

# **Safeguarding and Quality Assurance**

## **IRO ANNUAL REPORT**

**April 2022 to March 2023**

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## **Executive Summary**

The Annual Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Services in Cambridgeshire as required by statutory guidance. This report covers the period from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

Key highlights of this report are:

- The number of children in care rose by 35 this year (from 597 at the end of March 2022 to 632 at the end of March 2023).
- A total of 1,687 Child in Care Reviews were held this year.
- Feedback from children and families positively reflects the IROs' use of their skills to amplify the voice of the child in Care Planning.
- The IRO Escalation Protocol continues to be fully embedded across the service. IROs' use of Case Alerts and the Dispute Resolution Process continues to evidence the impact of their oversight of children's Care Plans.

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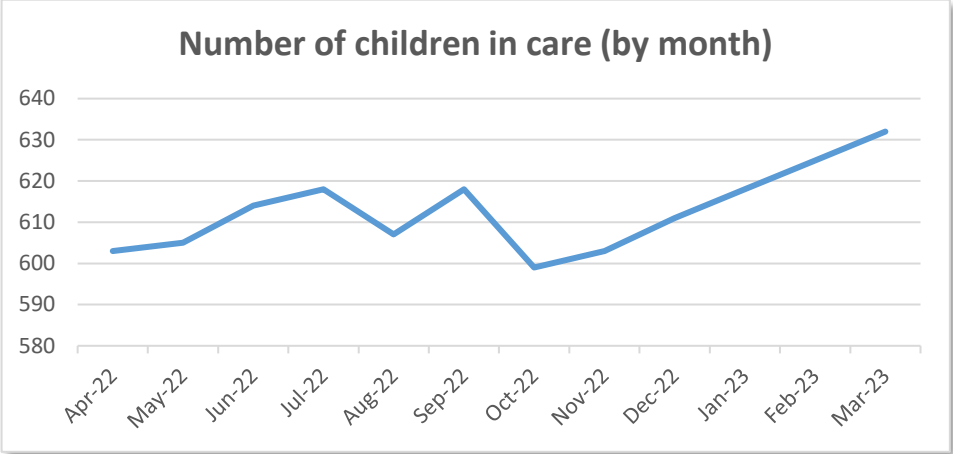
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## 1.0 Legal context of the IRO Service

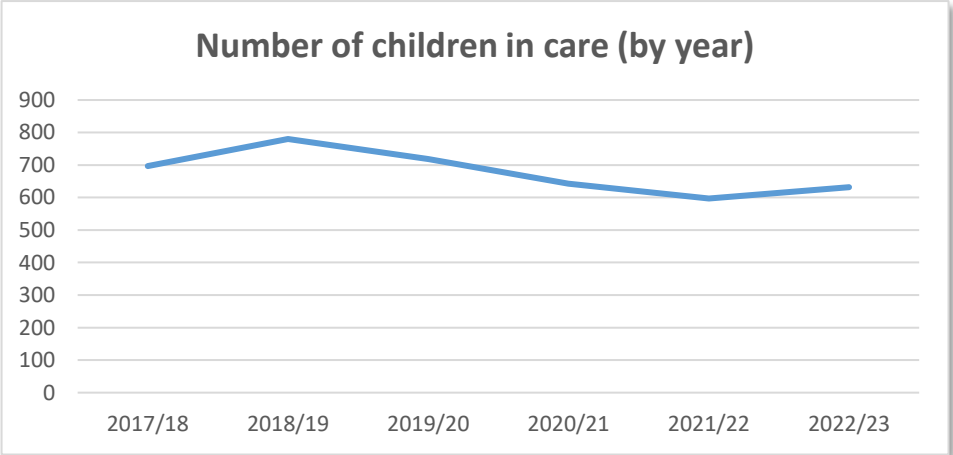
- 1.1 The appointment of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act (2002). Amendments to statutory guidance in 2010 embedded the IRO role further within 'Care Planning Placement and Case Review' and 'The IRO Handbook'.
- 1.2 Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that every child who is looked after (in this report referred to as "in care") must have a Care Plan. The Care Plan must detail the long-term plan for the child's upbringing and the arrangements made to meet the child's day-to-day needs.
- 1.3 It is a core responsibility of the IRO to review the child's Care Plan and ensure that the local authority gives due consideration to any views expressed by the child within Care Planning. The IRO has a responsibility to monitor the local authority's performance of its functions in relation to the child's case.
- 1.4 The core mechanism for reviewing the child's Care Plan and ascertaining the child's wishes and feelings is the child's 'Child in Care' (CIC) Review, which are held at statutory intervals.
- 1.5 The IRO Handbook states: 'The manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting panel. This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed.' (IRO Handbook 2010, page 48, paragraph 7.11.)

## 2.0 Population of children in care

2.1 At the end of March 2023 there were 632 Cambridgeshire children in care. This number rose sharply in the last three months.



2.2 Over the past five years the overall population of children in care had steadily been reducing but now appears to be rising again.



2.3 There appears to be no clear theme or trend that accounts for the larger number of children entering care in recent months.

2.4 28% of new children in care have been asylum seeking young people over the past three months. This compares to 26% last year.

2.5 46% of new children in care over the past three months have been subject to care proceedings. This compares to 47% last year.

2.6 52% of Cambridgeshire’s children in care currently live outside of Cambridgeshire County borders. This is up from 44% one year ago.

### **3.0 Professional Profile of the IRO Service**

3.1 In Cambridgeshire, the IRO Service sits within Safeguarding and Quality Assurance (SQA) and serves as a ‘critical friend’ to the organisation.

The wider functions of SQA include:

- The Child Protection Service: chairing conferences and quality assuring Child Protection Plans.
- The LADO Service: managing allegations against staff and volunteers working with children.
- Children’s Complaints and Feedback Team: addressing customer feedback including complaints, from across the People and Communities Directorate.
- Quality Assurance: carrying out audits and delivering workshops to support practice improvement as outlined in the QA framework.
- The Participation Service: engaging with children and ensuring their voices influence service development.
- Principal Social Worker: championing best social work practice.

#### **Staff Team**

3.2 The staffing establishment for the team is 9.0 IROs (full-time equivalent). Since December 2018 there has also been additional agency IRO cover in place to help to manage the volume of work for the team.

3.3 The stability of the staff team is good. Most IROs have been in post for over five years. There was an unusual turnover however at the beginning of 2023, when coincidentally one IRO retired, and two others decided to return to operational social work practice. Soon after, four new IROs were appointed, each of whom has brought complementary skills and new energy to the team.

- 3.4 The IRO service continues to have consistent and stable management and has done since 2017.

## **Staff Development and Support**

- 3.5 Each IRO has 1:1 supervision once every 6 weeks with their line manager to reflect on performance, practice, development, and support, as well as access to informal supervision when needed.
- 3.6 Monthly IRO Team Meetings have continued to be held over the past year and have now completely returned to being fully in-person.
- 3.7 New IROs are given a thorough three-week induction before starting to case-hold, and each is allocated a designated 'peer mentor' from this time to provide additional personalised support while they are settling in.
- 3.8 In terms of training opportunities, staff have attended webinars and talks delivered by Making Research Count and NIROMP. Internally there have also been opportunities for embedding learning, such as bespoke refresher training in Motivational Interviewing and staff Away Days.

## **Workload demand**

- 3.9 The IRO Handbook recommends a caseload for each full-time equivalent IRO of between 50 and 70 children. This volume of cases should allow the IRO to fulfil all their statutory functions to the best of their ability. In Cambridgeshire an average caseload of 66 per full-time IRO has been maintained through the year.
- 3.10 Effective business support staff use established systems to support the IROs. This does not include the typing of review reports, which the IROs complete themselves. IROs ensure that they distribute the decisions from CIC Review meetings to the responsible Team Manager within five working days of the review in accordance with the statutory guidance.
- 3.11 In Cambridgeshire the IRO service has responsibility for convening and chairing statutory Secure Accommodation Reviews (SAR) for all children living in a secure setting. Each SAR is chaired by a member of the IRO team and another member of the IRO team acts as one of the members of the decision-making Panel at the SAR. The child's allocated IRO also attends the SAR as an observer. In 2022/23 three Cambridgeshire young people were placed in secure accommodation.

3.12 The IRO service has responsibility for convening and chairing Placement Breakdown Meetings (PBM) when long-term matched foster placements come to an end. Over the past 12 months there have been 26 such placement breakdowns, which presents a significant commitment for IROs because, as well as chairing the PBM, the task involves in-depth preparation and the writing of a comprehensive report after the meeting.

## **4.0 Performance of the IRO Service**

4.1 A total of 1,687 CIC Reviews were held in the year 2022-23.

4.2 In 2022-23 over 99% of CIC Reviews were held within statutory timescale, which is not significantly different from last year.

4.3 Most reviews are held face-to-face. The reviews take place wherever the child or young person feels most comfortable to be able to engage in the meeting; often this is in their foster home or semi-independent accommodation.

## **5.0 Voice of the child in Care Planning**

5.1 There is an expectation nationally that children's views are sought for their CIC Reviews. This year 66% of children (over the age of 4) participated in their Reviews in person. This is a slightly higher proportion than last year (56%). 26% of children have preferred to engage less directly and have either just met on their own separately with their IRO or have given their views via another means.

5.2 IROs routinely keep in touch with children and young people between Reviews, usually by visiting in person or otherwise via WhatsApp or phone if this is the young person's preference.

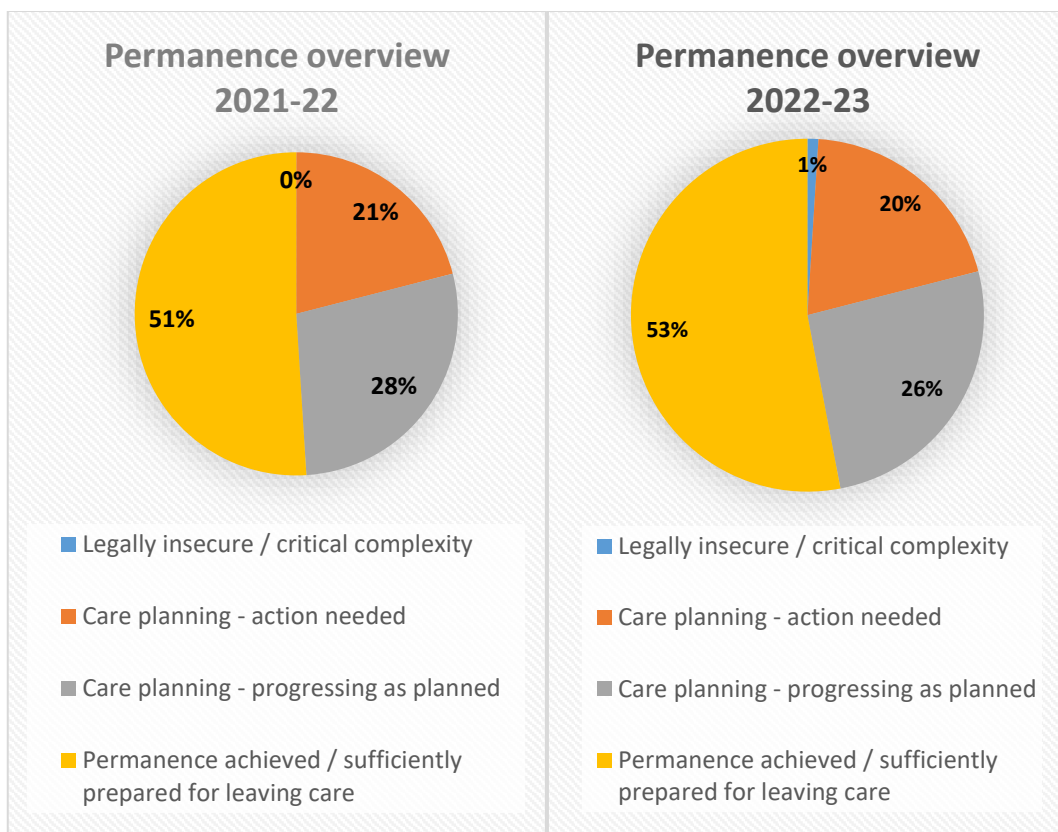
5.3 NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) provides advocates where they are requested by Cambridgeshire children in care. This year 14 children were accompanied by an advocate in their CIC Review, and 77 other children used advocates to support them with specific issues outside of their CIC Reviews.



## **6.0 Observations of the organisation's practice and performance with children in care**

### **Permanence tracking**

- 6.1 The IRO Service is instrumental in the monitoring and tracking of permanence for children in care. The IRO Service manages a Central Permanence Tracker (CPT) which is updated regularly from the outcomes of Reviews and escalations. The CPT is used to track any patterns and themes that indicate obstacles to permanence for children and areas where there have been improvements.
- 6.2 All children in care are colour coded on the CPT in relation to how effectively their Care Plans are progressing towards 'permanence' (i.e., where the child can achieve relative physical and psychological stability; a sense of 'being settled'). For 16-17-year-olds the CPT tracks the progress of their preparation for independence.
- 6.3 Over half of Cambridgeshire's children in care have an appropriate legal status and a well-matched stable placement that they can remain in until independence (coded green). This does not include adoption, as adopted children are no longer in care and therefore are not part of the children in care cohort.
- 6.4 The graphs below show that there has been a small degree of overall improvement over the last year in supporting children and young people to achieve permanence in a timely way, which is positive.



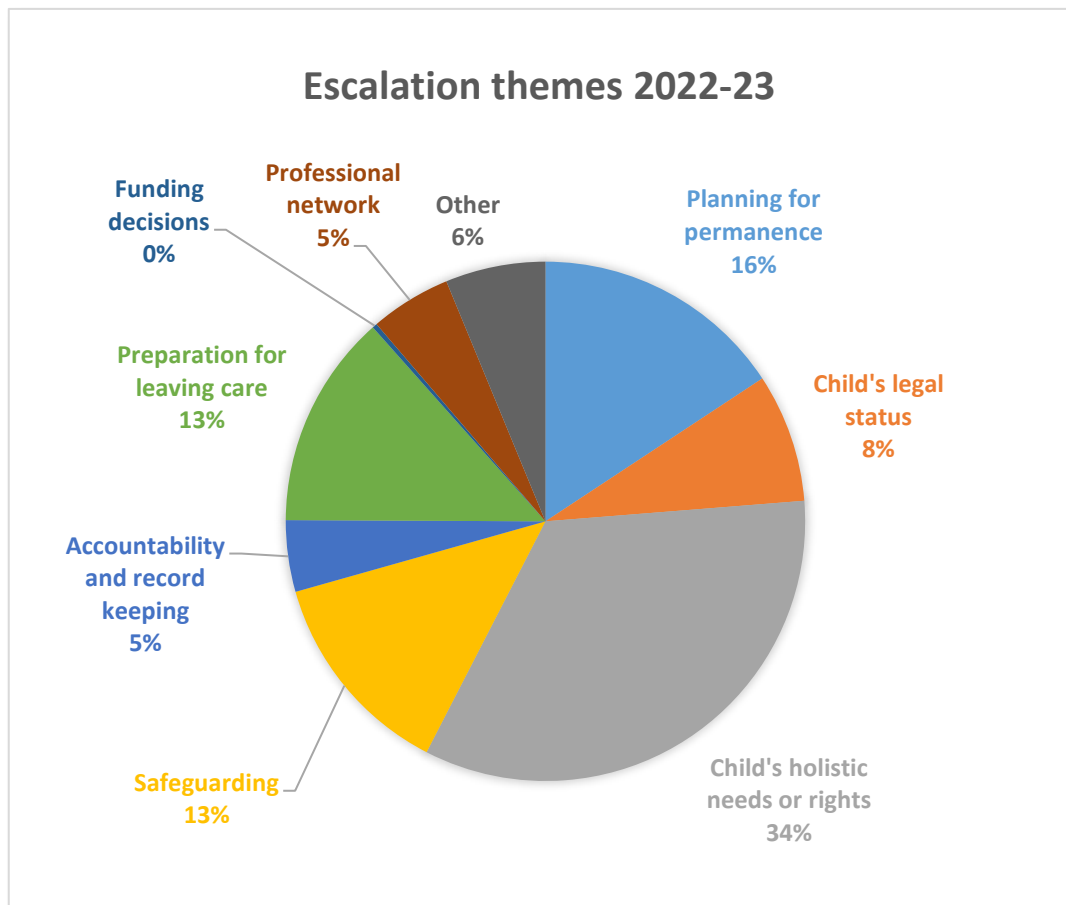
6.5 These graphs also illustrate that there are still a significant proportion of children and young people who need specific action in order to progress towards permanence. These children are at risk of drift and instability within the care system and are therefore the subjects of close attention and often escalations from IROs.

### IRO Escalations

6.6 A core function of the IRO role is to seek resolutions to delays or problems that arise within Care Planning. It is a statutory responsibility of the IRO Service to have a formal process in place to raise concerns and to ensure that this process is respected and prioritised by managers. In Cambridgeshire this is referred to as the Escalation Protocol.

6.7 Over the 12 months between April 2022 and March 2023, IROs raised 405 escalations to social care managers to prompt them to address the specific issues of drift or delay highlighted. This number can reflect more than one alert raised on an individual case. This is comparable to the number of escalations raised the previous year (404).

6.8 The types of issues raised by IROs fell loosely into nine categories:



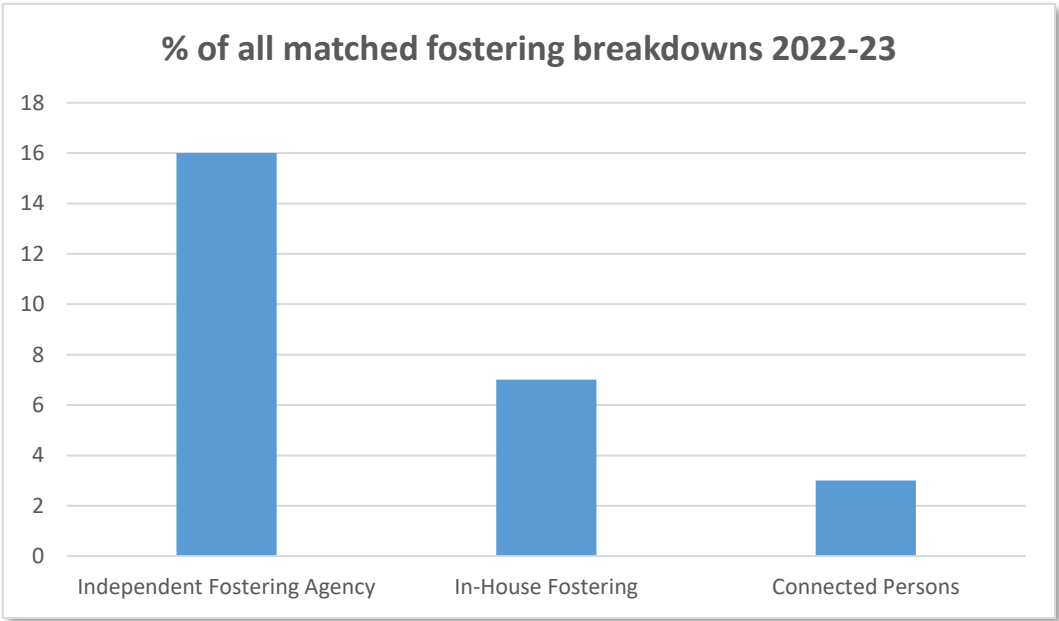
6.9 The above graph illustrates that most issues (114 over the year) were concerned with the child's holistic needs or rights. The alerts within this category included insufficient education arrangements, delays in addressing therapeutic needs and inadequate arrangements for the child to keep in touch with their family.

6.10 16% of issues raised related to concerns for the child's achievement of permanence within their timescale. Examples included delays in sibling assessments being completed and delays in formal matching assessments being completed to determine suitability of long term carers for individual children.

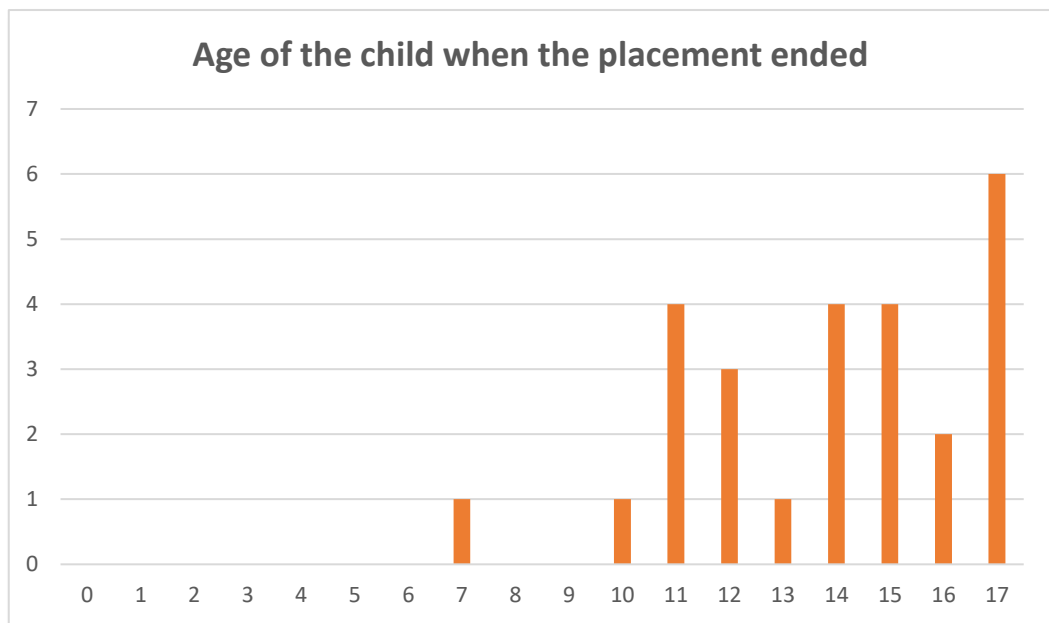
### Unplanned endings for children in long-term foster care

6.11 The IRO Service takes responsibility for chairing 'Placement Breakdown Meetings' where there has been an unplanned ending of a matched foster placement.

- 6.12 A final report is produced by the chair for each PBM which includes recommendations and learning points. These are circulated to all attendees and to the service managers for Fostering and Corporate Parenting.
- 6.13 Both quantitative and qualitative data is collected by the IRO Service relating to sudden endings of foster placements that have been matched long term through PBMs.
- 6.14 Between April 2022 and March 2023 there were 26 long-term foster placements that ended prematurely. This is comparable to the number over the previous year (25).
- 6.15 Of those whose long-term foster placements ended, 58% were boys and 42% were girls.
- 6.16 The graph below illustrates that most matched fostering placements that broke down were provided by independent foster agencies.



- 6.17 Most children were teenagers when the fostering placement came to an end, and 23% were aged 17.



6.18 Themes of causal factors for placement endings included:

- Carers externalising their limitations in coping with the child; insisting that specialist assessments or interventions are needed for the child, and then serving notice where there are subsequent delays in these being commissioned or arranged.
- Lack of life story work / honest conversations with children about difficult aspects of their pasts, which are often delayed due to a child appearing ‘unsettled’ or ‘not ready’.
- Some children who come into care later into adolescence find the routines and rules of foster care harder to assimilate.
- Insufficient information about the child being shared with proposed long-term foster carers prior to the match being agreed.
- Chronologies for children not being kept up to date on children’s files, which means that decisions about their lives are not always informed by an analysis of their full life experiences.
- Lack of continuity of social workers; poorly managed ‘good-byes’ resulting in children believing they are not worthy of sticking with. Where there is inconsistency, a recommendation is to hold regular ‘child’s journey’ meetings, to ensure that all those involved are aware of the child’s history and how this may impact on the child’s current and future presentation.

## 7.0 Impact of the IRO Service

### Impact for children

- 7.1 Regular Reviews by IROs ensure that Care Plans are progressing for children and that there is always a meaningful purpose for the child to remain in care. IROs maintain a consistent overview of case activity through ongoing monitoring. This includes scheduled monitoring points between Reviews and the use of specific monitoring forms, which provide the social work team with a child-focussed short audit of progress against agreed actions set in CIC Reviews.
- 7.2 The escalations raised by IROs elicit management attention where there are issues causing drift or delay. Over the last year 74% of IRO alerts were resolved as soon as they were received by the relevant social work team managers. This is a significantly higher proportion than last year (63%), which suggests that team managers have had more capacity/capability to attend to the issue within the timeframes needed by the child and set out by the IRO. This avoided the need for further escalation to senior managers.
- 7.3 However, where the issue raised could not be resolved within the given timeframe by the team manager this year there was more likelihood of the IRO then having to escalate to senior managers. Of the 405 escalations raised over the year, 17 had to be formally escalated by the IRO applying the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). This is significantly more than last year (7).
- 7.4 Significant issues raised within DRPs included:
- S had been made the subject of a placement order at the age of 10 after experiencing chronic intra-familial sexual abuse at home. S was desperate to be adopted and wrote to the judge to share her wish. She moved to prospective adopters soon after the placement order had been made, but her Care Plan subsequently became fraught with difficulties and delays. The local authority and S's prospective adopters found it hard to agree arrangements for commissioning therapeutic support for S.
    - The IRO observed the progress start and then falter several times and ultimately applied the dispute resolution process in order to focus the attention of all parties on resolving the obstacles to the adoption.
    - S was finally adopted in December 2022, aged 14. She was delighted.

- B is a 16-year-old boy who came to the UK in December 2022 fleeing persecution in Syria. He arrived alone and frightened after a journey by bus and lorry. He was aware that his uncle lived in Cambridge and so was upset to be placed with a foster family in Luton. Despite B's repeated requests to be allowed to be with his uncle there were delays in this being considered.
  - Using the dispute resolution process, the IRO brought the issue to the attention of the Assistant Director as there was concern that B's right to family life was being impacted by the delays.
  - This prompted an assessment of B's uncle to be undertaken by the social work team. This determined that there was no risk to B having contact with his uncle and in May 2023, to his joy, B moved in with his uncle.
  
- K was accommodated into local authority care in January 2022, when she was 12. There had been difficulties at home with her parents and it was unclear as to whether they would be able to manage and care for her consistently if she returned to their care. K was in limbo for months.
  - In light of ongoing delays in a permanence plan being determined for K, the IRO raised a DRP.
  - The local authority soon completed their assessment of parenting capacity of K's mum and dad, which concluded that she would sadly be at risk of significant harm if she were to return home.
  - A care order was made by the court in December 2022, and a plan was agreed for K to remain in care until she reaches 18.

## **Impact for the organisation**

7.5 The IRO Service has composed and circulated the Positive Practice and Escalation Report on a quarterly basis. The report summarises current themes of escalations and raises awareness of ongoing areas of practice concern. The report also includes observations of positive practice that have been appreciated by the IRO Service and Child Protection Chairs on behalf of children each month, thereby offering the wider organisation regular balanced feedback.

- 7.6 To support practice improvement in Pathway Planning, a small working group reviewed the design of the Pathway Plan alongside members of the Care Leavers Forum. While there have been some obstacles to overcome in terms of the implementation due to systems protocols, it is hoped that the new Pathway Plan will go live by the end of summer 2023.
- 7.7 The IRO Service Manager has led on a series of training sessions for personal advisers, social workers and other staff which focussed on preparing young people for leaving care.

## **8.0 Feedback for the IRO Service**

- 8.1 After each Review, the IRO business support team invite feedback about how the review was conducted, and whether they felt listened to by the IRO. Responses are received mostly from foster carers but also from schools, parents and occasionally from young people. The feedback is overwhelmingly positive overall, and attendees often comment that they feel a sound Care Plan has been agreed at the review.
- 8.2 Children and young people appreciate the consistency often experienced in the relationship that they have with their IRO. Most children get to know their IROs over a number of years; over half the IRO team have been in post for over five years, and one IRO has been with the team for 20 years. For example, one young man who had had to move suddenly from his long-term foster home to a new foster family he had never met before gave his IRO a big hug on seeing her. He had never shown her affection before but had known her for five years, and it was clear he felt relief in the familiarity. Others sometimes text their IROs out of the blue, which demonstrates their confidence that their IRO always has them in mind.



## 9.0 Review of the IRO Service Action Plan 2022/23

Objective	Outcome
Continue to review the existing mechanisms for a constructive feedback loop between the IRO Service and social care.	Regular liaison meetings between Corporate Parenting Service Managers and the IRO Service Manager have been diarised which promote communication between the different areas of the organisation.
Continue to progress the Pathway Planning Project, with IROs supporting the development of improved versions of Pathway Plan templates, for social workers and personal advisers to use as a basic tool when planning with young people preparing to leave care.	Six workshops have been delivered to staff across children in care and leaving care to support practice improvement. Work is ongoing to progress the implementation of the revised version of the Pathway Plan.
Review the format of consultation forms for children so that they can be completed quickly and easily via an online form as well as through paper consultation forms.	After consultation with the children in care council, it was agreed that the existing forms are sufficiently effective.
Review the existing format of the social worker's pre-review report which is shared with the IRO prior to the child's CIC Review, to make sure that this is sufficiently informed by the child's views and experiences.	A new version of the pre-review report has been built within the IT system and is now in its testing phase.
Integrate the local authority's 'Promise' to children in care into the usual agenda for CIC Reviews, so that children and young people can give their feedback directly in relation to whether they feel the commitments that the local authority has made to them are being delivered in reality.	All IROs now carry copies of the 'Promise' with them and use them as a tool routinely to help children to evaluate their own experiences of being in care.

IROs to strengthen their oversight of children missing from education or care.	IROs complete a Monitoring Form (similar to an audit) after each Review, which prompts them to consider whether the safeguarding protocol has been followed whenever a child has been missing from care. Any areas of delay are then challenged.
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## 10.0 IRO Service Action Plan 2023/24

### 10.1 Objective 1

Strengthen IROs focus on possible Care Plans for reunification or options for moving into the care of wider family as the child gets older.

### 10.2 Objective 2

Finalise the Pathway Planning Project with the new version of the Pathway Plan being implemented.

### 10.3 Objective 3

Review the policy and procedures for IROs involvement with Secure Accommodation Reviews.

### 10.4 Objective 4

Review IRO Escalation Protocol to ensure that it is as efficient as possible in its aim of challenging drift or delay on behalf of children where necessary.

### 10.5 Objective 5

Evaluate IROs methods of quality assuring the suitability of placements and support for children with disabilities living in residential care settings.