



City of Westminster

Westminster City Council

Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report



Westminster Participation Team: broadening young people's experiences!

Reporting Period	April 2022 – March 2023
Report of	Independent Reviewing Service
Report to	Senior Leadership -Children's Services
Report Author	Vivette Jenkins – Service Manager for Independent Reviewing Service, Bi Borough Children's Services
Date of Report	20th June 2023

Content

1	Executive Summary	3
2	The Legal Context and Purpose of the Independent Reviewing Service	4
3	Profile of the Westminster Independent Reviewing Service	5
4	Profile of Looked After Children Population the Independent Reviewing Service Supports	6
5	The Independent Reviewing Service Role in Reducing the Numbers of Looked After Children	8
6	Timeliness of Looked After Child Reviews	9
7	Participation in Looked After Child Review	10
8	The IRO Role in Quality Assurance and Safeguarding	11
9	Dispute Resolution Protocol	11
10	Care Planning	12
11	IRO Learning and Development	12
12	Participation and Engagement	13
13	Summary and Conclusion	14
14	Annual Work Programme for April 2022- March 2023	15
Appendix 1	Action Plan for 2023/2024	17

1. Executive Summary

The report provides an overview of the activities and impact of the Independent Reviewing Service 2022-2023, highlighting areas of good practice and development in driving forward improvements in care planning and delivery so our children can have the best outcomes possible.

The key highlights of this report are:

- The number of children in care increased by 11 (6%) at the end of this reporting period. The overall numbers of Looked After Children has increased slightly; whilst the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children arriving in Westminster has remained steady, the numbers of adolescents becoming looked after from our local population has increased. We believe this reflects rising concerns about contextual safeguarding and children at risk from extra-familial abuse.
- Improved timeliness of Looked After Child reviews; of 505 Looked After Child reviews were held in 2022-2023 with 99% undertaken within the statutory timescales.
- Increased opportunities to ensure the voice of the children and young people is key to all discussions and care planning arrangements; 91% of children contributed to their statutory review, with 80% of children attending their review.
- Dispute Resolutions remain consistent with previous years with 12 challenges raised, 10 informal, 1 formal and 1 service themed challenge; of these one was escalated to stage two with no escalations to Senior Management within this reporting period.
- During this reporting period, we have seen the publication of the final report of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and welcomed the DfE's response to support and continue to strengthen the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO).

2.The Legal Context and Purpose of the Independent Reviewing Service

The IRO has a key role in quality assurance and service improvement of the Local Authority's care planning for Looked After Children. This is delivered through oversight of care plans and providing scrutiny with an emphasis on raising challenge to prevent drift and delay.

Westminster City Council's IROs are skilled scrutineers, systematically performing their statutory duties set out in Section 25B (1) of the Children Act 1989;

- Monitor the performance by the local authority in relation to the child's case.
- Participate in any review of the child's case.
- Ensure that the wishes and feelings are given consideration by the authority.
- Administer statutory regulations to ensure compliance.

The Independent Reviewing Service operates within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, statutory guidance, issued to Local Authorities in April 2011 and linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance (2011).

The IRO Handbook sets out the statutory roles and duties of the IRO and the strategic and managerial responsibilities of the Local Authority in establishing an effective Independent Reviewing Service which include IROs;

- Chairing the child's review meeting
- Monitoring the child's progress on an ongoing basis.

The average caseload for a full-time IRO is between 50-60 which is consistent with the IRO Handbook recommendation of caseloads between 50 and 70. Oversight of case allocation activity, variation of case work and lead areas is maintained by the Service Manager through formalised mechanisms.

As a service we recognise the importance of having an operational and strategic lens on practice through representation at designated panels, forums, and planning groups. IROs provide an independent champion role for children and young people by [giving them a greater agency in the major decisions that affect their lives](#), ensuring their voice has been considered and actioned. The IRO role is valued as part of the decision-making process as their focus is on children's best interests, holding a mirror up to practice and raising challenge when needed.

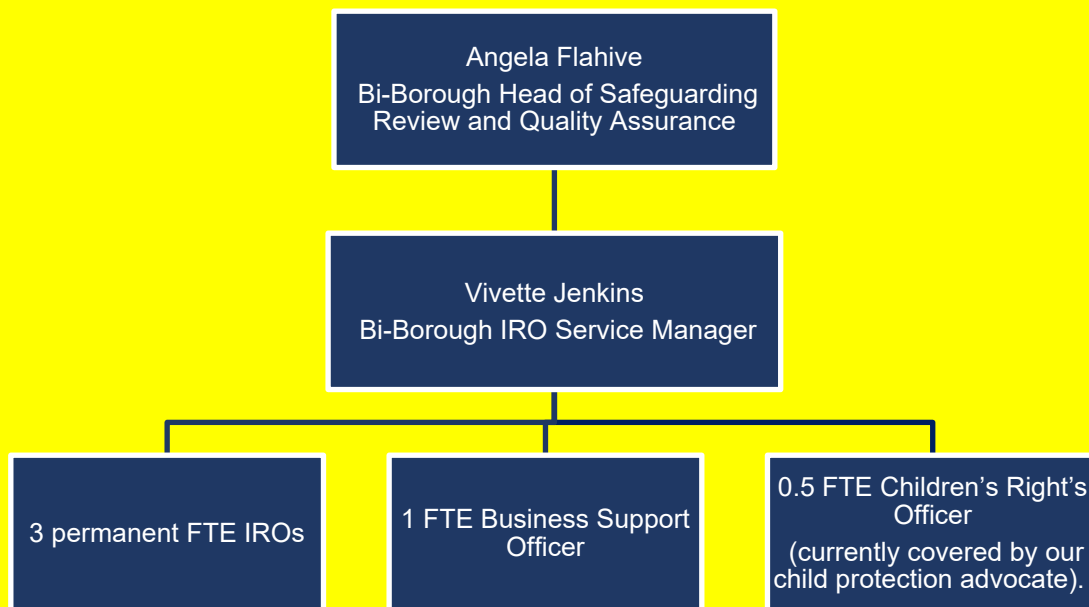
The Independent Reviewing Service provides representation at;

Westminster Guardians Board
Care Panel
Bi-Borough Permanency Board
London IRO Managers Forum
London IRO group
Contextual Safeguarding and Exploitation Champions Meetings
Lifelong links case discussion
Permanency Planning Meetings
Disruption Meetings
Strategy/review strategy meetings
Nation Referral Mechanism (pilot project) Steering Group
IRO regional conference
Cafcass Guardians Liaisons meetings

3. Profile of the Westminster Independent Reviewing Service

The Westminster Independent Reviewing Service is part of the Bi-Borough Safeguarding, Review and Quality Assurance Service. This is so the position of independence, from the frontline service line management arrangements is maintained.

The Independent Reviewing Service in Westminster staffing structure



The team provides quality assurance oversight to influence practice and wider service delivery to achieve positive outcomes for all our Looked After Children. IROs ensure care plans are timely and informed through assessments that provides a real and genuine response to the assessed needs of individual children. IROs take a lead role in ensuring care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child or young person's current views, wishes and feelings, checking they fully understand any implications of changes to their care plan.

As a service the IROs strengthen their challenge to the Local Authority through the dispute resolution protocol which has been effective in driving forward improvements in outcomes for the young people we review.

IROs are responsible for

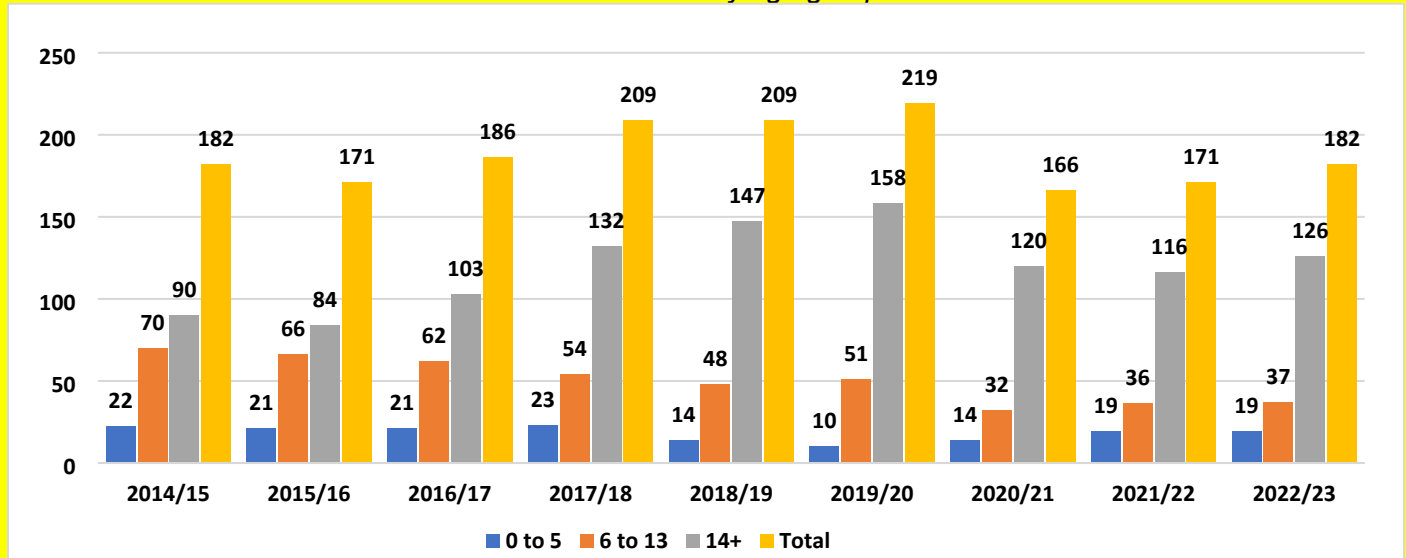
- Convening and chairing of reviews for Looked After Children.
- Convening and chairing of reviews for children placed for adoption.
- Convening and chairing of reviews for children placed under an intercountry adoption arrangement.
- Carrying out the LADO functions in respect to allegations against staff and volunteers.
- Holding team links meeting with the locality service they are attached to.
- Carrying out themed based audits.
- Participating in peer-on-peer observations.
- Delivering training about the function of the IRO to existing and new staff.

4. Profile of the Looked after Children Population the Independent Reviewing Service support

4.1 Data profile

On the 31st March 2023 there were 182 children and young people in care, this is up 11 from the previous year. A breakdown by age over time can be seen in Table A.

Table A - WCC Looked After Children - Total numbers by age group as of 31st March 2023



There has been a slight upward turn in the total numbers in, the care population in Westminster. Our new starters in the generic resident care population have remained consistent, while the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) arriving in the Local Authority have slightly increased in year.

Table B indicates new starters broken down by age group and generic compared with our unaccompanied minors population;

Table B: New LAC starters

	0-5	6-13	14+ (excl. UASC)	14+ UASC	Total
2016/17	35	31	30	50	146
2017/18	21	11	25	105	162
2018/19	23	10	39	103	175
2019/20	12	41	28	69	150
2020/21	19	10	29	34	92
2021/22	22	24	44	38	128
2022/23	25	23	40	46	134

Table C provides a breakdown of the reasons for new care episodes for 14-17-year-olds during 2022-2023. This cohort represents 86 children (64%) of new entries to care, of which the highest proportion entered care due to absent parenting 49 (57%). UASC accounted for 46 children (53%) of adolescent care entrants. During 2022-23 the proportion of adolescent entries into care due to remand arrangements remained low with 2 young people remanded into Local Authority Care;

Table C – Need type of young people aged 14-17 years entering care:

Need type for entries to care in 2022-23, aged 14 to 17 years	Total
Abuse or neglect	12
Child's disability	0
Parental disability or illness	0
Family in acute stress	11
Family dysfunction	12
Socially unacceptable behaviour	2
Low income	0
Absent parenting	49
Total	86

Historically, Westminster's UASC numbers have impacted greatly upon our overall current Looked After Children and Care Leaver populations with an increase in the total number of UASC care entries since 2016/17 (see Table D). However, we have seen a decrease in the numbers of UASC and it is reasonable to attribute this in part to the covid-19 pandemic travel restrictions which limited movement across borders. Fewer new arrivals have provided some opportunity for the IROs to undertake a wider range of quality assurance activities.

Table D – UASC at the end of each year

	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Total UASC at year end	47	69	82	89	58	50	48

4.2 Placement Profile

The Local Authority has a range of placement options when a child or young person comes into care:

- Kinship Foster Care (placement with extended family supported and regulated by the LA)
- Foster Care
- Independent Foster Care (private agency)
- Residential care (Children's Homes, Mother and Baby Units, Residential Schools, Health settings)
- Supported Lodgings (semi-independent)
- Other (independent housing, placed with parents, and youth offending Institutions)

In 2022-2023, of the 48 children aged 0-13 (90 % - 43) were placed with foster carers (kinship, LA, and independent agencies) or placed with parents. In 2022-23 most children aged 14+ becoming Looked After were placed in supported lodgings 50 (58%) or in Foster Care 34 (40%). The high proportion of children aged 14+ being placed in supported lodgings mostly relates to UASC coming into Westminster who are almost all aged 16 and 17 years old.

Table E Placement Type by age

Placement Type New starters aged 0-13, Placement Type	Total	Placement type New starters aged 14+, Placement Type	Total
Kinship Foster Care	9	LA Foster Care	28
LA Foster Care	24	Independent Foster Care	6
Independent Foster Care	10	Residential Care	2
Residential care	5	Supported Lodgings	50
Total	48	Total	86

5. The Independent Reviewing Service Role in Reducing the Numbers of Looked After Children

IROs are responsible for ensuring that Looked After Children achieve permanence and that this occurs without unnecessary drift or delay. During 2022-2023, 123 children were recorded as having left care (see table F).

In 2022-2023, 3 children (3%) who left care, did so because of adoption. 36 children (29%) left care because they returned to their parents. Work is continuing to ensure these children do not remain on care orders any longer than is necessary to ensure their reintegration into their family is timely. 4 (3%) exits from care related to children on a Special Guardianship Order. Table F below provides a full breakdown. Most of our children cease to be Looked After as they reach 18 years of age.

Table F – Reason for ceasing being child in care 2022-23

Reason Episode Ceased	Total	%
Care taken over by another local authority in the UK	6	5%
Returned home to live with parent(s), relative(s), or other person(s) with parental responsibility as part of the care planning process	35	28%
Returned home to live with parent(s), relative(s), or other person(s) with parental responsibility which was not part of the current care planning process	1	1%
Left care to live with parent(s), relative(s), or other person(s) with no parental responsibility.	5	4%
Moved into independent living arrangement and no longer looked-after supportive accommodation providing formalised advice/support arrangements Includes both children leaving care before and at age 18	2	2%
Adopted - application for an adoption order unopposed	1	1%
Adopted – consent dispensed with by the court	2	2%
Accommodation on remand ended	1	1%
Age assessment determined child is aged 18 or over and E5, E6 and E7 do not apply, such as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) whose age has been disputed	6	5%
Child moved abroad	1	1%
Aged 18 (or over) and remained with current carers (incl. under staying put arrangements)	49	40%
Special guardianship order made to former foster carer(s), who was/are a relative(s) or friend(s)	2	2%
Special guardianship order made to former foster carer(s), other than relative(s) or friend(s)	1	1%
Special guardianship order made to carer(s), other than former foster carer(s), who was/are a relative(s) or friend(s)	1	1%
Period of being looked-after ceased for any other reason (where none of the other reasons apply)	10	8%
	123	100%

Permanency planning remains a priority and is now fully embedded into the Looked After Child review process. Where appropriate, the option of a child or young person remaining in family placements is prioritised with a focus on returning children and young people to their birth families. Within the care planning, IROs monitor permanency planning from an early stage of a child's time in care. As a result, we have seen a slight increase in securing family-based options 2022-2023 (43) in this period.

Where children or young people require alternative long-term care outside their family, permanency planning continues to be tailored carefully to each child's needs. The Bi-Borough matching protocol maps out the local pathways when a child or young person is placed in long-term fostering which as part of their agreed permanency plan. For a child or young person aged 13 years and under, the process is managed by the Fostering Permanence service and presented to the fostering matching panel.

For those young people over 14 years old, the IROs take a lead on scrutinising the timeliness of permanency planning, which informs the Looked After Child review. The pandemic exacerbated an already bleak picture of backlogs and delays in the court process; this has continued to adversely impact on the timeliness of achieving permanency for those within care proceedings and in the Adoption process. The IROs continue to maintain oversight of permanency planning at every subsequent Looked After Child review, until permanency is achieved to ensure there is no drift.

The Independent Reviewing Service have been influential in ensuring the matching protocol for those children over the age of 14 years, who have a care plan of long-term fostering has been embedded in the Looked After Child review process. This has ensured young people are matched with their Foster Carers at the earliest opportunity, avoiding any drift or delay.

The information in the table above (*table F*) would suggest that care planning for Looked After Children continues to remain dynamic, that there is good throughput, and there is a positive focus on achieving permanence through family-based options.

6. Timeliness of Looked After Child Reviews

Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023 a total of 505 Looked After Child reviews were chaired by an IRO.

Table G – Looked After Child Reviews undertaken in 2022-23

REVIEWS UNDERTAKEN 2022-2023	
Total number of Looked after Children reviews April 22 to March 23	505
Numbers of reviews held within timescale	499
Number reviews held outside of timescale	6
Percentage of reviews held within statutory timescales	99%

Looked After Child reviews held outside of statutory timescales are due to several reasons, workforce pressures, incorrect data input, late notifications to the service. Highlight reports have been introduced to prompt actions to address discrepancies. To improve the timeliness of Looked After Child reviews, the Independent Reviewing Service is now informed when approval is given by the Head of Service for a child to become Looked After which has contributed to initial Looked After Child reviews being arranged in a timely manner.

It is important to note that these strategies have had a positive impact, as we have not seen an increase in late notifications. Overall, late notifications have reduced from 30 in 2019-2020, to 3 in 2021-2022, which has been maintained in 2022-2023.

As a service we will be undertaking the following activities to support the continued improved timeliness of Looked After Child reviews during 2023-2024

- Continue to strengthen support to locality teams and business support officers, to reduce the number of late notifications to the Independent Reviewing Service, by ensuring all details of new looked after children are recorded timely on the system so the correct electronic processes are triggered.
- The Independent Reviewing Service will, with the assistance of Business Support, map informal alerts which relate to late notifications, which will be shared periodically with Heads of Service with the aim of improving the timeliness of late notifications.
- Strengthen the working relationship with our Business Intelligence team to ensure we are coordinated in the way LAC reviews are recorded to minimise any discrepancies in the data that is being collected.

7. Participation in Looked After Child Reviews

The Independent Reviewing Service is committed to ensuring that all Looked After Children have the opportunity and are encouraged to participate and engage in their Looked After Child review process. In general, the feedback about utilising virtual platforms for Looked After Child reviews has been positive. The IROs continue to write the minutes of their Looked After Child review in the form of child centred letters.

In 2022–2023 91% of children over 4 years of age contributed to their statutory review, with 80% of children attending, which is down 4% from last year. IROs use a range of methods to seek the views of children and young people.

The table above shows the vast majority of children and young people attend or speak for themselves, at their Looked After Child reviews. However, in this reporting period we have seen a decrease in the participation at Looked After Child reviews. A possible hypothesis, particularly for our older young people is that they may have become more accustomed to using virtual platforms which means an in-person Looked After Child review maybe less favourable for them.

The table below provides the participation descriptions for Looked After Child reviews undertaken in 2022-2023.

Table H - Participation codes for reviews undertaken in 2022-2023

Participation Code	Total
PN0 - child under 4 at time of review	54
PN1 - child attend and speaks for themselves	349
PN2 - Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf. (Attendance views represented by advocate or independent reviewing officer (IRO))	6
PN3 - child attends and conveys their views non-verbally	3
PN4 - child attends; does not speak for themselves / convey their views	2
PN5 - child does not attend but asks advocate to speak for them	4
PN6 - child does not attend but conveys their feelings to the review by the facilitated medium	45
PN7 - child does not attend nor conveys their view to the review	42
Total	505

Particular focus has been placed on developing ways in which allows the service to respond differently to Looked After Children who are non-verbal or have SEN needs; to increase their participation, in line with their wishes, in the Looked After Child review process. Working in this way is a demonstration of our commitment of ensuring our Looked After Child review process, remains inclusive of all the children and young people we look after.

8. The IRO Role in Quality Assurance and Safeguarding

The Service Manager provides oversight and quality assurance by routinely observing Looked After Child reviews. This provides the opportunity to not only observe and reflect on the practice of the IRO but to hear directly from children/young people, parents/carers and professionals about their experience of being involved in a Looked After Child review. This feedback loop provides reflections which help to inform and review our delivery.

The IROs quality assurance oversight is demonstrated through their “footprint” on the case file, an audit of midpoint monitoring in-between Looked After Child reviews, pre-review discussions and case consultations with Social Workers. Pre-review discussions are a mechanism to facilitate dialogue between the IRO and social worker to share any risks in advance of the Looked After review.

Complaints by Looked After Children are shared with the IRO, who will explore the issues leading to the complaint and where applicable use the reviewing process to achieve resolution.

IROs maintain oversight of the missing children/young people reporting mechanism, to ensure the missing protocol is being applied and return home interviews are being carried out. The information provides insight of the push and pull factors that are contributing to the missing episodes and identifies areas of work to be addressed. The Independent Reviewing Service has a contextual safeguarding and exploitation champion as part of the wider council response to tackle online harms, digitally enabled grooming, and child exploitation

IROs provide a duty service to primarily support the Local Authorities Designated Officer (LADO) function. Whilst this provides opportunities to develop safeguarding practice in a specialised area of work it brings a noticeable increase in the volume of work that is generated through managing the administration of LADO. Going forward further consideration needs to be given to how demands are managed.

9. Dispute Resolution Protocol

The dispute resolution protocol is a key mechanism by which IROs highlight concerns and raise challenges with the Social Work locality teams and the Looked After Children service. A function of the IRO role is to identify and resolve issues, highlighting any trends which emerge from the care planning process. Any concerns are addressed as part of the quality assurance processes through the informal or formal dispute resolution protocol.

During 2022–2023 there were 12 occasions when the dispute resolution protocol was applied; 10 were informal challenges, 1 formal challenge and 1 themed service challenge. Within this, 1 challenge was escalated to stage two and no challenges escalated to Senior Management in this reporting period.

Noticeable trends include late notification of new Looked After Child arrangements, late/non receipt of social work reports/care plans, initial health assessments not completed within timescales, drift in registering young people to health care professionals and the IRO not being informed of changes in court decisions in a timely manner. The themed service alert related to a number of children and young people whose Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting fell significantly outside timescale or the PEP meeting held but not recorded on the system in a timely manner.

Challenges raised by the IROs are encouraged and welcomed by senior managers as a lever for service improvement. Overall, there has been a reduction in the number of formal dispute resolutions being raised, which can be attributed to the IRO efforts of improving practice and supporting locality teams develop a greater understanding of the collective contribution needed to improve outcomes for children.

10. Care Planning

The role of the IRO is instrumental when considering any implications for care planning when there are changes in legislation or new case law. The service is currently working collaboratively with the Local Authority to consider the recent judgement by the Court of Appeal regarding the use of S20 and the interplay between s.20 and s.31 Children Act 1989 in care planning, particularly when parents agree with the care plan.

The IROs have a lead role in ensuring children and young people are supported to contribute to their care plan in a way that is meaningful for them and ensuring they have a child friendly copy they can refer to as and when necessary. This practice continues in producing minutes for a LAC review in the form of a child friendly focused letter that explains how well they are doing, what people are worried about and what the next steps are to address worries.

We are currently reviewing the way recommendations are written to ensure they remain SMART and consistent across the service, linked to clear outcomes which directly impact on the child or young person and clearly identify who is responsible for taking an action forward and in what timescale. This will be informed by a review of the approaches currently used.

The service is also currently piloting an easy read social story format and widget symbols as a way of simplifying discussions held in the Looked After Child review for those with additional needs. This ensures that all of the minutes of Looked After Child reviews are accessible and meaningful to all the children and young people we look after.

11. Learning and Development

Westminster City Council continue to provide core Children's Services training which is available virtually or in person. IROs are equipped with the right knowledge and skills that enable them to scrutinise practice, plans and arrangements for our children and young people effectively. We have created learning and reflective spaces for the IROs based on the principle of promoting reflective practice to develop creative thinking skills and encourage active engagement with work processes. IROs have continued to build upon their systemic training and learning to drive forward positive outcomes for Looked After Children.

The IROs are becoming more familiar with carrying out peer-on-peer observations, which were introduced in the last reporting cycle; where IROs observe their IRO peers', chairing Looked After Child reviews. As we go forward, the aim is to draw on the data collected from each cycle of peer-on-peer observations, pulling out areas of good practice to be rolled out across the service. The data will also be used to identify any areas that can be strengthened within the Independent Reviewing Service, thus supporting the professional development of the IROs. Participating in peer-on-peer observations has enabled the IROs to evidence their peer reflection as part of their re-registration for Social Work England.

A number of IROs participated in "*Supporting effective IRO practice*" Course, run by Edge Hill University. This course enabled the IROs to engage in a critical analysis of the IRO role, to drive forward positive outcomes for Looked After Children.



A **Shared** experience!

12. Participation and Engagement

The Independent Reviewing Service remains committed to ensuring that the voice of the children and young people is key to all discussions and care planning arrangements. IROs build relationships with the children and young people they review, by raising their profile and ensuring children and young people are aware of the various opportunities available for their voice to be heard.

As a result of a closer working relationship with the Participation team, IROs are now able to routinely promote upcoming participation activities in Looked After Child reviews. IROs also actively raise awareness of Independent Visitors in ensuring all Looked After Children are aware they can speak to the Children's Rights Advocate, if they are concerned that the service, they receive is not responsive enough for them.

Seeking ways in which attendance and engagement in Looked After Child reviews could be increased has been a key priority, particularly for those who are non-verbal or have communication challenges. Working alongside our Bi-Borough participation team, the service is developing new ways in which to engage and obtain the views and wishes of our children and young people in their Looked After Child review through the introduction of Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). The PECS are visualised symbols in the form of cards, which can be sorted in a way which will communicate the wishes and feelings of those with communication challenges, with the aim of increasing participation.

Since the pandemic we have noted a drop in the return of consultation forms due to several factors, including timeliness of their distribution, accessibility to the forms which was designed as a hard copy and not easily accessible through mobile devices. A new electronic contribution form was successfully trialled, evidencing improved accessibility and an increase in consultation returns. The electronic consultation process will be rolled out in 2023-24, which will be an additional way of driving up participation in the Looked After Child review process.

13. Summary and Conclusion

Strengthening our permanency planning processes for young people over 14 years old through the Looked After Child review process has been a key area of improvement. As we go forward the service will support the Local Authority to embed the matching process for young people in long term foster placements, to ensure matches take place timely with senior management oversight.

The IROs have continued to bring rigour and challenge to care planning. Recommendations arising from the regular Looked After Child reviews provide a good overview of progress made and actions needed which ensures that drift is avoided in most cases. The IROs demonstrate their quality assurance oversight through their IRO “footprint” on the case file. This has proved to be an invaluable way of the IROs maintaining oversight and scrutiny of care plans with a clear emphasis of raising challenge to improve outcomes for our children and young people.

The voice of the children and young people remain key to all discussions and care planning arrangements. The IROs relationship with the children and young people they review is important. Significant efforts have been taken to address the changes in the IRO staff group, with the newly developed “all about me” information sheet. This sheet has a photo of the IRO and information about them, which includes a summary of what an IRO is and most importantly how IROs can be contacted in-between Looked After Child reviews. We have seen that whilst a very high proportion of children take part in their Looked After Child reviews, we have acknowledged that this was an area where further improvement could be made.

We have reviewed how the service could respond differently to those who are non-verbal or have communication challenges to increase participation in the Looked After Child review process. Working alongside our Bi-Borough participation team, the service is developing new ways in which to engage and obtain the views and wishes of our children and young people in their Looked After Child review through the introduction of Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). As we move forward further consideration will be given to explore ways to continue to increase participation.

Although we are currently at 99% of reviews Looked After Child review held within timescale, as a service we continue to strive for 100% timeliness. To achieve this, we are making efforts to strengthen our working relationship with our Business Intelligence team. This is to ensure we are coordinated in the way Looked After Child reviews are recorded to minimise any discrepancies in the data that is being collected.

14. Westminster Independent Reviewing Service annual work programme for April 2022- March 2023 – Analysis and Action Plan

Below is a Signs of Safety model tool which allows the Independent Reviewing Service to take reflective stance to having a lens on their own practice and how services and partners collectively promote the care planning needs of our Looked After Children.

What's working well	What are we worried about	What do we need to do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There has been an improved picture regarding late notification of children and young people becoming looked after which has had a positive impact on the timeliness of Looked After Child reviews, • The service is fully staffed with permanent members of staff who have caseloads below the national average. • The IROs have developed an “all about me” information sheet to raise their profile whilst also providing a simplified overview of the role of the IRO, so this can be better understood by children and young people. • A new electronic contribution form was developed. • Greater focus has been given to ways in which to increase participation of children and young people who have a disability, are non-verbal or have communication needs, through the use of PECS. • Strengthened partnership work with our Commissioning team when quality assuring the provision of placements for children and young people. • A robust system is in place to monitor unregulated placements and the permanency matching process for children 14 years plus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The timeliness of social work reports, pathway plans, IRO letters and Looked After Child reviews being completed/distributed within the agreed timescale. • The increased demands of the LADO function on the IROs. • The continued depletion of experienced Social Workers through recruitment and retention challenges has led to a changing face of the front-line social workforce in Children's Services. • How the IROs provide continuity of care planning to Looked After Children who were previously subjected to a CP plan. • Evidence IROs are contributing to the promotion of seeking family-based care options for Looked After Children. • Ways in which IROs evidence the voice of children and young people who choose not to attend their Looked After Child review or convey their views is considered in the decision-making process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The IROs to achieve the target of holding 100% of LAC reviews within timescale. • Complete the IRO/Commissioning workshop where the devised action plan of improving the quality assurance of placements and accommodation for Looked After Children can be implemented. • Complete the review of the LADO service. • Continue to develop the Looked After Child review process so it remains inclusive of all our children and their families by ensuring our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy remains embedded in the Looked After Child process where anti racist practice, Adultification, absent fathers and disproportionality is challenged. • Greater focus is to be given to a small cohort of children and young people who choose not to attend their Looked After Child review or convey their wishes, to ensure their views are being considered. • Incorporate the on-line consultation forms into the already established consultation processes to strengthen ways in which we consult and capture the views and wishes of children and young people.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Service Manager for IROs has oversight of individual IRO challenges which are escalated through the dispute resolution protocol which are tracked until they are resolved.		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To provide continuity in care planning explore ways in which the Child Protection Advisors can be involved in the initial Looked After Child review of any child who was subjected to a CP plan, as a way of contributing to robust care planning.• Develop opportunities to work in partnership with the Family Group Conference coordinator to ensure all family placements have been explored and prioritised before permanency planning begins in earnest.• Review the trial practice of completing letters using a social story framework in an accessible easy read format as a way of improving the active participation of children and young people who have a disability, are non-verbal or have communication needs.• A dispute resolution tracker is to be devised to ensure where thematic challenges arise these are escalated to the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance to ensure there is senior management oversight.
--	--	---

Appendix 1 Independent Reviewing Service Action Plan for 2023/2024

	Priority	Area for development	Outcome/value for children	Lead	Time scale
1	Going forward into 2023-2024 the Independent Reviewing Service action plan will address the timeliness of Looked After Child reviews.	Bring about an improvement in the number Looked After Child reviews held within timescale.	<p>Children and young people will have their Looked After Child reviews held in a timely way, which enables the IRO to review the care plan and maintain oversight that individual care plans meet the child or young person's needs.</p> <p>Timely Looked After Child reviews will also enable the IROs to oversee the permanency plan and raise challenge through the dispute resolution protocol which will contribute to reducing drift and delay in the care planning process.</p>	IROs / Service Manager	September 2023
2	Ensuring children and young people remain the central focus of our work.	<p>Roll out the on-line consultations for Looked After Child reviews to increase opportunities to capture the voice of children and young people, and their network prior to the Looked After Child review.</p> <p>Implement the introduction of the "all about me" information sheet, as a form of introduction and simplifying the role of the IRO to drive up meaningful</p>	<p>The use of electronic consultation forms will be embedded into practice as a way of elevating the voice of children and young people in the Looked After Child review process.</p> <p>Provides increased opportunity for children and young people to share their views including those who have disabilities, additional communication needs or are non-verbal.</p>	Participation team and IROs	December 2023

		<p>engagement in the Looked After Child review process.</p> <p>Trial the use of PECS, to create new ways of engaging children/young people who have a disability, are non-verbal or have communication needs.</p> <p>Review the trial practice of completing letters using a social story framework in an accessible easy read format as a way of improving the active participation of children and young people in their Looked After Child review process.</p>	<p>Children/young people who have a disability, are non-verbal or have communication needs are better able to share their views and engage in the decision-making process.</p>		
3	<p>Enhance the Quality Assurance function of IROs within permanency planning and care planning process.</p>	<p>A review of the IROs contribution to the LADO service is to be undertaken. This is so consideration can be given to how IROs continue to contribute to LADO safeguarding function without negatively impacting on the IROs capacity to effectively carry out the quality assurance function of their role.</p>	<p>The outcome of IROs having reduced or streamlined LADO responsibility will give IROs greater capacity to effectively undertake the Quality Assurance function of their role with more vigour.</p> <p>The impact on Looked After Children and young people will be evidenced through the IROs increased capacity to robustly scrutinise care plans in between Looked After Child reviews, ensuring the care plan meets the needs of the young person, preventing any drift and delay in the care planning process.</p>	<p>Head of Service and Management team in the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance team</p>	<p>July 2023</p>
4	<p>Contribute to the service objective of seeking family-based care options for Looked After Children and where this is</p>	<p>IROs to be proactive in ensuring family-based care options have been explored prior to initial Looked After Child</p>	<p>Increased opportunities to consider suitable placements with birth family for children and young people.</p>	<p>IROs, the Family Group Conference coordinator and</p>	<p>February 2024</p>

	<p>not possible permanency is achieved at the earliest opportunity.</p>	<p>reviews with a focus on engaging fathers and extended family as potential care givers.</p> <p>IROs to develop opportunities to work collaboratively with the Family Group Conference coordinator to ensure all family placements have been explored and prioritised before permanency planning begins in earnest.</p> <p>A robust system is to be maintained to monitor the matching protocol for young people aged 14 years and over.</p>	<p>Children and young people will observe the efforts undertaken to prioritise them remaining in family placements.</p> <p>Where children and young people require alternative long-term care outside their family, IROs will be instrumental in progressing a permanence plan at the earliest point which is tailored carefully to each child's individual needs.</p>	Children's Services	
5	<p>Strengthen the care planning processes.</p>	<p>Embed team links in locality teams to promote stronger working relationship with new and existing Social Workers to strengthen practice.</p> <p>A dispute resolution tracker is to be devised to ensure where thematic challenges arise these are escalated to the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance to ensure there is senior management oversight.</p> <p>IROs to continue carrying out themed audits and midpoint monitoring, scrutinising care plans to ensure they are based on sound assessments and needs led.</p>	<p>Through team links, evidence of disseminating good practice, and driving forward the shared vision of improving our collective responses to children and young people to improve outcomes for them.</p> <p>Stronger evidence of the dispute resolution protocol being used by IROs to capture emerging trends and provide robust challenge to contribute to reducing drift and delay in the care planning process which has senior management oversight.</p> <p>IROs able to evidence review decisions have a direct link to improving outcomes for children and young people.</p>	IROs, Service Manager, Head of Service for Safeguarding Review and Quality Assurance and Children's Services	March 2023

6	Consider learning from National Children Safeguarding reviews and Care Review that can be applied.	Develop ways to collectively consider learning from reviews to ensure any practice implications are considered.	The IROs will be better able to evidence the impact their work is having on improving	IROs, Service Manager, Head of Service for Safeguarding Review and Quality Assurance and Children's Services	March 2023
---	--	---	---	--	------------



Report originator: Vivette Jenkins

Report sign off:

Date: 20th June 2023

Date: