

Appendix A

Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

IRO ANNUAL REPORT

April 2021 to March 2022

Olly Grant
Independent Reviewing Service Manager
Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

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 2021 to 31 March 2022.

Key highlights of this report are:

- The number of children in care rose by 5 this year (from 592 at the end of March 2021 to 597 at the end of March 2022).
- A total of 1,655 Child in Care Reviews were held this year.
- Timeliness of Reviews continues to be excellent.
- 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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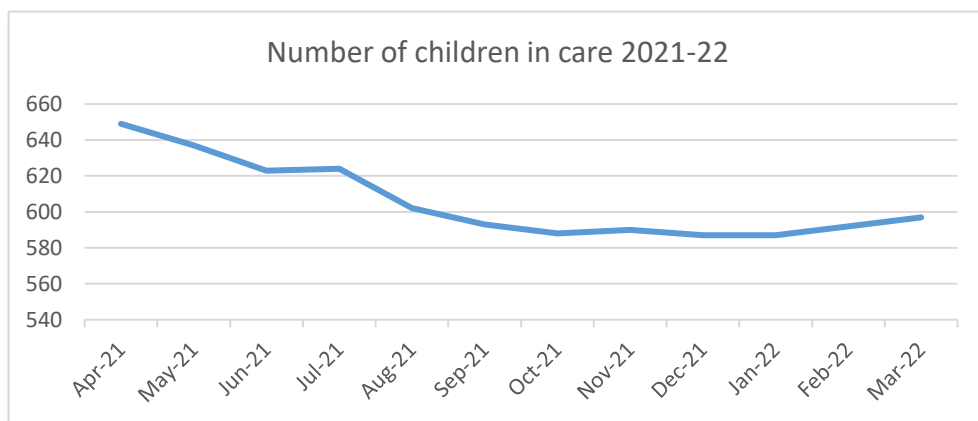
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1.0 Legal context of the IRO Service

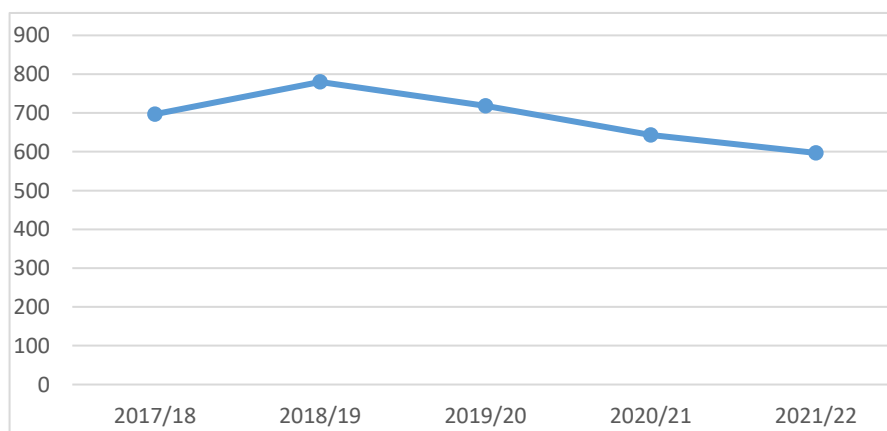
- 1.1 The appointment of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act (2002). Amendments to statutory guidance in 2010 embedded the IRO role further within 'Care Planning Placement and Case Review' and 'The IRO Handbook'.
- 1.2 Local 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; initially within 20 days of the child coming into care, then within three months, and then at least once every six months after that until the child leaves care.
- 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 2022 there were 597 Cambridgeshire children in care. This number continued a steady downward trend until December 2021, since which point, the number has slowly begun to rise again.



- 2.2 The overall population of children in care has steadily reduced over the past four years.



- 2.3 44% of Cambridgeshire's children in care live outside of Cambridgeshire county borders.

3.0 Professional Profile of the IRO Service

- 3.1 In Cambridgeshire the IRO Service sits within Safeguarding and Quality Assurance (SQA) and is accountable to the Assistant Director of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance. SQA serves as a 'critical friend' to the organisation.

The wider functions of SQA include:

- The Child Protection Service: chairing conferences and quality assuring CP 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 People and Communities Directorate.
- Quality Assurance: carrying out audits and delivering workshops to support practice improvement as outlined in the QA framework.
- The Clinical Service: enhancing therapeutic abilities of carers and relational social work
- The Participation Service: engaging with children and ensuring their voices influence service development
- Principal Social Worker: championing best social work practice.

- 3.2 In February 2021 Cambridgeshire and Peterborough SQA services formally aligned into one shared service. This means that Cambridgeshire and Peterborough IROs and Child Protection Chairs are one large team, and the roles of IRO and CP Chair have merged to that of 'Independent Chair' (IC). Some ICs work across CP and children in care, and some have caseloads that are just children in care or child protection.

Staff Team

- 3.3 The staffing establishment for the team is 8.8 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.
- 3.4 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. While covid restrictions still limit occupancy of rooms team meetings are held over a virtual platform. Often visitors from other parts of the organisation are invited, which helps to maintain good working relationships and communication between the IROs and the wider professional network working Cambridgeshire's children in care.
- 3.7 In terms of training opportunities, the nature of the lockdown restrictions opened up the breadth of online learning events available for staff. As well as participation in national events such as Community Care Live, staff have attended short courses 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 specialist IRO workshops led by the Service Managers.

Workload demand

- 3.8 The IRO Handbook recommends a caseload for each full-time equivalent IRO is 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 60-61 per full-time IRO has been maintained through the year.
- 3.9 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. All 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.
- 3.10 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 2021/22 one Cambridgeshire young person was placed in secure accommodation, therefore this

area of work did not present a significant contribution to the workload of the IRO team this year.

- 3.11 The IRO service has responsibility for convening and chairing Placement Breakdown Meetings (PBM) when long-term, matched foster placements comes to an end. Over the past 12 months there have been 25 such placement breakdowns (which is the same figure as for 2020-21). This 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. 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. In addition, every six months the IRO Service Manager reports on the themes of learning from PBMs and shares this with Heads of service.

4.0 Performance of the IRO Service

- 4.1 A total of 1,655 CIC Reviews were held in the year 2021-22.
- 4.2 In 2021-22 over 99% of CIC Reviews were held within statutory timescale, which is not significantly different from last year.
- 4.3 Gradually over the last year CIC Reviews have returned to being predominantly 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.
- 4.4 Monthly IRO peer and manager audits of CIC Review Reports and annual direct observations of chairs continued this year. Feedback to IROs helps to focus on the strengths of their work and ensures there is a consistent and high standard of written and direct work the whole team.

5.0 Voice of the child in Care Planning

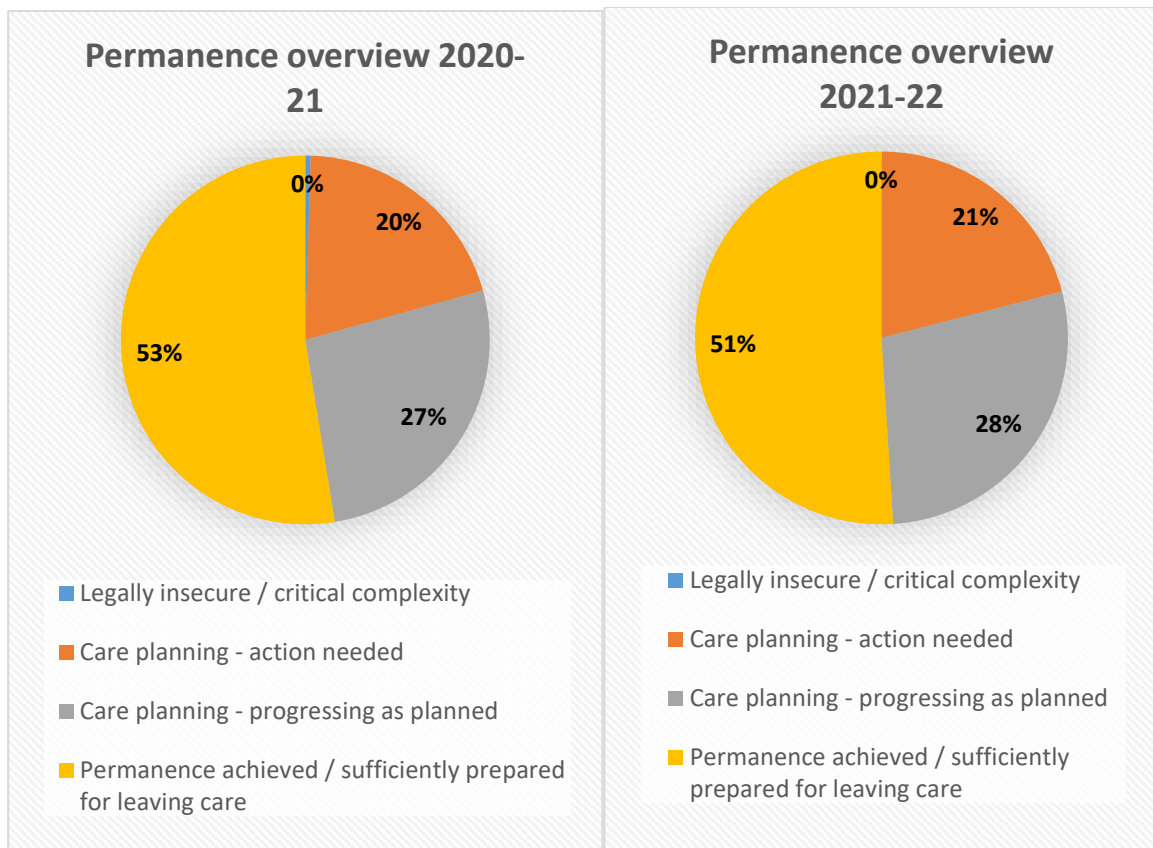
- 5.1 There is an expectation nationally that children's views are sought for their CIC Reviews. This year 56% of children (over the age of 4) participated in their Reviews in person. This is a slightly higher proportion than last year. 27% of children have preferred to engage less directly and have 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 21 children were accompanied by an advocate in their CIC Review, and 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. 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.



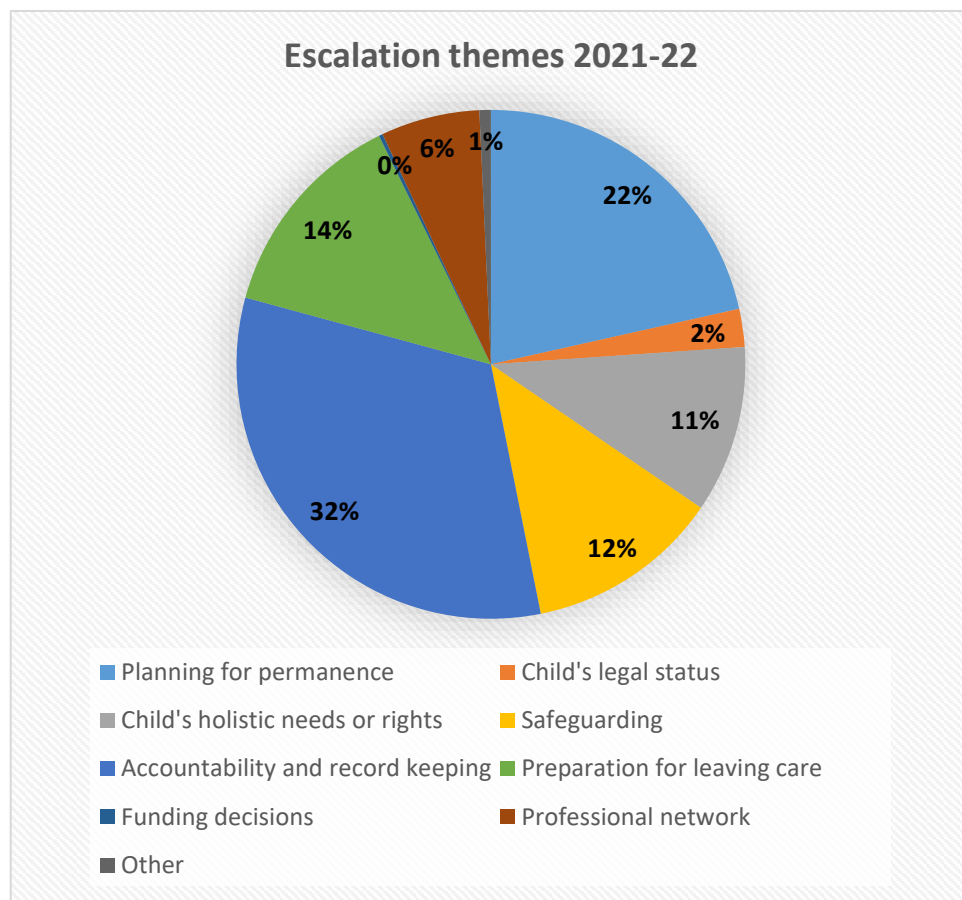
6.4 These graphs also illustrate that there are still a significant proportion of children and young people who need specific action in order to progress towards permanence. These children are at risk of drift and instability within the care system and are therefore the subjects of close attention and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

IRO Escalations

6.5 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.

6.6 Over the 12 months between April 2021 and March 2022, IROs raised 404 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 fewer than over the previous year. One hypothesis for this is around the reduction in the number of children in care, as well as areas of improved practice.

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



6.8 The above graph illustrates that most issues raised by IROs were concerned with accountability and record keeping. The alerts in this category included insufficient evidence of management oversight on the child's file, delays in recording, and pre-CIC Review Reports not being prepared in time for the child's Review.

6.9 Over a fifth of the issues escalated by IROs related to drift or delay in permanence planning. Within this category most of the IRO alerts concerned delays in decisions being made about Care Plans that were either not up to date, not appropriate for the child, or didn't sufficiently address the child's needs in a specific and measurable way.

6.10 A key area of focus for IROS has been on children in residential care, for whom the long-term plan for the child to live with a foster family is sometimes a challenge to achieve. There have been improvements this year in terms of management oversight of the Care Plans for these children and this has helped to limit drift overall. The Corporate Parenting Service accepts that in general Care Plans for children in residential care need to be more measurable and aspirational. SQA has

agreed therefore to re-deliver a series of workshops to support staff involved in Care Planning for children who find themselves living in childrens homes.

Unplanned endings for children in long-term foster care

- 6.11 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.
- 6.12 Between April 2021 and March 2022 there were 25 long-term foster placements that ended prematurely. This is the same number as the previous year.
- 6.13 Of those whose long-term foster placements ended 60% were boys and 40% were girls.
- 6.14 56% of foster placements that ended prematurely this year were with foster carers from Independent Fostering Agencies. 28% of foster placement endings were arrangements where a person connected to the child, such as a relative or a family friend, had become approved foster carers for a specific named child. 16% were placements with Cambridgeshire in-house foster carers.
- 6.15 Every six months the IRO Service provides an overview of data to the Service, which includes a summary of learning and recommendations made for future practice that have been established through the PBMs.

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 63% of IRO alerts were resolved as soon

as they were received by the relevant social work team managers. This is a significantly lower proportion than last year (77%), which suggests that team managers had less capacity/capability to attend to the issue within the timeframes needed by the child and set out by the IRO. In these instances the IRO escalated the issue to the relevant Head of Service. This led to swift resolution in most cases.

7.3 Of the 404 escalations raised over the year, seven had to be escalated by the IRO to the Assistant Director using the formal Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). This was only one more than the previous year, when six DRPs were raised over the 12 months from April 2020 to March 2021.

7.4 Significant issues raised within DRPs included:

- A 12-year old boy had a care order made when he was 8. However since this time he had not had a permanent foster home secured and he had moved four times since coming into care. His IRO was very concerned about the impact of such instability and so recommended that the local authority undertakes a formal matching assessment in order to determine whether his existing foster carers would be a good match with him long-term.
 - This DRP brought this issue of drift and its impact to the attention of the Head of Service, who was able to address the issues of delay and ensure that this assessment was at the top of the priorities for the social worker to complete.
 - This boy and his carers were delighted to hear the outcome of the assessment, and after 15 months of living together they were finally informed of the agreement for the placement to be matched long-term. The boy can finally know that he can stay where he is until he is ready to leave care.
- A 17-year-old girl was proud to learn that, after her hard work through sixth form, she had been offered a place at university. However on reviewing the plans for the young person the IRO was concerned that there were no specific arrangements in place for accommodation during the university holiday periods. The IRO felt there was insufficient attention being given to this part of the plan, and that the young person may find herself essentially homeless outside of term time. The IRO activated the DRP after initial case alerts were not able to resolve the issue.
 - Following the IRO's escalation the leaving care personal adviser met with the young person and made detailed plans with agreements for where the young person would stay during university holidays;

lifting a heavy burden of worry for the young person and enabling her to focus on her degree studies ahead.

- A young person with learning difficulties was beginning to think about her pathway plan after she turned 16. Her IRO wanted to make sure that the young person was sufficiently aware of the savings that had been made for her by her carers over the four years that she had been in care. On undertaking the CIC Review the IRO discovered that there was some uncertainty as to where the young person's savings were located and who was taking care of this money.
 - The IRO escalated the issue straight away, advocating for the young person and her right to her savings which would support her financial security after leaving care. The young person's social worker and the team manager were unable to resolve the issue and so the IRO activated a DRP. Eventually the details of the savings accounts were identified and the IRO ensured that the young person's savings were safely consolidated into her Junior ISA.

Impact for the organisation

- 7.5 The IRO Service composes and circulates the Positive Practice and Escalation Report on a monthly 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 A small working group within the IRO Service has begun to review the design of the Pathway Plan alongside members of the Care Leavers Forum. The new draft versions of the Pathway Plan have been designed to be more accessible and young-person focussed than the existing form of the Pathway Plan which is system-generated.
- 7.7 The IRO Service Manager has led on a series of training sessions with social workers and other staff which focussed on Care Planning. These sessions included the importance of incorporating the child's views into their plans, as well as looking at how we can ensure the language we use in children's plans avoids stigmatising or institutionalising them.

8.0 Feedback for the IRO Service

- 8.1 After each Review the IRO offers the opportunity to the young person, their parents, and professionals to complete and return a feedback form. Informal feedback is also elicited through activities organised by the Participation Service and through IRO Service Manager attendance at Foster Carer Support groups at least once a year.
- 8.2 Written feedback from young people about their IROs was generally very positive this year. The majority of young people said they always feel that their IRO listens to them, always feels their IRO is open and honest, and they always feel supported during their Reviews.
- 8.3 The feedback from parents was variable, with some feeling appreciative of the IRO's relationship with their child, while others had wanted to feel more included in the child's life so that they would have more to input to the Review.
- 8.4 Older young people are encouraged to chair or co-chair their Reviews. This often takes the form of the IRO and the young person agreeing together how the agenda for the meeting will be managed and both of them taking a role in guiding the conversation within the meeting.

9.0 Review of the IRO Service Action Plan 2021/22

Objective	Outcome
Continue to strengthen the relationship between the IRO Service and the Children in Care Council (CiCC).	<p>The IRO Service Manager has attended the CiCC this year, to develop the connection between the two services. Some IROs have attended the CiCC Awards Day in July 2021 which has also helped to build rapport between individuals.</p> <p>The IRO Service Manager is also the Service Manager for the Participation Service which helps ideas for collaboration across the two services to be easily shared.</p>
Continue to enhance the IRO's 'footprint' on the child's record, evidencing the IRO's involvement and oversight of the case progression.	Twice yearly 'Footprint Audits' have demonstrated that the IROs presence within the child's case records has continued to improve this year.
Strengthen the IRO oversight of pathway planning to support successful and timely moves to independence for young people leaving care.	A Pathway Planning working group has been set up and has already consulted with key stakeholders including the Care Leavers Forum. The project continues this year with the plan for the new pathway plan templates to be launched, to coincide with new guidance and a series of training sessions for social workers and staff.
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.	Unfortunately this has not been progressed this year as attention has been focussed on the Pathway Planning Project, so this will roll-over as one of the service goals for 2022-23.
Continue to support placement stability as this is key to the emotional wellbeing of children and young people. IROs will continue to conduct	IROs have chaired 25 Placement Breakdown Meetings this year, which have been shared with relevant managers for their oversight of the lessons learned from each of these unplanned endings for children. In addition a thematic report has been completed by the IRO Service which highlighted to senior managers the key factors that appear to repeatedly impact on

independent evaluations of unplanned endings in foster placements (through 'Placement Breakdown Meetings') and will also undertake appreciative enquiries of what works well, so that all learning can be woven back into practice.	placement stability, and some recommendations for future practice have been made.
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10.0 IRO Service Action Plan 2022/23

10.1 Objective 1

Continue to review the existing mechanisms for a constructive feedback loop between the IRO Service and social care.

10.2 Objective 2

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.

10.3 Objective 3

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.

10.4 Objective 4

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.

10.5 Objective 5

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.

10.6 Objective 6

IROs to strengthen their oversight of children missing from education or care.