



## Children's Services

# Independent Reviewing Service

## ANNUAL REPORT

April 2022 - March 2023

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The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the role and impact of the Independent Reviewing Service in Buckinghamshire Council for the period

1 April 2022-31 March 2023

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### **Report Owner**

Lauren Watts

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## Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the work of the Independent Reviewing Service for the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

### Headline Data

- Buckinghamshire Council had a corporate parenting responsibility for 509 Children Looked After as at 31 March 2023.
- During this reporting year the IRO service held 1300 Childrens reviews.
- 100% of children's reviews were held within statutory timescales.
- Numbers of children over 4 years old and participating in their review has increased by 4% to 88%.
- The number of IRO (independent Reviewing Officer) formal escalations using the IRO escalation / resolution policy and resolution tool on a child's electronic record has increased by 28%.
- 3 Young People were placed in Secure Accommodation under s25 Children Act 1989 and 3 monthly Secure Accommodation Reviews were held to ensure that the threshold for secure accommodation was still met.

The team has maintained good performance in holding children's statutory reviews on time with an increase in children and young people's participation. The service has improved delivery on behalf of children by embedding the IRO practice standards and IRO escalation / resolution policy and procedure. IRO's have continued to ensure the child's voice is strong in planning for their future. The service has proactively encouraged opportunities to seek feedback from children's families, and professionals via the use of consultation forms that inform the review process and questionnaires regarding the quality of their experience that will shape service improvements.

The IRO service has implemented monthly audit / dip sampling activity to improve the consistency and quality of the IRO footprint and ensure there is impact on the child's care plan, care journey and outcomes. The Service has significantly improved compliance with, and quality of Midway Reviews and this is reducing delay in progressing planned actions from reviews and enabling earlier resolution for children and young people.

A permanent Assistant director for Quality Assurance, Standards and Performance was appointed, the IRO service sits within their service portfolio. The IRO workforce has maintained stability and children receiving a consistent IRO has remained high.

## Recommendations

- Collaborate with Care Experienced young people to better understand, shape and improve young person-centred practice including consultation, planning and use of language within children's reviews. Specifically:
  - *How we consult with children and young people as part of their review*
  - *How we share information with children and young people who are new into care about their reviews and the role of the IRO and what is helpful for them to know.*
  - *How do children and young people experience their own reviews*
- Although child and young person participation has slightly improved, there is a need to ensure children's records reflect the quality of engagement. This means ensuring the review is child / young person led and facilitated evidencing the child's choice.
- Develop a reporting system alongside Business Intelligence for all IRO performance which will include the revised process for undertaking mid-way reviews.
- Update IRO practice Standards to specifically address IRO oversight in particular circumstances including Children missing from care, Children at risk of exploitation, Children placed within an unregulated placement or children and young people in hospital or secure accommodation, Children subject to a care order and placed at home parents.
- Improve consistency of recording on Childrens records to demonstrate IRO oversight and impact on children's plans.

## What will be the impact?

Care experienced children and young people will know that there is an enhanced level of scrutiny and consistency of IRO oversight ensuring they receive the highest standard of care possible and that their voice will be strong in the planning.

Children and young people will have opportunities to build working relationships with their IRO who will be influenced by best practice.

Children and young people will know their rights and be assured that their IRO will be active in consulting with them regarding all aspects of their care experience.

Children and young people will find that their wishes and feelings; hopes and aspirations are given voice and wherever possible will be built into their plans. Plans will be progressed at pace.

Children and young people will find professionals and families seeking to work together to remove barriers to success and to ensure the best outcomes possible for each individual child.

Children and young people will receive timely, consistent and effective interactions from professionals involved in their lives. The use of proactive consent techniques will enable more children and young people to benefit from the professional support available to them.

Children and young people will increasingly find that all professionals working with them have a better understanding of what it is like to be care experienced and they will be treated with care and compassion.

IRO's will be proud of their contribution and assertive with the influence they have in the lives of children and young peoples who are care experienced.

Recording on children's records will reflect a child centred approach ensuring that any child who wishes to access their records will be able to gain a strong understanding of their journey and decisions that were made which impacted their lives.

## **Introduction and background**

This report summarises the key activities undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) during the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

The primary role of the IRO is to ensure that a child's plan fully reflects their current needs and that the actions within the plan are consistent with the Local Authority's corporate parenting responsibilities towards a child looked after, and to ensure that their current wishes and feelings are given full consideration. The Department for Children School's and Families, 'IRO Handbook' (2010) and Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 set out the statutory guidance for IROs and local authorities in relation to case management and review for children looked after.

### **The IRO Service Profile**

The IRO service is part of the Quality Standards and Performance Service that includes Child Protection Advisors (CPAs), Allegations Management Team (LADO), Safeguarding Partnership, Independent Panel Chairs, AYSE Social Work Academy, Principal Social Worker and the Training and Development Team. IROs ordinarily are physically located in the Aylesbury, Amersham and High Wycombe offices to strengthen relationships with the individual social work teams located in those areas. IROs spend a significant part of the working week seeing children wherever they live including those out of county.

The IRO service consists of a full-time Service Manager and nine IROs (equivalent to 8.3 Full Time Equivalent). Eight IROs have been within the service since before March 2022. All IRO's are experienced social work professionals who have previously undertaken management roles within operational children's social care teams. The range of skills, knowledge and experience across the team benefits children and young people. This extends to the wider workforce, with the IRO's recognising the importance of collaboration and developing positive working relationships with Social Work teams including utilising the IRO link role.

Incorporated within the IRO service are 4 Business Support Administrators (2 full time, 2 part time). IRO caseloads have been stable within the recommended range of 50-70 as set out within the IRO Handbook.

The IRO service has monthly team meetings and practice development sessions to focus on areas of practice improvement. Each IRO has monthly supervision with the manager, and an annual performance appraisal in line with the Council’s performance appraisal system (Coaching for Performance). A fortnightly touchdown meeting is held as part of a communication strategy that includes regular email and verbal updates.

**Service data analysis for Children Looked After 2022-23**

This section provides data that summarises the key activity relevant to the Independent Reviewing Service during the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023. The total number of reviews completed as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 was 1300. 100% were completed within statutory timescale.

**Number of children ‘looked after’ by the local authority**

Buckinghamshire Council was responsible for **509 children ‘looked after’** as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, as noted in figure 1. Table 1 records the number of children looked after between 2016-2023 year on year for comparison.

Figure 1

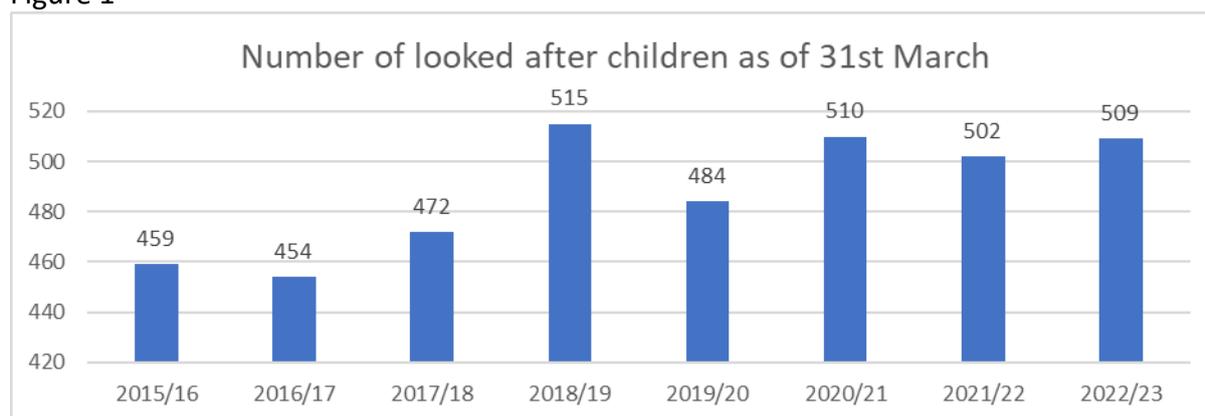


Table 1

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Children Looked After on 31 <sup>st</sup> March	459	454	472	515	484	510	502	<b>509</b>

**Age profile of children ‘looked after’: 2016-2023**

The age profile of children (shown separately for boys and girls) looked after across the last 7 financial years is broken down by gender in table 2.

Table 2

Age on 31 <sup>st</sup> March	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Boys								
Under 1:	17	8	8	9	17	13	12	7
1 – 4:	38	36	28	29	28	33	31	19
5 – 9:	48	46	46	42	40	43	42	35
10 – 15:	92	100	113	123	112	124	125	113
16 – 17:	53	63	70	73	79	77	75	131
<b>Total</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>265</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>305</b>

The significant increase in 16- and 17-year-old males is attributable to the increase of unaccompanied children referred to the Council via the national transfer scheme (NTS). Males aged 1-4 have decreased by nearly one third. Females aged 10 to 17 have also decreased and more markedly in the older age range. It is hoped that the newly forming Edge of Care Service will, over time, reduce the numbers of young people over 10 becoming Looked After.

#### **Age of child at the point of becoming ‘looked after’ between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022-31<sup>st</sup> March 2023**

Table 3 sets out the age of a child on the day they became ‘looked after’ during this reporting period. The highest number of children per age are babies under the age of 1 year. The second highest being 68 young people aged 16 years, an increase of 20 from the previous reporting year.

Table 3

Age when came into care	Number of children
0	74
1	14
2	25
3	24
4	46
5	37
6	38
7	34
8	41
9	34
10	28
11	36
12	33
13	33

14	44
15	51
16	68
17	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>693</b>

**Overview of children looked after by gender: 2017 – 2023.**

Table 4 shows the overall % of boys who are looked after was 60% in 2022/23 compared to 40% of girls. The gap between numbers of boys against girls becoming Looked After has widened.

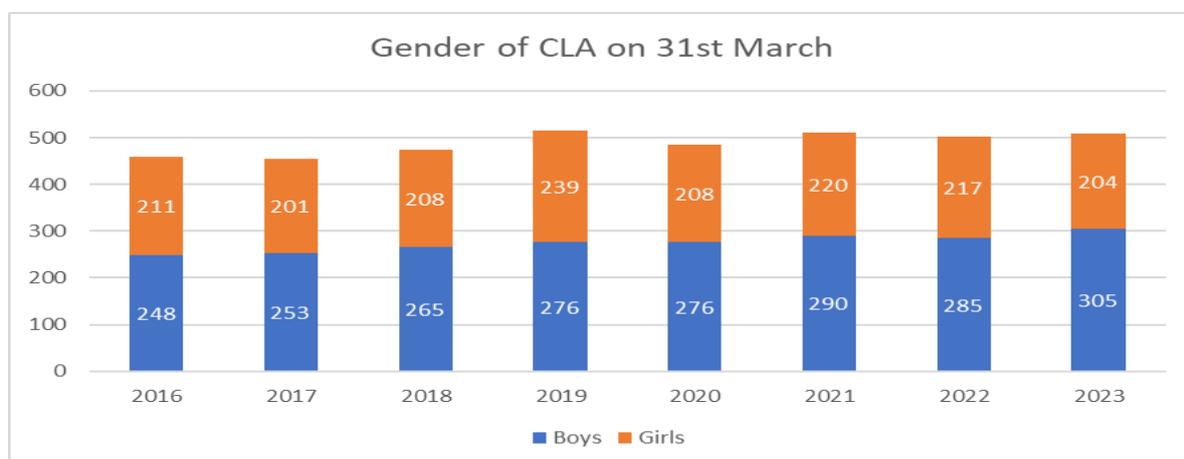
Table 4

Gender of CLA on 31 <sup>st</sup> March	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Boys	248	253	265	276	276	290	285	<b>305</b>
Girls	211	201	208	239	208	220	217	<b>204</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>459</b>	<b>454</b>	<b>473</b>	<b>515</b>	<b>484</b>	<b>510</b>	<b>502</b>	<b>509</b>

Gender of CLA on 31 <sup>st</sup> March	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Boys	54%	56%	56%	54%	57%	57%	57%	<b>60%</b>
Girls	46%	44%	44%	46%	43%	43%	43%	<b>40%</b>

Figure 2 shows a slight increase of boys and girls over the 7-year period. Up until 2022 gender statistics were very consistent at 57% and 43% respectively

Figure 2



## Legal status of children looked after

Every child who is looked after by the local authority, regardless of their legal status, must have a care plan which details the long-term plan for the child’s upbringing and the arrangements made by the Local Authority to meet their day-to-day needs. All Local Authorities have a statutory duty to regularly review that care plan within legislative timescales (Care Planning and Case Review Regulations 2010).

Table 5 summarises the legal status of the ‘children looked after’ supported by the Local Authority. The number of care orders and interim care orders is less than last year. There is an increase in the use of section 20 Children Act 1989 and this is at least in part attributable to the increase in unaccompanied children referred to above. Wherever possible social work teams work in partnership with parents to reduce the number of applications to the court.

The significant reduction in Placement Orders leading to adoption is likely to be explainable in the context of increased Connected Persons permanency for children. Case law now dictates that the threshold for a Placement Order is “nothing else will do”. Essentially the court must be satisfied that there is no measure less than adoption that will meet the child’s needs and promote their welfare.

Table 5

		2015 /16	2016/1 7	2017/1 8	2018/1 9	2019/2 0	2020/2 1	2021/2 2	2022/2 3
Care Order	Interim	71	89	58	62	55	99	84	<b>66</b>
	Full	227	240	291	299	290	293	302	<b>278</b>
Voluntary agreements s20		113	97	92	112	102	84	97	<b>143</b>
Placement Order		45	26	29	39	34	32	18	<b>15</b>
On remand, committed for trial, or detained		2	2	2	3	3	2	1	<b>1</b>
Emergency orders or police protection		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>6</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>459</b>	<b>454</b>	<b>472</b>	<b>515</b>	<b>484</b>	<b>510</b>	<b>502</b>	<b>509</b>

## Children Looked After as on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 by placement type and location

Table 6 and 7 show the range of placement options for children looked after. The number of children placed with foster carers continues to be higher than other placement types which is positive with more children experiencing family placements. There are around approximately a third of children looked after who are living outside of the local authority

area this is a positive reduction on last year. This impacts on their family time arrangements and on care planning. As part of the child’s review the Independent Reviewing Officers will see the child and visit them in their environment. Distance that is recorded as unknown within table 7 is due to a recording anomaly and a system fix is being explored. The child’s placement address is known for these children and recorded on their individual electronic record.

Table 6

<b>Placement Category</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2022</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> March 2023</b>
Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)	165	157
Residential	55	54
Schools, Health, Secure & YOS	2	5
Semi-Independent	44	83
Internal Other	20	19
In-House Fostering	175	156
Placed with Parents	37	28
External – Other	4	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>502</b>	<b>509</b>

#### **Looked After Children as at the 31<sup>st</sup> March by Placement Location**

Table 7

	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2022/23</b>
Under 20 miles and inside LA boundary	215	210	202	171
Under 20 miles and outside LA boundary	80	78	60	57
Over 20 miles and inside LA boundary	31	20	25	33
Over 20 miles and outside LA boundary	158	182	187	135
Distance not known or not recorded	0	20	28	113
<b>Total</b>	<b>484</b>	<b>510</b>	<b>502</b>	<b>509</b>

#### **Children Who Ceased to be Looked After during the year by reason**

There has been an overall decrease this year in the use of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) from a four year high of 26 last year to 11 this year. The number of children returning home to parents or those with parental responsibility has also decreased by 5 to a four year low of 12. Adoptions unopposed are lower than last year and more in keeping with previous suggesting that the spike in 2021/22 was more of an anomaly. The increase in

young care leavers staying put with long term carers is very positive and demonstrates both accurate matching and important improvements of overall outcomes for many young people.

Table 8

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Adopted – consent dispensed with	10	15	6	0
Adopted – application unopposed	13	13	18	12
Died	0	0	0	0
Care taken by another LA	3	0	2	1
Returned home to live with parents or relatives as part of care planning process	19	21	17	12
Returned home to live with parents or relatives not as part of care planning process	7	4	4	1
Left care to live with parents, relatives or other person with no parental responsibility	64	33	42	36
Residence order / Child arrangement order granted	7	2	1	0
Special guardianship order	24	16	26	11
Moved into independent living (with support)	10	17	0	1
Moved into independent living (with no formalised support)	2	1	0	0
Transferred to residential care funded by adult social services	11	10	2	0
Sentenced to custody	2	1	0	0
Accommodation on remand ended	1	0	1	0
Age assessment determined child was 18 or over	0	0	1	1
Child moved abroad	0	1	0	1
Aged 18 (or over) and remained with current carers (inc under staying put arrangements)	0	17	64	72
Care ceased for any other reason	65	36	27	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>193</b>

## Children looked after as on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2023 by permanency plan

The IRO Manager attends the permanency tracking panel to reflect the individual views of IRO's and contributes to timely permanency planning. All children cared for have a permanency plan in place by their second review. This is recorded by the IRO within the Child's Review Report on the children's electronic recording system.

IRO's have oversight of these plans within the child's review and again at a midpoint between reviews. IROs identify any drift and delay and escalate as appropriate. The IRO manager participates in the weekly resource panel to ensure IRO views are captured, and any concerns about where a child is going to live are fed back to IRO's to ensure oversight and challenge as required.

Table 9 shows the number and percentage of children in each of the areas of permanency planning.

Table 9

Permanence plan	Number as at 28 <sup>th</sup> February	%
Return to family	93	18%
Adoption	24	5%
SGO/CAO	1	0%
Supported living	40	8%
L/T residential	49	10%
L/T fostering	238	46%
Other	30	6%
Not recorded	39	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>514</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Children Entering and leaving the Care System during the reporting year by placement type.

As of the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 there were 509 children Looked After. During the reporting period 194 new children became looked after whilst 185 Child Looked After episodes were ended. The impact of this is significant for the role of the IRO as there is requirement to hold more frequent reviews in the early stages of becoming Looked After; usually at least 3 in the first year. There is also likely to be an additional review just before a child or young person reaches 18 or their care journey comes to an end.

Tables 10 and 11 show a visual representation of the methods and mechanisms by which children and young people begin and end their care journey.

Table 10

Placement Category	CLA started YTD 2022/23
Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)	37
Residential	10
Schools, Health, Secure & YOS	3
Semi-Independent	63
Internal Other	1
In-House Fostering	72
Placed with Parents	7
Other	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>194</b>

Table 11

Placement Category	CLA ended YTD 2022/23
Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)	19
Residential	9
Semi-Independent	53
Internal Other	12
In-House Fostering	52
Placed with Parents	36
Other	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>185</b>

### Duration of care for children not currently Long-Term Fostering but whose permanence plan is to be Fostered Long Term

Table 12 shows the number of children by age group whose care plan is long-term fostering and are not yet matched to permanent foster carers. The total 82 represents a 36% decrease on this time last year and demonstrates the value of the permanency tracking process.

Table 12

Duration of Care	No. of children
0-6 months	6
7-12 months	11
1-3 years	27
3-5 years	18
5-7 years	6
7-10 years	9
10 years +	5
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>82</b>

**Children who are looked after and made an application for asylum in the UK as on 31 March in each year:**

Table 13 shows the number of children under 18s who had an immigration status of claiming asylum in the UK (at any time between 1 April and 31 March) and who were looked after on 31 March of each year. Due to national developments Buckinghamshire Children services participate in the National Transfer Scheme and are required to support a specified number of young people claiming asylum in the UK. In March 2022 the Department for Education directed Buckinghamshire Council to take 0.01% of our population which is 128 children under the age of 18. Due to the ages of the children being transferred, Children services forecast that we will not meet our required number until March 2025. Buckinghamshire Council have accepted all children referred via this scheme.

In response to the 181% increase in numbers of unaccompanied minors Childrens services have created a dedicated team to support Children who are Unaccompanied and claiming asylum in the UK. Every IRO is experienced in working with children in this situation with diverse needs and is skilled in working with interpreters as well as the guidance for Children’s Services in supporting these young people.

Table 13

<b>Year</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
<b>Children under 18 who are unaccompanied</b>	20	15	35	29	21	21	26	73

**One year on**

In December 2021, Ofsted completed an inspection of Buckinghamshire Children Services and made the following recommendation for the IRO Service:

“Improve the impact of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in decisively escalating children’s cases when there is drift and delay in the progress of their care plans.”

Following the Ofsted report published in February 2022, the IRO Services recommendations below were set out for 2022/23 within last year’s annual report.

**Recommendations for 2022/23 with end of year update**

- When IROs escalate cases (as a result of drift and delay) the IRO will set specific actions which are time bound and attributed to the relevant professional including the IRO. They will maintain oversight until a satisfactory resolution has been reached.

There were 272 occasions where the formal resolution process was used in the reporting year 22-23. This is an increase of 59 from the previous year. 76% of resolutions were resolved within 28 days. Within the IRO resolution tool IROs set specific actions required with a time

limited response. This is monitored by the IRO until a satisfactory outcome has been achieved for the child. The IRO Manager undertakes monthly auditing activity of active and resolved resolutions to review the quality and impact of the process and inform service improvement. This has improved IRO oversight of timeliness and ensured the desired outcome achieved for the child.

- The IRO's will continue to focus on building strong and effective relationships with the social work teams with a focus on achieving the best possible outcomes for children in care.

Each IRO links to a team or service area within the wider children's services framework. They attend quarterly team meetings and act as a conduit for information sharing between the Social Work Teams and the IRO Service as a whole. The IRO Practice Standards and resolutions policy and procedure has been discussed with teams throughout the year. There is IRO representation at resource panel and permanency tracking panel to provide input and oversight of how Children's plans are progressing. The IRO service manager meets monthly with the Care Services Team manager, the Court team manager and the head of the Virtual School. The IRO manager jointly chairs the operational partnership meeting which includes representatives from the Children Looked after health team, CAMHS, Virtual School, Social work teams including fostering and the family time service. Feedback has been positive from the increased engagement and relationships are reported as being improved which has been shared via processes such as Check and Challenge.

- The service will develop systems to enhance understanding of IRO activity and their impact on the quality of care received by children and young people including the function of mid-way reviews and direct feedback.

The IRO Service has strengthened the monitoring and oversight of Care Plans and Pathway Plans between Review meetings by introducing a new form / workflow on the child's electronic recording system and implementing a formalised process to improve consistency and provide a mechanism to evidence compliance with mid-way monitoring. Social workers have reported this has helped to track progress of IRO review recommendations and decisions to ensure they are embedded within the child's care / pathway plan. At the child's review the IRO's book a conversation with the social worker at a midpoint between six monthly reviews. Where drift and delay has been identified the IRO has the opportunity to address this at an earlier stage and set out within the mid-way review how they will do this either with via a verbal conversation with the social worker or utilising the formal resolution process.

- The service will improve the use of data to enable effective monitoring, tracking and assurance pertaining to IRO performance and impact on children's plans, including timeliness of IRO escalations.

The IRO manager tracks all IRO resolution timeliness to completion and undertakes audits of the quality and impact on children's plans. The wider data monitoring continues to be a target for the next reporting period given there are wider changes to how we utilise business intelligence. There is a desire to bring together a cohesive reporting system which collates all

IRO data into one weekly / monthly report, this requires further planning and dialogue with Business Intelligence colleagues.

- The service will increase audit / dip sampling activity to ensure the consistency and quality of the IRO footprint and impact on the child's care plan, care journey and outcomes.

The IRO service has implemented monthly audit / dip sampling activity to ensure there is consistency in IRO footprint, and impact of IRO work is collated. This consists of monthly manager audits (one per IRO) and bimonthly peer auditing activity using an agreed audit tool in appendix 3. 57% of manager audits met good during this period. 59% of peer audit activity met good. Feedback from Audit activity is shared within one-to-one supervision with IRO's and at monthly team development sessions. Key areas of performance are targeted that require improvement in evidencing such as:

- Strengthening the evidence of voice of the child within their review
- Impact of the IRO mid-way review undertaken between 6 monthly reviews.

The IRO footprint and impact is also dip sampled as part of the whole service monthly quality assurance activity. Findings of which are collated, shared and learning considered within peer auditing activity.

- The IRO's will share best practice to improve consistency across the IRO service when challenging and seeking to improve practice.

Learning from IRO manager audit activity is disseminated at monthly IRO practice development sessions. Over half of the audits undertaken by the Service Manager were rated good or above. In the case of those that did not meet good there were areas of work that did but this was not consistent across all areas. Learning and improvement that is required for IRO oversight that have not met good have been discussed in one to one supervisions and improvement plans agreed. Wider themes identified are addressed within Practice Development Sessions. Peer auditing has helped to inform greater consistency in the quality of IRO oversight and impact. IROs have found this a particularly helpful way to highlight and share good practice.

- The service will increase feedback received from children and their families regarding how children's reviews are held, their involvement and impact this has had.

Between January 2023 and April 2023, the IRO Reviewing Service conducted targeted feedback activity. This is in addition to other feedback received either informally or via the complaints and compliments procedures. 85% of the responses were from professional colleagues including foster carers. 14% were from parents and only 3% were from children and young people. This is a low level of response from both parents and young people. We are working with the We Do Care, Children and Young People's participation group to find alternative ways of seeking young people's feedback about the experience of Children and Young People within their care planning and review. This will be focus of the improvement plan for 2023/24. The IRO Team are meeting with the Care Ambassadors in June 2023 to commence this work.

The majority of Childrens reviews continue to be held in person usually at the child’s home. Some professionals or family members join via MS Teams using a hybrid model where appropriate. Preference is given to IRO’s conducting meetings face to face with the child or young person. Where the review has been conducted in full via MS teams the IRO has visited the child in person on a separate occasion.

In March 2022 our improvement partners from Hampshire shared the findings of a joint audit that was undertaken with Buckinghamshire managers in respect of placement stability for Children and Young People Looked After by Buckinghamshire. One of the recommendations was for the Care Services Team Manager and the IRO Service Manager to undertake a further audit of the quality of children’s care plans and deliver joint training to Social Workers, Supervising Social Workers within the fostering team and IROs to improve how risks and needs are identified and strengthen placement stability within our different roles for children and young people. The joint training took place in October 2022. The training feedback from participants was positive and IRO’s have seen an increase in the number of placement support meetings held.

### **IRO Service Activity**

Table 14 shows the Independent Reviewing Service conducted 1300 Childrens reviews during 2022/23. Table 15 shows that over the course of the year 100% of reviews were held within statutory timescales.

Table 14

CLA Reviews	Apr 22	May 22	Jun 22	Jul 22	Aug 22	Sep 22	Oct 22	Nov 22	Dec 22	Jan 23	Feb 23	Mar 23	2022/23
No. of reviews	120	109	107	129	67	138	118	114	151	103	93	51	1300

Table 15

	Apr 22	May 22	Jun 22	Jul 22	Aug 22	Sep 22	Oct 22	Nov 22	Dec 22	Jan 23	Feb 23	Mar 23
% of reviews completed in time	100%	100%	98%	99%	100%	99%	98%	98%	96%	99%	99%	100%

### **Voice of children and young people**

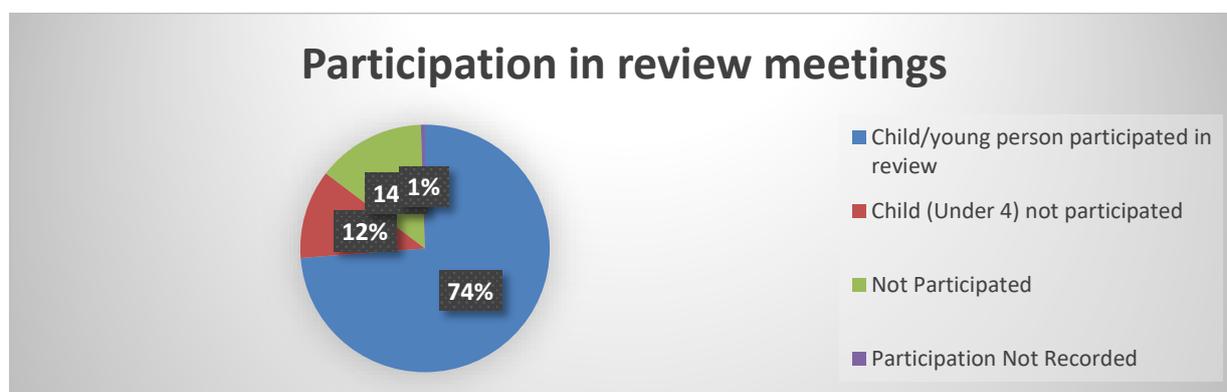
The participation of children in their reviews was 74% overall in 2022/23. This is a slight increase on last year. 15% of children declined to participate in their review or were unable to and a further 12% were aged under 4 years old. 88% of children who would be expected to participate took part in their reviews, a 4% increase against last year. Participation rates are presented below. All IRO's encourage Childrens participation and try to resolve any barriers.

Table 16 and figure 3 shows a month-by-month analysis of the participation of children and young people at their review meetings. Where children choose not to attend the IRO will ensure they see the child on a separate occasion and understand their wishes and feelings.

Table 16

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	22/23	%
Child/young person participated in review	92	86	75	95	53	96	98	84	96	77	75	32	959	74
Child (Under 4) not participated	15	12	14	12	9	18	7	13	20	14	7	10	151	12
Not Participated	12	11	18	22	5	24	13	17	33	12	10	6	183	14
Participation Not Recorded	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	3	7	1

Figure 3



## Advocacy

Every child in care continues to have access to an advocate via our commissioned service The National Youth Advisory Service (NYAS). During 2022/23 NYAS provided 86 Looked After Children and Young People with advocacy on a total 154 occasions. This represents an increase of approximately 30% from the previous year. This is encouraging as increasing the use of advocacy was a target the IRO service wanted to achieve. At each review the IRO considers with the child or young person the potential requirement for an advocate. During

the reporting year a total of 94 new advocacy referrals were made. IROs encourage carers and Social Workers to effect referrals for advocacy. On 8 occasions the IRO referred directly.

In 2022/23 NYAS provided an advocate as part of the child's Looked After Review on 15 occasions, which was a decrease of 18 in the previous year. This may be attributed to an increase in IRO placement visits and children's reviews returning to being held in person. Table 17 is a summary produced by NYAS of the issue-based advocacy requests received by them.

Table 17

ISSUE	Apr – Jun 22	July – Sept 22	Oct – Dec 22	Jan – Mar 23	TOTAL
Statutory Meeting	8	4	7	7	26
Parental support - CP		2	2		4
Issues in placement	7	4	3	7	21
Unsuitable school / college				1	1
Living arrangements		3	1		4
Change of placement		2	5		7
Pocket money/allowance/ benefits	2			2	4
Social Worker /PA	3	2	1	2	8
Access to personal belongings			1		1
Transition in education	2			2	4
Access to equipment / resources	1		4	1	6
Transport to activities			1		1
Care leaver allowance		1			1
UASC		1			1
Access to care	1	1	2	1	5
Advice on other services	1			1	2
Legal		1	2		3
LA complaint	4	3	3	1	11
Mental Health		1			1
Parents contact		3	4		7
Siblings contact	1	1	1	1	4
Pathway planning			3	1	4
Relationship with LA	2		2	2	6
Bullying in education			1		1
relationship with Siblings			1		1
Relationship with carer/ parent		1		1	2
Transition to adult services		2		1	3
Exiting care system		1		1	2
Access to education		1			1
Transition to adult	1				1
Safeguarding	1			1	2

Access to recreational activities	2			2	4
Life story work	1				1
Access to files / records	1			1	2
Other services complaint	1			1	2

NYAS also provides independent visitors for Buckinghamshire children looked after. Each independent visitor is carefully matched to a child and commits to befriending and visiting a child or young person for a minimum of two years. Between April 2022 and March 2023, NYAS matched 10 new independent visitors to children or young people. This is lower than last year, but Independent Visitors are carefully matched and most become long term arrangements. Seven Independent Visitor arrangements ended mostly due to young people reaching 18. There are currently 43 Children benefiting from Independent Visitors.

### **Improving outcomes for children through their Review and the resolution process**

A key function of the IRO is to resolve problems arising from the child’s care plan and ensure all necessary actions are progressed in a timely way. Where problems arise in relation to care planning, implementation or decision making the IRO will, in the first instance, attempt to resolve the issue in an informal way through discussion and ‘notification’ of concern to the Social Worker and Team Manager. Should the concern be significant or not resolved to the satisfaction of the IRO, the concern will be escalated to the attention of the Team Manager (Stage one) Head of Service (Stage two) Service Director (Stage three) for ‘resolution’ Corporate Director (Stage four) or referral to CAFCASS for resolution (Stage five).

The Resolution Process is designed to be a proactive tool to advise Social Workers, Team Managers and Senior Managers that standards defined by Children’s Social Care have not been adhered to. A Resolution procedure is a statutory requirement for children who are Looked After, and the IRO has the mandate to refer to CAFCASS at any point in the process. This system is also used to highlight areas requiring action by practitioners and managers to prevent drift and delay. If the issues cannot be resolved by first tier managers and IROs, it will be escalated to the next level. A Resolution Meeting is held, and the IRO will maintain oversight of the issues or issues until resolved. Table 18 shows the number of IRO resolutions raised per month totalling 272. There has been 28% increase in number of formal escalations during the reporting period.

Table 18

Month	Apr 22		May 22	Jun 22	Jul 22	Aug 22	Sep 22	Oct 22	Nov 22	Dec 22	Jan 23	Feb 23	Mar 23	2022/23
Resolutions	47		26	16	31	12	18	26	25	26	11	10	24	272
Month	Apr 21		May 21	Jun 21	Jul 21	Aug 21	Sep 21	Oct 21	Nov 21	Dec 21	Jan 22	Feb 22	Mar 22	2021/22

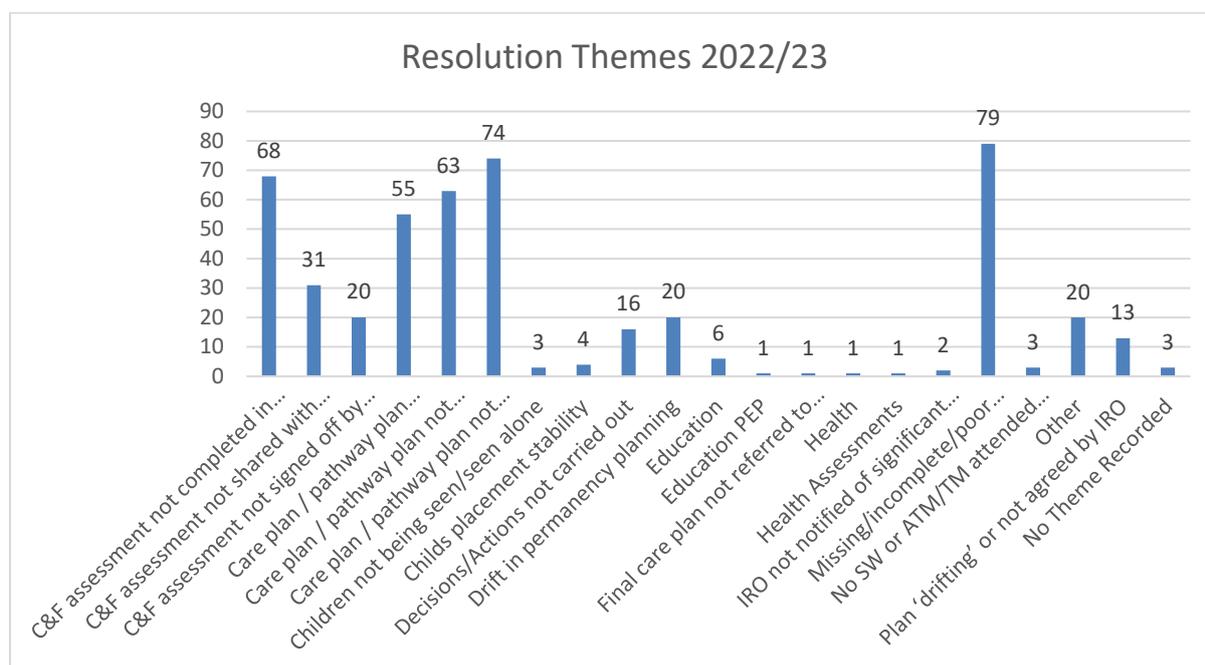
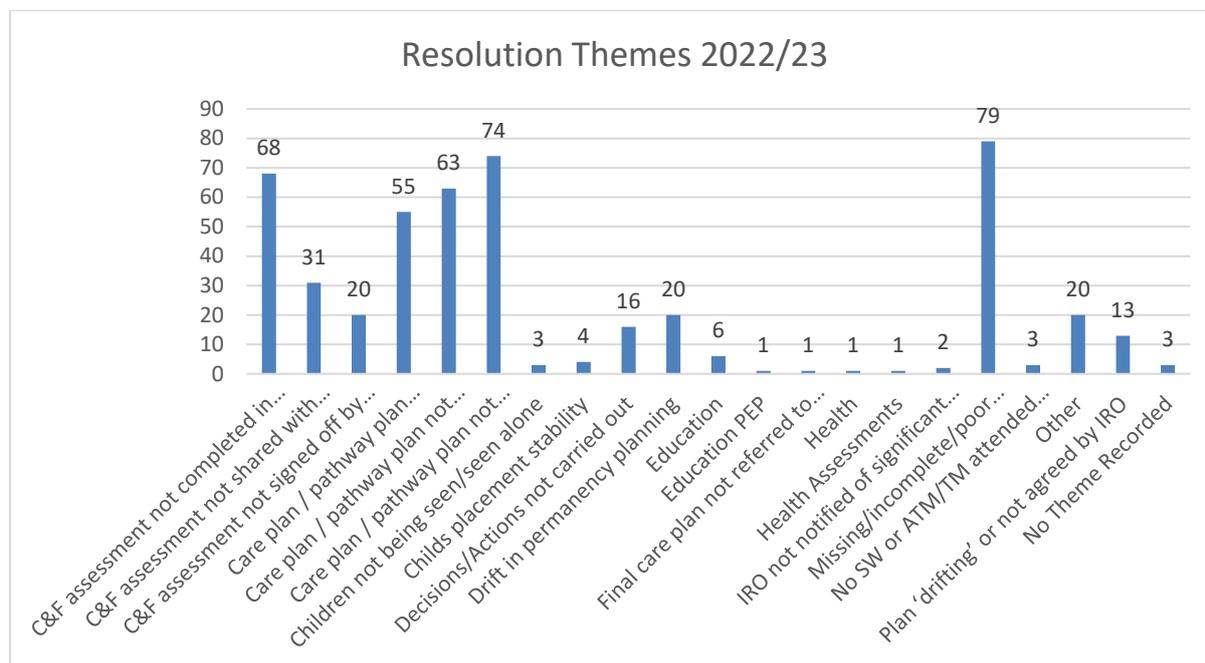
Resolutions	28	32	14	13	10	14	9	17	18	13	17	28	213
Month	Apr 20	May 20	Jun 20	Jul 20	Aug 20	Sep 20	Oct 20	Nov 20	Dec 20	Jan 21	Feb 21	Mar 21	2021/22
Resolutions	4	2	2	5	10	11	31	7	6	2	7	5	82

It is to be expected that a higher number of formal IRO resolutions would be raised within the children in care teams and the Court Team as they support a higher number of children looked after in comparison to other social work teams (see table 19). The IRO Manager undertakes monthly audits of active and resolved resolutions. The IRO Manager then meets with the Team Managers of the Children in Care and Court Team separately to consider the impact of the IRO resolution for the child and to progress any outstanding issues. IROs are linked to social work teams to strengthen communication and working relationships. This year this has included working to embed the IRO Escalation Tool and Resolution Policy and Procedure – see Appendix 1 and 2. IRO Team Meetings provide for individual feedback from IRO’s linked to specific teams and opportunity for wider discussion regarding consistency and themes of formal escalations. Managers use the IRO resolution data from weekly reports to address themes and inform supervision, practice development and training.

Table 19

Team	April 22	May 22	Jun 22	Jul 22	Aug 22	Sep 22	Oct 22	Nov 22	Dec 22	Jan 23	Feb 23	Mar 22	2022/23
Children in care team	16	15	7	16	3	8	18	9	15	8	6	11	132
Court Team	13	8	2	7	5	7	5	5	7	0	4	6	69
Children & Young Adults Disability 0 – 25 service	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Care Service – Aftercare Wycombe	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Help & Protection Aylesbury	0	1	0	0	3	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	8
Help & Protection Chilterns	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0	11
Help & Protection High Wycombe	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	5
Help and Protection Project Team	13	1	4	6	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	1	30
Social Work Academy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wycombe Assessment Team	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Aylesbury Assessment Team	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chiltern & South Bucks Assessment Team	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Children with Disabilities	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	7
UASC Team	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
Assessment Project Team	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Adoption Family Finding	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2

Figure 4



There were 23 resolutions raised under 'other' where the issue did not fit into a specific category such as: a specific request from a child, an issue relating to the intervention if an outside agency.

The majority of resolutions were raised and resolved by a Team manager at stage 1. This equates to 86%. A further 7% were raised and resolved by the social worker at the informal stage and 5% were resolved by a Head of service at stage 2. Within this reporting period there were no escalations to the Service director at stage 3 or above and no escalations to CAFCASS.

Table 20 shows the stages at which resolutions were resolved.

Table 20

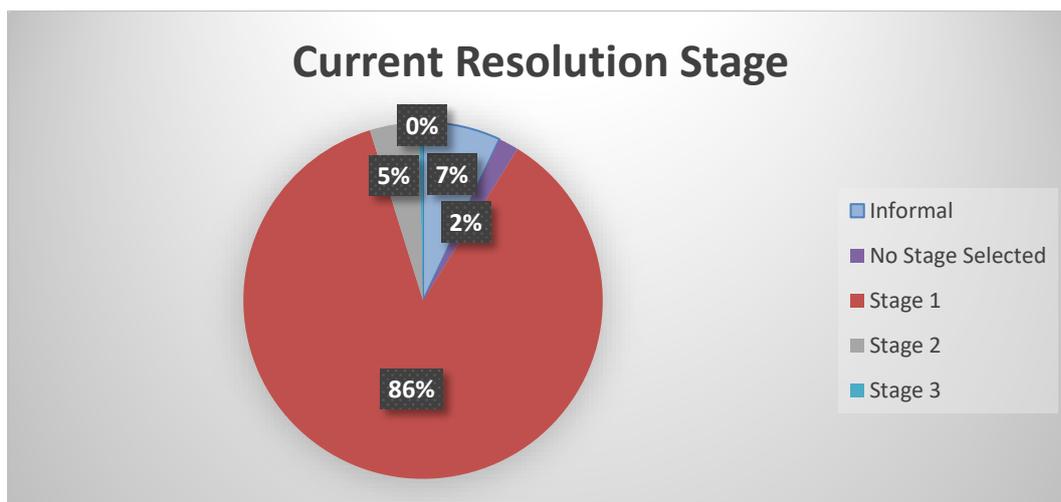
Current Resolution Stage	Apr 22	May 22	Jun 22	Jul 22	Aug 22	Sep 22	Oct 22	Nov 22	Dec 22	Jan 23	Feb 23	Mar 22	2022/23
Informal	6	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	19
No Stage Selected	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	5
Stage 1	39	14	14	31	12	16	24	24	23	10	5	23	235
Stage 2	2	2	0	0	0	2	2	1	2	1	0	0	12
Stage 3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

89 resolutions were resolved within one week and over half were resolved in less than 2 weeks. Resolutions that took over 4 weeks to resolve totalled 67, changes in social work or manager have impacted response timescales along with delay in IRO's escalating which is an area of improvement for the coming year. The IRO manager will work with managers and IRO's to improve response timeliness. See Table 21 below.

Table 21

Table 21 Resolution Duration Category	Apr22	May 22	Jun 22	Jul 22	Aug 22	Sep 22	Oct 22	Nov 22	Dec 22	Jan 23	Feb 23	Mar 22	2022/23
1 – 2 Weeks	10	9	1	5	4	1	2	9	4	2	1	3	51
2 – 3 Weeks	8	4	1	2	2	7	1	4	5	2	0	2	38
3 – 4 Weeks	7	1	1	1	9	1	1	4	1	1	0	0	27
4 Weeks+	4	3	11	1	1	3	3	9	7	8	6	11	67
Less than a Week	18	13	9	14	4	3	6	3	6	4	5	4	89

Figure 5



## Impact and Outcomes

Every child or young person who is supported by the Local Authority as a Child Looked After has had an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) allocated on the day their looked after journey began. The initial Child's Review is held within 20 working days. Second and subsequent Reviews are held within statutory timescales which the service has met. The IRO makes formal recommendations at a child's review which are shared with the social work team. All IRO recommendations made within this reporting period were agreed by the relevant Team Manager and subsequently became review decisions which were incorporated within the child's care plan and evidence IRO influence and contribution to the child's care planning process.

The IRO Service has strengthened the midway reviews by introducing a new form to the workflow on the child's electronic recording system and by implementing a formalised process. Social workers have reported this has helped to track progress of IRO review recommendations and decisions to ensure they are embedded within the child's care / pathway plan and are progressing. At the child's review the IRO's agrees a date to hold a conversation with the social worker at a midpoint between six monthly reviews to review progress. Where drift and delay is identified the IRO has the opportunity to address this at an earlier stage and set out within the mid-way review the subsequent actions required to bring the plan back into focus and also to provide a log of what the IRO intends to do themselves to ensure that they contribute to positive outcomes for the child or young person. Where appropriate the formal resolution process will be commenced following a midway review with the Social Worker.

The increase in audit activity, feedback and practice improvement sessions is helping to evidence compliance with IRO Practice standards and enable a greater level of consistency amongst IROs report writing, and documentation which is an area of continued growth within the service. The progress of the IRO service over the last year has enabled a stronger focus going forward on the participation of children, young people within their reviews and shaping of the IRO service and quality of case recording.

Case examples which demonstrate IRO impact on a child's, young person's plans

### **Participation of a child within their review meeting**

A new IRO who joined the team in September 2022 met with a 13 year old female child who did not want to engage in her reviews or planning for her future. She said, "I don't like hearing bad things or want it to be like a pity party'. The IRO explored this further and reinforced that it was her meeting and that the meeting could take place in a variety of different forms, which she could choose. The IRO explored with her what she felt a 'good meeting' would look like for her to change her mind and attend any future meetings. She discussed where she would like the Review to be held, who she wanted to attend her Review and the IRO agreed with the young person how they could contribute meaningfully. This led to the young person feeling empowered to chair her own review with appropriate support from the IRO. The meetings were led by the young person and have been a great success. This approach reinforced the importance and significance of the IRO listening to, valuing, and respecting a young person's views, wishes and feelings and led to a more meaningful experience for the young person.

### **Participation of a young person within their review meeting**

The IRO visited a 16 year old girl prior to her Review to ascertain her views, wishes and feelings. The young person took 30 minutes to come downstairs to meet with her IRO and presented as reluctant to talk. She sat on the sofa with her back to the IRO and with her hood up so there was minimal eye contact for a further 15 mins. The young person said she has previously had a number of different social workers, that she "doesn't like them' and she wouldn't be attending her Review that day. The IRO talked this through with her and reinforced that it was her meeting and together they can agree how it will be conducted. With encouragement and support from the IRO the young person agreed to stay and lead her meeting. She did a great job in chairing her Review and was really open and honest about a number of personal struggles that she was experiencing. The young person gained confidence from this experience, and she continues to make steady progress, feel better in herself and trust the support of others. Furthermore, at the most recent Review meeting, the IRO observed a noticeable difference in the young person who came downstairs after approximately 5 minutes of the IRO's arrival smiling, engaging, and offered to make her a coffee. They talked more easily with eye contact. This was the young person's last review as they were about to turn 18. She said she was "sad" that this is her final Review meeting.

### **Parent Participation within their child's review meeting.**

The IRO will consult and involve children's parents within their child's review wherever possible. The review is a process and can be held as a series of meetings. In one particular situation where the child's parents were separated and had an acrimonious relationship the IRO was proactive in involving both parents and received the feedback below from the child's father via the complaints and compliments team:

"It was agreed that all CLA meetings will be "split meetings" for both parents. Listening to my concerns I believe that the IRO had made a concerted effort to explain procedures and they organised additional meetings for me so that I could be updated and feel more involved. It appears that the IRO has swiftly obtained a good grasp of this case and is taking the role seriously for the benefit of the children. I am grateful for her efforts".

### **IRO advocacy in respect of a child wishes to make changes to their time spent with family.**

The young person's care plan set out their living arrangements to stay in a 38-week residential placement and return home to live with family at weekends and holidays. The young person shared with the IRO in his review meetings that going home to his family in the holidays was causing him extreme anxiety. The young person requested that his residential placement was extended to 52 weeks. The social worker had a different plan, but the IRO maintained their view that this was in the best interests of the child. The IRO advocated on his behalf making representations to his social worker, the manager and the placements resource panel and a 52 week placement was agreed. The young person felt listened too and is now more settled and happier in himself.

### **Professional continuity for a child from their IRO**

The IRO was a constant professional throughout this young person's care journey which started in 2020. The young person was initially placed within a residential placement and a Care Order was granted by the court. The young person was involved with the criminal justice system and parents were struggling to prevent his involvement in anti-social behaviour. Part of the permanency plan was to support the young person to develop coping strategies to self-regulate his emotions and behaviour towards others and introduce positive role models which would enable him to return to his family. Last year, after a careful transition he did return to live with his family and turns age 18 this year. The consistency of his IRO as one professional during his care period helped to support the care plan and ensure it was moving forward in the right way for the young person who continues to be doing well now he is back home where he wants to be.

### **IRO formal challenge of a child's proposed care plan**

A young mother and her baby were placed in a mother and baby foster placement. The young person had made some poor decisions which had impacted on the care of her baby. The Social work team made the decision for the young person and her baby to be separated. Both the IRO for the young person and the allocated IRO for the baby were of the same view that the young person had not been adequately supported within the mother and baby foster placement and should be given a further opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to parent within a supportive environment. The IRO for the baby utilised the formal resolution process at stage 2 to share her views that the mother and baby should not be separated until the young person had been given the opportunity to consider the impact of her decision making on her child and a full assessment of her parenting be undertaken. The IRO also requested that a child review meeting should be held to ratify any change in the care plan. The Head of Service presiding over the resolution agreed with the IRO and the young person was moved to a different placement where she was allowed to continue parenting her child whilst observations and an assessment could be safely undertaken. At time of writing, this assessment is in progress.

### **IRO strengthening the child's voice through advocacy and using the formal resolution process.**

The child who was living separate from her brother felt that her social worker talked about her brother and his views at her review. The IRO had also observed this. The young person felt that her voice did not matter. The young person was living with her foster carers and was waiting for them to be matched at foster panel as part of her permanency plan. The IRO met with the child who was able to expand on her feelings and spoke to her social worker to gain his perspective. The IRO wanted to ensure the young person felt that her voice is valued and acted upon. The IRO made a referral to NYAS (with her permission) and the advocate was swift to meet with her and help her present her view. The IRO met with the social workers manager and raised a formal IRO Resolution to address the drift and delay in progressing the young person's permanency plan. The Team Manager overseeing the resolution felt it was necessary to change the child's social worker who then swiftly progressed her permanency plan. The Young person told the IRO at her most recent review that she feels listened to, she likes her new social worker and can now focus on her GCSE exams which she is determined to pass.

### **IRO Oversight and contribution to safety planning and placement.**

The young person was aged 15 and at the point of starting his care journey he was a victim of criminal exploitation, involved with the criminal justice system and unable to live with his family. There is currently a national shortage of suitable foster and regulated residential placements for children and young people. Children under 16 years must be placed in an Ofsted regulated placement. After extensive placement searches a regulated placement could not be found. This young person had to be placed in a local unregulated placement with a high ratio of staffing support and a deprivation of liberty safeguard in place. The IRO supported the safety planning arrangements and contributed to regular risk management meetings. He supported the writing of an accurate balanced placement referral for the young person to accurately reflect the child's strengths, managed risks and support needs. Whilst this was not an ideal, the IRO added professional oversight and capacity of support to a situation that enabled the young person to remain safe. The young person did become more settled and has nearly completed a level 2 Gym Instructors Course and for the first time is considering college.

### **IRO advocating for resources to support the child's care plan.**

The IRO made review recommendations that a child required life story work to help them make sense of why they were no longer able to live with their birth family and support them settling with their foster carers. These review decisions became part of the child's care plan. Progressing this was delayed due to life story worker recruitment issues. The IRO advocated the need to commission this service given the delay and impact on the child's emotional health and placement stability. This was supported by the Team Manager overseeing the care plan. The work has subsequently started, and the child's carer reports this has made a significant difference to how the child feels in herself, she has a better understanding why she is unable to live with her birth family and feels reassured about her permanency plan.

### **IRO using the children's review to support family reunification**

The IRO supported two young people to realise their wish to return home. Their mother had demonstrated sustained changes to her personal situation and was safely parenting younger siblings. The IRO used the Childrens Reviewing process to recommend an assessment of their mother's suitability to parent was completed and this informed their care plan and ultimately led to successful reunification with the children's mother that is now supported by a Supervision Order. This was a good example of partnership working with a parent, a proactive social worker, their manager and a close working relationship fostered by the IRO.

**IRO consistent support to a child / young person noted by a foster carer via a compliment sent to the Director of Childrens Social care.**

"As a foster carer I felt compelled to write, to tell you how grateful my husband and I are for the support, advice and hard work provided by the IRO - she has been outstanding. Since she first became our child's IRO, until today, our child's final CLA Review before her 18th birthday, the IRO's support has been unwavering. My husband and I have benefited from her guidance and advice and this has been invaluable over the years and we are extremely grateful for everything she has helped us to achieve for our young person.

Equally, the benefit that our young person has received from her IRO's constant enthusiasm, interest and presence in her life is immeasurable. In the time she has been Looked After, the IRO has been the only constant from within Buckinghamshire and this has without doubt contributed to the security that our young person has felt in our care.

In short, the IRO has made such a difference to our young person's experience of being a Buckinghamshire Looked After Child and we cannot thank her enough.

## **Feedback**

### **What people who have taken part in a child's review have said about the IRO Service**

'I am happy to take part in my review meeting and I feel supported to attend the review meeting. The reviewing officer will ask to see me, prior to the meeting, if I want to see him independently to talk any issues/concerns without the presence of carers and professionals. I choose not to have a separate meeting with IRO'. (Child)

We feel very well supported by our IRO who is helping us through some challenging times. His knowledge, understanding and advice is invaluable and we are grateful for his support and guidance. (Professional Colleague)

I have attended every review for my son. We have had 7 Social Workers, various carers/residential placements. Myself and the IRO have been constant. The IRO listens to everyone's views, has made herself readily available to my son who has regularly called his own meetings. She accurately records the meeting and always hears the concerns that are raised and puts an action plan in place. The IRO is easy to talk to and my son has built a good relationship with her. (Parent)

The review was well organised which allowed all professionals to be able to send in their report in time for the meeting. (Professional Colleague)

The IRO was excellent. Some of the agencies involved in the care of my son have been well intentioned but often not following through on actions agreed and we have been left 'dangling' not knowing what to do next. If she continues as she started, my son has a chance. (Parent)

I am settled in the placement and everyone is supportive. My review meeting went really well and I get good support in placement and school. I feel able to speak to the reviewing officer if I have any concerns and worries. I have the reviewing officers contact number if I need to speak to him. (child)

I feel happy the way meeting conducted. The reviewing officer gave time to speak my voice. I do not want to change anything. (child)

## Appendix 1

### 1) Independent Reviewing Officer Practice Standards



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## Appendix 2

### 2) Independent Reviewing Officer Dispute Resolution policy



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## Appendix 3

### 3) Independent Reviewing Officers dip sample audit tool.



IRO dip sample  
template 22.23.pdf