

Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

IRO ANNUAL REPORT April 2019 to March 2020

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Executive Summary

This 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 2019 to 31 March 2020.

Key highlights of this report are:

- The number of children in care fell by 62 this year (from 780 at the end of March 2019 to 718 at the end of March 2020).
- A total of 2275 Child in Care Reviews were held this year.
- Timeliness of Reviews continues to be excellent.
- The IROs Escalation Protocol has been fully embedded across the service. The impact of IROs oversight and escalation where necessary has proved to be significant for children and has contributed to an overall improvement in the proportion of children who are settled and stable in care.

This report concludes with an evaluation of the IRO Service Action Plan of 2019-20 and outlines the new IRO Service Action Plan for 2020-21

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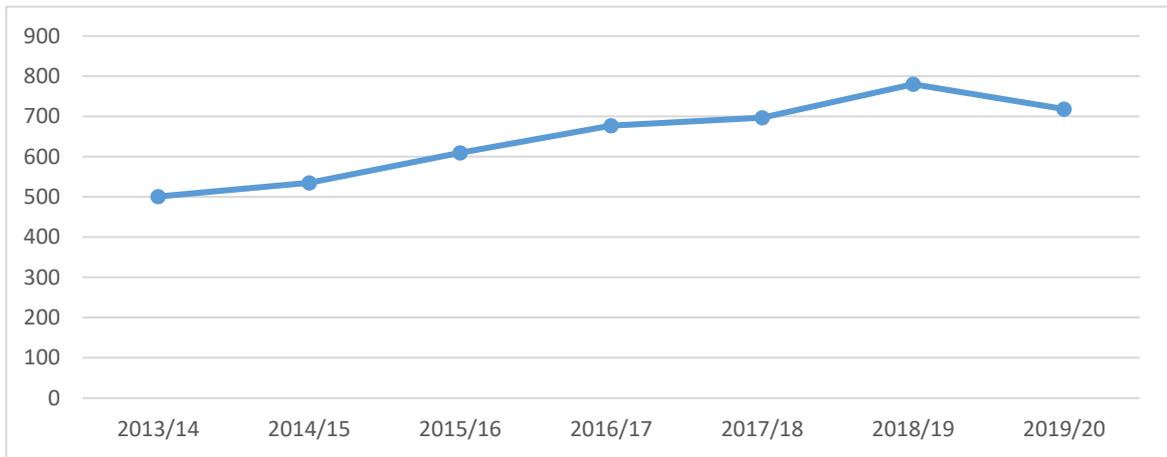
1.0 Purpose of the IRO Service

- 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 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.)
- 1.3 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.
- 1.4 It is a core responsibility of the IRO to 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.
- 1.5 Every local authority is required to have a dispute resolution procedure that reflects the process for effectively resolving areas of disagreement raised by the IRO in respect of care planning. This includes access to independent legal advice for the IRO and referral to the Child and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS).
- 1.6 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 later, and then at least once every six months after that until the child leaves care.

2.0 Profile of the population of children in care

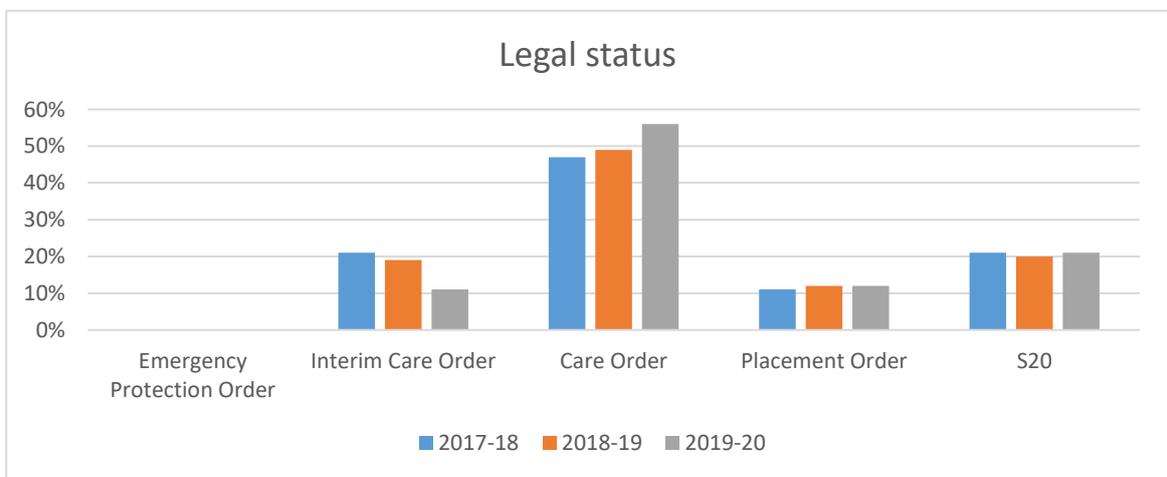
2.1 As at the end of March 2020 there were 718 Cambridgeshire children in care. This compares to 780 at the end of March 2019 and represents a decrease of 8% over the past year. There had been a steady increase over the last five years of the numbers of children in care as represented in Graph 1. The trend began to reverse in May 2019.

Graph 1: Number of Children in Care



2.2 Table 2 illustrates that there is a larger proportion of children who are the subject of care orders, and fewer who are the subject of interim care orders than over the past two years. This suggests that court proceedings may have become swifter overall for children.

Graph 2: Legal status of Children in Care



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 broadly exists to act 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;
- Customer Care: 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;
- Principal Social Worker; championing best social work practice.

Staff Team

3.2 The staffing establishment for the team is 10.4 IROs (full-time equivalent). 1.4 posts are fixed term to March 2021 and the remaining nine are permanent. Since December 2018 there has also been additional Agency IRO cover in place to cover vacancies and help to manage the volume of work for the team.

3.3 Once again, membership of the IRO team has been stable this year, with no departures of permanent staff.

3.4 In terms of diversity, there are only three male members of staff and the rest of the IRO Team are female. The majority of the staff team identify as White British. Overall the team do not reflect the gender balance and ethnic mix of the population of children in care in Cambridgeshire, though all recruitment selection is not discriminatory and open to all. There are however a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds represented within the social work teams.

3.5 Attached to the IRO Service is a dedicated Business Support Team of one Senior Business Support Officer and 2.5 FTE Business Officers.

- 3.6 There is a permanent Service Manager in post and a second Service Manager (shared with Peterborough) this arrangement enables the sharing of the line management of the IROs.

Staff Development and Support

- 3.7 Each IRO has 1:1 supervision every other month with their Line Manager to reflect on performance, practice, development and support, as well as access to informal supervision when needed. 2019 also saw the introduction of bi-monthly Group Supervision to allow for further opportunities for reflective team discussions.
- 3.8 Monthly IRO Team Meetings take place in Huntingdon and attendance is mandatory for all IROs. Standard agenda items include staff wellbeing and management updates. 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.
- 3.9 In early 2020 The IRO Team participated in bespoke training in Motivational Interviewing and a workshop on the Family Safeguarding Model to help to inform and prepare them for the implementation of the new way of working for the Safeguarding Teams.
- 3.10 The Eastern Region IRO Managers group and IRO practitioners groups are established within the region. Cambridgeshire's IRO Service Manager and two IROs are active members of the Eastern Region group. The quarterly regional meetings offer a space for rich discussion about dilemmas and challenges of the role, national trends, significant case law developments and learning from one another.

Workload demand

- 3.11 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. This will include the conduct of CIC Reviews within timeframe, consulting children prior to their review and a continuous overview of the welfare of the child and their permanence plan. At the beginning of April 2019 caseloads were high at an average of 69 per full-time IRO. By the end of the year caseloads had gone down to an average of 60, which felt much more manageable for staff.

- 3.12 Effective business support staff use established systems to support the IROs. This does not include the typing of minutes, 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.
- 3.13 In Cambridgeshire the IRO service has responsibility for convening and chairing statutory Secure Accommodation Reviews for all children living in a secure setting. Children in secure accommodation are subject to Secure Accommodation Orders due to extreme risks of absconding and associated risks of harm to themselves or others. In 2019/20 five Cambridgeshire young people were placed in secure accommodation; one in Nottingham, one in Southampton and three in Scotland. 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 and therefore overall this area of work significantly contributed to the workload of the IRO team this year.

4.0 Performance of the IRO Service

- 4.1 A total of 2275 Reviews were held in the year 2019-20. This is a significant rise from the 2022 Reviews that were held in 2018-19, and the 1974 Reviews 2017-18.
- 4.2 In 2019-20 99% of CIC Reviews were held within statutory timescale. This is an improvement from last year, which was 93%. The reasons for late Reviews this year were:
- Review rearranged as no attendees at scheduled Review
 - Social worker off sick / unable to attend the scheduled Review at short notice
 - Late notification of child coming into care
 - Foster carer and young person unwell so the Review had to be re-scheduled
 - Care plan not sufficiently prepared for the Review so the Review had to be re-scheduled
- 4.3 IROs chair Reviews at the child's preferred venue. This is often at the child's foster home or residential setting. 52% of children are placed out of county, which means that a significant proportion of IROs working time is spent travelling. On average a full-time IRO will travel around 904 miles per month.
- 4.4 It is important that IROs maintain a level of continuous oversight into the progress of the care planning for children that they work with. IROs are therefore required to record evidence of their monitoring through a record of their 'footprint' on the child's case. Twice yearly 'Footprint Audits' illustrated that there was significant improvement in this area over the year.
- 4.5 Monthly IRO Peer and Manager Audits of CIC Review Reports and annual direct observations of chairs continue 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.
- 4.6 January 2020 saw the introductions of Liquid Logic as a database recording system for Cambridgeshire's children. This meant significant shifts and adjustments for IROs and Business Support to learn how to set up and record CIC Reviews. The team had excellent quality IT support and attention to assist with the transition, which has now been fully embedded.
- 4.7 Towards the end of March 2020 the IRO Service began working from home in accordance with the covid-19 lockdown restrictions. This limited all

Reviews to being virtual and IRO visits to children were suspended. IROs chaired Reviews through Skype and communication with young people increased through phone and video calls.

5.0 Voice of the child in care planning

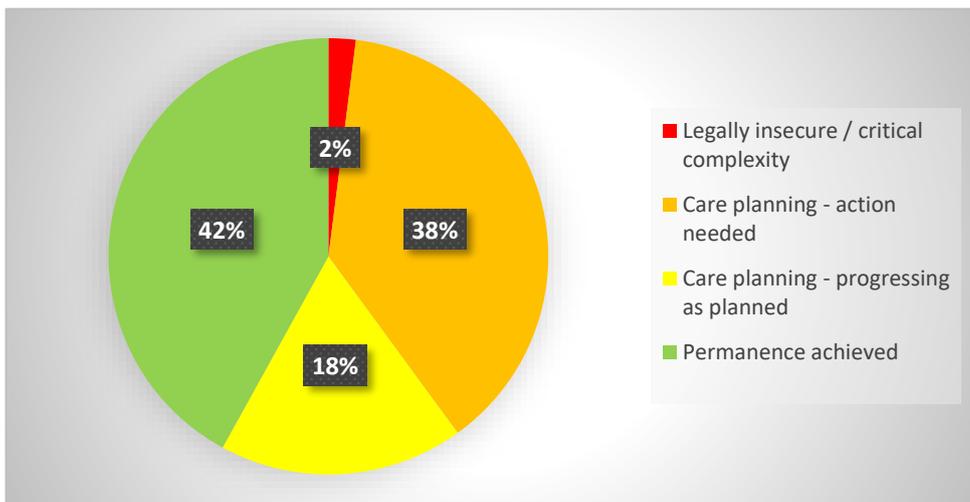
- 5.1 There is an expectation nationally that children's views are sought in an age appropriate manner for their CIC Reviews. This year in Cambridgeshire 55% of children over the age of 4 attended their CIC Reviews in person. Not all children and young people wish to attend their Reviews; 36% conveyed their views via another person, through Mind of My Own or through a consultation document.
- 5.2 This year 59% of children were visited by their IROs in between Reviews so that IROs could keep in touch and monitor how their wishes and feelings are impacting on ongoing care planning.
- 5.3 NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) provides advocates where they are requested by Cambridgeshire children in care. Advocates are there to support the child to put their views across, or to represent the child's views on their behalf at any meeting relevant to that child. NYAS do not work with children who are subjects of care proceedings as these children are allocated a CAFCASS Guardian to advocate for them and reflect their views in court. This year, NYAS worked with 276 Cambridgeshire children in care.

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

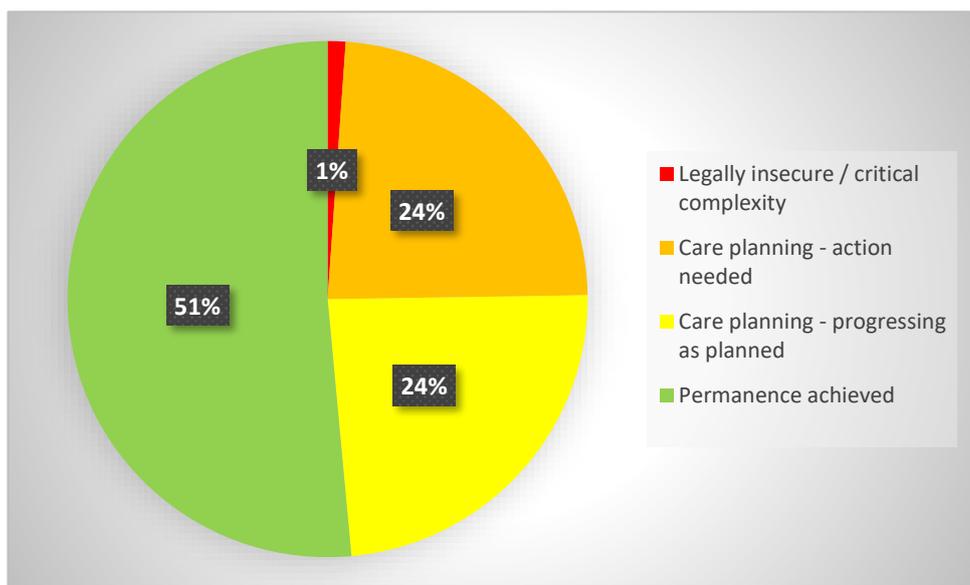
Permanence tracking

- 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 The children who have critical complications or delays to their care plans, such as children who have been waiting an extensive period of time to be adopted or who are missing from care, are flagged 'Red' on the CPT. These children have CIC Reviews at the increased frequency of once every three months to ensure that a sufficiently high level of scrutiny and attention to the child's circumstances is maintained.
- 6.3 As well as those children highlighted 'Red' all other children are also colour coded on the CPT, and Graphs 3 and 4 below show that there has been significant progress over the last year in supporting children and young people to achieve permanence in a timely way. Over half of Cambridgeshire's children in care are now in positions where they have an appropriate legal status and a well-matched, stable placement that they can remain in until independence. 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 These graphs also show that there are still a significant proportion of children and young people who are in need of some action within the system in order to progress towards permanence. These children are at risk of drift and instability within the care system and are the subjects of close attention and often escalations from IROs.

6.5 **Graph 3: Permanence overview 2018-19**



6.6 **Graph 4: Permanence overview 2019-20**



IRO Escalations

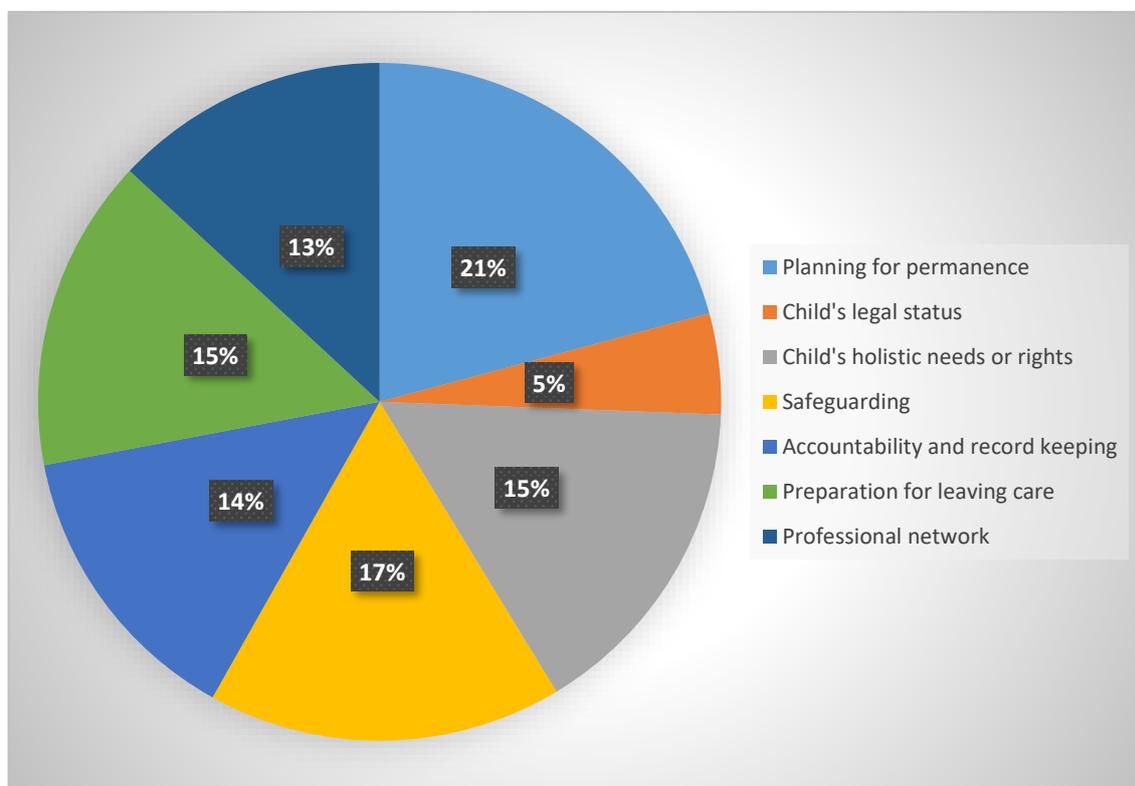
6.7 A core function of the IRO role is to seek resolutions to problems that arise within care planning. It is a statutory responsibility of the IRO Service to have a formal process in place to raise concerns and to ensure that this process is respected and prioritised by managers. In Cambridgeshire this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

6.8 The Escalation Protocol was minimally revised again in November 2019 so that it fit well as a mechanism to be used across Cambridgeshire County

Council and Peterborough City Council. It also gave clearer definition to the lower level escalations ('Case Alerts') and formal escalations which required the attention of the Assistant Director ('Dispute Resolution Process' or 'DRP').

- 6.10 Over the 12 months between April 2019 and March 2020 IROs raised 738 escalations to social care managers to prompt them to address the specific issues of drift or delay raised. This is more than double the number of escalations raised the previous year.
- 6.11 Rather than this just indicating an increase in drift and other issues a key factor behind this increase lies in the further embedding of the escalation system with IROs. Over the past year IROs have become more confident to raise relevant issues and senior managers have equally become more responsive when issues are raised.
- 6.12 The types of issues raised by IROs fell loosely into seven categories, as can be seen in Graph 5.

Graph 5: Themes of IRO Escalations



- 6.13 Graph 5 illustrates that most issues raised by IROs were concerned with drift or delay in achieving permanence for children in care. This included, for example, care plans not being updated regularly enough, delays in identifying and assessing long-term compatibility of a child's foster placement (known as 'matching') or delays in sibling assessments.
- 6.14 In terms of the issues around safeguarding that IROs escalated, which was the second most prevalent theme raised, the majority of these related to concerns of overdue visits to children in care.

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'.
- 7.2 The escalations raised by IROs, where there are issues causing drift or delay, guarantee immediate management oversight. Increasingly over the year the escalations raised this year were addressed within the deadline set by the IRO (based on the child's timeframe) by the relevant social work Team Manager. This shows that, in the instances where social work practice has fallen below standard the IRO has been instrumental in ensuring plans get back on track quickly.
- 7.3 By the end of March 2020 IROs found that roughly one quarter of their escalations were not adequately dealt with by the Team Manager within the required timeframe. This meant, in order to ensure that the child's needs and rights were being adequately addressed the IRO had to escalate the matter to the Head of Service or further.
- 7.4 Of the 738 escalations raised over the year, 17 had to be escalated by the IRO to the Assistant Director using the formal Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). Overall this was a significant increase from just 6 DRPs raised in 2018/19.
- 7.5 Significant issues raised within DRPs included:
- A 12-year old's parents had agreed for her to be accommodated (Section 20) but the IRO was concerned that there would be significant concerns for her safety and welfare if her parents withdrew Section 20 consent
 - Following the IROs escalation this child is now the subject of an interim care order
 - One IRO escalated concerns about delayed permanence planning for a 6-year old. The boy had been cared for under a Special Guardianship Order but his Special Guardian had requested him to be accommodated as she no longer felt able to care for him and she withdrew her involvement. Given his young age his IRO believed strongly that the local authority needed to obtain parental responsibility for him.

- The IROs intervention in this case prompted the local authority to issue care proceedings and a prospective adoptive family is now being sought for him
- A 17-year old mum was preparing to leave care. An assessment had concluded that she was parenting well but that she and her young child would need support to move into appropriate accommodation. The IRO was very concerned that just three weeks before the young person was to turn 18 there were not appropriate transition plans in place for moving on and the existing placement was only commissioned to her 18th birthday.
 - The DRP led to an extension in placement funding being agreed in order for focussed planning to take place so that the young mum and her son could be supported to move on appropriately.

Impact for the organisation

- 7.6 The IRO Service constructs and circulates the Positive Practice and Escalation Report each month which summarises the 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 in care each month; thereby offering the wider organisation regular balanced feedback.
- 7.7 Each month the emerging themes with respect to permanence are discussed in Quality of Practice Meetings. This enables dialogue around the broader context for any challenges, and highlights areas for learning and support.
- 7.8 This year specialist responsibilities have been allocated to some of the IRO roles and there are now named IROs who focus on specific issues for children in care. The relevant IRO takes responsibility for keeping abreast of developments in legislation and practice and is established the named link between the IRO team and the respective team within the wider service. We now have IRO links with LAC Health, the Independent Visitor Service, CAF/CASS, the Participation Service, the Adoption Team and the Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers Team.

8.0 Feedback on the IRO Service

- 8.1 This year standardised evaluation forms for Reviews were introduced. After the Review the IRO offers the opportunity to the young person, their parents and professionals to complete and return an evaluation form. These are used to help the IRO consider how best to manage the Review for each young person in the future, as well as giving insight to managers about the performance of their staff.

“I am very grateful for IRO as she is very kind and professional”
- 16-yr old unaccompanied asylum seeker

- 8.2 Feedback from young people about their Reviews and their IROs was generally very positive. The majority of young people ‘always’ felt that their IRO listens to them, ‘always’ feels their IRO is open and honest and ‘always’ feels supported during their Reviews.
- 8.3 Parents who returned evaluation forms generally expressed that they felt they were either ‘always’ or ‘mostly’ included within their child’s Review and that the IRO is ‘always’ or ‘mostly’ open or honest with them. Some parents fed back that they were ‘not sure’ whether a good plan for their child had been agreed through the Review, suggesting that more time may be needed for IROs and social workers to explain to parents the plans that are being progressed for their child.

“The Review was very well organised and I do feel both the IRO and the social worker have a good view on my son”
- Father

- 8.4 Professionals have often completed evaluation forms for Reviews that they participated in, and again the feedback has been predominantly very positive.

“The IRO knows the children and young people well. This allows her to fully understand the children’s lived experiences and ensure that the plan for the child that is being proposed is in the best interests of the child. Her Reviews are well written and decisions are shared quickly, allowing me to move forward with writing the child’s care plan”

- Social worker

“My child’s IRO is right on the button. She always follows up in the Review on tasks that should have been completed since the last Review”

- Foster carer

“I have been really impressed with the IRO’s style of working. I have several cases with her which have had a few issues and she has always ensured that the needs of the children are kept at the centre of our working. Thus far, all the foster carers I work with who have this IRO have had nothing but positive comments to make about her. I just wanted to show my appreciation to her for always advocating for the children and escalating matters when things have drifted.

- Fostering Supervising Social Worker

- 8.5 Following the Focussed Visit in January 2020 Ofsted recognised that “Additional oversight and scrutiny are provided by independent reviewing officers, who keep track of what is happening in children’s lives.”

9.0 Review of the IRO Service Action Plan 2019/20

9.1 Objective 1

IROs to support children in care to have greater opportunities to influence standards of professional practice and decision making by:

- Improving working relationships and partnership work with Voices Matter (Cambridgeshire's Children in Care Council);
- IROs to audit one care plan per month, in conjunction with the young person, with feedback to be shared with the relevant social work team;
- Children and young people to be offered feedback forms with respect to their IRO and their management of the CIC Review.

Outcome:

Children and young people are now routinely offered feedback forms at the end of each of their Reviews, which has been able to contribute to service planning and staff development moving forward. Over the year discussions have begun about how to strengthen the connection between the IRO Service and Voices Matter, though unfortunately the pace of these has been impacted by the recent covid-lockdown. Equally the IRO care plan audits have not been able to get fully underway and so this will be an objective to be achieved in 2020/21.

9.2 Objective 2

IRO Service to improve opportunities for feedback from birth parents, carers and other professionals with respect to the CIC Reviews and IRO practice.

Outcome:

Standard feedback forms are now shared with parents and professionals after Reviews and these are now embedded into the Review process. The return rate of feedback forms is very good generally and the detail of the comments has been useful in ongoing evaluation of our service delivery.

9.3 Objective 3

IROs to record information about compliance with respect to completion of required documentation and arrangements of Reviews. This will provide

qualitative feedback to Social Work Team Managers in respect of focussed care planning, to be shared in the supervision with social workers.

Outcome:

IROs now routinely complete a 'Monitoring Form' after each Review, giving added quality and compliance control to their case management overview at least once every six months. Each Monitoring Form is shared with Social Work Team Manager for them to use as a tool for discussion and performance management within supervision with the child's social worker.

9.4 Objective 4

To support the local authority to develop pro-active models of working to enhance placement stability for children and reduce instances of placement breakdown and multiple moves for children, by:

- Conducting a service-wide review of recent Placement Breakdowns;
- IRO Service taking responsibility for holding Placement Breakdown Meetings;
- IRO to support Corporate Parenting to review matching procedures for assessing long-term 'matches'.

Outcome:

Placement Breakdown Meetings for children in foster care are now undertaken by the IRO Service. A service-wide review has been undertaken and is awaiting approval for sharing with Corporate Parenting to support them with ongoing service development.

9.5 Objective 5

Introduction of specialist roles and duties for IROs, to broaden their influence across the service and promote the voice of the child.

Outcome:

Some specialist roles have now been developed within the IRO Team and plans are being prepared to build on these relationships further as the service begins to plan for taking steps towards face-to-face service delivery again.

9.6 Objective 6

IRO Service to support the organisation to improve standards and consistency in returning children to the care of their parents where appropriate. The IRO Service will do this by:

- The IRO Service Manager, (or a representing IRO) to join senior managers to oversee the consistency in standard and quality of reunification assessments and plans for return home at regular Reunification Monitoring Meetings;
- IROs to support the development of a Return Home Policy;
- IRO Service Manager (or a representing IRO) to contribute to Reunification training across the service, to reinforce expectations with respect to quality of Assessments and Plans.

Outcome:

There have been delays in the progression of this objective this year. Reunification training has not yet been rolled out and conversations with Corporate Parenting will continue as to how to continue to work together to focus on the process of Reunification when this is the right pathway for a child.

9.7 Objective 7

To ensure the child's voice is strongly heard through the care planning and Review process, so that children can have a leading influence on their care plans by:

- Increasing the proportion of children who are consulted by the IRO prior to their Review.

Outcome

IROs continue to work hard to visit and speak to as many children as possible prior to their Reviews. Unfortunately the switch from the ONE system to Liquid Logic in January has meant that currently exact data around consultation cannot be measured and such a report is under construction. Visits are routinely discussed in supervision and so managers are reassured that IROs are visiting children.

9.8 Objective 8

To ensure children's needs regarding dental and health assessments, and risk assessments around Child Criminal Exploitation or going missing are

undertaken as appropriate by responsible social work teams. IROs will do this by:

- Increasing oversight of records of assessments, both as part of regular CIC Reviews and interim monitoring.

Outcome

IROs oversight of relevant assessments has improved through the implementation of Liquid Logic, and through the routine Monitoring Forms completed by IROs after each Review.

10.0 IRO Service Action Plan 2020/21

10.1 Objective 1

To further strengthen the relationship between the IRO Service and Voices Matter (Cambridgeshire's Children in Care Council). A representative from the IRO Service will meet with a group of young people at least once in the year (potentially through the Just Us groups or Voices Matter) to gain feedback on their views of the service and how CIC Reviews are run.

10.2 Objective 2

To evaluate the new ways of working that have been established in response to covid-19 restrictions, and preserve the elements that have proven to be effective for children. This includes careful analysis of the potential benefits of communicating with young people via video or social media and being adaptive and creative in planning Reviews.

10.3 Objective 3

To further improve the feedback loop with respect to the comments received from children and young people after their Reviews. This year the service plans to record young people's feedback using a systematic tool so that themes can be collated and analysed. This will support service development and give opportunities to feed back to young people to demonstrate the value of their feedback.

10.4 Objective 4

To establish a routine for IROs to regularly meet with young people to co-audit their care plans and pathway plans. This will enable IROs to use their skills to support young people to quality assure their own plans and to raise issues if there are points within plans which the young person feels are unrealistic, do not meet their specific needs or do not relate to their own personal goals.

10.5 Objective 5

To collate and analyse information gathered from Placement Breakdown Meetings for children in foster care. Findings can be incorporated into a bi-annual Report which can then inform further learning and development for Corporate Parenting.