

Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

IRO ANNUAL REPORT April 2020 to March 2021

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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 2020 to 31 March 2021.

Key highlights of this report are:

- The number of children in care fell by 75 this year (from 718 at the end of March 2020 to 643 at the end of March 2021).
- A total of 1,510 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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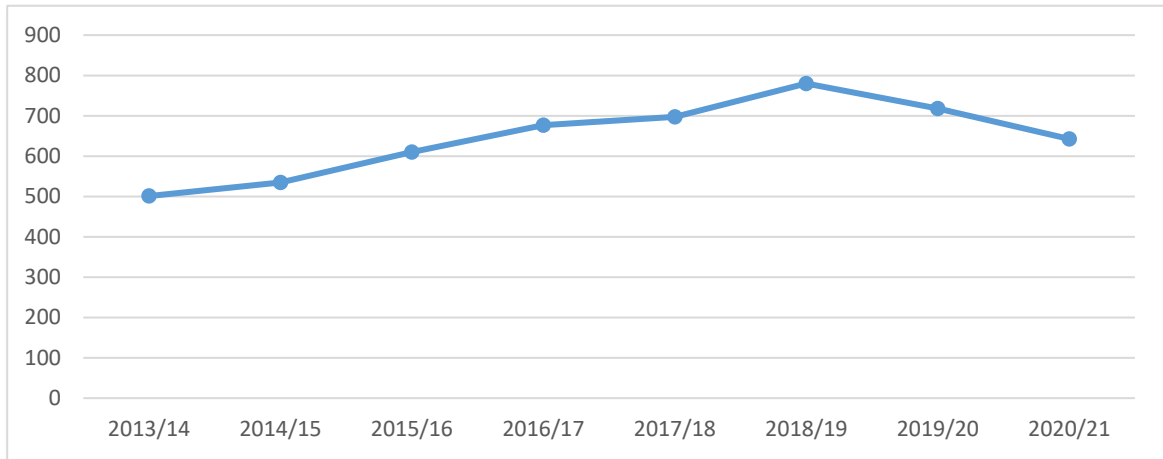
1.0 Purpose of the IRO Service

- 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.
- 1.6 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 At the end of March 2021 there were 643 Cambridgeshire children in care. This compares to 718 at the end of March 2020 and represents a continued reduction since May 2019.

Graph 1: Number of children in care



2.2 Over the past 12 months 248 children ceased to be looked after.

2.3 34 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were looked after during 2020-21.

2.4 During the year 2 young people were remanded into local authority care and one person was supported in a secure accommodation unit.

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.
- 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.
- The clinical service: enhancing therapeutic abilities of carers and relational social work
- Principal Social Worker: championing best social work practice.

3.2 At the end of 2020 SQA was the subject of a formal consultation. This concluded in February 2021 with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough SQA services aligning into one joint service. This means that Cambridgeshire and Peterborough IROs and Child Protection Chairs have become one larger team, and the roles of IRO and CP Chair have merged to that of 'Independent Chair'. The role is therefore technically now 'dual' and can provide continuity for any child who is the subject of a Child Protection Plan and then becomes a child in care.

Staff Team

- 3.2 The staffing establishment for the team is 9.8 IROs (full-time equivalent). One full-time post is fixed term to March 2022 and the remaining posts are permanent. 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 membership of the IRO team has been stable this year. Two permanent IROs left in summer 2020 (one of whom was part-time) and another moved on in March 2021. One IRO returned from extended maternity leave in September, and two new IROs have joined from other areas of Children's Social Care.
- 3.4 In terms of diversity, there is only one male member 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 the recruitment selection process 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 who are responsible for convening Reviews and distributing all Review reports to the attendees of Review meetings.
- 3.6 The IRO Service Manager has been in post since June 2017. Line management of IROs is shared with a second Service Manager who also co-manages the Peterborough Independent Chairs.

Staff Development and Support

- 3.7 Each IRO has 1:1 supervision at least once every 8 weeks / every other calendar month with their line manager to reflect on performance, practice, development, and support, as well as access to informal supervision when needed. Since the beginning of the pandemic line managers have also been holding fortnightly informal group 'Keeping in Touch' virtual meetings to support with ongoing team communication and cohesion as everybody adjusted to working from home.
- 3.8 Monthly IRO Team Meetings have continued to be held over the past year, moving to a virtual platform rather than meeting in person. After a natural period of adjustment the Team Meetings have become almost as effective as previously, though the aim is to return to face to face when possible. 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 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 conferences such as that held by Social Work England in autumn 2020, staff have attended short courses and talks delivered by Making Research Count and the Office of the Children's Commissioner. Internally there have also been opportunities for embedding learning and skills for IROs, such as bespoke refresher training in Motivational Interviewing and specialist IRO workshops led by the Service Managers.
- 3.10 The Eastern Region IRO Managers group and IRO group are established within the region. Cambridgeshire's IRO Service Manager and two IROs are active members of the Eastern Region group. The regular regional meetings offer a space for rich discussion about the 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. In Cambridgeshire an average caseload of 60 per full-time IRO has been maintained through the year.
- 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. 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 2020/21 one Cambridgeshire young person was placed in secure accommodation (compared to five in the previous year), therefore this area of work did not present a significant contribution to the workload of the IRO team this year.
- 3.14 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 2019-20). This has presented a significant increase in workload 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 1,510 Reviews were held in the year 2020-21.
- 4.2 In 2020-21 over 99% of CIC Reviews were held within statutory timescale, which is not significantly different from last year.
- 4.3 Since March 2020 all CIC Reviews have been held 'virtually' using Skype or Microsoft Teams. While this new method naturally took a little while for IROs and all participants to adjust to, generally the Reviews have continued to be effective despite the restrictions. Where there have been challenges this has been mostly in relation to technical obstacles.
- 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 has been some 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.

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. The greatest impact of the virtual nature of Reviews has been on the IRO's ability to elicit the views of some children, particularly those with disabilities, young children or those who use interpreters, where face to face conversations are significantly more effective. On the other hand, there were indications that for some young people participating via virtual platform was more comfortable than attending Reviews in person, and as such there were some who were more talkative and engaged in their Reviews when online. In total this year 55% of children over the age of 4 attended their CIC Reviews in person. This is the same proportion as the previous year, illustrating that the switch to virtual Reviews has not presented a significant barrier for children's participation overall.

- 5.2 As ever, not all children and young people wish to attend their Reviews; 32% conveyed their views via another person, through Mind of My Own or through a consultation document.
- 5.2 Due to the restrictions in place over the last year IROs have only been able to visit a small proportion of children in care. The slight lifting of restrictions towards the end of 2020 allowed visits to take place subject to individual COVID-19 visiting risk assessments between June and December 2020. This meant that overall, significantly fewer children were seen in person by their IRO over the past 12 months. While many IROs have been able to maintain or establish communication over the phone, text or videocall with young people, IROs are very much looking forward to being able to see children in person again to listen to their feelings and views.
- 5.3 NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) provides advocates where they are requested by Cambridgeshire children in care. This year there was reduction in the number of advocates working with children in care by about 90%, which can be again be largely apportioned to the limitations of working remotely during the pandemic. Encouragingly the numbers of children accessing advocacy to support them in CIC Reviews now appear to be beginning to rise again.

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

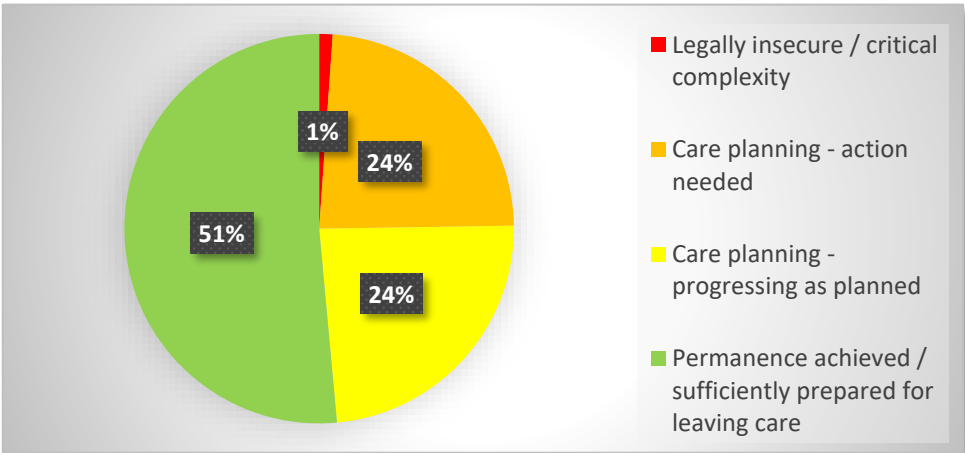
Permanence tracking

- 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.

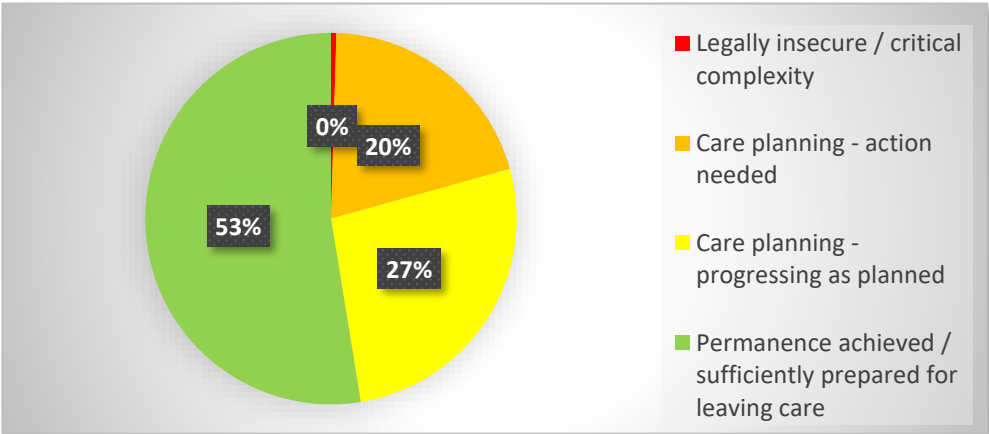
6.3 Over half of Cambridgeshire’s children in care have an appropriate legal status and a well-matched, stable placement that they can remain in until independence (coded green). This does not include adoption, as adopted children are no longer in care and therefore are not part of the children in care cohort. Graphs 2 and 3 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. The aim is for all children to be coded as either ‘yellow’ or ‘green’.

6.4 However, 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.

6.5 **Graph 2: Permanence overview 2019-20**



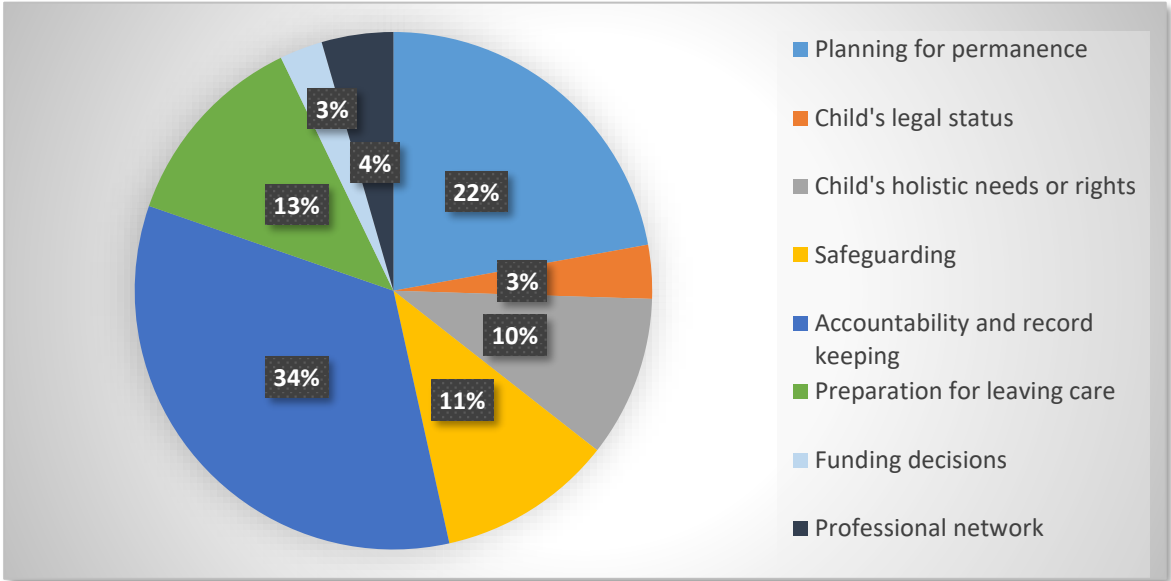
6.6 **Graph 3: Permanence overview 2020-21**



IRO Escalations

- 6.7 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.
- 6.8 Over the 12 months between April 2020 and March 2021 IROs raised 506 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.
- 6.9 The types of issues raised by IROs fell loosely into eight categories, as can be seen in Graph 4.

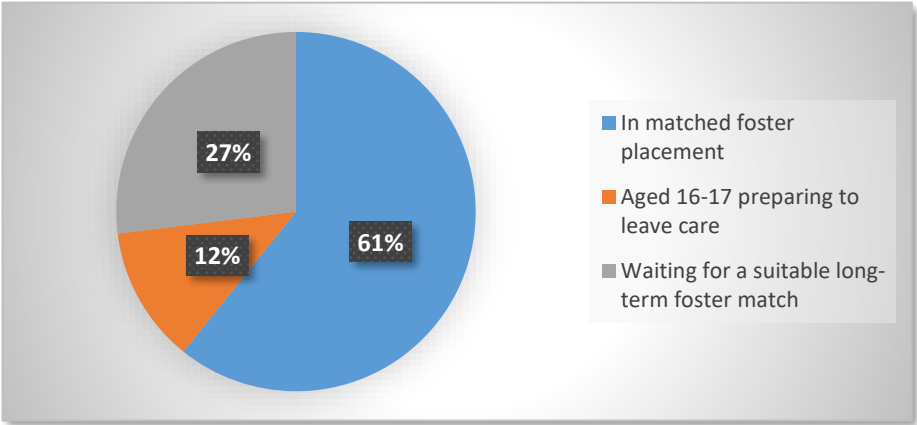
Graph 4: Themes of IRO Escalations



- 6.10 Graph 4 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.

- 6.11 Almost a quarter of the issues escalated by IROs related to drift or delay in permanence planning. Within this category most of the Alerts concerned delays in decisions being made about whether an identified foster placement was determined as a suitable long-term match or not. For children this would mean an extended period of limbo before they could be confident that they could settle into a foster home that would commit to them until adulthood.
- 6.12 The permanence plan for almost all children with care orders is long-term foster care in a matched foster placement. At the end of March 2021 there were 408 children who were the subjects of Care Orders.

Graph 5: Long-term matched foster placements



- 6.13 Graph 5 shows that, of all the children with Care Orders, 248 (61%) were in matched placements and a further 50 (12%) were aged 16 or 17 and therefore would not at this age be matched long-term. The remaining 110 were waiting for suitable long-term foster families to be found for them.
- 6.14 The Corporate Parenting Service recognises that this is an area of practice that needs attention and have responded with a strategic review of the family finding matching procedures for children with permanence plans of long-term foster care.

Placement breakdowns for children in long-term foster care

- 6.15 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.

- 6.16 Between April 2020 and March 2021 there were 25 long-term foster placements that broke down. Of those whose long-term foster placements ended most were boys, and 60% were aged 14 or over. Over half of the placements that ended had been matched for two years or less, which means that the Matching Assessment had been completed between 2018-2020. Three placements had been matched for less than 6 months.
- 6.17 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 immediate management attention where there are issues causing drift or delay. Over the last year 77% of IRO Alerts are resolved as soon as they are received by the relevant social work Team Managers. 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.
- 7.4 Of the 506 escalations raised over the year, 6 had to be escalated by the IRO to the Assistant Director using the formal Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). Overall, this was a significant reduction from 17 DRPs raised in 2020/21.
- 7.5 Significant issues raised within DRPs included:
- A 17-year old had a scheduled heart operation soon before his 18th birthday, following which he was anticipated to need 3 months' recuperation. The IRO raised concern that his pathway plan had not

addressed this need, and that instead the proposed plan was for him to move out from his foster home at his 18th birthday.

- Following the IRO's escalation the social work team secured an extension of funding for his foster placement to enable the young person to recover from surgery effectively before moving on to supported accommodation.
- A little boy of nearly two years old was in a short-term foster placement while care proceedings were ongoing. The local authority's assessment of his mother's parenting capacity concluded that it would be unsafe for him to return to her care. The boy's IRO raised concerns on learning that the local authority's plan changed to one of reunification with his mother without a clear rationale as to how the risks identified would be mitigated.
 - The IRO's intervention in this case prompted the local authority to revisit their parenting assessment and carefully re-assess the areas of risk that had been identified.
- 12-year-old twins had been living in their matched foster placement for over five years and their carers wished to become special guardians for the children. The carers were concerned however that the impact of no longer receiving fostering allowance would affect the quality of life for the children and so they requested that the local authority consider exceptional financial support post Special Guardianship Order. The IRO was concerned at the length of time taken for the local authority to respond to the carers' request, and that the delay was impacting on the children's pursuit of permanence.
 - Once the IRO raised the DRP a swift decision was made by the Head of Service and the carers were given a response to their request. This enabled definitive decisions to be made about future plans for the twins.

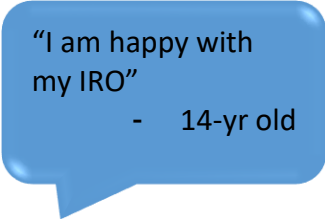
Impact for the organisation

- 7.6 The IRO Service composes 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 each month, thereby offering the wider organisation regular balanced feedback.

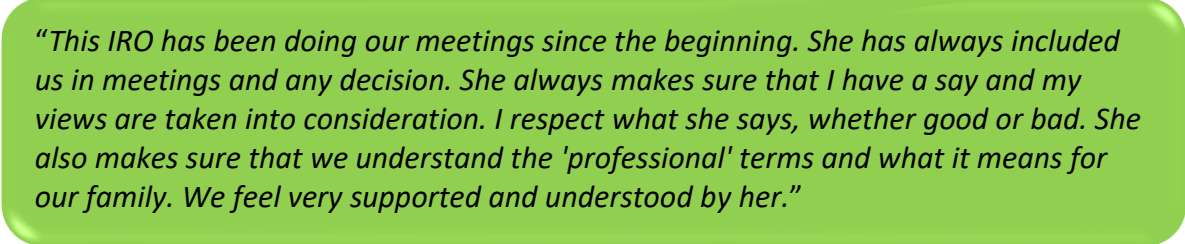
- 7.7 This year the IRO Service has delivered two Learning from Placement Breakdown reports along with a one-off, larger-scale study of the impact of placement breakdowns on young people. The findings from this work have been shared with the Corporate Parenting service and have been integrated into the review of procedures for care planning with children that are the subjects of care orders.
- 7.8 A small working group within the IRO Service reviewed the design of the Care Plan and CIC Review Report documents within the Liquid Logic system. IROs felt strongly that the reports generated needed to have more user-friendly language and layout to enable children and families to fully engage in and understand them. The draft versions by the IRO working group became the basis of wider consultations with relevant stakeholders before being incorporated into the system. The new forms have now been authorised and are due to be implemented in April 2021.

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 paper feedback form. For much of 2020 the response rate was low, and so in early 2021 the format of the feedback form was simplified. Since then the response rate has started to increase.
- 8.2 Written feedback from young people about their IROs was generally very positive. 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 Most parents who returned feedback forms generally expressed that they felt they were very included in their child's Review and felt that the IRO represented their views.



"I am happy with my IRO"
- 14-yr old



"This IRO has been doing our meetings since the beginning. She has always included us in meetings and any decision. She always makes sure that I have a say and my views are taken into consideration. I respect what she says, whether good or bad. She also makes sure that we understand the 'professional' terms and what it means for our family. We feel very supported and understood by her."

"I do feel that my son's views are listened to by IRO and always checks directly with my son, if she's got things right and understood his wishes."

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. The feedback from a foster carer illustrates how important this can be for young people as they develop their independence skills:

"The IRO was child-centred throughout the meeting and G (the young person) was made to feel empowered to express her views. It was lovely to observe G being given opportunity to exercise her emerging independence in reviewing her care plan and making decisions about her future. This is very helpful for G's self-esteem and confidence. G felt listened to and valued."

9.0 Review of the IRO Service Action Plan 2020/21

Objective	Outcome
Further strengthen the relationship between the IRO Service and Voices Matter (Cambridgeshire's Children in Care Council)	One IRO is the Link IRO from the IRO Service with Voices Matter. The Link IRO was able to meet once virtually with Voices Matter and there are plans to build the relationship further when in-person activities and meetings can take place again.
Evaluate the new ways of working that have been established in response to COVID-19 restrictions.	Following the collation of service user feedback and discussion amongst IROs about what works, the service are now drafting protocols for how Reviews should be conducted, and the level of flexibility that could be applied in relation to virtual interactions with children when the pandemic restrictions are lifted.

Further improve the feedback loop with respect to the comments received from children and young people after their Reviews.	It has been difficult to progress this while IROs have been having more limited face to face contact with children. However, requests for feedback are now via email rather than solely on paper, which has helped to elicit children's views.
Establish a routine for IROs to regularly meet with young people to co-audit their care plans and pathway plans.	After establishing this objective, it became clear that the format of the Care Plan needed to be reviewed in order for children to be able to fully engage in them. Now that the new forms are to be implemented and there are proposals for face to face visits to resume when restrictions lift IROs will be able to begin to introduce to children the idea of co-auditing their care plans.
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.	This objective has been completed and two Learning from Placement Breakdowns reports have been completed and shared with Corporate Parenting this year.

10.0 IRO Service Action Plan 2021/22

10.1 Objective 1

Continue to strengthen the relationship between the IRO Service and the Children in Care Council (CiCC). The IRO Service Manager has also taken on an interim management role with the Participation service which will support the collaborative opportunities between the IROs and CiCC.

10.2 Objective 2

Continue to enhance the IROs 'footprint' on the child's record, evidencing the IRO's involvement and oversight of the case progression.

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

Strengthen the IRO oversight of pathway planning to support successful and timely moves to independence for young people leaving care.

10.5 Objective 5

Continue to support placement stability as this is key to the emotional wellbeing of children and young people. IROs will continue to conduct 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.