

TITLE	Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report (2021-22)
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2 November 2022
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

This Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report (2021-22) provides quantitative and qualitative information about the profile and quality of corporate parenting for children in care (CIC) in Wokingham and the impact of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service. It highlights the issues affecting children in care in the Borough.

RECOMMENDATION

That this report is considered by the Overview and Scrutiny panel. For information and questions.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

Children in Care profile and activity - 2021-22

- At the end of the year there were 136 children in care compared to 102 at the end of March 2021. This is a rate of 33 per 10,000.
- 93 children came into care compared to 50 last year.
- 58 children left care compared to 49 the previous year
- The gender split was 63% male and 37% female.
- The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) increased from 7 in April 2021 to 26 in March 2022
- There was an increase in older children aged 16 and 17 (non-UASC) coming into care - 33 compared to 8 the previous year.
- There was a significant increase in the percentage of children in care who were accommodated under S20 (62 compared to 24 last year). 23 of these children were UASC. In light of recent Ofsted observations around our service provision for UASC, this may be an issue that we need to scrutinise further or audit
- 16 children were subject to Placement Orders at the end of the year compared to 9 in March 2021.
- 22 children who were in care were also subject to child protection plans

Impact of IRO Service:

Despite the service having reduced capacity at times during the year, the IROs have maintained good performance on timeliness of reviews with 361 out of 368 (98%) reviews being held on time.

The IROs are continuing to provide formal challenge but have been able to deal with most issues informally. There has been a reduction in the number of formal challenges in the last year, which we believe is in part is due to three reasons: the increased activity of IROs between reviews; the fact IROs are more routinely being invited to listen in to permanency planning meetings; and lastly the good working relationships and access to team managers that the IROs have establish - which often enables problems to be resolved at an early stage.

Promoting child's voice and participation:

IROs have maintained a high number of children being involved in their reviews, speaking for themselves or using an advocate to be their voice. Reviews are held in different parts when required, to ensure they are child focused while also enabling the participation of birth parents and carers.

Signposting to Advocacy and Independent Visitors (IVs): The Children's Advocate has supported 79 children in care to participate in their reviews. She has also had 179 contacts with 136 children in care between reviews (although some were repeat contacts with children). Wokingham has recently reviewed its contract with the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) to provide an independent visiting service for children in care. Sixteen children in care have been matched with independent visitors through NYAS, a service which helps them build relationships, develop independence, try new activities, or share things they like doing.

Background

The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer was established by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, s.118 (amended s.26 of the Children Act 1989) with the responsibility of reviewing placements and plans for children in care.

The IRO has a crucial role to play in ensuring that the local authority fulfils its responsibilities as a 'corporate parent' for all the children that it looks after. The IRO should ensure that the child is offered stable care that is sensitive and appropriate to each individual's personal needs so that the child is able to flourish and achieve. The plan for each child must demonstrate how the services provided have fully taken account of the child's wishes and feelings.

The IRO Handbook (2010) sets out two clear and separate aspects to the IRO role;

- chairing the child's review and
- monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.

In exercising both parts of this role, the IRO must ensure that the child's current wishes and feelings have been established and considered.

Analysis of Issues

The overall trend is that the number of children in care has been increasing, however the numbers in Wokingham are still lower than the average rate of our statistical neighbours (46.30) and when compared to the England average (67). The chart below shows the rates per 10,000 over the last four years.

The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in care in Wokingham increased significantly in the second half of last year, to 15 at the end of December 2021 and then to 26 by the end of the year. These young people have a range of UASC educational, care and emotional needs.

There was an increase in older children aged 16 and 17 (non UASC) coming into care - 33 compared to 8 the previous year. Some of these young people were presenting as homeless or experiencing a breakdown of family relationships. Although work is done via the Compass team

to try to help young people return home, this is not always possible. This increase could also be linked by the new housing protocol and the process of joint assessment by housing and social care with children's rights advice available to young people about their options. Further work is needed to understand the reasons and will be an area for audit in the coming year.

In terms of the legal status of young people in care, there was a significant increase in the percentage of children in care who were Accommodated under S20 - 62 compared to 24 last year - 23 of these children are UASC. An audit has been commissioned to explore this.

There were 16 children were subject to Placement Orders at the end of the year compared to 9 in March 2021. Most of these children have experienced neglect and trauma and their behaviour can be very dysregulated and unsettled and this may mean it takes longer for them to reach legal permanence through adoption. An adult has been completed and the timeliness of plans for this group of children is being monitored.

There have been some issues with the performance/timeliness of initial health assessments and the notifications to health that children are in care, and this is being monitored.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	n/a		
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	n/a		
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	n/a		

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

Not applicable

Cross-Council Implications

For information.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Please confirm that due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty has been taken and if an equalities assessment has been completed or explain why an equalities assessment is not required.

Climate Emergency – This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030

Please state clearly what the impact of the decision being made would be on the Council's carbon neutral objective.

List of Background Papers
IRO Annual Report 2021-22

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