

# Independent Reviewing Service

## Annual report 2021 - 2022

## 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 2021 – March 2022. This is the 12th annual report.

1.3 The IRO service in Wolverhampton consists of:

- Rachel King Head of Service
- Sonia Mahay Service Manager
- Sarah Hartill Team Manager
- Sylvia Young Team Manager
- 9.5 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 and Exploitation Service.

1.4 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 9.5 FTE IRO's at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. The service had additional support from agency workers during this time owing to long term sickness. 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 circa 85 children on 31 March 2022. This compares to 66 in March 2020. The increase is due to the implementation of the priority in last Annual Report (2020/2021) that all staff members undertake the dual role to ensure fair and consistent caseloads across the service.

3.3 The tables below reflect the demographics of the Children in Care (Table 1) as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 and the IRO/CP Chairs (Table 2).

Table 1:

Ethnic Group	CYPIC Cohort
White: British	58.7%
Mixed: White and Black Caribbean	10.1%
Black: Caribbean	5.2%
Other: Any other ethnic group	5.0%
Mixed: Other Mixed	3.7%
Black: African	3.5%
Mixed: White and Asian	2.5%
Asian: Indian	1.9%
White: Other White	1.9%
Mixed: White and Black African	1.9%
Asian: Other Asian	1.6%
Asian: Pakistani	1.6%
Other: Arab	1.2%
Black: Other Black	1.0%
White: Irish	0.2%

Tabel 2:

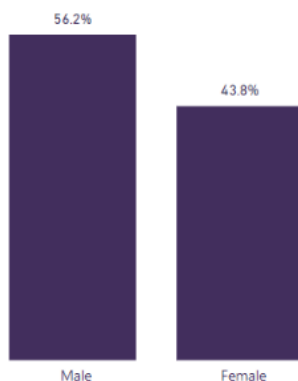
	Percentage
Asian	9.09%
Black	9.09%
Mixed	9.09%
Not Stated or Other	18.18%
White	54.55%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

3.4 The Annual Report 2020/2021 highlighted that a new management system (ECLIPSE) was implemented in September 2020, there was recording and inputting errors on Eclipse which impacted performance reporting. Throughout 2021/2022 we have worked with colleagues in Data & Analytics team to address these issues and performance reporting has improved. In 2022-2023, we will be continuing to improve our data collection and performance management information.

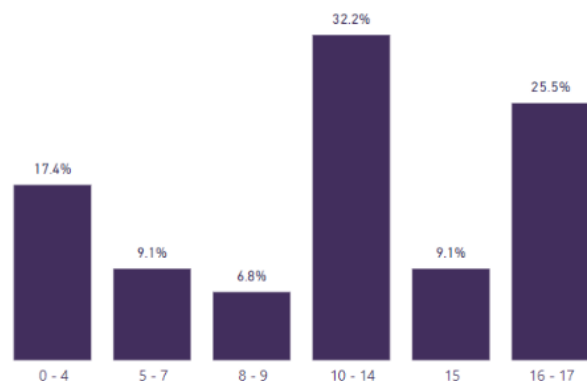
#### 4. Our Children and Young People in Care population.

4.1 There were 522 children and young people in care as of 31/03/22, compared to 541 in 2021. Of the children in care at the end of the 2021/22 year, 44% were female and 56% were male, a change from 46% female and 54% male at the end of the previous year.

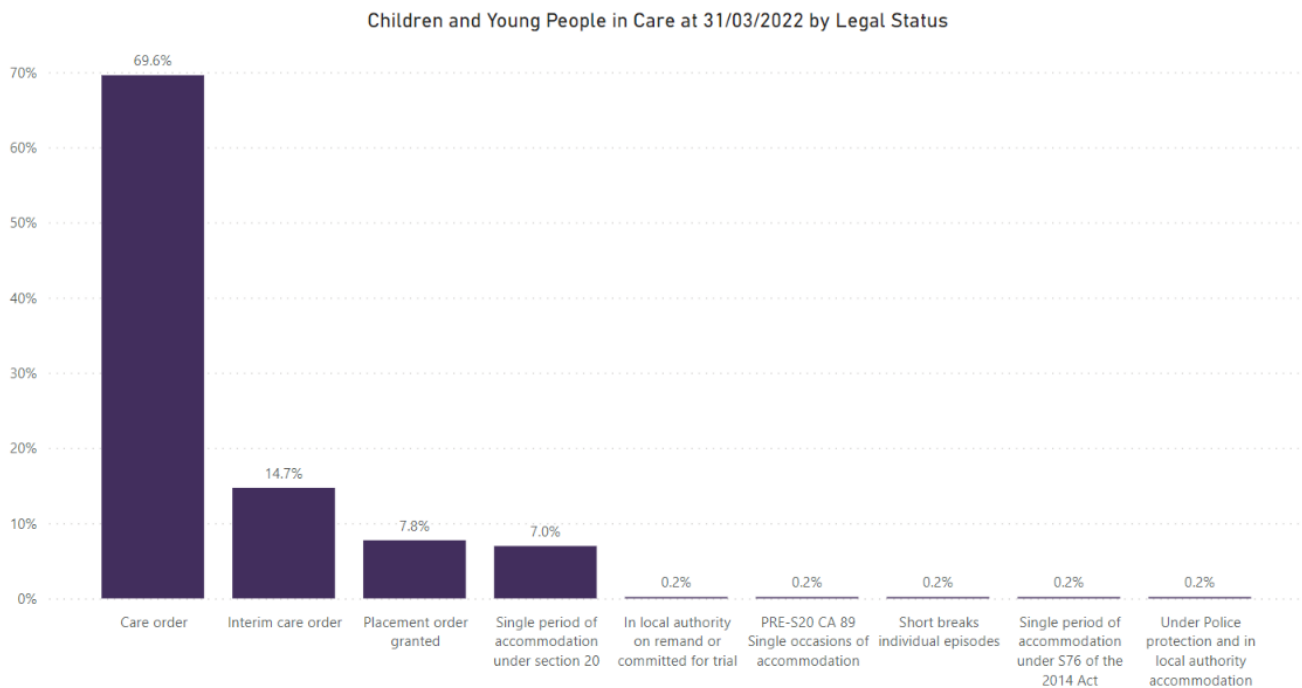
Children and Young People in Care at 31/03/2022 by Gender



Children and Young People in Care at 31/03/2022 by Age Group



4.2 As of 31/03/2022, the breakdown of legal status for children and young people in care showed that there had been a 3.7% decrease from the previous year to 69.6% in the proportion with a care order, also a decrease of 4% in the percentage with a placement order. The percentage with an interim care order increased from 10.5% to 14.7% at the end of the 2021-22 year with the proportion with placed under section 20 more than doubling from 3.3% to 7%.



## 5. Our IRO service

5.1 The local authority is required to carry out review meetings in line with timings specified in the Regulations [regulation33]:

- 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.

5.3 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, 99.8% of all children and young people in care had an update review (99% in 2021). The lowest percentage recorded in the 2021-22 year was September 2021 with

95.1% of children and young people in care with an up to date review, this shows the improvements made to continue with consistent positive performance in this area. 84% of reviews had been completed in timescale for those that were completed in the year.

5.4 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 and a letter is now sent to the allocated Social Worker explaining the process. Children can make direct contact with their IRO by calling, by text or by email. During 2021/2022 we have developed online consultation forms and online feedback forms. Further work is 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, software has now been purchased to support the inclusion of children with disabilities. We will develop consultation forms using this software and promote the use of the online forms created in 2022/2023.

5.5 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.

5.6 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.

5.7 The recorded achievement in this area of activity is also a measure of local authority performance. For the review meetings that took place in the 2021-22 year, 98.3% of children had participated in their review, a notable improvement from 92% seen in the previous year.

5.8 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 and reviews have increased during 2021/2022 compared to 2020/2021 which was limited during owing to the impact of Covid-19, we have made requests to Data & Analytics team, so we are able to track this moving forward.

5.9 In March 2022 , two Apprentice Participation Officers completed an audit of a selection of IRO records. They advised they loved the records where they got a feel for the young person. They were really positive about the review records that explained how the child was in the review, they shared how amazing it would be to read about them as a baby babbling through a review or having cuddles. They were complimentary about reviews that are concise, clear, and easy to read. They found some of the reviews were too long for them to read as adults, if they are too long a young person is unlikely to be engaged by them. All the review records both addressed problems and celebrated achievements. Some were more balanced than others. They explained that it would be important for the young person to feel a connection to the IRO from reading the record and feel good about themselves. All the records were written to the young person, which the service feel is an amazing achievement and evidence the commitment to keeping the young person at the centre of what we do.

5.10 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.

5.11 There was one child reviewed under the Short Break Statutory Guidance (Section 20(4) of the Children Act 1989) in 2021/2022 (0 in 2020/2021) 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.



5.12 The Safeguarding service have received no complaints and 14 compliments for 2021/2022 compared to no complaints and one compliment in 2020/2021. 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 and direct emails to the service.

**Examples:**

*'The IRO chaired the meeting well, they encouraged positive and meaningful engagement from everybody throughout the review. Information was clarified to make sure mother understood everything that was being said. The IRO had an ongoing focus on information which would be useful for permanence planning / later in life work. Particular attention was paid to the child being the focus of the review, the progress they are making and the progress of the care plan'*

*'The IRO's minutes were excellent and really pleased that when the IRO writes they talk to the child or young person'*

*'An IRO received praise from Social Worker on a Child in Care review, advising 'how the child in care review was chaired, by having all parties present including birth parents and addressing all areas of the childcare plan in a balanced and sensitive approach. The IRO addressed complex areas on health, development, and education for the children and how as professionals we aim to work in a collaborative approach with birth parents to progress care planning to give children the best possible outcomes'*

The IRO service continue to explore ways to gain feedback from children about their experience of reviews and their IRO. Online feedback forms have been developed for children and young people.

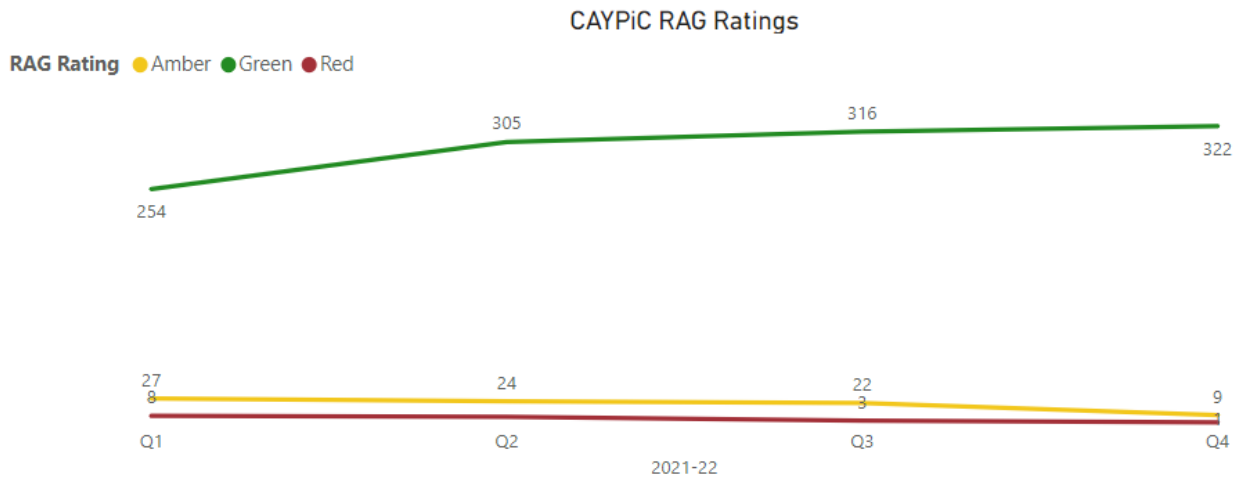
## **6. Conduct of the organisation in relation to the review**

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 Quality assurance forms are completed following the review .The RAG (Red/Amber/Green) quality rating system, in respect of reviews, including the progress of plans, preparation for the

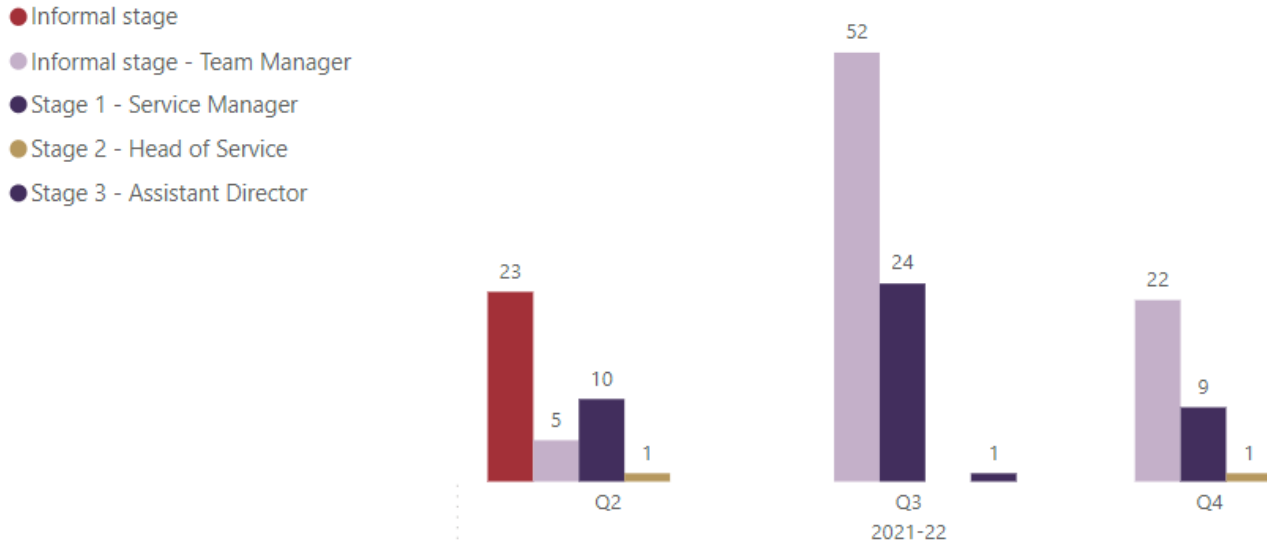
meeting and the quality of reports, has been used consistently in Wolverhampton since August 2014. In 2021-22, RAG ratings were issued in relation to 1298 reviews, a slight increase from 1292 in 2020-21. 92% were Green, 6.5% Amber and 1.5% Red. The graph below shows an increase in the proportion rated Green and a reduction in the percentage rated Amber or Red throughout the 2021/22 year.



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 resolution in keeping with the severity of the concerns. Ambers and Reds generate an informal resloution discussion recorrd. If not addressed or if the IRO deems that formal dispute is required, this will be expedited.

6.4 During 2021-22, 46 formal resolutions were implemented in Wolverhampton, an increase of 3 from the previous year. This was made up of 43 at Stage 1 (Service Manager), 2 Stage 2 (Head of Service) and 1 Stage 3 (Assistant Director). 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 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, this reflected in graph below.

### Dispute Resolution Meetings



Some children and young people have been discussed at both informal and formal stage as per escalation through the resolution process. While there has been an increase in formal disputes, this was expected given Ambers and Reds rag ratings generate an informal resolution 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 was to review the Dispute Resolution policy as well as the recording of Dispute Resolutions to enable effective tracking of resolutions by the IRO's. The Policy has been reviewed and update the title of the procedure has been renamed to Resolution Procedure this to reflect our restorative practice and encompasses what we want to achieve for our children and families which is a resolution.

6.5 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. Service Managers meet to discuss the findings and key themes that arise from resolution meetings and follow up actions, below details some key themes and outcomes discussed in 2021/2022 :

- The review process not being followed on Eclipse which was impacting on plans and reports being completed. There has been multiple meetings with Data & Analytics team, changes have now been made and performance has increased and will continue to be monitored.
- Reviews being held in timescales and progression of care plans has been impacted by staffing. There has been recruitment of staff in the service.
- Reports not being authorised in advance of reviews. Service Managers have raised this at managers meetings with team managers and this will continue to be monitored.
- Personal Educational Plan's (PEP) not being completed, this has improved at the time of writing this report they are at 93% completed with actions in place to address outstanding peps.
- Later life letters and life story work, the service now have a plan in place to address this and are launching a revised policy in respect of life story work.

6.6 The IROs complete a Recognition of Excellent or Good Practice notification when there is evidence of high-quality practice. 33 notifications were awarded in 2021-2022 (an increase from 28 in 2020/2021).

*Examples:*

*'Young person shared that his YPA has a 'good reputation' amongst his friends, he is always there to support them 'and it's genuine, because they cares, not because they are being paid, when you don't have your parents, you want someone like them'*

*'The children's lived experiences were well captured and despite the complexities in play. The social worker evidenced working restoratively with the parents while keeping the focus firmly on the children's needs'*

'Recognition of a Social Worker's ability to effectively progressed the plans for the children and family'

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.

## **8. Any resource issues that are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service**

8.1 The safeguarding service and children's services has experienced staffing and sickness issues in 2021/2022 which is line with national issues regarding staffing, this has impacted on timeliness of some reviews and progression of care plans. As discussed above the Service Managers meet to regularly discuss issues and agency staff have been appointed to limit the impact on children and families.

8.2 Annual observations of IROs chairing a review and feedback being obtained directly from the child and parent where appropriate, has began but was not fully completed in 2020/2021 owing to capacity, this will be progressed in 2022/2023.

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

- Moving to a hybrid approach where children and young people are seen in person as well as sometimes virtually. Our operating model has been updated to reflect a hybrid approach.
- Routinely obtain feedback about IROs and the quality of reviews from children, Social Workers and other professionals. Practice weeks have included observations of reviews which include feedback from attendees. We have developed an online consultation forms for children and young people these will continued promoted.
- Relaunch the refreshed approach to reviews to increase levels of participation and promote creativity. This has taken place refresher sessions have been delivered to teams..
- Continue work on developing bespoke resources for children in care who have a disability to enable their participation in reviews. The software has now been purchased we will look at creating resources in 2022/2023.
- Review the Dispute Resolution process, including evidencing the effectiveness for children and young people and ensure recurring themes are reported to senior managers. This has been completed the policy has been refreshed and renamed inline with our restorative approach.
- Continued development of the use of performance information and observations to improve practice both within the service and across children services. This has taken place and performance reporting has improved, we continue to work with the Data & Analytics team to capture data in respect of Hybrid working.
- Monitoring participation of parents and improving parental engagement. We have now created a section on the quality assurance document so this can be captured and reported on in the next annual report.

- 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. This has been completed all staff now undertake a dual role.

## 10 Priorities for 2022/23

- Promote consultation and feedback forms for children and young people.
- Develop bespoke resources for children in care who have a disability to enable their participation in reviews.
- Refresh the policy for children in care reviews.
- Continue to work with the Data & Analytics team to capture data in respect of hybrid working and reporting for participation of parents .
- Observations of practice to take place for all staff members in 2022/2023.
- Explore opportunities to include IROs in the observation of frontline social work practice, e.g., care planning meetings, core group meetings and strategy meetings. This will keep IROs in touch with frontline practice.

## 11. Conclusion.

11.1 This report has highlighted the work of the IROs in Wolverhampton from April 2021 to March 2022 and is an update on the last annual report. The next report will cover the period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023. The information contained in the annual report evidences the work of the service and how it is focussed on improving outcomes and ensuring young people and families are engaged in reviews. On Monday 23 May 2022 the independent review of children’s social care published its final report ‘The independent review of children’s social care: final report’. This is an independent review of the needs, experiences and outcomes of the children supported by social care. A recommendation from the review in relation to the role of the IRO’s is *“All children in care should have access to independent, opt-out, high quality advocacy - replacing the existing Independent Reviewing Officer and Regulation 44 Visitor roles. Advocacy services should be*

*commissioned by the Children's Commissioner, who should be given powers to refer children's complaints and concerns to the court".* The government response to the recommendation of the review is due to be announced in December 2022, the safeguarding service will need consider the next steps for the service following the announcement in December.