

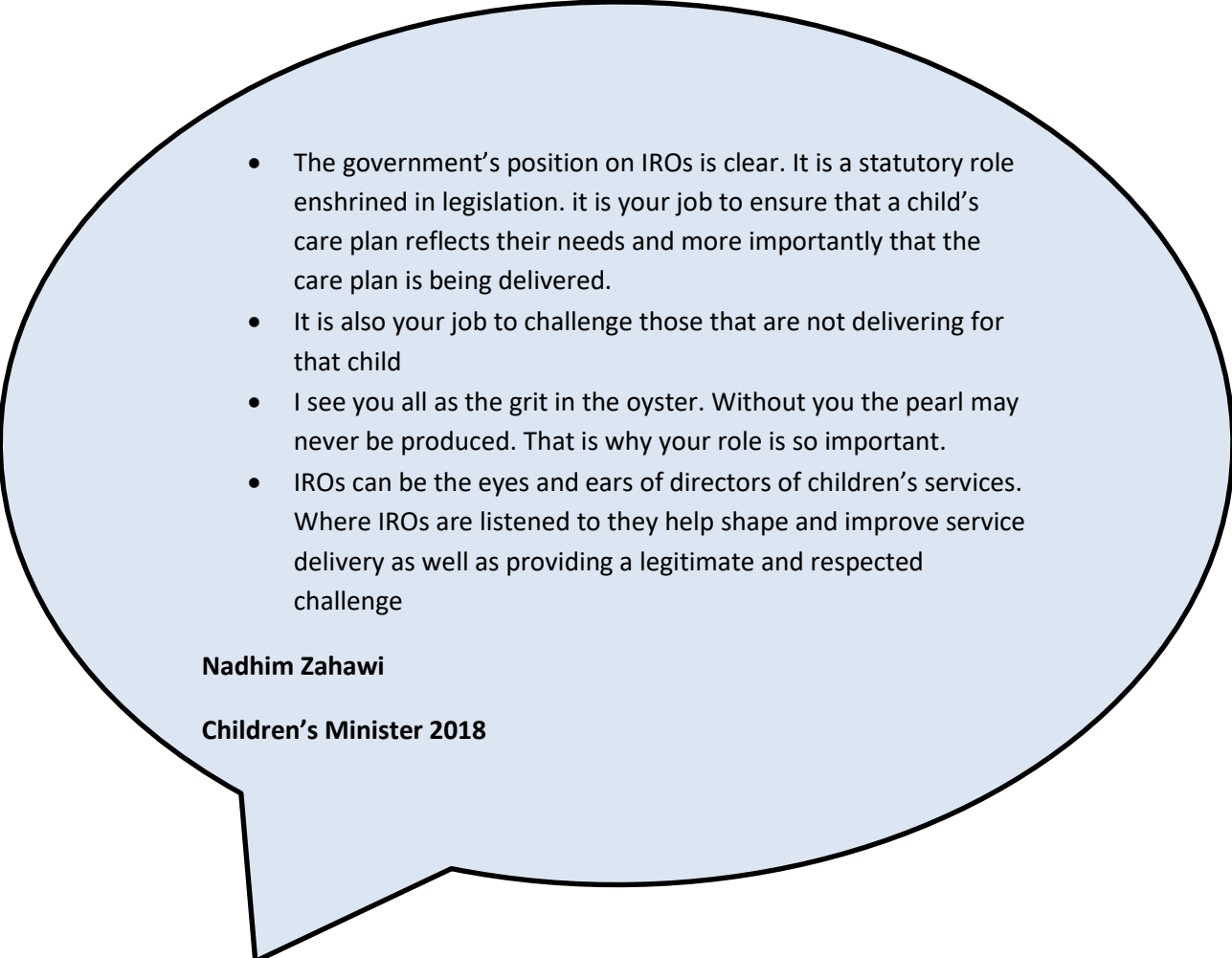
INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER

ANNUAL REPORT 2021 – 2022



At the end of this reporting period Sheffield had a Looked after population of 666 children, a slight reduction of 8 children over 2020/21.

During the reporting period a total of 978 children were looked after with 309 children becoming looked after and 312 ceasing to be looked after.

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- The government's position on IROs is clear. It is a statutory role enshrined in legislation. It is your job to ensure that a child's care plan reflects their needs and more importantly that the care plan is being delivered.
 - It is also your job to challenge those that are not delivering for that child
 - I see you all as the grit in the oyster. Without you the pearl may never be produced. That is why your role is so important.
 - IROs can be the eyes and ears of directors of children's services. Where IROs are listened to they help shape and improve service delivery as well as providing a legitimate and respected challenge

Nadhim Zahawi

Children's Minister 2018

In order for the aspirations and expectations for children in our care to be realised, it is important that the Corporate Parenting Board responsible for achieving them receive regular reports that set out progress. This Annual Report is part of that process.

An annual report of the IRO Service for LAC is required in accordance with the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and subsequent statutory guidance in 2010 as set out in the IRO Handbook

In addition to the Corporate Parenting Board this report will be presented to the DCS, Lead Member for Children, Young People and Families, CPP and CiCC & the Sheffield Children Safeguarding Partnership.

The Sheffield Context: Improvement Programme and Corporate Parenting Strategy

Improvement Programme

Since June 2017, as a result of findings from a review of Children's Social Care and in response to our most recent OFSTED inspection in 2019, Sheffield City Council has been running an ambitious improvement programme. The Improvement Programme has had a direct impact upon the IRO service and some of the changes that have occurred have been part of a total service change. As a result of the improvement programme we have:

- Created a strong performance culture and there is now monthly reporting from the Service into Directors Performance Clinic, providing clear line of sight into practice and appropriate challenge.
- Building on and improving our performance framework (Contextual Safeguarding, Adoption, Aspire, Permanence, placement sufficiency)
- Strengthening the arrangements for children who go missing from care
- Strengthening the arrangements to manage allegations against professionals
- Developed a Quality Assurance framework
- Developed a Workforce Strategy and invested in our workforce
- Monitored Caseloads, Performance and Sickness
- Continued to embed Signs of Safety across the service
- Developed Practice Standards for IROs
- Organisational Health Check is fed into Improvement data

Corporate Parenting Strategy

Sheffield City Council is committed to ensuring that the life chances of every child and young person in its care are improved in line with their peers. This is documented in our Corporate Parenting Strategy. The strategic priorities in our Strategy have been determined by local and national priorities, and in continued consultation with children and young people. They are:

1. Keeping children and young people in care and care leavers involved in services.
2. Supporting success in Education, Training and Employment.
3. Ensuring Children and Young People in Care and Care Leavers are Happy, Healthy and Resilient.
4. Identifying permanent homes and families for Children and Young People in Care.
5. Ensuring there are enough high quality and stable arrangements for all our children and young people in care and care leavers.
6. Keeping our Children and Young People in Care and Care Leavers Safe.
7. Supporting our care leavers' journey to independence.

The work of the IRO service must therefore be seen within both the context of the improvement programme and furthermore in its direct alignment with the above priorities.

Purpose of service and legal context

A House of Lords judgement in 2002 concluded that a local authority that failed in its duties to a looked after child could be challenged under the Human Rights Act 1998, most likely under article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights relating to family life. The judgement recognised that some children with no adult to act on their behalf may not have any effective means to initiate such a challenge.

In response, the Government made it a legal requirement for an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to be appointed to participate in case reviews, monitor the local authority's performance in respect of reviews, and to consider whether it would be appropriate to refer cases to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass). This is set out in section 26 of the 1989 Act, as amended by the 2002 Act.

Later, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Reviewed Case Referral) Regulations 2004:5 made under section 26 of the 1989 Act, extended the functions of Cafcass so that on a referral from an IRO they could consider bringing proceedings for breaches of the child's human rights, judicial review and other proceedings.

The 2008 Act extends the IRO's responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's review to monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's case, as set out in sections 25A-25C of the 1989 Act (inserted by section 10 of the 2008 Act). The intention is that these changes will enable the IRO to have an effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process.

Together, the amended 1989 Act and the Regulations specify:

- the duties of the local authority to appoint an IRO.
- the circumstances in which the local authority must consult with the IRO.
- the functions of the IRO both in relation to the reviewing and monitoring of each child's case; and
- the actions that the IRO must take if the local authority is failing to comply with the Regulations or is in breach of its duties to the child in any material way, including making a referral to Cafcass.

Learning and Improvement

When inspected in 2019 OFSTED had this to say about Sheffield's IRO Service;

- Independent Reviewing officers (IROs) know children well and regularly see them outside of their reviews to help children participate and express their views. They provide valued insight into children's lives and challenge professionals effectively on behalf of children to ensure that they receive the right support and that their plans are progressed. Reviews of children are timely and involve relevant partners and agencies

Sheffield City Council was judged to be "good" in 2019.

Profile of the IRO Service

The Independent Reviewing Service sits within the Quality Assurance and Involvement Service (QAIS) under the leadership of Assistant Director for Safeguarding & Quality Assurance, Donna Taylor. The management structure is independent of Children's Social Care in compliance with the minimum standards for independence set by central government for IROs.

The team is currently made up of 12.6 permanent FTE (full time equivalent) (total 15 staff) qualified Social Workers all with a minimum of 5 years post qualifying experience. The team provide a specific and specialist social work service and operate under the minimum standards for independence set by government in the IRO Handbook.

The team includes 0.2(FTE) (1 staff) who is working with the audit team and 1.6 (FTE) (2 staff) Fostering Reviewing Officers (FRO) who are responsible for undertaking all Annual Foster Carer Reviews (FRO Annual Report is issued separately).

In QAIS, three Service Managers work together across Child Protection, LADO, Foster Care Reviews and CLA reviews. Within this team Janice Lightowler is the lead for the Independent Reviewing Service and therefore the author of this report.

In the service we have a wealth of knowledge and experience in all aspects of front line and Social Work management including fostering, safeguarding, residential, CAFCASS, youth justice and children looked after. The IRS strives to continuously develop good practice which is informed through case law, research and training, learning from Serious Case Reviews, other Local Authority Ofsted judgements and Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAI), statutory guidance and regulations which provides the legislative framework for good practice with Looked after Children. To promote continuous professional development members of the service can access regular training and conferences, including those provided by the National Independent Reviewing Officer Managers Partnership (NIROMP) and National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers (NAIRO) to promote continuous professional development.

We have

- 2 male IROs, 13 female.
- 1 IRO of European heritage, 14 from a White British background
- 10 full time and 5 part time IROs
- 1 IRO with a registered disability
- 1 IRO who is a registered carer

This team of IROs does not currently reflect the demographics of the looked after population and being acutely conscious of this we are aware of the need to address any potential cultural bias, influences or impact of diversity on planning. Our interview panels for new staff have been culturally diverse, staff have completed the EDI training modules required by SCC and have been participating in training with Migration Yorkshire to keep up to date with issues and the care planning needs of our diverse CLA population including UASC.

One IRO has been on maternity leave for the majority of this reporting year and we have been fortunate to have agency cover throughout this period minimising the impact of this absence on children and other staff members

Recruitment both temporary and permanent has been very successful with no gaps between starters and leavers anticipated. The Local Authority have been supportive with keeping this crucial team fully staffed and for that we are grateful.

IRS has a dedicated Business Support (BS) team who are responsible for the administrative process for reviews. This includes booking rooms, issuing invitations, consultations and post review reports as well as collating for the IRO any responses and reports made available for reviews and ensuring that contact details are current to prevent data breach. They are a team of 5.1 FTE staff, managed by a full time Business Manager who in addition gathers data and provides information and support to the Service Manager.

2021/22 has been a busy year and it continued to be dominated by the Covid 19 pandemic and the changes to working practices that this imposed. The team rose to the challenge of consulting and reviewing, using the technology available to ensure that children and young people still had a voice in the reviewing process albeit virtually and that reviews of the care plan continued. At year's end we are in recovery, and beginning to move away from the virtual world of reviewing, albeit retaining where appropriate when this works for the young people.

Quantitative Information

A total of 978 children and young people have been looked after and therefore reviewed in this reporting period. This is a gain of 30 children over the last reporting year so whilst the year end figures show a slight decrease, total numbers of children looked after over the year and numbers of reviews chaired have risen.

1734 reviews were chaired by an IRO with an average over the year per FTE of 161.

The IRO Handbook recommends that caseloads for IROs should be between 50 and 70. During this reporting period the caseload for each established FTE IRO varied between 56-76 with variation outside these figures only occurring when working hours changed, and with starters and leavers as caseloads were built up or reduced. Caseloads of 70 and above were recorded in supervision on 12 occasions.

At the end of this reporting period Sheffield had a looked after population of 666 children, a slight reduction of 8 children over 2020/21, but there were 30 more children looked after during the year over 2020/21 figures.

The Children Looked After Service who deliver a social work service to all children with a confirmed permanence plan for care currently have the highest number of young people looked after accounting for 58% of the overall population, a 10% increase on last year.

The proportion of looked after children per 10,000 population aged under 18 years is 56.3 in 2022, this is a slight reduction over last year. The last figures produced in 2021 that we can compare show Sheffield was at 57.2, still significantly lower than Yorkshire and Humber at 78, England at 67 and statistical neighbours at 92.3.

473 (71%) of looked after children are placed with foster carers, 18% of whom are connected persons. 19% of young people looked after are placed in residential care.

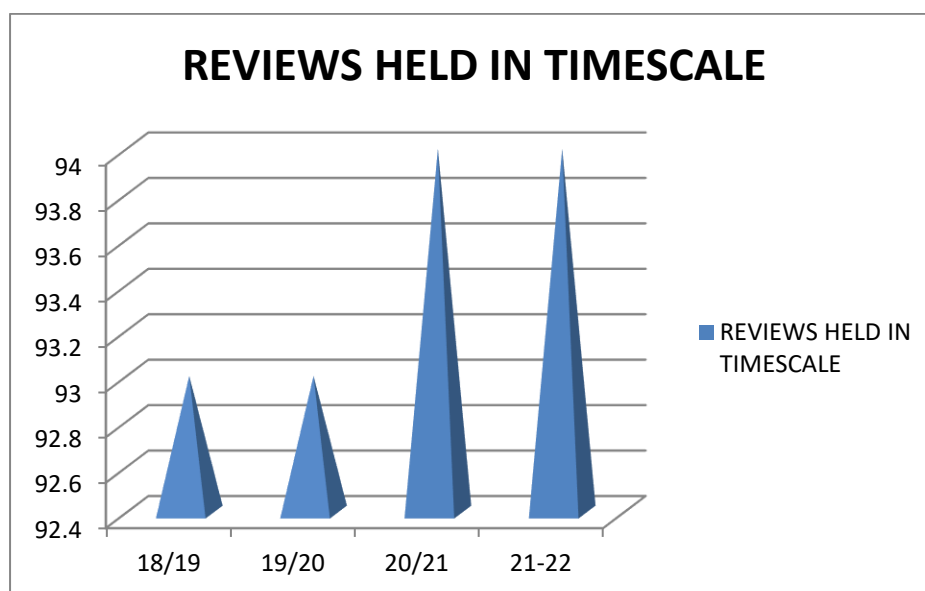
Performance for Placement stability is currently at 70%, a reduction of 2% on last year. This is the percentage of looked after children who have been in the same placement for at least 2 years.

Those children, during this reporting period, that have been or are placed more than 20 miles from their home, has remained relatively stable at 11% of the LAC population. This has been the case for the past 3 reporting years.

Qualitative Information

This section of the report will include information on timeliness, workflow and challenge.

Timeliness



This graph shows the percentage of children who had a timely review as this is how central government asks us to report. So, in 2021/22, 94% of children had a review in timescales. Children and young people over 4 years of age participate in their reviews in a range of ways. Our report to central government states that the percentage of children participating in their CLA reviews during the year 2020/21 was 97%.

Issue based advocacy was provided to 58 children and young people throughout the year. Advocacy referrals were made on 3 occasions by the IRO.

During the pandemic which continued to dominate this reporting year IROs have tried to be creative and have continued to consult with children. Visiting them outdoors when permitted and when not, using the technology available including Zoom and What's app to ensure their views are heard

Workflow

LAC Stats	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Reviews	434	450	436	414	1734
Recommendations on in 5 days	391 (90%)	371 (82%)	355 (81%)	356 (86%)	1473 (85%)
Report authorised in 15 days	280 (65%)	255 (57%)	207 (47%)	219 (53%)	961 (55%)
Report authorised in 20 days	357 (82%)	327 (73%)	270 (62%)	308 (74%)	1262 (73%)
Report issued in 20 days	334 (77%)	259 (58%)	232 (53%)	253 (61%)	1078 (62%)

The number of reviews held is similar to last year. Recommendations recorded on Liquid Logic within 5 working days has improved from 82% in 20/21 to 85% with only small variations throughout the year. Despite higher caseloads and some sickness in the team, achieving reports written in 15 and 20 working days has remained stable but reports being issued in 20 working days by our BS team has been impacted by the pandemic and the government requirement to work from home as well as staffing challenges.

Achievements

Clear oversight of frontline practice and assurance of quality is fundamental to how the Local Authority knows itself. IRS is part of this oversight and assurance, and these are the areas of achievement we have been focussing on this year

- The team is fully and permanently staffed with appropriately experienced and qualified IROs and 1.6 FTE Fostering Reviewing Officers
- Supervisions have been undertaken regularly with 100% compliance. We have used data to compare individual against team performance and this has been motivational.
- All PDRs were completed and each IRO has completed training which ensures their compliance with the CPD requirements for Social Work registration
- When required, consultations and reviews have been held virtually but as the impact of the pandemic has reduced we have begun to return to face to face visits and meetings
- We have however sought to retain the positive elements of virtual working and when appropriate we continue to use virtual consultation and reviews.
- We have prioritised meeting children and young people away from their reviews and in particular before their first review using this opportunity to explain the role of the IRO and function of a CLA review
- We have reviewed and updated our children and young person's consultation forms
- We have introduced a new "residential" report for CLA review
- We have completed a compliance outcome for CLA reviews held and in this way have been able to reflect back, via Directors Performance Clinic, Social Work compliance with practice standards

- We have maintained a focus on our workflow whilst recognising the impact of the pandemic on working practices. As much as we have been able to, we have shifted to virtual means of communication and therefore reducing our reliance on paper
- We have SoS practice champions in the service.
- We have worked hard to keep caseloads manageable and when they have risen, we have responded by increasing team capacity
- IROs chair fewer reviews and instead make use of the local dispute resolution process to challenge drift and delay and this is evidenced in statistics. We have worked hard to achieve greater consistency in this area of work and this has included forging stronger links with Fieldwork colleagues at both peer and management levels
- IRO footprint on the case records is visible with them taking individual responsibility to monitor the delivery of time critical actions
- Service Manager is a member of the Public Law Subgroup of the Sheffield Family Justice Board where we have a role in developing local good practice with the courts
- Two IROs represent Sheffield CC on the Yorkshire & Humber IRO Forum giving us the opportunity to learn from each other.
- Service Manager represents Sheffield CC on the NIROMP (National IRO Managers Partnership) regional group, learning from peers and contributing as a group to the development of national practice
- IROs have continued to be a stable professional in the lives of children looked after and unnecessary changes are not made.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance has two sides to it. Ensuring and assuring the Local Authority that IRS are providing a good quality, consistent service and secondly quality assuring the practice experience of children and their families and reporting back to the Local Authority any areas where practice falls short and could be improved.

In order to ensure good quality consistent practice from IRS we have done a number of things. Monthly supervision and annual PDRs have been completed. Training has been sourced to meet identified team and individual training needs. Workshops have been used to reinforce expectations of the IRO role and to ensure we complete our core requirements.

In order to quality assure the practice experience of children looked after and their families the IRO has a statutory duty to monitor the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to the child's case and to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. Challenge and resolution are an integral part of the IRO role. Informal and formal resolution form part of the same continuum of resolution, which needs to celebrate the achievements of resolution as well as highlighting the problems that require resolution.

Challenge is divided into groups

Informal, and Formal with levels 1,2,3 & 4 taking the challenge up through the management structure.

IRS can also compliment good practice and in this reporting period have issued 52 compliments across the teams, an increase of 49% over the previous reporting year.

Teams	East	West	North	CWD	CLA	LCS	Adoption	Placements	Amber	REED	Edge of Care
Compliments	4	1	12	2	31	0	0	1	0	0	1

CLA service recorded the highest proportion of compliments at 60% followed by North area Fieldwork at 23% of the total.

Teams	Informal Challenge	Formal Challenge	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
East	7	15	8	7	0	0
West	32	11	8	2	1	0
North	22	10	9	1	0	0
CWD	8	9	3	4	2	0
CLA	53	55	32	13	4	6
LCS	1	1	1	0	0	0
Adoption	0	0	0	0	0	0
Placements	0	0	0	0	0	0
Amber	2	1	0	1	0	0
Edge of Care	0	1	0	0	1	0
REED	1	0	0	0	0	0
NRPF	1	0	0	0	0	0
TOTALS	127	103	61	28	8	6

There have been 127 informal challenges and 103 formal challenges raised throughout the year, which is a 10% increase across the board.

Although challenge numbers for the CLA Service look high the percentage of challenges in relation to the percentage of CLA held by the service has dropped but not significantly. They case hold 58% of the CLA population so as one would expect they had a higher proportion at 42% and 53% of informal and formal challenges raised with them. Informal challenges to West area Fieldwork rose in this reporting year to 25% and this is more significant as they hold fewer CLA cases

There are 4 main categories for challenge. These are:

1. Lack of preparation
2. Drift and delay
3. IRO challenge of the care plan
4. Practice Issues

In challenge both informal and formal the most significant category was “drift and delay” at 53% with practice issues at 18%, Challenge of the care plan at 14% and lack of preparation at 11%.

For formal challenge “drift and delay” accounts for 60% of challenge and this would be as expected as the IRO role was set up to ensure that care plans for children are delivered in a timely way.

The purpose of challenge is to resolve at the lowest level and in a timely way and we record this on Liquid Logic where the progress of the challenge and it's timely resolution can be monitored and measured. The following two tables demonstrate the progress of and time to resolution for challenges raised in this reporting period and the third the teams where challenge escalates through the levels

Challenge Level	Challenge Issued	Response Received (%)	Response not received (%)	Response in 5 working days (%)
1	61	61 (100%)	0	40 (66%)
2	28	28 (100%)	0	20 (71%)
3	8	8 (100%)	0	3 (38%)
4	6	6 (100%)	0	0 (0%)
Totals	103	103	0	63 (61%)

Challenge Level	Challenge Issued	Escalated	New
1	61	9 (15%)	52
2	28	18 (64%)	10
3	8	5 (63%)	3
4	6	6 (100%)	0
Totals	103	38 (37%)	65

Challenge Level	Challenge Issued	Escalated	East	West	North	CWD	CLA
1	61	9	0	2	1	1	5
2	28	18	6	2	1	4	5
3	8	5	0	0	0	1	4
4	6	6	0	0	0	0	6
Totals	103	38	6	4	2	6	20

Of the 103 formal challenges 65 were new and 38 were challenges that escalated through the levels above. Looking at escalation we can see that the higher up the level of challenge the more likely it is to have been escalated and by the time the Director is involved 100% have been escalated. This is to be expected.

Comments made about individual IROs

“I just wanted to share with you that A said the CLA Review today was really good. She felt listened to and was happy that all the things she had raised with you when you met were talked about. I wanted to say from my perspective I thought the meeting was so child focused. It was clear that you have A’s best interests at heart, and you had such a clear understanding of her wishes and feelings which were then fed into the meeting. I also thought it was clear that you have A’s back (can’t think of a better way to say it really). You challenged the placement about drug use and the impact this is having on her and I think she really appreciated it as in the past this has been dismissed by other professionals.”

Young Person & Children’s Involvement Officer

“IRO writes her reports/ decisions in a completely child centred way and I really like this style. The reports read in a very personalised way and also in a way that makes sense to the child should they read the report in the future.” **Senior Fieldwork Manager**

“I wanted to put this into an email for you as I really respect your input, you have been our reviewing officer since the beginning and have always taken not only the thoughts and feelings of our children into consideration but have always listened and taken our thoughts and feelings into consideration too.” **Foster Carer**

1. Developments planned for 2022/23

- We will continue to review the care planning for children looked after and where possible this will be face to face
- For those children, young people and families who have preferred virtual consultation and reviews we will work with them to ensure that we build the positive elements of this into the way we work in the future
- We will continue to work with children, their social workers, carers and other involved parties to support their participation in reviews
- We will continue to prioritise meeting children and young people away from their reviews and in particular before their first review, using this opportunity to discuss with them how they would wish to be involved in the review process.
- We will change the way we write our decisions and reports so that they are directly written to the child/young person using language that is easily understood
- We will work with the senior management team to introduce lighter process reviews for those children and young people who are in long term matched and settled foster placements
- When children who have a child protection plan become looked after we will work to one plan overseen by an IRO
- We will continue to inform the Local Authority when the service that looked after children receive does not meet established practice standards
- We will continue to use data, audit and supervision to improve and maintain quality and consistency of practice
- Particular focus will be made on developing greater consistency of practice and approach in the area of challenge
- Senior leadership to continue to promote to frontline managers that the IRO role is welcomed, endorsed and supported and that when issues are raised these will be responded to in a timely way as per the protocol.

Author - Janice Lightowler

Service Manager

Independent Reviewing Service