

Independent Reviewing Service

Annual report 2020- 2021

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The IRO Handbook (2010) is the statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review of children and young people in care. It states that the IRO Manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Board. It should also be available to the public on the Council website.
- 1.2 This report covers the period from April 2020 – March 2021. This is the 11th annual report.
- 1.3 The Safeguarding Service is based at the Priory Green Building in Pendeford, Wolverhampton. However, between April 2020 – March 2021, staff have been working from home due to the covid pandemic. Most of the team had a mixed caseload of Children in Care and Child Protection, with only three of the IROs holding a solely Children in Care caseload.
- 1.4 The IRO service in Wolverhampton consists of:
 - Rachel King Head of Service
 - Sonia Mahay Service Manager
 - Sarah Hartill Team Manager
 - 10.5 FTE IRO's

The management of the IRO team provides supervision to the IROs and responsibility for the team. The Safeguarding Service Manager also manages the Independent Foster Home Reviewing Officers.

- 1.5 The IROs have a key role in assuring the quality of the care planning for children and young people in our care. This report provides an opportunity to highlight areas of good practice, areas for improvement, identify emerging themes and trends. The report will set out the work undertaken to date and outline the service development priorities for the coming twelve months.

2. Purpose of service and legal context

- 2.1 Legislation for the reviewing of children and young people in care is supported by detailed guidance which informs the planning in Wolverhampton. The guidance includes Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and the IRO Handbook. The IRO Handbook states that the statutory duties of the IRO are to:

- monitor the Local Authority's performance of their functions in relation to the child's case;
- participate in any review of the child's case;
- ensure any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority;

- 2.2 The IRO service has an important quality assurance role as outlined in the IRO Handbook: *'As part of the monitoring function, the IRO also has a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority's function as a corporate parent and to identify any areas of poor practice. This should include identifying patterns of concern emerging not just around individual children but also more generally in relation to the collective experience of its looked after children of the services they receive. Where IROs identify more general concerns around the quality of the authority's services to its looked after children, the IRO should immediately alert senior managers about these. Equally important, the IRO should recognise and report on good practice'*.

- 2.3 All children and young people in care, including children who are in an adoptive placement prior to an adoption order, are covered by the legislation. This applies to all children who are the subject of a Care Order (under section 31 of the Children Act 1989), or who are voluntarily

accommodated for a period of more than 24 hours (section 20 of the Children Act 1989), including in Short Break Care, or who are placed for adoption under the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Also, those who are in care because they are remanded by the court to local authority accommodation. These young people require an allocated IRO and reviews in their place of custody.

3. The service

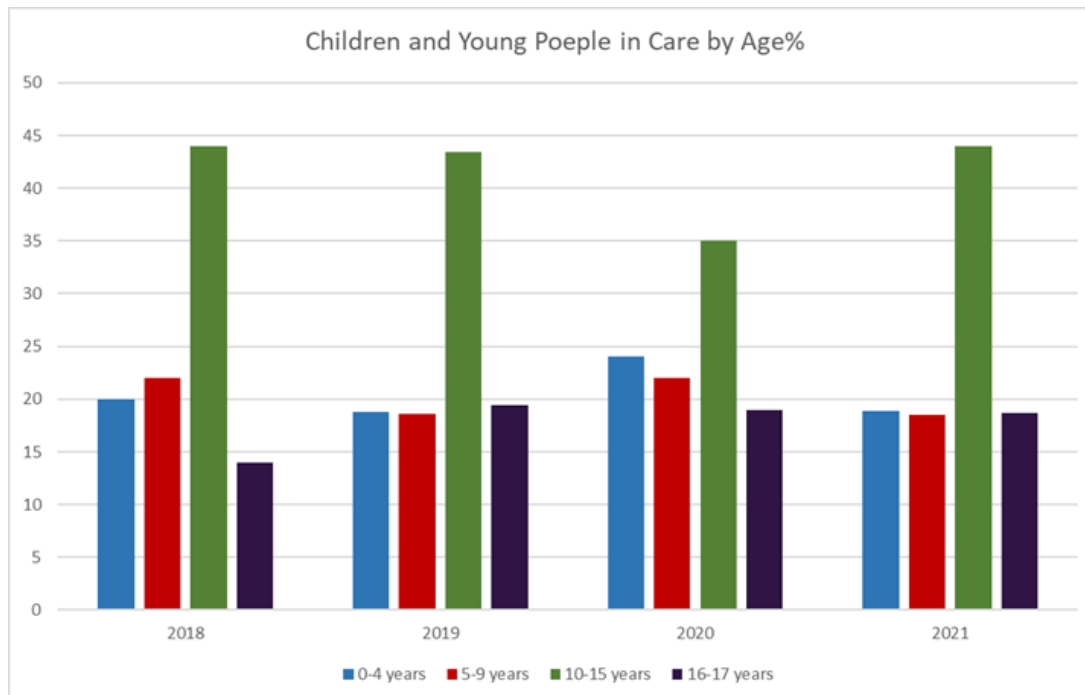
- 3.1 The Service had an establishment of 10.5 FTE IRO's at March 2021. The service had additional support from agency workers during this time owing to long term sickness and vacancies during April 2020 – March 2021. During this period the Safeguarding Service created a full time Team Manager post to support the service and successfully recruited to the vacancy. There have been some staff changes and it remains an experienced team; some of whom have worked for Wolverhampton for many years, meaning some IROs have been consistently involved with the same young people. The IROs have a range of experiences and backgrounds which is an asset to the service .
- 3.2 The IRO Handbook recommends IRO caseloads of 50 – 70 children per IRO. The average caseload, including children and young people in care, children on a child protection plan, and those receiving care through short breaks (Section 20), was 66 children on 31 March 2021. This compares to 77 in March 2020. The reduction is owing to additional support being provided via agency workers to cover long term sickness and the reduction of children and young people in care. Most of the team had a mixed caseload of Children in Care and Child Protection, with only three of the IROs holding a solely Children in Care caseload. The makeup of caseloads is regularly reviewed and a priority for 2021/2022 is that all staff members undertake the dual role to ensure fair and consistent caseloads across the service.
- 3.3 In terms of diversity, the profile of the team is representative of a range of ethnicity and cultural backgrounds (60% white British, 30% Asian, 10% black/British/African/Caribbean). The children and young people in care of Wolverhampton were from the following backgrounds during 2020-2021: 57% white

British, 5% Asian, 10% black/British/African/Caribbean, 9% mixed white/black African/Caribbean, 2% mixed white/Asian, 17% other .

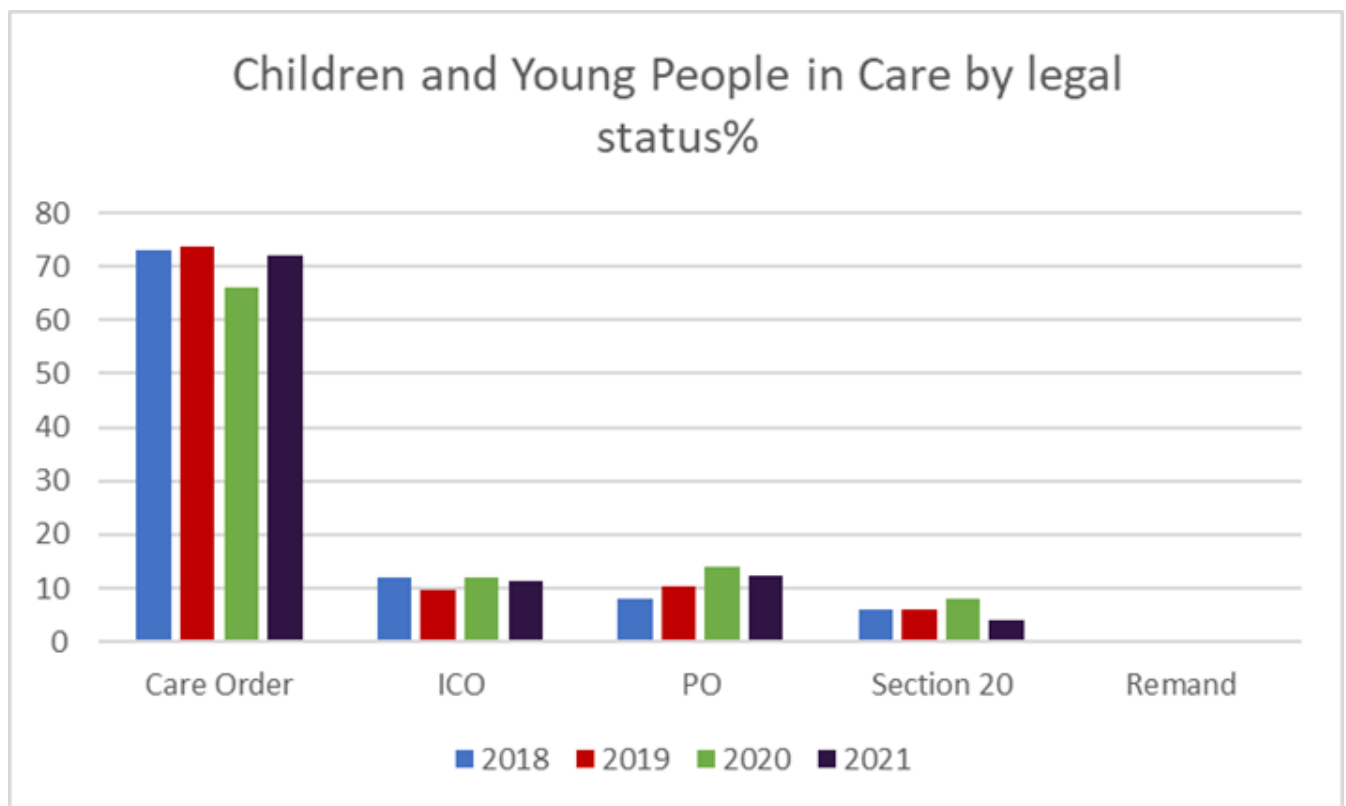
3.4 There was a new management system (ECLIPSE) implemented in September 2020. Since the launch of Eclipse there has there been recording and inputting errors on Eclipse which has impacted performance. Throughout the last two quarters we have worked with colleagues in Insight and Performance to address these issues, but this has impacted on data between September 2020 – March 2021. In 2021-22, we will be continuing to improve our data collection and performance management information.

4. Our Children and Young People in Care population.

4.1 There were 541 children and young people in care as of 31.3.21, compared to 588 in 2020. The total number of children who were in care between 01.04.20 – 31.03.21 was 684. Of these 317/46% were female (344/46% in 2019) and 367/54% were male (398/54% in 2019). The charts below show the percentage of children in care by age . The data shows an increase in the numbers of 10-15-year-olds in care from 2020, and a reduction in the other age groups.



4.2 As of 31.3.21 in relation to legal status, the chart below shows the percentage of all children remaining subject to Care Orders has slightly decreased, this is owing to an increase of other orders being granted at the final hearing such as Child Arrangement Orders. Children and Young People subject to care proceedings, Interim Care Orders and Placement Orders has decreased, as has the number of children placed under Section 20 agreements. The decreased use of Section 20 and Interim Care Orders, alongside there being no children who exited then returned to care, evidences social work teams are safely and effectively reducing the number of children who need to be in care. There were two young people on remand.



5. Our IRO service

5.1 The local authority is required to carry out review meetings in line with timings specified in the Regulations [regulation 33]:

- the first review of a child's case within 20 working days of the date on which the child becomes looked after;
- the second review no more than three months after the first;
- the third and subsequent reviews no more than six months after the previous one;
- a review whenever the IRO directs; and

- a review in all other circumstances as specified in the Regulations.
- 5.2 On 31 March 2021, 99% of all children had an update review (97% in 2020). This shows a good increase in performance from the previous year.
- 5.3 An IRO is allocated to all children and young people in care within 24 hours of the Safeguarding Service being informed of that child's entry into care. Information is sent to the child via a letter. Children can also make direct contact with their IRO by calling, by text or by email. Further work is still underway to develop consultation tools suitable for children with disabilities, which has been difficult to achieve due to a lack of access to suitable computer programs within the council. However, as part of work aimed at developing child friendly reviews, some positive work has been undertaken to ensure children with disabilities and those with limited communication are able to participate within their review. Software is being purchased to support the inclusion of children with disabilities.
- 5.4 The majority of brothers and sisters, whether placed together or not, are allocated to the same IRO. This ensures consistency of information exchange, oversight of care planning and decision-making, including sibling contact, and is particularly of benefit when children have different social workers.
- 5.5 The involvement of children in their own reviews is regarded as an essential part of the process. *'A key task for the IRO will be to ensure that the review processes, and particularly review meetings, remain child and family centred'* (IRO Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002.) The IRO has an important role in ensuring that the child:
- can make a meaningful contribution to their review;
 - speaks for themselves if they are able and willing to do so; and where this is not possible that their views are conveyed by someone else on their behalf or by an appropriate medium; and
 - has been given the opportunity to make a written contribution to the meeting, particularly if they have chosen not to attend or are unable to attend for some other reason.

- 5.6 The recorded achievement in this area of activity is also a measure of local authority performance. As of 31 March 2021, 92% of children had participated in their review. This was the same in 2020 .
- 5.7 The IRO is required to speak with the child alone prior to the first review and before every subsequent review (regulation 36). The requirement for direct contact with the child extends to observation of babies and younger children. In person visits have been limited during this period owing to lockdown restrictions and the impact of Covid-19, therefore communication has been more creative. In person visits have been completed to children and young people who required a visits during this time.
- 5.8 The Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002, states that *‘The IRO has an important role in ensuring that all parties to the review are able to make an effective contribution.’* In order to assist in this aim, age appropriate consultation papers continue to be sent to the child/young person, and carers, prior to a review. The child’s consultation paper provides the IRO with an overview of the child’s feelings about the various aspects of their care and the services he/she is receiving; and assists the IRO in ensuring the child’s voice is heard. Work has been undertaken to giving children choices about how to prepare and participate in their reviews. This approach has been rolled out but hindered by the impact of Covid-19 limiting in-person contact. This is an area the service is keen to progress moving forward. Although, reviews have been virtual during this period, creative reviews have still taken place, for example, PJ party reviews, tea parties, dressing up. The IROs now record the reviews by way of writing to the child so when children want to access their records they will be child focused , written to them, they will be able to understand them and the record forms a part of their life journey work.

Example:

“The Young Person was encouraged to help write his report and his views were captured well, this enabled the meeting to focus on his achievements and the Young Person showed us his ‘world map’ picture, his Lego constructions and a picture of the 16lb carp he caught, he told us he enjoyed his meeting by video and would choose this again in the future”.

- 5.9 IROs continue to work hard to involve parents in their children’s reviews, albeit sometimes this means consultations take place by telephone discussion or separate meetings. Social Workers and IROs need to ensure they are providing this option of participation to parents. Monitoring participation of parents and improving parental engagement will be an area of focus moving forward.
- 5.10 There were no children and young reviewed under the Short Break Statutory Guidance (Section 20(4) of the Children Act 1989) in 2020/21 (0 in 2019/20) as they are reviewed by Disabled Childrens and Young People team as there brakes are under 75 overnights a year and for those over 75 overnights they are in care.
- 5.11 The IRO service have received no complaints and one registered compliment between April 2020-March 2021 . However, compliments have been received via other avenues, such as the Director of Children’s Services (DCS) regular newsletter called the “Round Up”, which goes out to all colleagues in the Children and Young People’s Service, detailing good practice.

Example:

“I feel that you were a good support, compassionate, empathetic and a very fair IRO. Your grasp of these children and their needs was very intuitive and was always at the forefront of your mind. I have always found you approachable but very professional at the same time”

“IRO was very child friendly and really engaged well with the young person and they usually struggle with new professionals but the IRO was brilliant”

“The day after the review the carer phoned me to say that they really appreciated the IROs approach within the review as it had put the young person at ease in what can sometimes be a daunting experience. The child has complex needs and the carer felt that IRO was sensitive to these. The IRO also asked the child a number of “fun” questions and had taken the time to read about her likes/dislikes which was nice to see”

“I have seen the IRO explain some difficult things to children so well. The IRO has a real natural ability to explain things in a child friendly and warm manner that I don’t think should go unrecognised”

- 5.12 The IRO service continue to explore ways to gain feedback from children about their experience of reviews and their IRO. Further work needs to be undertaken to find a way to

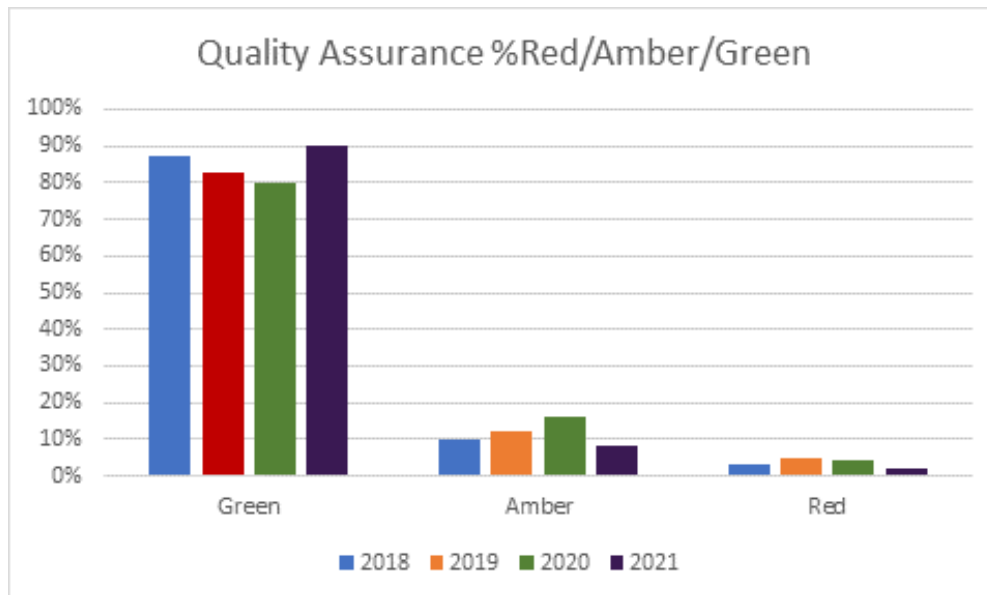
routinely gain this feedback . The team manager and participation officer will be exploring ways to gain feedback and strengthen this area of practice. In addition, when compliments are received, the Service Manager will ensure these are officially reported to 'Have Your Say'.

6. Conduct of the organisation in relation to the review

6.1 The IROs quality assure each child's case at every review which include the following:

- Quality of preparation for review by social worker, including report preparation, preparation of the child/young person and sign off by manager,
- Quality of care planning, including how up to date the care plan is,
- Quality of contribution by the child/ young person and other attendees, to review,

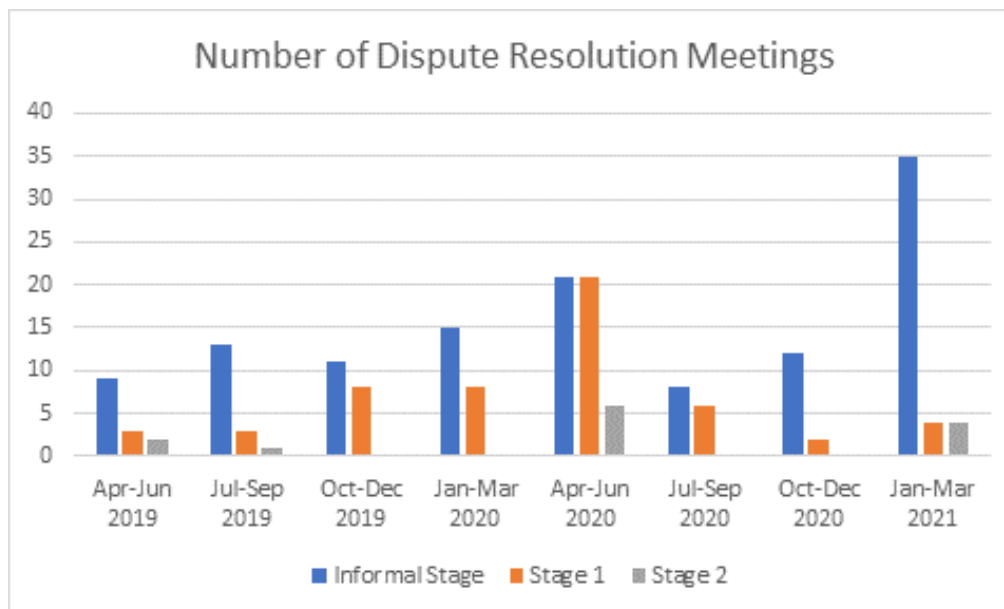
6.2 The RAG (Red/Amber/Green) quality rating system, in respect of reviews, including the progress of plans, preparation for the meeting and the quality of reports, has been used consistently in Wolverhampton since August 2014. In 2020-21, RAG ratings were issued in relation to 1292 reviews (1501 in 2019-20). The chart below compares ratings over the last four years. This shows an increase in Green RAGs being issued and slight reduction in Ambers and Reds, suggesting an increase in good quality Care Planning.



6.3 Following a review the IRO will rate the care planning the child is receiving as Green, Amber or Red. Green indicates that there is good the care planning. If Amber or Red,

this indicates that there are concerns with care planning and the IRO will raise a dispute resolution in keeping with the severity of the concerns. Ambers and Reds generate an informal dispute discussion record, this process was introduced in the last quarter to ensure that it is detailed how the concerns have been addressed and the agreed action. If not addressed or if the IRO deems that formal dispute is required, this will be expedited.

- 6.4 During 2020-21, 43 formal dispute resolutions were implemented in Wolverhampton. This protocol commences when the IRO identifies serious concerns about drift or delay in a child's care plan and is unable to resolve the difficulty with the social worker or their manager. The table below shows the breakdown of the use of dispute resolution and demonstrates that IROs are exerting effective challenge of the Local Authority regarding care planning for children where there is serious concern or delay, and that escalation continues to the next stage where matters are not resolved. It would be expected for most disputes to be resolved at the informal stage by the IRO and Team Manager.



Some children and young people have been discussed at both informal and formal stage as per escalation through the dispute resolution process. While there has been an increase in formal disputes, this was expected given Ambers and Reds rag ratings generate an informal dispute discussion record. This process was introduced to ensure that it is detailed how the concerns have been addressed and the agreed action. Also,

this provides consistent recording and tracking of the outcomes of informal stage discussions, which has led to the increase in the formal stages meaning that concerns that have not been addressed are escalated. Concerns that have arisen have been in respect of permanence planning, life story, family time arrangements, care planning, drift and delay, care and living arrangements. A focus for 2021-2022, is reviewing the Dispute Resolution policy as well as the recording of Dispute Resolutions to enable effective tracking of resolutions.

Examples:

The IRO had raised concerns about the care of a child , following the DR process the child was moved and now thriving in the care of another family member.

IRO raised concerns about life story work not being completed , this was actioned and explored with the young person.

IRO raised concerns about adoption planning, this was addressed resulting in a positive plan for the child.

6.5 Quality assurance forms are also completed following the review, reports are now available on the findings of quality assurance work, which means the service is able to identify trends and patterns of practice and bring them to the attention of Children's Social Care. The Safeguarding Manager provides a report to the Children and Young People's Management Team on a quarterly basis, highlighting areas of good practice and areas for concern and action. Below details key themes identified in the quarter prior to eclipse implementation:

- There has been an increase in performance of Social Worker's preparation for reviews, with pre-review consultations with parents/carers and child slightly increasing.
- There has been an improvement in the quality of Social Worker's reports to review, and an increase of the reports being completed and authorised within timescale.

- There has been a slight increase in Social Work assessments being completed to evidence progress of the Care Plan. The assurance that the Care Plan has progressed in terms of other actions, and that the family time arrangements meet the needs of the child has remained static since the previous quarter.
- There has been a slight decline in evidence that actions to progress permanence plans have been taken and a slight decrease in permanence planning meetings having taken place before the second review. There has also been a slight decrease in actions to undertake Life Story work. This is most likely a reflection of the difficulty overall in progressing permanence plans during Covid which included court delays.

6.6 The IROs complete a Recognition of Excellent or Good Practice notification when there is evidence of high-quality practice. 28 notifications were awarded in 2020-2021 (a decrease from 44 in 2019-2020) again this figure is likely to be impacted by good practice shared via the round up.

Examples:

“Social Worker demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the law and asylum processes and has the ability to empathise and support the young person”

“Good preparation for a Child in Care review; Social Worker had sought the child’s views and the report to the review was co-produced with the child. Child was well prepared to participate in his virtual review”

“Social Worker preparing a child for their ‘virtual review’ and ensuring the review had a celebratory feel; supporting the child to participate in the review. Progressing life story work and permanence actions for linking and matching”

6.7 The IRO service promotes good practice across Children's Service and has implemented a training programme available to all Social Work staff. Sessions are delivered regarding best practice for Social Workers in relation to Child Protection Conferences and Child and Young Person in Care Reviews. These sessions are offered on a quarterly basis and delivered jointly with Advanced Practitioners; the training has been well received particularly by newly qualified Social Workers. Training is also now being offered by the Team to partner agencies in relation to their contribution at Child Protection Conferences.

6.8 Wolverhampton IRO service attends the regional IRO Practice Share meetings on a quarterly basis with a number of West Midlands Local Authorities. These meetings have provided good opportunities for IROs to network and share ideas for practice improvement.

7. Any resource issues that are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service

7.1 The year 2020-21 has been greatly impacted by the global pandemic, this has had an impact of work that has been completed by service from in person to virtual. Whilst the service adapted to the circumstances, the absence of physical human connection has impacted on seeing our children and young people and wellbeing of our staff.

7.2 Annual observations of IROs chairing a review and feedback being obtained directly from the child and parent where appropriate, has not taken place in 2020/2021 owing to capacity. This is an area that will be a focus for 2020/2021.

8. Review of last year's priority areas for improvement and action

8.1 Develop a system for routinely obtaining feedback about IROs and the function of reviews from children, Social Workers and other professionals. This report details that this is an area that is being progressed by the team manager and the Participation Officer.

8.2 Measure the impact of the roll out of the refreshed approach to reviews, particularly in terms of participation and creativity. This work is in progress, the roll out of the CAYPIC review approach was impacted by Covid-19 restrictions, which resulted in a complete

change in practice . However, the Review Steering Group has been re-established and this will be progressed in 2021/2022.

- 8.3 Measure the impact of the use of technology for increasing child and parental participation in reviews. Virtual working was accelerated as a consequence of Covid-19 , virtual reviews have been well received although virtual working has at times been wearing, it is felt that a blended approach would be positive moving forward.
- 8.4 Continue work on developing bespoke resources for children in care who have a disability to enable their participation in reviews. Software is being obtained in order for the information to be given to young people in easy read, once this is available bespoke resources will be produced.
- 8.5 Monitoring the impact of the Dispute Resolution process and ensure recurring themes are reported to Heads of Service. The dispute resolution process continues to be monitored and themes are reported to managers, work is going to completed to review the policy and procedure in 2021/2022.

9. Priorities for 2021/2022

- Moving to a hybrid approach where children and young people are seen in person as well as sometimes virtually.
- Routinely obtain feedback about IROs and the quality of reviews from children, Social Workers and other professionals.
- Relaunch the refreshed approach to reviews to increase levels of participation and promote creativity.
- Continue work on developing bespoke resources for children in care who have a disability to enable their participation in reviews.

- Review the Dispute Resolution process, including evidencing the effectiveness for children and young people and ensure recurring themes are reported to senior managers.
- Continued development of the use of performance information and observations to improve practice both within the service and across children services.
- Monitoring participation of parents and improving parental engagement.
- Even distribution of workloads, having mixed and manageable caseloads for all staff (CP and CAYPIC), which is regularly reviewed to allow for positive outcomes for children to be achieved.

10. Conclusion.

- 10.1 This report has highlighted the work of the IROs in Wolverhampton from April 2020 to March 2021 and is an update on the last annual report.
- 10.2 The service continues to work to improve child participation and consultation, for children with a range of needs and circumstances and will support the roll out of the revised model for reviews across the Social Work Teams.
- 10.3 The next report will cover the period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.