



**Harrow Council  
Children's and Young People  
Services  
IRO Annual Report  
1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023**

# Harrow Council – Children’s Services

## IRO Annual Report 2022/23

### *The Contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Children in Care*

This Annual IRO report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Services in Harrow as required by statutory guidance.

The IRO Annual Report must be presented to the Corporate Parenting Board and the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

### **Purpose of service and legal context**

The Independent Review Officers’ (IRO) service is set within the statutory framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO is to have management of the Review process and a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for Children Looked After and for challenging drift and delay.

The National Children’s Bureau (NCB) research ‘The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers in England’ (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings regarding the efficacy of IRO services. The foreword written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson; made the following comment:

The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or whether we are failing.

The NCB research outlines several important recommendations with three having an influence on IROs work plan priorities which remain in effect:

1. Where IROs identify barriers to their ability to fulfil their role, or systemic failures in the service to looked after children, they must raise this formally with senior managers. These challenges and the response should be included in the Annual Report.
2. IROs method for monitoring cases and how this activity is recorded should be clarified.
3. A review of IROs core activities and additional tasks should be undertaken. There is a need to establish whether IROs additional activities compromise independence or capacity.

## Key messages – learning and improvement

This Annual IRO report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO services in Harrow, as required by statutory guidance.

Improvement priorities identified for 2022/23 included:

- IRO service, including administrative staff to continue to monitor that correct processes are followed and help raise standards with regards to invitations being sent out in a timely manner with consultation papers; social worker's reports for reviews always completed before the review and that information is accurately recorded on casefiles and kept up to date to reflect the child's journey.
- IRO reports to continue to reflect and ensure the voice of the child; link with the new Participation Officer to promote this.
- IRO's to progress their Champion roles.
- To continue to undertake some Reviews in Children's Centres in the community using a Hybrid model, having face to face contact with Children, Young People, Parents and Carers where agencies can contribute virtually
- To continue to monitor Health Assessments/SDQs to ensure that they are supporting physical and emotional health outcomes.
- To continue to monitor the quality of Personal Education Plans and that they are being used to support children and young people attend and attain in their education and support their ambitions for a move towards independence, further education, and employment.
- To continue to monitor care planning and escalate through the Dispute Resolution Protocol and Care Planning Group, where there is unreasonable delay or no permanency plan by 2<sup>nd</sup> Review. Reviews will continue to be delivered in a timely manner to meet statutory requirements.
- Maintaining standards of good quality IRO reports and recommendations which are SMART and to review in supervision.
- Understanding the needs of the ethnically diverse cohort of young people and to understand the cultural issues with confidence.

## Professional Profile of the IRO Service

The IRO Service sits within Quality Assurance and Service Improvement with its core functions consisting of reviewing plans for children in care and monitoring the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding responsibilities. Their position within this service area has supported the IROs need for independence and

challenge as their management line, up to and including the Assistant Director, is different to that of the children and young peoples' social workers and managers.

The team has been stable for several years with children and young people experiencing continuity of IRO. The IROs bring a wealth of knowledge and stability to the service.

IROs are part of Quality Assurance and Service Improvement and are qualified Social Workers. The service during the year has experienced some changes with one of the IRO's having a career break and there has been a period of long-term sickness with the team. This did place some pressure on the service however, long term agency staff have supported the service. There are 3.2 permanent IRO posts which are currently covered by 4 members of staff, 3 full-time and 1 part-time. In terms of gender and diversity, the profile of the service does reflect the Looked After population and IROs do reflect diversity with regards to their ethnicity and cultural backgrounds.

IRO's along with other managers, complete the monthly Practice Evaluation programme which has a theme each month and provides learning through the service as an outcome. IRO's report that they have had lots of involvement in final care planning for a backlog of final hearings that had been delayed during the Covid pandemic. This involved reading parenting and other assessments and making recommendations about the final care plan and providing the IRO views in writing so that they can be included in the final social work statement at court.

The IROs are managed by a full-time Quality Assurance Manager who provides them with supervision and working within Quality Assurance and Service Improvement ensures that there is a culture of continuous review and development of the service.

Within the QA service, IRO's and Child Protection Chairs are trained to 'cross over' when the need arises. All IRO's have chaired Child Protection Conferences when the need has arisen; it is best practice for the allocated IRO to be consistent through the child/young person's journey while in care however, child protection chairs have provided IRO cover when essential. Some IRO's and CPC's have a caseload which reflects both child protection and children looked after young people.

## **Administrative Support**

The IROs are supported by business support workers who manage and arrange the administration of the reviews, send out invitations and consultation documents and distribute the IRO recommendations and reports.

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## **Quantitative information - Looked After population and the IRO service**

### **Key Messages**

The Looked After population for 2022/2023 has ranged from 188, with a higher number of 195 in October 2022, dropping to 179 in March 2023. IRO caseloads have been within the recommended 50-70 set out in the IRO Handbook.

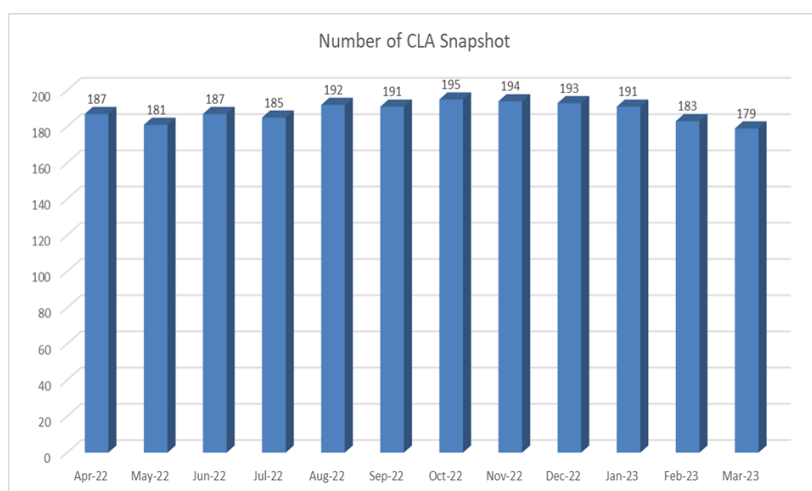
A total of 542 Reviews were Chaired by IROs in the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 showing a slight decrease of 3.7%.

Many children and young people who started to be Looked After were aged at 16 plus (39%). This is a higher percentage from last year where 37.2% of young people coming into care were over the age of 16.

67 Looked After Reviews concerned children and young people with a disability. In these circumstances the increased time required to elicit the wishes and feelings of a child with additional needs is to be recognised. This is an increase from the previous period of 63 reviews where children and young people had a disability.

In terms of permanency outcomes during 2022/23, 38.1% of children and young people returned home to live with parents or relatives and 3.5% were adopted. Compared to the previous period, figures are higher; 2021/22 which showed 31.1% of children and young people returning home to live with parents or relatives and 3.8% were adopted.

## Looked After population during 2022/23:



The age profile of children and young people entering care during the period:

8.6% of children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 were aged less than 1

10.5% of children were aged 1 to 4

10.5% of children were aged 5 to 9

31.4% of children were aged 10 to 15

39% were over 16

A national benchmarking survey (December 2013) identified that the average caseload for IROs ranged between 49 and 95. Within Harrow, across the year, IROs have had an

average caseload of 45. IRO's have a balanced caseload so that complexity and distance are shared equitably across the service.

During 2022/23 the IROs have continued to have several other responsibilities with their Championing roles in the areas of permanency planning, Health Assessments, Personal Education Plans (working with the Virtual School) and Participation; IRO's are currently working to re-establish these champion roles following the impact of a different way of working during and after the pandemic. The IROs undertake training for foster carers with regards to the role of the IRO and the Looked After Children process. IROs also have links with the social work teams and attend Team meetings, including with the Fostering Team, Children Looked After and Children in Need Teams, Leaving Care and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children Team and the Children and Young Adults Disabilities Service (CYADS). One of the IRO's delivers induction sessions on the role of the IRO to new trainees. This helps to improve consistency within the social work teams and to build up good working relationships between the IROs and social worker.

IRO's are involved in permanency planning; Age Assessment, attend strategy meetings and offer advice regarding young people who are missing and liaise with Court Guardians. IRO's attend the IRO London forum and bring to the Team any research and learning shared at this meeting. The IRO's continue to support the Child Protection Chairs in rolling out the Signs of Safety workshops throughout the service by co delivery of the training. The IRO's keep updated on relevant policies and procedures. They continue to be part of the Practice Evaluation programme which looks at practice and performance. One of the IRO's is looking to update the health referral form for Children in Care to ensure that this is age appropriate and current.

In the period 2019/20 the number of the Looked After population was between 175 and 193. August 2020 saw a rise in the number, with a figure of 202, reaching 207 in December 2020, before returning to pre covid levels in March 2021 with a figure of 182. In January 2022 the number rose to 195, in March 2022 slightly reducing to 190. On 31 March 2023 this number dropped to 179 (numbers increased during the covid period before becoming stable).

During this time social care has continued to deliver some services and support to young people virtually. IRO's undertake face to face reviews at placement and within the local Children's Centre and use the hybrid model with some reviews taking place virtually. IRO's have worked hard in trying to keep young people interested and active in participating in some way in their meetings.

## **Why are Children Looked After?**

During the period children and young people have come into care for a variety of reasons including: a young baby's parents having a complex history of vulnerability, both care leavers with a history of very poor mental health, domestic abuse. Breakdown of relationship between parent and a 16-year-old young person resulting in the assault of a parent; a 7-year-old becoming the subject of Police Protection following an allegation of physical abuse by mother and a medical which determined non accidental injury. Young person in foster care for the duration of a police investigation into allegations of sexual assault of his female sibling. Young people coming into care where there is CSE or CCE following missing periods and young unaccompanied minors seeking asylum.

## Permanency Outcomes

During the period 2022/23, most children have achieved permanency through a return home to live with parents 38.1%.

The profile in terms of children leaving care as of 31st March 2023:

- 38.1% Returned home to live with parents/relatives.
- 24.8% Moved into Independent Living.
- 10.6% Turned 18 and remained in same care arrangement
- 8.8% Special Guardianship Order granted.
- 4.4% Child moved abroad
- 3.5% Adopted
- 1.8% Sentenced to Custody
- 1.8% Child Arrangement Order
- 0.9% Died
- 0.9% Age assessment child is 18 or over

## Entitlements and Advocacy

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Looked-After Children and Care Leavers Inquiry (2013) asked children and young people what the most important entitlements for looked-after children and care leavers were. The All Party Parliamentary Group selected the five that the children and young people said were most important for looked-after children and for care leavers.

IROs have routinely considered children and young peoples' experience of the ten entitlements and have raised issue with the local authority where appropriate.

### **IROs findings on the entitlements for looked-after children for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023**

1. There is an expectation that all looked after children have a Care Plan that says what their needs are now, what will be done to meet those needs and the plans for their future. However, there are occasions when IROs have highlighted that these need to be updated to reflect the child's current situation.
2. There is an expectation that all looked after children have a Care Plan that sets out their views, particularly for those aged 4 years and above.
3. 100% of children of an appropriate age, had information about their entitlements, including information about decision making processes and professionals' responsibilities to hold a review before any significant decision is made in relation to their care plan. This information is sent out by the CLA admin and includes 'The Young Person's Guide to Care Planning', 'CLA Guide Leaflet' and 'Independent Visitor Leaflet', complaints procedure information and for open to the Leaving Care Team, a copy of the Leaving Care Charter.



4. There is an expectation that when a social worker visits or has contact with a child or young person, they must speak to them alone unless the child or young person refuses, or it is not appropriate at that time, or the social worker is unable to.

Advocacy and Independent Visitors service provision in Harrow is currently provided by Community Solutions (Harrow Mencap) as part of commissioned services. IRO's can make referrals directly through Community Solutions via the electronic system (Mosaic). The Youth Justice Board commission's advocacy services for young people detained in young offender institutions (YOIs) and secure training centres (STCs).

IROs routinely check that children and young people know about advocacy and how it can support them in having a real say in decisions affecting their lives. This is evidenced by the IRO recording within the Review report indicating when an advocate is involved.

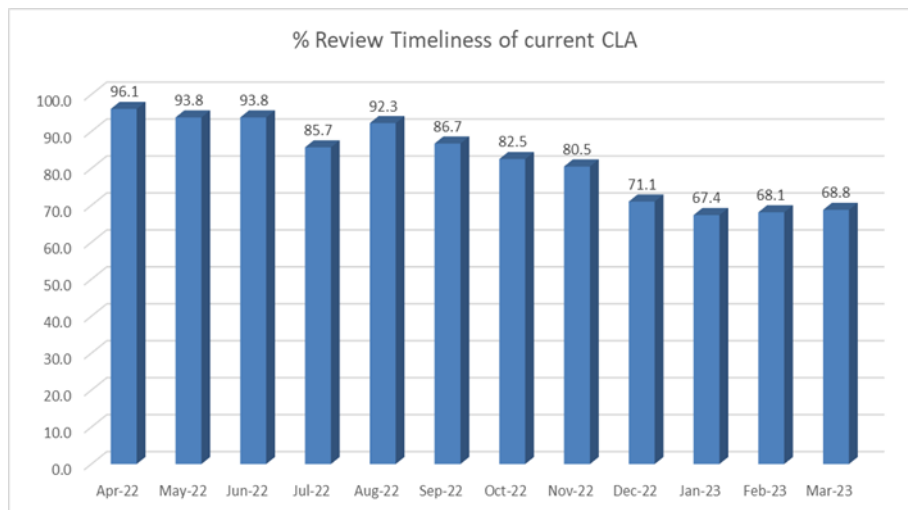
IROs have continued to help ensure that children have access to advocacy, but it is important that they continue to discuss at Reviews and record in their reports whether a referral to an Advocate is appropriate, including when this has taken place. Advocacy can be essential for the children and young people and these processes can make a vital contribution to safeguarding and promoting their welfare and rights.

Within the initial pack that is sent by the looked after administrators to all children when they first become looked after there is information about their review, the Access to Records leaflet, advocacy, The Harrow Children's Pledge, how to make a complaint and information about Independent Visitors; also, the Young Peoples Guide to the Care Planning and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. The Independent Reviewing Officers check within the Review as to whether a child or young person has received all this information and whether they understand the information including the Harrow Children's Pledge. Going forward the pack will be refreshed and updated.

## **Timeliness of reviews**

IRO's completed some reviews in a series of meetings to ensure the relevant people were involved and the meeting remained child focused and friendly. During this period there has been a drop in performance regarding achieving timescale for reviews as the team experienced long term sickness and recruitment of an interim IRO in that time. IRO's and Child Protection chairs covered reviews where possible during this time. Those reviews that were out of time, were so by no more than a few weeks and this did not adversely impact on care planning.





## Qualitative information - Achievements and impact of IRO service

### Key Messages

IROs routinely check whether children know about individual advocacy and how to make a complaint. They also check at Reviews whether an independent visitor is needed, and any communication needs requiring additional or specialist support.

### Children and young people's preparation and involvement in Reviews

During the period 78.4% of children and young people over the age of 4 were able to participate in their review; this includes attending and/or contributing to their Review. This shows an improvement from last year's figure of 76%.

Less than 10% of children and young people did not participate nor convey their views, in their Reviews for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023.

IRO's have supported and encouraged young people to be actively involved in their review including a role in part chairing their own review or setting their own agendas wherever appropriate.

IRO's attend other significant meetings such as Strategy meetings; give advice when young people go missing and in relation to high-risk cases; involvement in Permanency Planning and monitoring with cases going through Court.

### Quality of Care Planning

IROs continue to monitor the quality-of-Care Plans and raise through the Monitoring Forms and Dispute Resolution Protocol any concerns about the care planning process. Children and young people can expect to contribute to their care plan and to expect that they will have their own copy. IROs routinely check that the care planning process has helped

children and young people to have their say about matters important to them and helped them to understand what is happening and why.

## **Progress-chasing Activities between Looked After Reviews**

All children and young people are sent details of their IRO in the initial pack when they become looked after. IROs will follow up after Reviews on the most complex of cases and expect to be informed of significant meetings to do with a child and to be consulted with regards to changes in care planning, significant events or the disruption of a placement. This period has involved building and testing a system on Mosaic where IROs will be provided with an update from the social worker at the midpoint between Reviews.

## **Management oversight**

The statutory Guidance states that operational social work managers must consider the decisions from the Review before they are finalised. This is due in part to the need to ensure any resource implications have been addressed. Once the decisions are completed the Manager has 5 days to raise any queries or objections. This has been achieved by the IRO electronically sending a Task to the relevant manager once the decisions have been completed. The manager then has 5 working days to complete the Task if they are happy with the decisions or respond to the IRO if they do not agree with any of the decisions. The outcome of these across the period indicates that managers are overwhelmingly satisfied with the decisions made at Reviews.

## **Children's Views about their IRO and their review process**

The Participation Officer has been supporting a system of feedback from children and young people to obtain their views. This also allows them to comment about their experience of their IRO and other aspects of their care. During the period 2022/23, there has been a Role Profile review of the Participation Officer (PO). This has resulted in a strong focus on our children looked after and care leavers. The feedback that the PO gathered through speaking and meeting with children and young people is very clear, thorough, and detailed and the views and wishes shine through this feedback. A consultation form is completed and made available to the IRO before the review. Their views are also contained within the IRO reports following Reviews.

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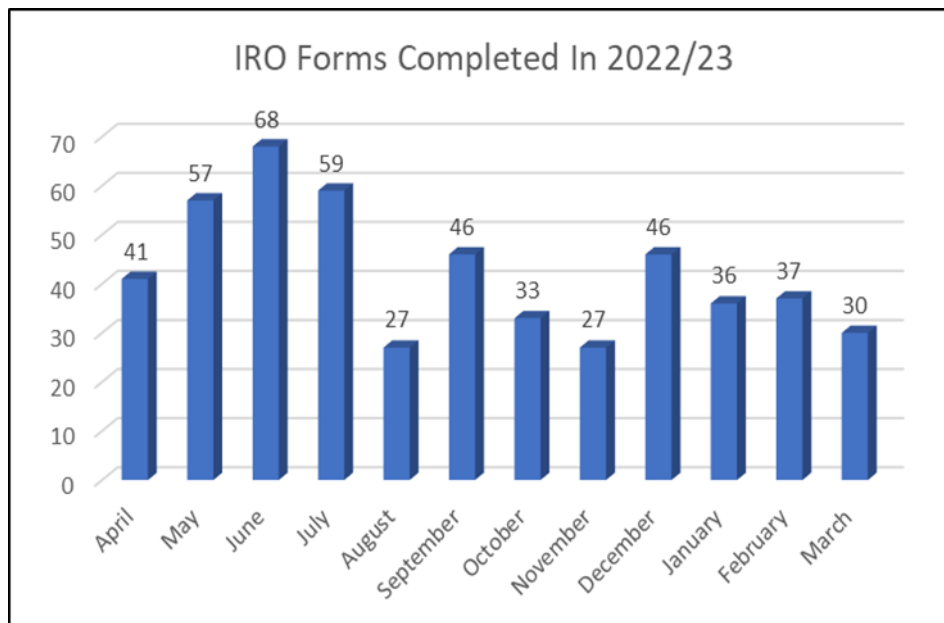
## **Quality Assurance of the IRO Service**

### **Identifying good practice, problem resolution and escalation**

There continues to be processes in place to highlight and resolve issues identified using the IRO Monitoring Form and Dispute Resolution Protocol. The IROs also identify examples of good practice and work with the Participation Officer to receive feedback from young people. Young people are aware of the role of the IRO and comment that they are aware of their upcoming review meetings. While some young people do not wish to

attend their review, they are encouraged to provide feedback and to speak separately with the IRO before their meeting.

## Monitoring Forms

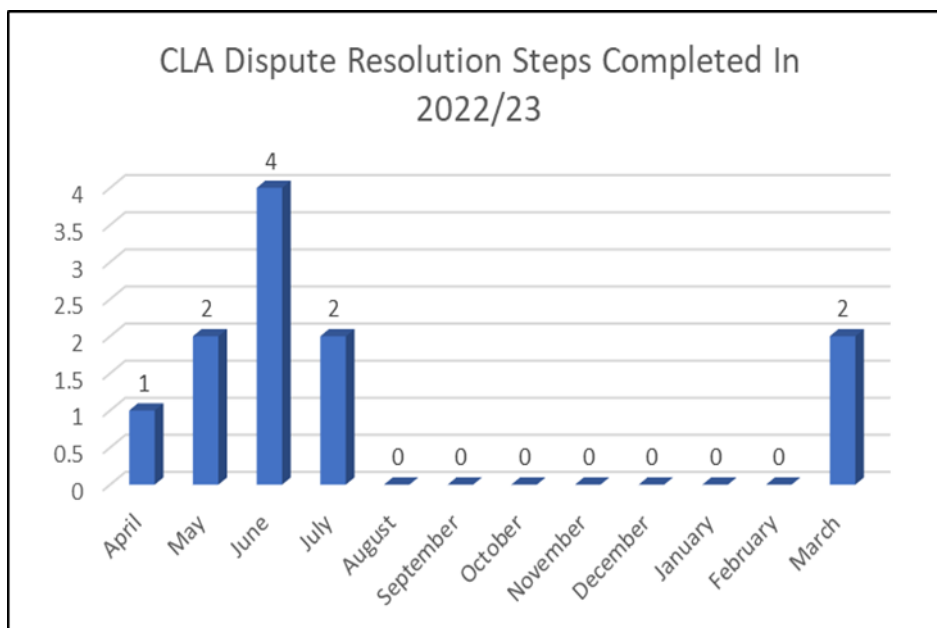


Key information obtained through the Monitoring Forms completed by IROs:

- By 2<sup>nd</sup> Review, there was a Permanency Plan in place for a large majority of 85.5% of children. Those where there was not a Permanency Plan by 2<sup>nd</sup> Review tended to be complex cases being in care proceedings, with assessments not yet completed and there being more than one potential plan, dependent on the outcome of those assessments.
- With regards to social worker visits, across the year a large majority of 76% took place within timescale. This shows a slight drop in the figure against last year which was 86%. This meant that 24% of visits did not take place within timescale. This also shows a drop in performance than seen last year where the figure was 13% which had been an improvement on the previous two annual periods. These issues were addressed by the IRO, either using the Monitoring Form or the Dispute Resolution Protocol and it is expected that an improvement will be seen in the next annual period.
- Across the year a similar figure as seen last year with over 85% of children and young people having an up-to-date Health Assessment at the time of their review. The Children Looked After Health team continued to work to improve practice to ensure that health information was relevant, timely and uploaded on to the child's casfile as promptly as possible.
- Across the year over 68% of children and young people had an up-to-date Personal Education Plan at the time of their review. This meant that 32% of cases either needed a Personal Education Plan to be completed or updated. This period has

seen a drop in performance with children and young people having up to date Personal Education Plans at the time of their review. Completion of PEP's in a timely manner will remain an on-going priority within Children's Services to ensure that Personal Education Plans are up-to-date and on casefiles.

## Dispute Resolution Protocol



Key information obtained through the Dispute Resolution Protocols initiated by IROs:

- ✚ Throughout the year Dispute Resolution Protocols were raised in respect of 11 children, 7 Child Looked After Reviews. Three were resolved at Stage 1 between the IRO and Team Manager. The disputes related to invite lists and social workers reports not being completed; Care Plans and Pathway Plans not reviewed and updated.
- ✚ All of these were resolved at Stage 1 by the outstanding actions being completed or dates set for required actions to take place and managers taking forward visit timescales to ensure these improved to the required levels.
- ✚ Dispute Resolution Protocols were raised in respect of 7 young people; 5 Child Looked After Reviews and resolved at Stage 2, issues raised by IRO:- No record on the case file of social work visits undertaken between reviews; An 18 year old required an update Pathway Plan reflecting support and services and to agreed forward planning around accommodation, further education, finances and mental health support. No social workers report or updated Pathway Plan for a young person 20 weeks pregnant. Delay in progressing a referral for a Paediatric Assessment and the IRO not being updated following an allegation from the young person against the foster carer. Changes to the care plan, children returned to live

with father and grandparents which raised safeguarding concerns (this was satisfactorily progressed within an agreed timescale by AD).

- ✚ These issues raised were addressed and progressed by the Team Managers and AD with satisfactory outcomes. In one case, the learning from the dispute raised was discussed at the Social Work Management School to emphasis and outline the role of the IRO in care planning and the importance of updating the IRO.

## **Supervision and training**

IROs have scheduled monthly supervision and adhoc case discussion as required. This is provided by their manager. IROs have Appraisals and are encouraged to attend training to meet the Social Work England registration requirements plus areas of interest and development.

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

The IRO role is not to identify the resources needed to meet a young person's needs but to ensure that the team around the young person, their carers and the young person themselves understand the changing needs of the young person, and that services are appropriately identified and delivered. In addition, their views on individual children and their care plans are fed into the Child Care Planning Group which meets monthly, chaired by the Divisional Director, to ensure that planning is progressing in a timely manner so that permanency is achieved for looked after children as swiftly as possible.

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## **Achievements for this last year**

Good quality of IRO reports and recommendations to ensure that recommendations are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely). IRO's continue to highlight good practice and development directly with social workers and line managers.

Using the newly developed and updated Opening Statement to use at reviews and other meetings.

Monitoring of Health Assessments/SDQs to ensure that young people are supported with their physical and emotional health outcomes.

Monitoring of the quality of Personal Education Plans and that they are being used to support children and young people attend and attain in their education.

Where children have a period of missing from care, they have Return Home interviews and that there is an understanding of what the push pull factors are in order to reduce this happening.

Continue to monitor care planning and escalate through the Dispute Resolution Protocol and Care Planning Group, where there is unreasonable delay or no permanency plan by 2<sup>nd</sup> Review. Overall, there is good practice in Harrow regarding permanency planning.

Link with the Participation Officer, Complaints and Advocacy services to ensure there is continuous learning from feedback from children and young people; parents, professionals and carers. Overall young people report positively about the value of their relationship with social workers and carers.

IRO's have seen children and young people face to face and continue to ensure they could see and engage with younger children, on Teams and via WhatsApp video calls, visits, and phone calls. They operate a Hybrid model for CLA reviews held in Children's Centres in the community.

IRO's have attended Adoption Selection Panel when requested to ensure they are involved in the care planning and placement matching.

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## **Annual work programme with areas for improvement for next year April 2023 – March 2024**

Targets for the following areas have been identified and the service expects to deliver improvements during the period, contributing to Key Measurable outcomes linked to the following:

- IRO reports to continue to reflect and ensure the voice of the child; link with the new Participation Officer to promote this. IRO's to attend Adoption Selection Panel as and when requested.
- IRO service, including administrative staff to continue to monitor that correct processes are followed and help raise standards with regards to invitations being sent out in a timely manner with consultation papers; social worker's reports for reviews always completed before the review and that information is accurately recorded on casefiles and kept up-to-date to reflect the child's journey.
- IRO's to progress their Champion roles.
- To continue to undertake some Reviews in Children's Centres in the community using a Hybrid model, having face to face contact with Children, Young People, Parents and Carers where agencies can contribute virtually
- To continue to monitor Health Assessments/SDQs to ensure that they are supporting physical and emotional health outcomes.
- To continue to monitor the quality of Personal Education Plans and that they are being used to support children and young people attend and attain in their education and support their ambitions for a move towards independence, further education, and employment.

- To continue to monitor care planning and escalate through the Dispute Resolution Protocol and Care Planning Group, where there is unreasonable delay or no permanency plan by 2<sup>nd</sup> Review. Reviews will continue to be delivered in a timely manner to meet statutory requirements.
- Maintaining standards of good quality IRO reports and recommendations which are SMART and to review in supervision.
- The IRO Role Profile will be updated to reflect the dual role while maintaining separate services between the IRO and the child protection chair. There will be consultation on merging the IRO service with CP chairs through the CYPS re design.

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## Overview and Summary

Our service has continued to move forward undertaking face to face reviews and operating a Hybrid model for reviews being held virtually. Using Teams and having face to face visits has worked well and enabled young people, parents, and other agencies to have various methods available to be able to engage in the review. Having such experienced and established IROs has been beneficial in providing more consistency for looked after children and has assisted with the process of challenge where it has been appropriate.

The IRO service continues to be vital in helping to ensure that care planning for looked after children progresses in a timely manner, including hearing the voice of the child and that there is a holistic approach to looked after children with consideration of their health needs, including mental health, as well as education, stability of their home and where possible contact with their family and that, where appropriate, there is independent escalation and challenge to achieve this.