

# Independent Reviewing Service

## Annual report 2022- 2023

## 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 2022 – March 2023. This is the 13th 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.

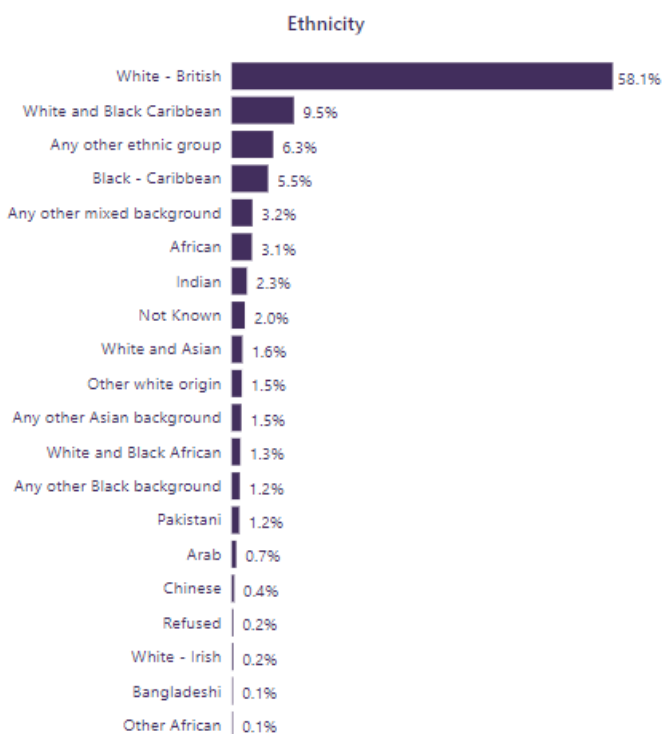
### 3. The service

3.1 The Service had a permanent establishment of 9.5 FTE IRO's at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023. The service had additional support from agency workers during this time owing to long term sickness and recruitment. 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 full time 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 81 children on 31 March 2023. This compares to circa 85 in March 2022.

3.3 The tables below reflect the demographics of the Children in Care (Table 1) as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 and the IRO/CP Chairs (Table 2)

**Table 1:**

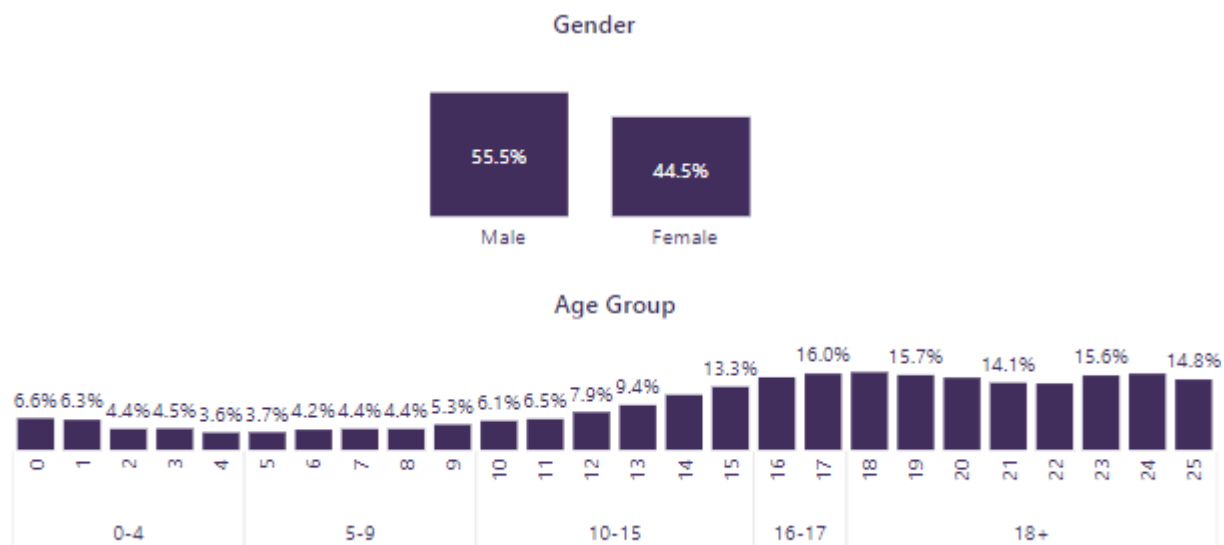


**Table 2:**

Ethnic group	Percentage of IRO/CP conference chairs
Asian	7.69%
Black	7.69%
Mixed heritage	7.69%
Not recorded	15.38%
Other ethnic group	0.00%
White (British)	61.54%
White (other)	0.00%

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

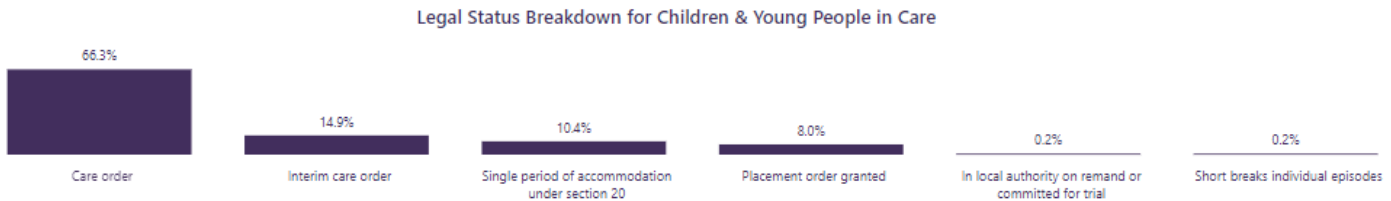
4.1 There were 505 children and young people in care as of 31/03/23, compared to 522 in 2022. Of the children in care at the end of the 2022/23 year, 44.5% were female and 55.5% were male, a change from 44% female and 56% male at the end of the previous year.



4.2 As of 31/03/2023, the breakdown of legal status for children and young people in care showed that there had been a 3.3% decrease from the previous year to 69.6% in the

proportion with a care order. There was a slight increase of 0.2% in the percentage with a placement order. The percentage with an interim care order increased from 14.7% to 14.9%

at the end of the 2022-23 year with the proportion with placed under section 20 increased again this year from 7% to 10.4%.



## 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.

5.2 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, 99.6% of all children and young people in care had an up to date review (99.8% in 2022). The lowest percentage recorded in the 2022-23 year was August 2022 with 97.6% 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. The Review timeliness for 2022-23 is 99.3% compared with 84% for 2021-22 , this is an improved area of performance, staffing and miscalculation of dates has impacted on the timeliness of some reviews .

5.3 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.

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 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 2022/2023 we have rolled out online consultation forms and online feedback forms. In addition, we have developed consultation resources suitable for children with disabilities, we are in the final stages of completing the resources and will roll these out in 2023/2024.

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 2022-23 year, 98.3% of children had participated in their review, the same was reported in 2021-22. The service understands

the importance of getting to know the child, their interests and importantly what matters to them, below are examples.

### **Examples;**

- *A child beginning and ending her review with some highly spirited singing on her karioki machine.*
- *A child whose pet tortoise was included in the review and was recorded as in attendance and care plan.*
- *Children who have lead thier reviews by running a quiz e.g love island,favourite football team.*
- *Meeting the child in school and playing games with them to get to know them prior to the review.*
- *IRO purchased a KEEPWISH talking cards gadget to interact with a young person with disabilities. This enabled them to communicate, the types of food they likes, the people they enjoy seeing at family time.*
- *The IRO watched TOPBOY on netflix before visiting a YP owing to their experiences.The YP was so impressed,they opened up about thier life and experiences.They spent 3 hours together taking , shared thier rapping skills, showed the IRO how they use social media.*
- *The IRO and child ran up and down in a lounge each of them wearing back packs, chasing each other and having lots of fun. It meant, the toddler was centre to the review, showing lots of skills they leant over the last 6 months and how independent they have become so quickly.*
- *The IRO pretended to be a dinosaur for child at every review. They all had to pick which dinosaur they were going to be at the start. There was much growling in every review and it was fun!*
- *During a visit we went through the young persons Play Therapy Box and they discussed how different items in the box had helped them in different situations and when they are used. We also used the play therapy journal to reflect on some of their thoughts and feelings about their care plan. This was especially helpful as the young person had a learning disability.*
- *With a young person, who doesn't really like to discuss their feelings, we used a fine motor activity where we used pincers to select different animals and add them to a jar (for example pick up five brown squirrels, three pink pigs ect). Whilst doing this the young person was so focused on the activity that they happily discussed their thoughts and feelings.*
- *We have had discussions about intrests such as cricket, football this opened up banter especially when I tell them that I support Man Utd and the West Indies cricket team.*



5.8 IROs continue to work hard to involve parents in their children's reviews, albeit sometimes this means consultations take place by written contribution, attending the review, telephone discussions, separate meetings or views gathered by another person. 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.

5.9 There was one child reviewed under the Short Break Statutory Guidance (Section 20(4) of the Children Act 1989) in 2022/2023 (1 in 202/2022) as they are reviewed by Disabled Childrens and Young People team as there breaks are under 75 overnights a year and for those over 75 overnights they are in care.

5.10 The Safeguarding service have received no complaints and 19 compliments for 2022/2023 compared to 14 compliments for 2021/2022. 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:**

*'We both just wanted to let you know our thoughts on yesterday's Child in Care review and wanted to let you know that we both thought your approach with the carer was fantastic. We felt the review was positive and very restorative.'*

*'Social workers had the following feedback for Independent Reviewing Officer following a recent Child in Care review, stating, ' wanted to let you know that we both thought your approach with the carer was fantastic. We felt the review was really positive and very restorative. It was so nice to hear that you took the time to go and meet the child in school and played games with them to get to know them prior to the review meeting. We have both experienced how difficult the reviews have been previously due to the difficulties in the relationship between family and thought you handled this really well by bringing the conversation back to the child and focusing on his needs.'*

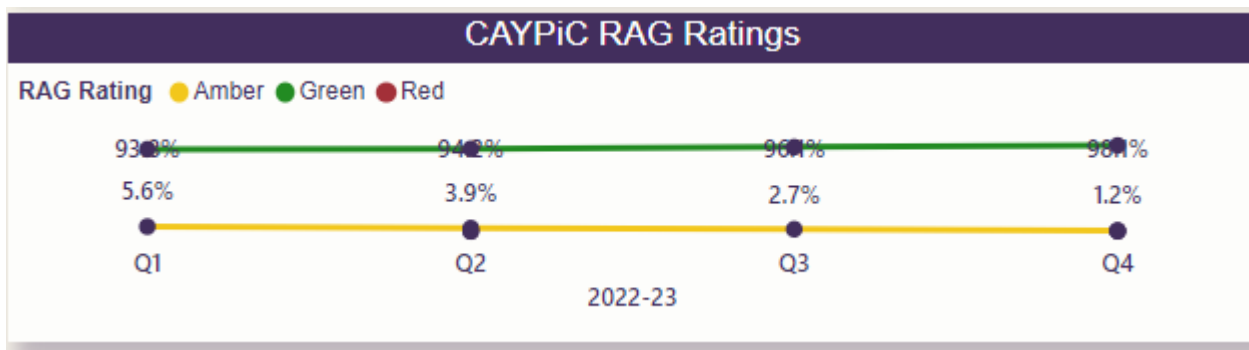
*'The IRO had an excellent manner and skills in the review of young person.'*

## 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 2022-23, 95.7% were Green, 3.3% Amber and 0.2% Red. The graph below shows an increase in the proportion rated Green and a reduction in the percentage rated Amber or Red throughout the 2022/23 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 record. If not addressed or if the IRO deems that formal dispute is required, this will be expedited.

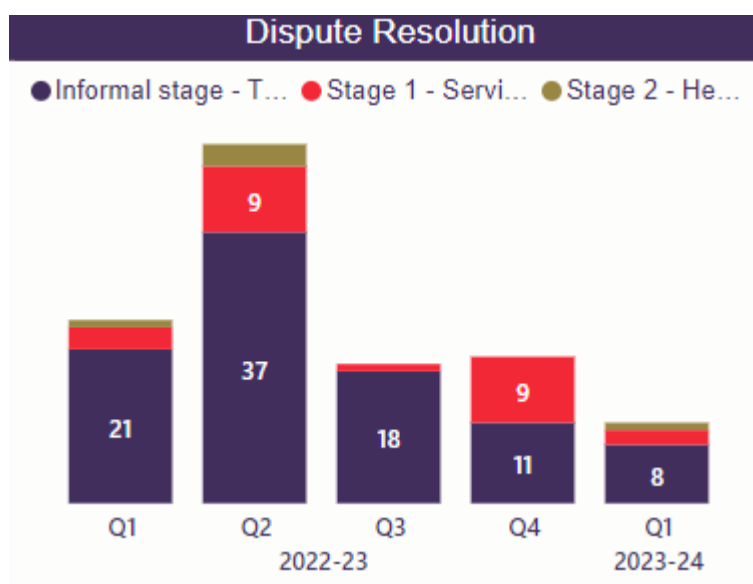
6.4 During 2022-23, 26 (a reduction of 20 in 2021/2022) formal resolutions were implemented in Wolverhampton (the below data is reflective of resloutions for children in care and child protection planning). This was made up of 22 at Stage 1 (Service Manager), 4 Stage 2 (Head of Service) and no Stage 3 (Assistant Director). There were 88 informal resolutions compared with 171 in 2021-2022. In between reviews, the IRO's complete midpoint checks and prior to reviews have consultations with social workers, this supports identifying

challenges early and resolving matters before escalation is required, this coupled with decrease in the number of children in care will have contributed to the number of resolutions decreasing.

6.5 The resolution process has been used to raise concerns in relation to life story work, , safety planning, changes in social workers and not the same social workers for brothers and sisters. Also, preparing for transition , progression of care planning,

and disruption meetings not being held. As well as family time arrangements and the impact of decision making around this. In addition, pathway needs assessments outstanding, not sharing significant information with IRO about changes to care plan before review, delay in review being completed, no allocation of social worker. The issues will have been raised with managers and escalated in line with resolution protocol the outcome will be agreed actions to resolve matters and monitoring that the matters have been resolved.

6.6. 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.



6.7 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

arisen from resolution meetings and follow up actions , below details some key themes and outcomes discussed in 2022/2023:

- The review process not being followed on Eclipse which was impacting on plans and reports being completed. A session was held with Team managers in the Children in Care to support the understand the process for reviews. The indicator for care plans being updated 10 days following the review was included within the performance dashboard.
- Reviews being held in timescales, progression of care plans and changes in social workers has been impacted by staffing. There has been recruitment of staff in the service but difficulties staffing continue.
- Later life letters and life story work, the service has been reviewing this and this work is progressing.

6.8 The IROs complete a Recognition of Excellent or Good Practice notification when there is evidence of high-quality practice. Four notifications were awarded in 2022-2023 (a decrease from 33 in 2021/2022). The safeguarding service will promote the use of good and excellent practice notifications within the service, as there continues to be a declining recognition. A monthly reminder has been put into the team's calendar.

6.9 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 Child and Young Person in Care Reviews. These sessions are offered on a quarterly basis and delivered jointly with Advanced Practitioners. In March 2023, co-production training was delivered to the IROs by the Co-production & Youth Engagement service about co-production with young people, to support co-production with young people in reviews.

6.10 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.

- 6.11 In January 2023 , the team completed a peer audit of IRO review records took place. Team members gave individual feedback to one another and advised that this was a positive exercise to share best practice. The audits found that all the records sampled reflected a celebration of the young person alongside raising any worries. All the review records reflected participation of the young person and all the records were written to the child. The suggestions for improvement included ensuring the IRO record is translated for children where English is not their first language. Also, including the child's views directly in the record.
- 6.12 In March 2023, peer discussion focused on six examples of IRO records for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). Positive feedback was received from the IROs who participated, the process was helpful and a useful opportunity to connect for peer support. Each group had a peer reflection brought to the group by one of the team, again this received positive feedback. Future peer reflections will also include space for a reflective case discussion/ solution circle.
- 6.13 Findings report that all reviews were done with the child and participation can be seen. All IRO records were clear regarding immigration matters, addressed problems and worries appropriately and celebrated the child's achievements. Two out of 6 IRO records received feedback that they could have been more focused on the cultural, language and religious needs for the child. All IRO records were written to the child and in simple language but only 1 record was translated into the child's first language, and the IRO record did not reference that it was being translated. Interpreters were used consistently.
- 6.14 Moving forward, as per the guidance, the IRO will ensure they establish the first language of both the child and the parents at the 15 days before review conversation. A child may be of the view that their use of the language is adequate, but it is important that each child can participate appropriately in the process and that their views are fully represented. Where a child or parents first language is not English (and they are receiving a copy of the report) consideration should be given to arranging translation of the IRO record.

6.15 In March 2023, observations of IROs in reviews was completed. In summary, findings from the observations highlighted areas of excellence practice and areas for improvement . All reviews observed were child friendly, well chaired, enabled participation from attendees and focused on care planning . Children and young people’s views had been gathered and their achievements celebrated. Areas for improvement included the recording of mid-point checks, consultation forms and pre planning for reviews, engagement of parents, setting ground rules at the start of the review and discussing timescales.

6.16 Feedback from one young person at their review shared that they felt involved, happy, in control, listened to, supported, valued and happy. They said they felt a little bored and worried and shy but explained that singing a song at the beginning meant she felt less worried and more joyful throughout the meeting. They shared that it was brilliant meeting and that the IRO was a nice lady. *“They are kind and support my decisions and make me feel safe, they talked about my mum which I found really helpful, they are really chatty, and I like that”*.

6.17 Another young person shared that they felt the IRO had supported them well , they have helped them with a move from their old placement to a new placement. They shared they are listened to by the IRO. Feedback back from another young person was the IRO had been brilliant. *“All the social workers they have had different approaches, some more experienced than others, however the IRO has been perfect, easy to talk to, I have liked the last 10 years”*. They added that, *“the IRO is relaxing, makes sure what I want is heard, formal is awkward and different to how I talk”*.

6.18 Feedback from the foster carers has included that they felt the IRO had listened to them, and it was good to see how much the IRO was involved with the young person. Foster carers reported that the activities during the review were a good ice breaker. Another carer commented that the IROs approach was child based, they have a good rapport with the child, and through the time living with them, the IRO had been the one person the young person was happy to see, having sometimes not wanting to have the social workers visiting. They said the IRO had provided good feedback and encouragement to them and this has been a positive experience.

6.19 Observations and audits will take place in 2023/2024 to monitor service delivery and improve on areas of practice highlighted.

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

7.1 As in 2021/2022 the safeguarding service and children's services has experienced staffing and sickness issues which is line with national issues regarding staffing. This has impacted on timeliness of some reviews and progression of care plans. The government 2022 reporting for Children's social work workforce ( available from; <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-s-social-work-workforce>) highlights in 2022, the number of children and family social workers fell for the first time since the series started in 2017. This has likely contributed to increases in the number of vacancies (a series high), agency worker employment (a series high) and average caseload. The sickness absence rate also increased in 2022 (another series high). Recruitment and retention remain a priority for safeguarding and children's services, agency staff have been utilised in the safeguarding service to limit the impact on children and families.

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

- Promote consultation and feedback forms for children and young people. We have rolled out online consultation forms and online feedback forms.
- Develop bespoke resources for children in care who have a disability to support their participation in reviews. We have developed consultation resources suitable for children with disabilities, we are in the final stages are completing the resources and will roll these out in 2023/2024.
- Refresh the policy for children in care reviews. We have reviewed the policy for children in care reviews, this is awaiting approval from senior leaders.
- Continue to work with the Data & Analytics team to capture data in respect of hybrid working and reporting for participation of parents . We continue to work with the Data

& Analytics team to improve the IRO performance dashboard , this has been delayed owing to competing demands in the Data & Analytics team and rebuild of all dashboards that was required.

- Observations of practice to take place for all staff members in 2022/2023. This was completed in 2022/2023 . Observations of IRO's have also taken place during practice weeks as well as peer audits.
- Explore opportunities to include IROs in the observation of frontline social work practice, e.g., care planning meetings, core groups. The IROs are given observations to complete as a part of practice weeks .

## 9. Priorities for 2023/24

- Roll out the resources for children in care who have a disability to support their participation in reviews.
- Roll out the refreshed policy for children in care reviews.
- Improving parental engagement at reviews through the development of online consultation forms and feedback forms. Parental engagement and participation to be monitored.
- Where a child or parents first language is not English (and they are receiving a copy of the report) consideration should be given to arranging translation of the IRO record.
- Continue to work with the Data & Analytics team to capture data in respect of hybrid working, reporting for participation of parents and provide breakdown of the resolutions by service area and teams .



## 10. Conclusion.

10.1 This report has highlighted the work of the IROs in Wolverhampton from April 2022 to March 2023 and is an update on the last annual report. The next report will cover the period from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. The information contained in the annual report evidences the work of the service and how it is focussed on improving outcomes for children and young people. The Department for Education (DfE) has advised that the IRO role needs to be reviewed and strengthened in response to the independent review of children's social care published in May 2022. The safeguarding service will need consider the next steps and implementation for the service when the DfE advise what is required.