with allocation primarily being led by an IRO's capacity. Whilst the average caseload of an IRO remains fairly consistent, there were more children coming into care in Q2 and Q4 than leaving and for a small IRO service which is often working at capacity, this creates additional pressure on IRO's and in turn impacts on IRO's being able to review care plans within 20 working days of the child coming into care.

Table 4: Children entering and leaving care by quarter

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Children coming into care	12	22	16	27
Children leaving care	21	13	10	17

Figures taken from Children's Services data

8.7 As the above shows, Q4 saw the highest number of children coming into care and this pattern has continued into Q1 and Q2 of 2022-2023.

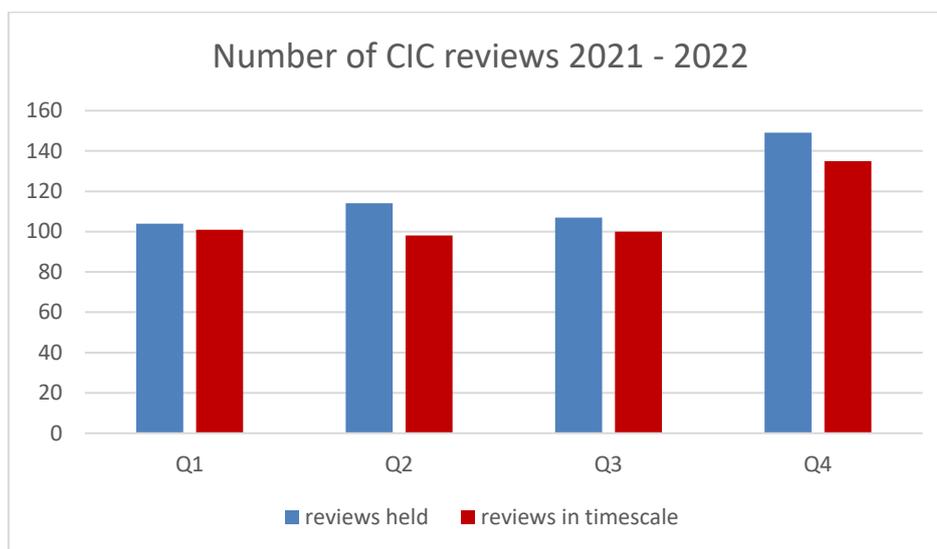
Table 5: Number of Child in Care Reviews over five-year period

	March 2022	March 2021	March 2020	March 2019	March 2018
Children In Care allocated to IRO	197	181	181	192	168
Total Reviews held	474	501	528	454	461

Figures taken from Children's Services data

8.8 The IRO Service chaired a total of 474 child in care review meetings in 2021-2022, again a decrease of 27 reviews from the previous year, this being despite the number of children in care remaining the same. It is not entirely clear as to the reason child in care review rates are declining when numbers of children in care are increasing, this is an area of practice that requires exploration by the IRO manager.

Graph 1: Timeliness of child in care reviews



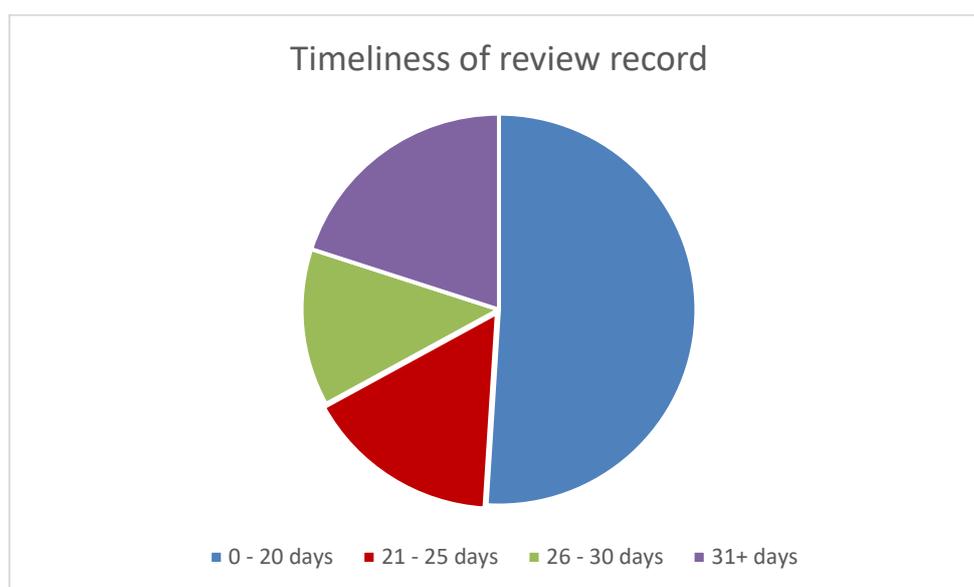
Figures taken from Children's Social Care data

8.9 Between the 1st April 2021 and the 31st March 2022 of the 474 reviews held 435 (92%) were held in timescale and 40 (8%) were out of statutory timescale.

8.10 There are a number of reasons as to why a review cannot proceed within timescale or on the date scheduled. Of the reviews not in timescale, 15 (3% of total reviews) were a result of the allocated IRO not being available, either due to absence from work or due to capacity. Q2 saw the most reviews out of timescale (16), and this is likely to a direct correlation to the number of children coming into care and this falling during the summer period when availability of the child, their carer/s, IRO and social worker are likely to be compromised.

8.11 There were 12 (2%) reviews not held within statutory timescale due to the social worker not being available, for a review to proceed the IRO will require the social worker to be in attendance. The absence of a social worker being available can be due to their absence from work, being newly appointed and not being able to commit to the pre-agreed date or in some instances the social worker needing to cancel due to competing priorities. The IRO service continues to highlight the importance of child in care review dates to social work teams and carers and this will be an area which will require continued monitoring.

Graph 2: Timeliness of review record



8.12 Following a child's review, the IRO must provide a written record of the decisions or recommendations within five working days of the completion of the review. A full record of the review should then be distributed within 20 working days.

8.13 During this reporting period 51% of review records were completed and circulated within 20 working days, 16% were sent between 21-25 days, 13% were sent 26-30 days and the remaining 20% sent 30+ days after the review. The service has unfortunately therefore not met its target of ensuring 85% of review records are sent within the statutory timescale. The capacity of IRO's is the reason the majority of review records are not sent in timescale, a part-time IRO can often find themselves spending large amounts of time travelling to see children and holding their reviews, reading records, expert reports, speaking with professionals, the child's family and considering the plans. Whilst timescale in this area of practice is not as high as the service aspire to, IRO's know their children and are able to bring to life in supervision with their manager the issues their children face, the complexities of their needs and the plans being progressed.

8.11 In the Ofsted inspection of children's services in February 2022, Ofsted identified *'The outcome of reviews are sensitively written to children, capture their opinions and are used to inform care plans'*. The IRO manager was pleased to see recognition of IRO's within Bath and North East Somerset working in a sensitive and child focused way, and whilst review record timeliness is an area for improvement, the quality of the record remains high as does an IRO's knowledge of the children they work with.

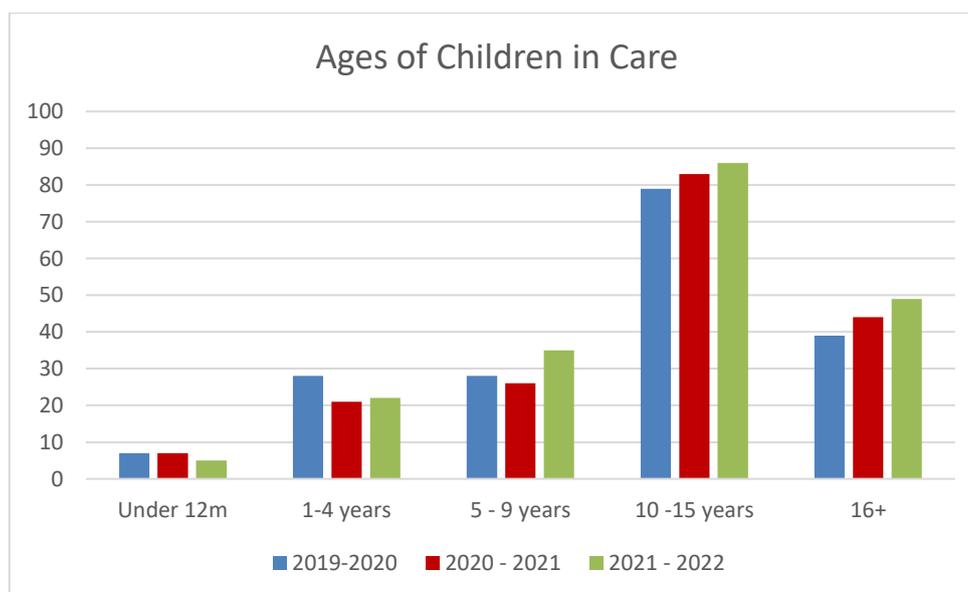
9. Profile of children in care in Bath and North East Somerset:

Gender:

9.1 In November 2021 the Government produced its annual statistics of looked after children in England up to the period ending 31/03/2021. This showed that males continued to account for 56% of children in care. The gender breakdown in Bath and North East Somerset has continued to be in line with previous years, with 51% of children in care being male and 48% female. The remaining 1% of children identified as gender fluid or non-binary.

Graph 3: Children by age as of 31st March 2021

9.2 As of the 31/03/2022, 3% of children in care were under 12 months old, 11% of children were aged between 1 and 4, 18% were aged between 5-9, 44% of children were aged between 10-15 and 24% of children aged 16 years or over. These figures are in line with the statistics for England at year end March 2021 where 5% of children in care were less than a year old, 14% were aged 1-4 years, 39% of children were 10-15 years old and 23% were 16+ years.

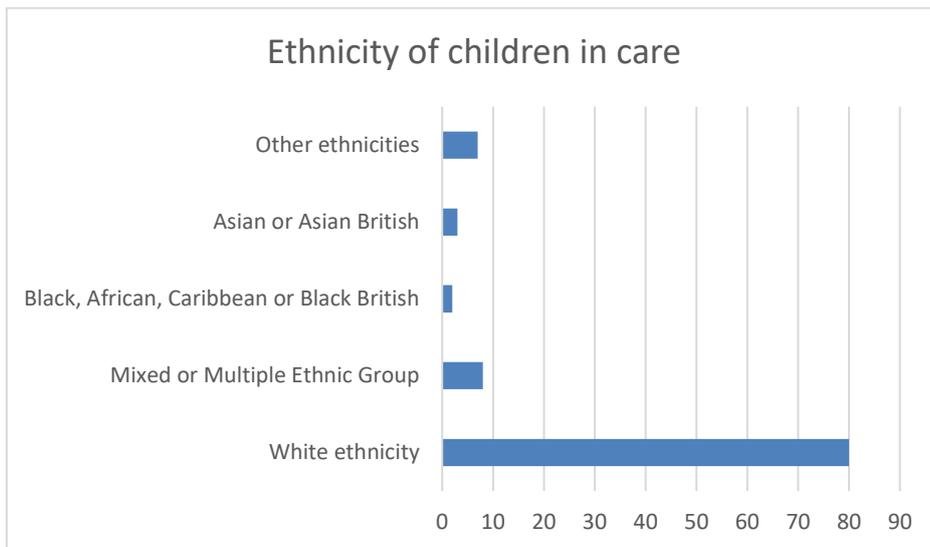


Figures taken from Children's Social Care data

9.3 The above shows the age ranges of children in care within Bath and North East Somerset over a three-year period, this highlights that the majority of children in care are aged 10+ years.

9.4 There are no changes to a child's IRO from the day they enter care unless the IRO were to leave their role, or the child requested a new IRO. This allows positive relationships to be developed between the IRO, the children, their carers, and family.

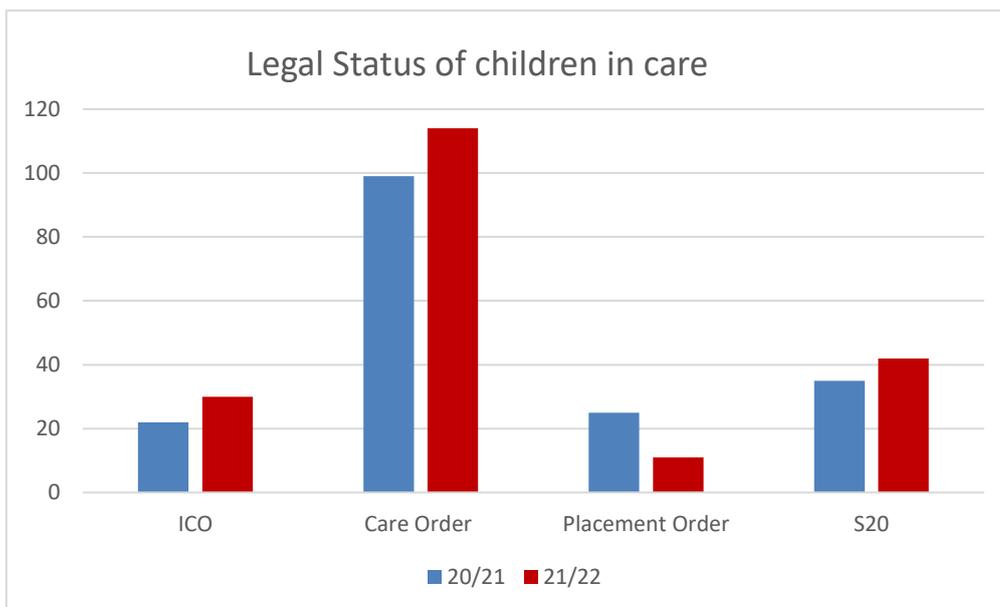
Graph 4: Ethnicity of children and young people in care



Taken from Children's Social Care data

9.5 The majority of children in care are of White ethnicity (80%). The cultural needs of all children in care is an area that IRO's continually consider and promote in their decisions or recommendations from a child's review. Social Workers demonstrate they consider a child's cultural needs as well as issues of diversity with Ofsted identifying in the inspection of children's services in February 2022 *'The individual identity needs of children in care are extremely well understood, including sexuality and gender identity, the position of children within their family group, and in relation to culture, religion and language'* (Page 6, Inspection report of Bath and North East Somerset local authority children's services).

Graph 5: Legal status of Children and Young People in Care



9.6 The above shows that 58% of children in the care of the local authority have a permanence plan for the child to remain a child in care. Plans for these

children will be closely reviewed by their IRO, with reviews held at least once every six months. Children in long term care benefit from the longevity of the relationship that the IRO role offers, with IRO's being able to bring to life a child's journey and experiences, especially when changes in care arrangements are necessary.

- 9.7 There has been a significant reduction in the number of children in care whose care plan is adoption, with a 9% reduction from last year. This decrease could be a result of the increase in children being placed with a relative or connected person under an SGO (23%) but could also be a result of how children's social care is working with families, which could be preventing very young babies from entering care. The age in which a child comes into care is an area that IRO's will consider, if they identify a child has been left at risk of harm for too long this will be raised directly with the social work team and the manager of the IRO service, any themes identified will be reported back to senior managers in children's social care.

Table 6: Ages and legal status of children in care

Age category at report end date	Interim Care Order	Full Care Order	Placement order granted	Single period of accommodation under Section 20	Total
Under 12m	4	0	1	0	5
1- 4 years	14	2	5	1	22
5 - 9 years	8	21	5	1	35
10 - 15 years	3	70	0	13	86
16+ years	1	21	0	27	49
Total	30	114	11	42	197

Figures taken from Children's Social Care Data

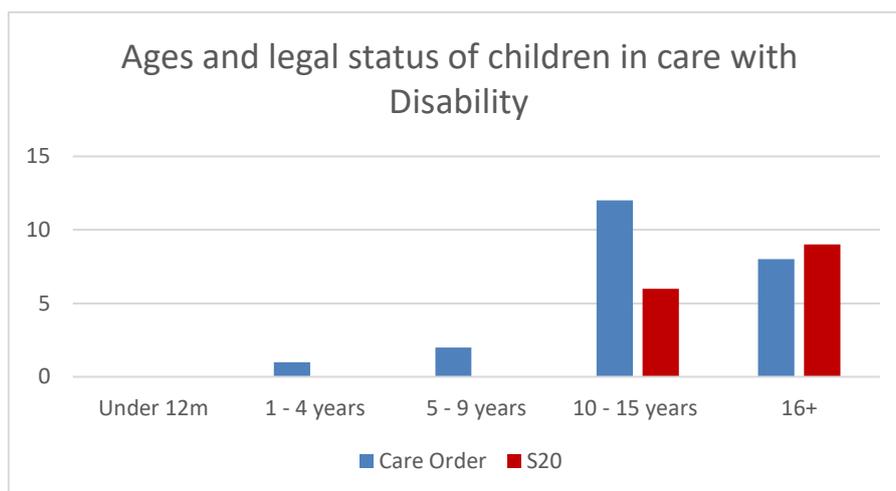
- 9.8 The above table shows the legal status and ages of children in care, there were as of 31/03/2022, 14 children under four years old who had yet to have a permanence plan and decisions about their long-term were being overseen by the family courts. If these children are unable to return to the care of their parents, live with family members or a connected person it is anticipated that a number of the children will have a final care plan of adoption.

- 9.9 There are five children aged between 5-9 years old who are subject to a Placement Order, for these children they will either be placed with adopters awaiting a Court hearing for the Adoption Order to be granted or care proceedings may have concluded with a placement order being granted but adopters have not yet been found. The placement of children for adoption requires careful consideration and can be impacted by the level of need a child has, the trauma they have experienced, their age and the number of adopters available. In statistics published by Coram BAAF, they reported that on average during 2020-2021 a child will be in care for 494 days before moving in with their

adoptive family and that 2,180 children had a placement order but had not been placed as of 31/03/2021.

9.10 When a child is made subject to a Placement Order, the requirement is that their IRO will convene a child in care review within 3 months of the Order being granted, statutory requirements dictate that a child should have a review thereafter every six months, in Bath and North East Somerset IRO's will hold reviews at a higher frequency should they have concerns about the progress of family finding or the complexity of the child's needs which may in turn create some difficulties in adopters being matched. For some children, adoption is not always possible even when the IRO, Social Worker and Courts have deemed this to be in the child's best interest. Where a child subject to a Placement Order remains in care with no prospect of adopters being found, the IRO will request the social work team review the care plan and consider whether long-term care should become the permanence plan. Any changes in care plan need to be ratified by the IRO and any change in plan will require the social work team to revoke the Placement Order. IRO's monitor and review the timeliness in which applications to revoke Orders are made, any issues of drift and delay will be escalated, and the Head of Service for Care Outcomes informed.

Graph 6: Children placed in care with a disability



Figures taken from Children's Social Care data

9.11 Of the 197 children in care, 38 (19%) children are recorded as having a disability. As the above graph shows, 17 of these children are 16 years and over. These children will likely require an assessment by adult social care to consider what support they may require as they become adults. IRO's will include in their review recommendations a referral to the transitions panel for all children aged 16+ who are likely to need support as an adult. The panel will have a duty to consider whether a young person is entitled to a transition assessment under the Care Act 2014. This assessment will consider what needs in terms of care and support the person would have after their 18th birthday. In this reporting period, IRO's have identified delays in transition assessments being completed which has left plans post 18 for some children uncertain. In instances where adult social care has not completed their assessment and a young person turns 18, the IRO service has been pleased to see the continued commitment by

children’s social care to the young person whilst awaiting an outcome from adult social care.

10. Children placed at distance from Bath

Table 7: Type of placement beyond 20 miles

Type of placement	No of Children
Family	3
Foster Care	82
Residential / Children's home	15
Residential School	1
Mother and Baby	0
16+	7
Other	17
Adoption	0

Figures taken from Children’s Social Care data

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 nationally in securing care arrangements for children that see them remain local to their family, friends, and school. In Bath and North East Somerset, 125 (64%) children in this reporting period were placed in a care arrangement that is 20 miles from their family home.

10.2 As of 31/03/2022, there were 16 children residing in a residential setting / children’s home or school, accounting for 8% of the entire child in care cohort. Whilst this is a relatively small number, the IRO service is keen to see a strategy being developed by children’s social care that sets out what steps will be taken to identify families for these children, especially for children under 10 years old.

11. Unaccompanied, Asylum Seeking and Trafficked Children:

11.1 The definition of a refugee according to the 1951 United Nations Convention is;

“A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

11.2 In the UK, a person becomes a refugee when government agrees that an individual who has applied for asylum meets the definition in the Refugee

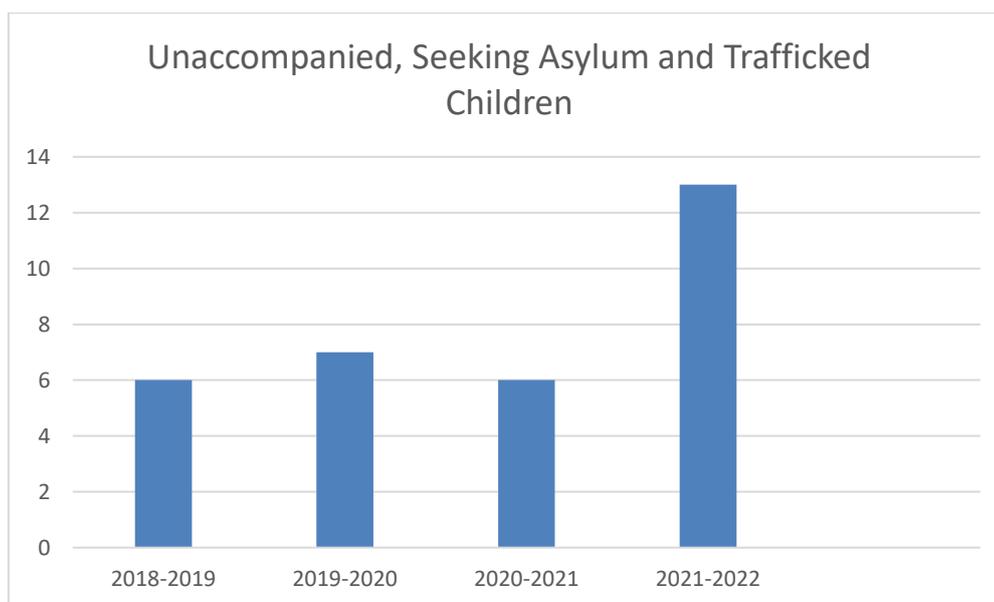
Convention and in turn they will 'recognise' that person as a refugee and issue them with refugee status documentation. Usually, refugees in the UK are given five years' leave to remain as a refugee. They must then apply for further leave, although their status as a refugee is not always limited to five years.

11.3 A person seeking asylum according to the Refugee Council is;

'A person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been concluded'.

11.4 In this reporting period, Bath and North East Somerset Council have seen an increase in the number of children coming into care who are seeking asylum or refuge. The placement of these children across the country is overseen by the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) protocol which has been established to ensure the safe placement of unaccompanied children in the UK. In November 2021 all local authorities were given legal notice to accept transfer of children into their care, providing crucial placements and services for these children.

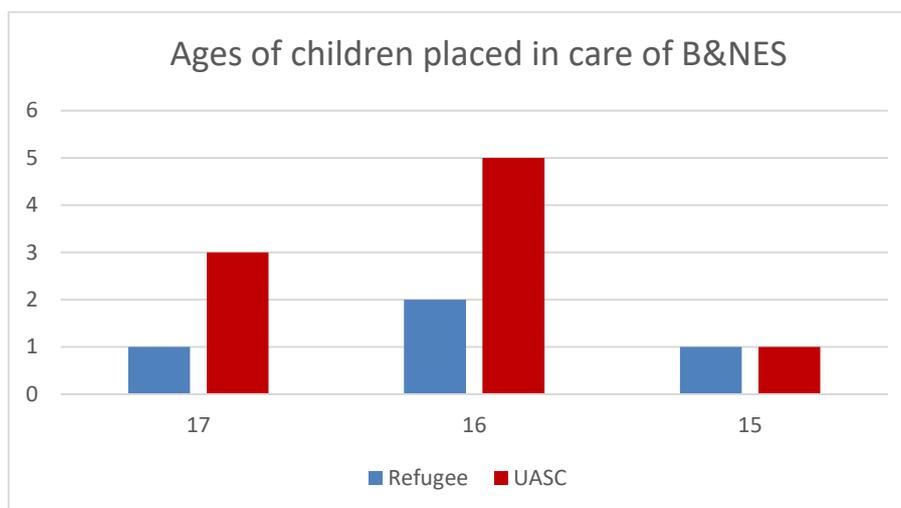
Graph 7: Immigration status



Figures taken from Children's Social Care data

11.5 The above shows the significant increase in numbers of children seeking asylum being placed in the care of Bath and North East Somerset. The majority of these children are not placed locally and are residing in London, Croydon, Birmingham, Kent, and Chelmsford, often a placement they have been in before Bath and North East Somerset became corporate parent. IRO's introduce themselves to these children, providing translated documents that explain their role, how they can be contacted and the purpose of a child in care review. IRO's will meet all children in person ahead of their review and will ensure the use of interpreters to ensure the child is able to fully participate.

Graph 8: Ages of unaccompanied, seeking asylum and trafficked children



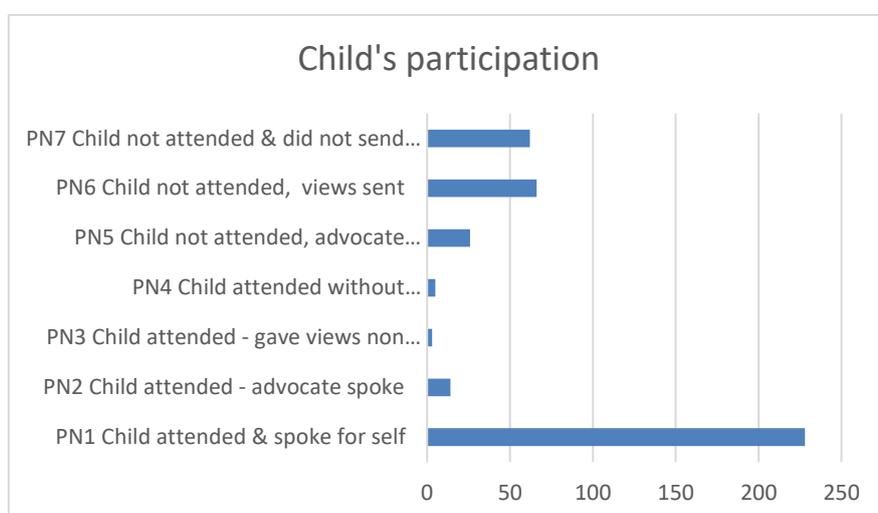
Figures taken from Children's Social Care data

11.6 All unaccompanied children are between 15—17 years old, speak little to no English, have limited understanding as to what it means to be a child in care and what they can expect as a child living in the UK. For many children, they will have never been to the area of Bath and North East Somerset, have a desire to be in an area where they can maintain contact with other young people and adults they met whilst travelling to the UK and part of a community that they feel able to establish some connection to. Every IRO within the service is now allocated an unaccompanied child / young person and the IRO service has recognised the importance of continuing to develop the skills, knowledge, and expertise in working with this particular cohort of children in care.

11.7 In the first six months of 2022-2023, 16 unaccompanied children or children with refugee status were placed in the care of Bath and North East Somerset, with this number anticipated to grow. This will have a significant impact on the IRO service and IRO's being able to fulfil their statutory responsibilities.

12. Child focused reviews, participation and feedback

Graph 9: Children and Young People's participation in their review



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

12.1 IRO's oversaw 474 reviews in this reporting period, with 63% of reviews seeing a child attend and speak for themselves, have their advocate speak for them or the child attended but chose not to contribute. Children aged 4 and under will be seen by their IRO in the presence of their carers and in their placement. IRO's will consider the relationship between the child and carer, how at ease the child is in their environment and how the child interacts with other members of the family/household.

12.2 Like last year, 15% of reviews held in this reporting period took place without the child being in attendance or providing their views. All children in care are sent a consultation form ahead of their review, are referred to Off the Record for advocacy and contacted by the IRO (where age appropriate), their choice not to participate is therefore respected if they have consistently said or shown that they do not want to be a part of this.

13. Children and Young Peoples Feedback:

13.1 Obtaining feedback from children in care about the service they receive from IRO's was identified as an area of priority for this reporting period, unfortunately due to demands on the service, the challenges faced at the start of 2021-2022 and the changes in personnel there has been no further development in this area. The service is very aware of the need to gain the views of those with lived experience and intends to assign some time and resources in the coming year to achieve this.

13.2 Whilst obtaining feedback about the IRO service has not been possible, the IRO service was instrumental in supporting children to participate in the Bright Spots 'Your Life, Your Care' 2020-2021 survey which was undertaken between February and April 2021. This saw 40 children in care aged between 4-18 years old taking part. The results from this survey were shared in January 2022 and highlighted;

- Children who participated in the survey reported trusting the adults they lived with 'all or most of the time' or 'sometimes'.
- Nearly 75% of the young people (aged 11-18 years) talked regularly with the adults they lived with about things that mattered to them. This was seen favourably when compared to the general population who talked regularly to a parent.
- Nearly all of the children and young people reported that the adults they lived with showed an interest in their education.
- Every young person had access to the internet and reported being able to practice independence skills such as cooking, laundry and going to the bank.
- 97.5% of children and young people got the chance to have fun or take part in hobbies or activities outside of school.
- 27% of young people reported not always feeling safe in their current home.
- Children and young people in B&NES were statistically less likely to feel included in decisions social workers made about their lives (65% vs. 87%).
- Boys less often reported 'always' feeling safe at home (50% vs. 88%) and they also less often reported 'always' feeling settled (40% vs. 88%).
- Apart from some children not trusting their social worker, all of the children's other responses in the survey depicted entirely positive care experiences.
- 46% young people reported very high levels of positivity about their future.

14. Dispute resolution and escalation:

14.1 IRO's seek to work in collaboration with social work teams and other professionals. Should issues arise where IRO's are in disagreement with plans being proposed for children they will always seek to resolve this at the lowest level, often discussing matters with the child's social worker and social work manager. IRO's as part of their day-to-day practice will offer views and question plans and decisions being made for children, IRO's encourage open dialogue with social work teams and promote the importance of regular contact with a child's social worker between child in care reviews.

14.2 The dispute resolution protocol provides a framework for IRO's to utilise when there are disagreements about plans for children which have not been possible to resolve between the IRO and Social Worker. The protocol has three stages; informal (IRO raises concerns directly with Team Manager responsible for child), formal (IRO has not been able to reach resolution at informal stage and so concerns raised with relevant Head of Service for Children's Social Care) and Director level (in rare instances where resolution at formal stage hasn't been achieved and concerns relate to welfare and safety of child, these will be escalated to the Director or Assistant Director of Children's Social Care).

14.3 In this reporting period there were 39 informal escalations raised by a child's IRO these include;

- *Completion of Social Work report for a child's review;* Before every child in care review a report should be prepared by the child's social worker, this should provide an understanding as to the child's needs and how these are continuing to be met, how the care plan has been progressed, the child's

achievements as well as any worries, how family time is progressing and an update on the recommendations from the previous review. IRO's across the service continue to have challenges in receiving these reports ahead of the review with some reports remaining outstanding at the time of the review. For some children the report isn't completed for a further 1-3 months post review. The manager of the IRO service has continually raised this area of practice with Heads of Service for Safeguarding Outcomes and Care Outcomes.

- *Lack of evidence that social worker received supervision;* The supervision policy within children's social care sets out that a social worker should discuss a child in care within every other supervision (every 8 weeks). IRO's review the child's record and consider the frequency of supervision, where there is no evidence between a child's review that supervision has taken place IRO's will raise this as part of their quality assurance work. In this reporting period there were several instances where an IRO raised an informal escalation about the lack of supervision as wanted assurances the plans for the child were being discussed in supervision between the social worker and their manager.
- *Allocation of children;* In this reporting period, an IRO was concerned that children who had a permanence plan remained in Safeguarding Outcomes and given the children's care plan and level of need the IRO was of the view the children needed to transfer to Care Outcomes as a matter of priority, this service area having the expertise and knowledge in working with children whose care plan is long term foster care.
- *Delay in response to safeguarding concerns;* An IRO raised a concern informally that a safeguarding concern that arose within a child's placement had not been referred to the Local Authority Designated Officer in a timely way.
- *Provision of services to children in care;* For six children in care in this reporting period, IRO's have been concerned that they have not been given access to services that are either in line with the child's wishes and feelings or are services that have been identified as part of the child's care plan. IRO's have advocated for the children in these instances and children's social care have taken forward the suggestions of the IRO.
- *Delay in legal orders being sought / revoked;* If an IRO identifies delay in applications to court, they will initially raise this as an informal escalation., should the IRO remain concerned about the timeliness of applications they will utilise the formal stage of the dispute resolution protocol.
- *Uncertainty around family time and impact on child;* At every child in care review the IRO will consider the plans in place for children to see family and friends and will make recommendations surrounding this area of a child's care plan. Should an IRO have ongoing concerns about the impact of family time or lack of family time being offered to the child the IRO will make an

informal escalation requesting children's social care review family time arrangements.

- *Suitability of placement;* In this reporting period an IRO had concerns about the suitability of a child's placement and was not satisfied this was promoting the child's needs. The IRO raised their concerns and asked the social work team to consider the plans for this child.
- *Completion of needs assessment and pathway plan;* IRO's will make recommendations at every child in care review about the need for relevant children to have an updated needs assessment and / or pathway plan. At subsequent reviews, where there is no evidence the recommendations have been progressed the IRO will informally raise and seek a timescale for completion by the social worker's manager.
- *Uncertainty around plans post 18;* Children in care will have their final child in care review 4-6 weeks prior to their 18th birthday to ensure recommendations from previous reviews have been completed.

14.4 In this reporting period there were eight formal escalations made by IRO's due to the level of concern identified;

Child	Basis of formal escalation	Outcome
Child A	IRO raised concerns that a student social worker was allocated to child in care with no evidence of support being offered from a qualified practitioner. Child learned of placement coming to an end by their carer leaving child with a level of uncertainty as to plans.	Social Work team identified qualified practitioner to work alongside student. Child in Care was supported by advocacy to make a complaint about their placement ending and there being uncertainty as to the plans going forward.
Child B	Concerns about lack of legal framework around children and of this possibly contributing towards delay for the children in permanence being achieved.	Children's Social Care agreed to seek legal advice.
Child C	A former child in care contacted their IRO as did not feel supported by the local authority in relation to the arrival of their sibling from Afghanistan.	Care leavers team agreed to liaise with local authority where sibling placed. Challenge as to age assessment raised.
Child D	Social Work report for first and second child in care review not completed.	Social Work reports completed, and commitment given to these being done in a more timely way going

		forward.
Child E	No statutory visits by social worker for two months since child came into care and recommendations from first child in care review not progressed.	Visit to child took place and steps taken to progress recommendations.
Child F	IRO had identified concerns for child's safety and did not deem social work team to have robust oversight of risks and vulnerabilities within placement.	Review of child's plan and needs undertaken by Head of Service for Care Outcomes.
Child G	IRO was not in support of change in care plan for sibling group.	Final care plan was reviewed by Agency Decision Maker and Assistant Director for Children's Social Care.
Child H	Drift and delay in care planning for permanence despite young person's wishes and feelings.	Social Work team reviewed plans and timescale for completion of actions.

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 was providing quarterly reports to Senior Managers in Children's Social Care but due to changes in the governance structure the reporting arrangements are under review with the Director of Children's Social Care and Director for Education and Safeguarding.

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)	Outstanding.

Children in care will have access to life story work delivered in an age-appropriate way. (outstanding from 2019 – 2021)	The IRO service is awaiting completion of a life story policy by children’s social care, this piece of work has been outstanding since 2019 and the IRO manager has raised at children’s social care improvement board.
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 (Area for improvement 2021-2022)	The IRO service continues to have challenges in meeting the target of 85%, this is an area of performance that continues to be reviewed and monitored.
IRO’s to have input and oversight of any plans for reunification, consideration of learning where reunification has been successful and unsuccessful. (Area for development 2021-2022)	The NSPCC reunification framework was launched in 2021 and members of the IRO service either attended the training around reunification or the launch event. IRO’s will be encouraged to contribute to any evaluation of the project.
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. (Area for development 2021-2022)	Outstanding, to form part of service plan for 2022-2024.
Children with disabilities, greater focus on how children are supported to participate in their review. (Area for development 2021-2022)	Completed and ongoing - IRO’s ensure all children with a disability have been referred to advocacy or have someone who can ensure their voice is heard. IRO’s visit children in placement and observe them, seek information on child’s progress from those that know them well and utilise communication methods the child can access.

18. Areas of focus for IRO Service

18.1 The IRO service will be focusing upon the outstanding areas of development and improvement from previous years as these are areas of priority.