



**WOKINGHAM**  
**BOROUGH COUNCIL**

## **Independent Reviewing Officers**

### **Annual Report**

### **2021 to 2022**

The Contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving  
Services for Children in Care

<b>Governance and sign off</b>		
<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date of meeting</b>	<b>Actions or outcome</b>
Children's Departmental Leadership Team	27 July 2022	
Corporate Parenting Board		

**Report completed by:**

Liz McAuley, Service Manager, Quality Assurance and Safeguarding

**Date of this report:** June 2022

**Date of next report:** June 2023

	<b>Executive summary</b>
<b>1.</b>	<p><b>Purpose of this Annual Report:</b></p> <p>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 what the IRO service is worried about, what is working well and identifies areas for improvement.</p>
<b>2.</b>	<p><b>Children in Care profile and activity - 2021-22</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• 93 children came into care compared to 50 last year.</li> <li>• 58 children left care compared to 49 the previous year</li> <li>• The gender split was 63% male and 37% female.</li> <li>• The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) increased from 7 in April 2021 to 26 in March 2022</li> <li>• There was an increase in older children aged 16 and 17 (non-UASC) coming into care - 33 compared to 8 the previous year.</li> <li>• 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</li> <li>• 16 children were subject to Placement Orders at the end of the year compared to 9 in March 2021.</li> <li>• 22 children who were in care were also subject to child protection plans</li> </ul>
<b>3.</b>	<p><b>Impact of the IRO Service:</b></p> <p><b>Being a consistent person in the child's journey through care:</b> In Wokingham we have an experienced and stable team of IROs with many children having had the same CP Chair and/or IRO throughout their care journey. Throughout 2021-22, the IRO service adapted to the challenge of living with COVID-19 and has been able to flex and change as the pandemic has progressed. We are now in a new phase of conducting more face-to-face meetings while also retaining virtual and hybrid options.</p> <p><b>Maintaining timely reviews:</b> despite the service having reduced capacity at times during the year, the IROs have maintained good performance in terms of the timeliness of reviews, with 361 out of 368 (98%) reviews being held within timescales.</p> <p><b>Providing oversight and challenge:</b> 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. Some of the challenges this year have been about providing life story work for children who are adopted. Others have related to children in long term care</p>

	<p>maintaining connections with family networks, (having photos, memory boxes etc). Another theme has been around ensuring life journey work has taken place to help children understand their heritage and the reasons as to why they are in care.</p> <p><b>Promoting child's voice and participation:</b></p> <p>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.</p> <p><b>Signposting to Advocacy and Independent Visitors (IVs):</b> 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.</p> <p><b>Highlighting broader issues which affect children in care:</b> The IRO service uses performance data and quarterly reports to highlight issues they are noticing for all children in care. In 2021-22 the IROs have noted the increase in placement orders and delays in some children reaching adoption; deficits in placement choice for children with complex needs; risk outside of the home for some children in care; and challenges around the consistency of life story work being completed.</p>
4.	<p><b>The key strategic priorities of the IRO service in 2022-23 are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ <b>To consistently provide good quality reviews for children in care.</b> This will include making sure that children know the plans for their care and that they have reports which they can access. Furthermore, the service will seek to work with colleagues in children's social care to ensure that social worker reports are robust and always provide an updated assessment of the child's needs at each review. Finally, the service will work to ensure that the voice of the child and their lived experience is understood and informs the Care Plan.</li> <li>❖ <b>To raise awareness about and promote the role of the IRO.</b> This will include work to promote awareness about the purpose of care planning and reviews to children, parents, carers, social workers and other agency colleagues.</li> <li>❖ <b>To demonstrate the effectiveness of the IRO service</b> with clear examples of what difference it is making by seeing children and overseeing the review process. This will include clearly demonstrating challenge and follow up when care plans are not progressing as planned, as well as raising issues within the system or low performance which affect more than one child in care.</li> </ul>
5.	<p><b>Author's key recommendations</b></p> <p>That this report is shared with the Corporate Parenting Board and the Independent Scrutiny and Impact Group of the Berkshire West Safeguarding Partnership and that any learning is incorporated in the Quality Assurance Activity for 2022-23.</p>

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1.** All Officers and Councillors in Wokingham have a duty to ensure that the needs of children in care are being met and that children grow up feeling loved, cared for, feel safe and have the same opportunities as their peers. There should be a commitment from all members of the council to advocate for the needs of children in care, promote and provide opportunities that allow children to develop and grow and to overcome the adverse experiences they may have experienced in their life before coming into care.
- 1.2.** This Annual Report provides quantitative and qualitative information about the Independent Reviewing Officer Service in Wokingham and the quality of corporate parenting for children in care (CIC) in the borough during the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. It highlights what the IRO service is worried about, what is working well and identifies areas for improvement.
- 1.3.** The highlights of the report will be discussed with the Children in Care Council and the key findings will be presented to the Children's Services Senior Management Team, the Quality Assurance Board, the Corporate Parenting Board and the Berkshire West Safeguarding Children's Partnership, Independent Scrutiny and Impact Group.

## **2. Purpose of the Independent Review Service and the legal context**

- 2.1.** 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.
- 2.2.** 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.
- 2.3.** 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.

### **2.4. Service structure**

The IRO service is managed by the Service Manager of the Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Team who reports to the Assistant Director, Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Standards (QASS) within Children's Services. The team is structurally located outside of the direct line management of children's social care. The staffing structure is set out below. This arrangement provides;

- Capacity for chairing both child protection conferences and child in care statutory reviews and covering periods of leave and sickness.
- Continuity for children receiving services in the child protection arena who then come into the care system.
- Independence from the line management of children's social care cases.
- Capacity to manage the administrative processes and to work to statutory timescales.

## 2.5. Staffing Establishment on 31 March 2022

Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Team	Administration Team
1x Service Manager (full time)	1 Team leader
4x Full time equivalent Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) / Child Protection Chairs	2 Children in care administrators
1x Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) / Child Protection Chair (3 days)	

- 2.6. All the IROs have significantly more than the five years' post qualification experience as required under Regulation 46 (The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations) (2010). The IRO service has remained stable with no changes of staff this year. All the IROs are experienced and passionate about their role and they provide a consistent IRO presence for children at their reviews. The team consists of all white British females. Although the team members are from different parts of the UK and have different life experiences, we are conscious that this profile does not match the population of children in care. The team is currently undertaking a programme of systemic training, and as part of this learning we have been using the social graces model<sup>1</sup> to help us to reflect on our own background, experience and unique identity and how we can better understand the unique identity of the children we work with in our day to day work.
- 2.7. The IROs are supported by the administrative team, who organise review meetings and circulate decisions and reports. The Administration Team Leader manages the administrators, oversees the administrative activity and tracks monitors the internal performance of the team.
- 2.8. IROs receive monthly one to one supervision and participate in WBC's performance review system, which is an opportunity to highlight good practice, performance, identify any learning needs and development opportunities. The IROs from the West of Berkshire authorities meet periodically to share good practice and liaise with colleagues from CAFCASS and the joint legal team. The IRO manager attends the South East Regional IRO Managers' Partnership (SEIROMP) and the Berkshire Managers Meeting (which also includes a liaison meeting with a representative from the joint legal team and the CAFCASS Berkshire manager).
- 2.9. The IROs have benefited from the specialist training programme on trauma informed practice and systemic training. The training has helped them to be aware of signs of trauma and how to respond when children become dysregulated or withdrawn within reviews – as well as how to avoid further exclusion at school or from carers giving notice. They have also attended IRO learning sets with an external facilitator which have covered topics relevant to the role, such as themes from the National Panel Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews. The IROs in Wokingham, are part of the SEIROMP Community of Practice which is a community of IROs across the SE region, with a range of experience, skills and subject matter expertise with a common goal to create positive change together with the aim of ultimately improving the lives of children and

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<sup>1</sup> John Burnham Social Graaaccceess model

young people in care. The workshops delivered in 2021-22 have been on the role of the IRO and the call for change from the Care Review, Exploitation, and Child Focused Meetings.

- 2.10.** All children in care are allocated an IRO when the team is informed that they are in care. It is the intention that the IRO allocated at this point will be as consistent as possible throughout the time the child is in care. Where children had previously been on a child protection plan, their CP chair becomes their IRO. The IRO Handbook recommends that caseloads for IROs should be between 50 and 70 children in care. Since April 2021 the number of children in care has risen from 104 to 136 at the end of March. There has also been an increase in children on Child Protection (CP) Plans. IROs have a dual role in Wokingham, so the increased numbers of children in care and on CP Plans has impacted on the workload of the team who now have on average 60 children per full time worker. During the year the team has also been impacted by two periods of long-term sickness and one vacancy for a part time CP chair.
- 2.11.** Access to independent legal advice is a requirement of the statutory guidance. Arrangements are in place for IROs to have access to impartial independent legal advice through a representative from the joint legal team, which does not work directly within Wokingham. This has been used twice in 2021-22.

### 3. Profile of Children in Care - Statistical data for 2021-22

#### 3.1. Number of Children in Care

At the end of the year 2021-22, Wokingham Borough Council had 136 children in its care, which is a rate of 33 per 10,000. This represents a significant increase from 102 children in care at the end of the previous year. The numbers have ranged from 104 in April 2021 to 136 in March 2022.

**Table A:** Number of children in care and rates per 10,000

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
<b>2021/22 Numbers</b>	104	109	111	112	118	114	111	110	118	123	124	136
<b>2021/22 Rate per 10,000</b>	25.2	26.4	26.9	27.1	28.6	27.6	26.9	26.7	28.6	29.8	30	33

Rates per 10,000 are used as a method of benchmarking local authorities' children in care against other authorities which have similar characteristics – known as statistical neighbours. Figures are expressed as a ratio and are calculated by dividing the local authority's actual numbers by its total child population's estimate sourced from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). 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.

### 3.2 Ages of children coming into care

The table below shows the spread of ages of children coming into care with the biggest group being between 16 and 17 years old, followed by 10-15 years old. This represents a change from the previous year, when more younger children were coming into care. Some of the older cohorts are unaccompanied asylum seekers but a larger number are young people 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.

**Table B:** Ages of Children coming into care (at the point they came into care)

	Apr-Jun 21	Jul-Sept 21	Oct-Dec 21	Jan-Mar 22	Total
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Age under 1</b>	4	4	1	1	10
<b>Age 1 – 4</b>	1	1	4	4	10
<b>Age 5 – 9</b>	2	5	4	5	16
<b>Age 10 – 15</b>	5	3	8	8	24
<b>Age 16 – 17</b>	6	6	6	15	33

### 3.3 Legal Status of children coming into care

**Table C:** Legal Status when coming into care (all children at the point they came into care)

	Apr-June 21	Jul-Sept 21	Oct-Dec 21	Jan-Mar 22	Total
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Interim Care Order</b>	5	11	1	6	23
<b>Police Protection</b>	1	0	4	1	6
<b>Section 20</b>	11	8	17	26	62
<b>Emergency Protection Order</b>	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Remanded to LA accommodation</b>	1	0	1	0	2
<b>Short Breaks</b>	0	0	0	0	0

During 2021-22, 23 children came into care as the result of an application to the court for an Interim Care Order. This is a slight increase from 21 in 2020-21. 62 children came into care through a voluntary arrangement under Section 20 (a significant increase from 21 the previous year). Two young people were remanded to local authority accommodation. The number of

children coming into care under Police Protection Orders and Emergency Protection Orders due to being at risk of immediate harm remains the same as the previous year (six). The main change is the rise in Section 20 and this links with the number of older children accommodated above. An audit is planned to explore the underlying reasons for this trend.

## 4. Profile of Children in Care

### 4.1. Legal Status of children in care

The legal status of children in care at the end of the year has remained similar to 2019-20 in terms of the overall split. The majority are subject to Care Orders, which reflects that they are in permanent long-term arrangements. There has been an increase in the number of children accommodated under Section 20, but when looking at this figure as a percentage of the total cohort, the proportion of children being accommodated in this way is comparable to last year (16% and 17%). There has been an increase in the proportion of placement orders, which increased from 9% to 12%. While some children are reaching permanence through adoption in a timely way, for others there has been some disruption to the adoption placements and more pace is needed to secure permanence in a timely way. An audit has been completed to explore this and an action plan is in place. As a part of this work, IROs will be key in escalating children where there is drift and delay.

**Table D:** Legal Status of all children in care on 31 March 2022

Legal Status	Mar-22		Mar 21	
<b>Total</b>	<b>136</b>		<b>102</b>	
<b>C1 – Interim Care Order</b>	30	25%	25	22%
<b>C2 – Full Care Order</b>	34	44%	45	25%
<b>E1 – Placement Order granted</b>	16	13%	13	12%
<b>J1 – Remanded to Local Authority Accommodation or to Youth Detention Accommodation</b>	1	17%	1	1%
<b>V2 – Single Care of accommodation under Section 20</b>	55	16%	17	17%
<b>V4 – Accommodated under agreed short-term breaks</b>	0	0	1	1%

### 4.2. Gender of children in care at end of year

**Table E:** End of quarter snapshot of gender of children in care

Gender	Jun-21		Sept-21		Dec-21		Mar-22	
<b>Male</b>	71	63%	79	69%	76	64%	86	63%
<b>Female</b>	41	37%	35	31%	42	36%	50	37%

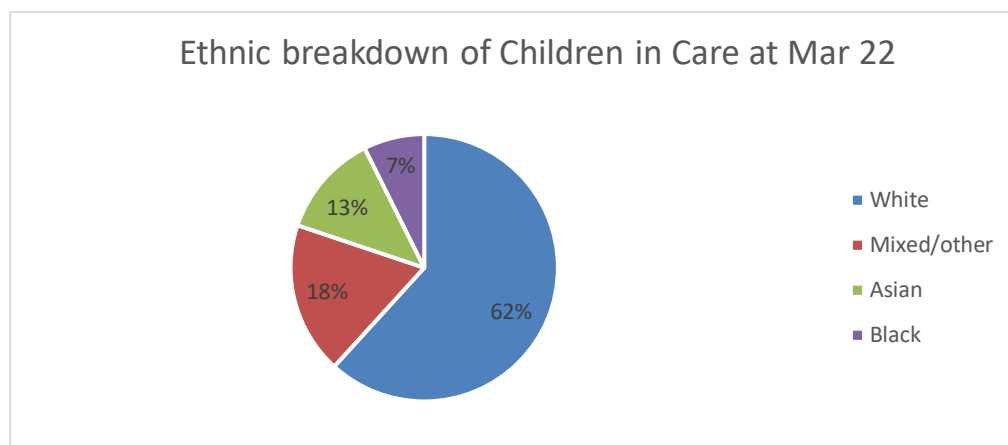
The children in care population in Wokingham continues to consist of higher numbers of boys than girls, a pattern which has remained consistent throughout 2021-22 and is in line with the previous year. This is in part due to the number of UASCs represented in our cohort, who are



currently all male. This is a notably different gender balance when compared to children on CP plans, where 53% are female and 46% are male (1% unborn).

#### 4.3. Ethnicity of children in care

**Figure 2:** Ethnic breakdown of children in care March 2022



The chart above shows the ethnic breakdown of children in care in Wokingham at the end of March 2022. It shows a slightly higher percentage of white British children when compared to last year. The percentage of Black children is in line with last year, but there is an increase in Asian children (7% to 13%), as well as a slight increase in those described as mixed/other (from 17% to 18%). These figures include the higher number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in care at the end of the year. In Wokingham, a project is underway to try to capture more detail for the group of young people described as mixed/other as they represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The table below shows a higher percentage of Black, Asian and mixed/other children in care compared with the local child population. This may require further exploration or audit in the coming year.

**Table F: Ethnic Breakdown of all children in Wokingham**

	Ethnic breakdown of children in Wokingham as a whole	Ethnic breakdown of the children in care Mar-22
White	82.4%	62%
Mixed/other	6.25%	18%
Asian	9.73%	13%
Black	1.63%	7%

#### **Practice example:**

IROs undertook two audits looking at Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) and White British children to identify what information they know about the child's identity using the systemic 'SOCIAL GRACES' model (GRRAAACCEEESSS, John Burnham; 1993). This audit showed that information about country of origin, ethnicity, religion dietary needs and language, is usually known and recorded for UASCs but there are gaps about ability/disability, sexuality and class. Information about disability, learning needs, diagnosed health issues is more difficult to find and there is often no option for us to seek this information from other agencies as they have no history in this country.

The second audit found that for White British children information about gender, age, geography, ability, education, appearance generation and economic background was well known but there were gaps in the understanding of and descriptors for spirituality, religion, ethnicity, race and culture. In the sample of children, there was a pattern of children mostly originating from the local area, coming from backgrounds of generational problems and involvement with services, low educational attainment and families in struggling economic circumstances. Half of the children came from Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) families where the parents have settled locally but who may have had grandparents or ancestry who travelled around. Both audits highlighted the importance of asking open questions and finding out how people want to be described in terms of their race, ethnicity and culture. The audits also indicated the importance of asking if religion or spirituality is important to children and being creative in how IROs describe the culture of white British children - who might identify with a type of music, a football team, being outdoors or having animals around. In response to this work the IROs have been trying to capture the unique stories of children and write about their identity (in the broadest sense) within the review minutes.

#### 4.4. Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers in Care

**Table G:** Unaccompanied Asylum seekers in care - month end snapshot

	Q1 2021			Q2 2021			Q3 2021			Q4 2022		
UASC	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
No	7	8	11	14	14	13	12	14	15	15	17	26

The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in care in Wokingham increased significantly in the second half of 2021-22, to 15 at the end of December 2021 and then to 26 by the end of March. Those who came into our care prior to December were spontaneous arrivals or came via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) on voluntary basis as and when we had capacity. In February 2022 the NTS became mandatory for Wokingham and our number of 'transfer in' UASC's increased. In November 2021, an asylum hotel opened in Wokingham for adults and families. A number of UASCs were identified to be living in the hotel, following them being age assessed in Kent (their port of arrival) as being over 18. They then subsequently disputed their assessed age on arrival in the hotel in Wokingham and the Local Authority made a reassessment and deemed these young people to be under 18. There has been some press coverage about unlawful age assessments being undertaken at the point of arrival, which were subsequently overturned.

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. Some were spontaneous arrivals and others identified via a local refugee hotel, following them being age assessed in Kent as being over 18 and then disputed their age on arrival in the hotel in Wokingham. There has been some press coverage about unlawful age assessments being undertaken at the point of arrival and in the cases of these two young people, Wokingham Borough Council deemed these young people to be

under 18. Some children were placed via the National Transfer Scheme in the earlier part of the year.

During the year we have had three UASCs aged 12, 13 and 14 years arriving in the area. These children are notably younger than the UASC cohort we have received in previous years. In response to this, the local authority has initiated care proceedings to ensure the children in question have legal security, and so the local authority is able to exercise parental responsibility. The young people come from different countries, including Afghanistan, Vietnam, Sudan, and Iraq. They have different ethnic, religious and cultural identities. They have had different upbringings and levels of education in their home country but have all experienced insecurity, loss and trauma. IROs report that although these children's' homelife, family connections and journey to this country is explored in the reviews, often young people are reluctant to open up until they feel safe and feel they can trust authority figures.

Now that Wokingham has a significant cohort of UASCs, IROs have been working to improve their knowledge and expertise in this area of practice. As part of this, the IRO team have attended training which has highlighted common issues experienced by UASC -including exploitation, the emotional turmoil of past trauma and the future uncertainty of not being given leave to remain. The team also have regular updates from the Children's Advocate who is trained in age assessments and attends the first review for all UASC to check their rights and all legal options are being considered. The Ofsted focused visit in April 2022 also challenged the effectiveness of our service in meeting the emotional needs of these children in care. The new Looked After Children CAMHS Service which is being commissioned will be considering the unique emotional and trauma needs of UASC and the IROs feel this will be a helpful additional resource.

**Case example:**

In one review, the IRO tried to understand whether one young person was experiencing any struggles with his emotional wellbeing. What we knew was that as an unaccompanied asylum seeker, his journey had been hard, he had experienced significant traumas and loss and that he missed his family and friends. He said that he had some rough times but at this time he was happy. He explained that he had spent four days on the sea in a small boat in fear that he may die. The young person was reassured that it is OK to speak to someone or ask to if he has any worries at all. He said he was stressed when he was put in the hotel and he was frightened but he was now feeling happier, relaxed and ok.

#### 4.5. Children in receipt of a series of short breaks

**Table H: Number of children who are Children in Care under s20(4) as the result of the number of overnights spent in short breaks provision.**

	Apr–Jun 20	Jul–Sept 20	Oct–Dec 20	Jan–Mar 21
<b>LAC in receipt of short breaks</b>	2	1	1	1
	Apr–Jun 21	Jul–Sept 21	Oct–Dec 21	Jan–Mar 22

<b>LAC in receipt of short breaks</b>				
	1	0	0	0

Some children with complex health needs or significant disabilities who live with their families but are in receipt of packages of overnight care have looked after status under section 20(4) of the Children Act (1989). When the short breaks last more than 75 nights, an Independent Reviewing Officer is assigned to them, and they are reviewed on the same frequency as other children in care. During the year, there was one child who exceeded the 75 night threshold, which is less than in the previous year and lower than our statistical neighbours.

Having explored this with Social Care colleagues, they explained that the children who were previously part of this cohort, are now in the care of the Local Authority on a full-time basis, as their needs could no longer be met within the community.

There are also a number of children with disabilities in receipt of overnight short break packages, just none that exceed 75 nights, a continuous period of 17 days or 24 hours in one episode at present. These are the parameters set out in the Short Breaks Guidance that should lead to you triggering a Child in Care status, either on an ongoing basis (75) or for the period they are in the placement (17 days/24 hours). The group of children in question are currently being supported under section 17(6). This means that they are considered Children in Need and have an allocated Social Worker in the Children with Disabilities Service. Their packages of support are subject to regular review via Child in Need processes and an annual re-assessment. Should need for overnights be determined to increase, this is taken to the Children with Additional Needs Multi-Agency Panel (CANMAP). Decisions from this panel are recorded on the child's records and a tracking of overnights is managed in service. It is pertinent to note that the overall numbers of children requiring this higher level of intervention are low, therefore tracking in this way is feasible and manageable.

### **Children in care on child protection plans**

**Table I:** Children in Care on Child Protection Plans

	<b>Apr-Jun 20</b>	<b>Jul-Sept 20</b>	<b>Oct-Dec 20</b>	<b>Jan-Mar 21</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>18</b>
	<b>Apr-Jun 21</b>	<b>Jul-Sept 21</b>	<b>Oct-Dec 21</b>	<b>Jan-Feb 22</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>22</b>

In the end of March 2022, there were 22 children on dual plans which is higher than the position at the end of the previous year and the table above shows a pattern of higher dual plans at the end of the year. This is due to a number of children in court proceedings who are placed with parents in assessment processes or where review child protection conferences were pending to remove the child protection plan. The team follows the Berkshire West Safeguarding Partnership child protection procedures, so that when a child who was subject to a child

protection plan comes into care, they will have their first child in care review joint with the review child protection conference. This process provides continuity of planning and also reflects the need to manage risk while longer term care options are being assessed.

### Children leaving care and reasons

**Table J:** Children Leaving Care and Reasons

	<b>Apr–Jun 21</b>	<b>Jul–Sept 21</b>	<b>Oct–Dec 21</b>	<b>Jan–Mar 22</b>
	<b>8</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Adopted</b>	0	1	1	0
<b>Return to parents, planned</b>	1	6	5	0
<b>Return to parents, unplanned</b>	2	1	1	3
<b>Reached the age of 18</b>	5	5	6	5
<b>Special Guardianship orders granted</b>	0	1	3	7
<b>Ceased for other reasons</b> (CAO =Child Arrangements Orders and CCC= criminal conviction/custody)	0	2 - CAO	2-CAO	1 (CCC)
			<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>

The IROs have a role in monitoring the journey of children to permanence (which can be a range of options from adoption to return home to parents). The table above show that 21 ceased to be in care due to becoming 18, but 33 children left care and achieved permanence in a planned way due to having Special Guardianship Orders with friends and family carers; being adopted or returning home to parents in a planned way. The IROs have highlighted the children on placement orders who have not yet achieved permanence through adoption. An audit was completed on these cases and IROs are maintaining oversight as some are delayed due to the adoption placement disrupting. For a small number of this cohort, the plan for adoption has changed. The table below shows that a lower number of children will leave care due to reaching 18 so the number of children in care may remain high.

**Table K:** Projection of children Leaving Care within 2 years

	<b>Mar '23</b>	<b>Mar '24</b>
<b>No of Children to reach age of 18 expected to leave care</b>	20	10

## 5. Impact of IRO Service- Chairing the Child's Review

### 5.1 Timeliness of Child's Reviews

The child's first review must take place within 20 working days of them coming into care. The second review must take place no later than three months (91 days) after the first review, and subsequent reviews must take place no more than six months (183 days) apart. 368 reviews took place which was an increase from 337 the previous year. 98% were in timescale. Despite capacity issues at times during the year, we have maintained the same performance as last year. 2% of

reviews were late, which represents seven children. These reviews were rearranged within a short period, with the length of delay having little or no impact on the future care of the children involved. The internal monitoring systems by the CIC administrators are helping to maintain good performance on timeliness.

**Table L:** Children in care Reviews in timescale

2021-22	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
<b>No. Reviews</b>	18	43	19	39	29	45	22	32	38	31	30	32
<b>No on time</b>	18	43	19	39	28	44	22	31	37	29	29	32
<b>% on time</b>	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	97%	98%	100 %	97%	97%	94%	97%	100 %
<b>No. Reviews</b>			<b>No. in timescale</b>					<b>% in timescale</b>				
368			361					98%				

## 5.2 Writing up and circulating review decisions and reports

The IRO has five days to write up the decisions made at the review, at this point the manager for the case has 5 days to raise any queries or objections. Once the manager has indicated their agreement, the IRO then has 15 days to complete the full record of the review, which should be circulated within 20 days of the review taking place. Over the past year, the IROs were starting to make progress on improving their performance in this area but this dropped in quarter four when the team were dealing with a significant increase in children in care and higher caseloads, alongside one staff member being on long-term sick leave, and a part time CP chair vacancy arising. We have reviewed and strengthened our current tracking system to send earlier calendar reminders to IROs.

**Table M:** Completion of administrative tasks

2021-22	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Average per year
IRO /CIC Review Decisions sent within 5 days	60%	70%	78%	47%	64%
CIC Review Reports distributed within 20 days	66%	66%	61%	51%	61%

The IROs have been working on ensuring the decisions from child in care reviews are child focused and they have also continued to write their child in care review reports directly to children. This is done in a style that is meaningful to children. The records also form part of their file which they may access when they are older, so the IROs feel that it is important to write them in a style which is accessible to the child. It was noted in the recent focused visit that some children reported not receiving their reports, and we have subsequently identified that sending the full reports via

secure email may be a barrier to them being accessed. In addition, we believe that reports sent to carers may not always be reaching the children as intended. In response to this, in the coming year IROs will be sending a summary letter by post to children in an age-appropriate format, explaining their plan and what decisions the review agreed. It is our intention that this physical letter will also help contribute to life story work.

### 5.3 Supporting the participation of children in their reviews

One role of the independent reviewing officer is to ensure that children in care actively participate in their reviews and the planning for their futures. Children need to know that their views are valued and heard and IROs need to give children the opportunity to communicate with them in advance of the review. The IROs have been creative in their approach to contacts and visits with children. The number of children attending with an advocate to help communicate their views increased. A small number struggle to participate but IROs seek to obtain their views/voice from others and in the last year no children had a review where no views were conveyed.

**Table N:** Children's Participation in their reviews

		Apr-Jun 21		Jul-Sept 21		Oct-Dec 21		Jan-Mar 22	
Participation	Participation Codes	80		113		92		93	
Child under 4 at time of review	PN0	20	25%	22	19%	15	16%	19	20%
Child attends and speaks for themselves	PN1	31	39%	38	34%	30	33%	44	47%
Child attends and an advocate speaks for them	PN2	5	6%	8	7%	7	8%	2	2%
Child attends and conveys his or her view symbolically (non-verbally)	PN3	0	0	1	1%	0	0%	0	0%
Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her	PN4	0	0	0	0%	1	1%	0	0%

<b>Child does not attend but an advocate speaks for them</b>	PN5	10	13%	13	12%	18	20%	16	17%
<b>Child does not attend but conveys feelings by facilitative medium</b>	PN6	14	18%	31	27%	21	23%	12	13%
<b>Child does not attend and views are not conveyed</b>	PN7	0	0	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

#### **Practice example:**

IROs have been creative in how they support children to participate, a small number have chaired their own review; some had had special ending reviews to celebrate children returning home to parents. For one review everyone shared some food from the young person's home country at his last review before turning 18.

#### **5.4 Consulting with children, parents and carers:**

Consultation documents provide children and parents and carers with an opportunity to give their views in advance of the meeting and help them to participate, particularly in circumstances where it may not be able to attend. IROs are also communicating with young people via text and WhatsApp, but IROs feel the best approach is for the IROs to meet children in person to ascertain their views. For some this has been through going to a café, playing a game or kicking a football in the garden, allowing children to talk. They also speak to the parents and carers in advance on reviews. This helps ensure that children and parents are comfortable accessing a virtual meeting and provides an opportunity to discuss how they wish to participate. We had hoped that the new CICC app will enable children to access consultation documents online, but this has not been possible. Improving consultation with parents and children using a range of technology/paper methods for consulting with children and young people will continue to be explored in the coming year.

#### **5.5 Reviewing the Child's Care Plan**

The IRO handbook states that;

*The IRO should be provided with or have access to any relevant reports/plans or background information, including the current care plan, the report from the social worker (which should be available at least three working days before the commencement of the review), the current health plan or medical assessment report and the current personal education plan (PEP).*

The social worker's report for the review is the document which provides an overview and updated assessment of the child's needs. Following the feedback from the recent Ofsted focused visit, work is underway to improve the report format so that there is space for more for significant updates, in depth assessment and analysis of the child's needs.



The Health Assessments are completed and uploaded on mosaic for the IRO to view. The IROs are aware that there have been issues with the Initial Health Assessments (IHAs) for Wokingham being completed within the 20-day timescale but were reassured that many were close to the 20-day target. Action is being undertaken to improve the situation, including a monthly meeting between the provider, Berkshire Health Care Trust and operational meetings with service managers. IROs are also going to check at the pre meeting before the first review that social workers have completed the notification for an IHA.

The review process also considers the child's educational needs, progress and development and whether any actions need to be taken or are likely to become necessary before the next review, in order to ensure that the child's educational needs are met and not neglected. PEPs are completed by schools with input from, the virtual school. The IRO will review the current PEP in advance of the review and liaise with the social worker and virtual school if there are any issues. IROs have access to the E-PEP recording system.

The IRO service feels assured that children in care are well supported by colleagues in the Virtual School and by child in care health colleagues who have built up relationships with children in care over time. There are also online resources for children in care BHFT website; <https://www.berkshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/6955> and the KOOTH app. The Child in Care Nurse attends the Children in Care Council and the annual Oakwood CIC fun day.

The IROs feel that children in care have a good support from the Virtual School and when there are issue arising at school the VS can be a point of contact. Members of the Virtual School (VS) attend reviews on a regular basis and the VS employs a Level 6 Careers Guidance qualified Post 16 Officer, who links with all Year 12 and 13 children in Care and Care Leavers. She also attends the Year 11 PEPs to offer advice, guidance and transition support and has a lead for supporting UASCs. Extra ESOL tuition has been offered to all UASCs and many other post-16 learners access 1:1 tuition in variety of subjects. They prioritise English and Maths tuition where a young person has not yet achieved their GCSE grade 4 and have also provided A Level tuition in various subjects to support more able students.

## **5.6 Supporting children in care to have access to an Independent Visitor**

One of the roles of the IRO in reviews is to talk to children about having an Independent Visitor. At the end of 2021-22, 16 children in care were matched with independent visitors through National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) and four young people were in the process of being matched. In April 2021 the contract was extended by 10% to provide three additional places. Although extra capacity was added and referrals have been coming though, the overall number of matches/young people with an IV has not increased beyond 17 matches. This is partly due to some 19 years olds wanting to end their involvement with an IV, some young people moving placements and a change to the longstanding IV coordinator for Wokingham, which may have slowed down some of the activity. Overall, the service provided is well regarded by young people and carers and we hope that the increase in children and young people coming into care, we have retained the capacity to match up to 21 children and young people with an IV in the coming year. Independent visitors can continue to visit young people up to the age of 21 by agreement and this helps support care leavers in their transition to independence.

## 5.7 Promoting Advocacy and Children's Rights for Children in Care

Wokingham employs a Children's Advocate who works with children in care and care leavers. In 2020-21 she had 181 contacts with children in care (an increase from 163 last year). These contacts are in reviews and between reviews, supporting some in court, or in mental health provision and helping some younger children to write a letter to the judge in care proceedings.

**Table O:** Advocacy activity – Children in Care

	Q1		Q2		Q3		Q4	
Young People (YP)	No of YP	Contacts with YP	No of YP	Contacts with YP	No of YP	Contacts with YP	No of YP	Contacts with YP
Children in care	21	41	31	45	27	49	29	46
Care Leavers	6	26	10	23	5	28	7	21
TOTAL	27	67	41	68	32	77	36	67

### Themes of contacts with Children in Care

- Legal issues - including age assessments for young people, support in legal processes
- Attending professionals' meetings
- Issues with Care plans, placements, contact arrangements, housing options, standards of care and children's rights issues.

### Themes of contacts with Care Leavers:

- Complaints to Housing and Adult Social Care
- Placement / Housing/Accommodation issues
- Support accessing resources
- Legal issues including a name change and understanding of legal order
- Helping young people to mediate with other professionals

## 6 Impact of IRO Service – Oversight and challenge between reviews

### 6.1 IRO oversight

The role of the IRO is to monitor the progress on the child's care plan between reviews and this should be evidenced by seeing the footprint of the IRO on the child's record. For some children, where the plan is progressing on time with no issues the IRO may have less involvement between reviews, but for other children where there is drift or delay, the IRO should be actively involved. We have been recording the activity on case notes since 2020. During 2021-22 there were 525 IRO case notes recorded on children's records. IROs are now routinely invited to permanency planning meetings and placement stability meetings which helps them keep informed of the care planning and possible moves for children in care. They feel that this activity has helped the IROs keep an overview and be aware of the rationale behind care plans.

IROs have also held early reviews when that has been needed and maintained their involvement post 18 and post adoption to ensure actions such as life story work has been completed. IROs are also having pre meetings with social workers (which is a requirement in the IRO handbook) and midway reviews on some cases when they are required (this is not a requirement but is good practice). Our internal reporting on case notes suggests that IROs are still recording some of their pre-meetings and monitoring on case notes rather than on Mosaic steps and so this activity is more difficult to evidence and needs to be more consistent.

## 6.2 IRO challenge and dispute resolution

There has been a reduction in the number of challenges in the last year which is in part due to the increased activity of IROs between reviews, being invited to listen in to permanency planning meetings and having access to team managers which enables problems to be resolved at an early stage. The other reason may be the capacity of the team being stretched at times and some areas of concern not being recorded in the IRO challenge step on mosaic. We have reviewed our escalation procedures and feel that when IROs bring challenge on specific issues such as financial issues or documents not being completed, the matters are usually resolved at the first stage and rarely become protracted and usually support learning. However, for more complex issues such as the care plan drifting or progressing to permanent legal orders or care arrangements, the IROs need to escalate higher and to maintain pace when following up on previous challenges to prevent further drift and delay. Examples in the previous year have been in relation to children on placement orders, section 20 or placed with parents and this has been found in some of our audit activity. We have also identified the need for a more formal process for the team to bring challenge about issues which affect groups of children in care. We have requested a meeting to enable IROs to speak directly to the senior leaders, on a quarterly basis to have an opportunity to share information and raise any themes about placement sufficiency or services which affect children in care.

**Table P: IRO Challenges 2021-22**

2021-22	Number of challenges	Informal mosaic step	Formal mosaic step	Resolved without further escalation	Escalation required
Q1	8	1	7	5	
Q2	16	11	5	14	1
Q3	7	2	5	7	
Q4	3	2	1	3	
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>2 (level 2 to Service Manager)</b>

## 6.3 Themes identified in challenges:

The most common challenges relate to missing or poor documentation, reports not being completed on time/not being provided to meetings, or IROs not being informed of significant events such as placement moves or court decisions. In such cases, the challenge may not directly impact on the child but is designed to highlight the issue to managers with a view to improving practice. The remainder of challenges are made because there is a direct impact on the child and their care plan progressing. These include placement issues, contact arrangements, education and health needs not being met and the care plan drifting.

#### 6.4 Compliments and good practice:

Areas of good practice have also been identified by the IROs and passed back to the individual workers and their managers. They are recorded in the compliments log. In addition, the IROs have received some positive feedback in 2021-22.

***Compliments from partner agency colleague:***

*Can I share thanks to you xx, for chairing the meeting today. I was particularly impressed with the care you took to ensure parent was well informed and felt part of the meeting. It felt like quite a calm meeting even when tough things were being discussed.*

**Compliment from an attendee about IRO**

*'I wanted to highlight how well (IRO) chaired the meeting and I love the way she brings out all the positives for the young people in their review meetings'.*

**Feedback to IRO from a fostering agency about CS staff following the final review at 18 –**

*'Thanks WBC and all involved with (young person) for the excellent service provided by Children Services as a whole - this has made the outcomes for (young person) the best they could be – both the child and the carers have received nothing but a high standard of service'.*

#### 6.5 Feedback from children about reviews

What children and young people told us	What we have done
Shortly after the end of the reporting year, we had feedback from a group of children in care about not receiving their review reports.	<p>We checked on this and found reports were being sent out by secure email and that sometimes the e-mails were not being opened by carers and young people as it can be complicated to open the secure e-mails, and secure emails can't be opened on phones.</p> <p>In response, IROs are now posting out letters to each child/young person following their review which gives a summary of the review. IROs are also checking that they have all received your previous review reports when they speak to children prior to the next meeting.</p>

## 7. Emerging themes in 2021-22

Theme	What is being done in response
There was an increase in older children aged 16 and 17 (non UASC) coming into care - 33 compared to 8 the previous year.	Although their involvement may be short, for older children, IROs are involved in ensuring a permanence plan is agreed and that work to assist the young person returning home is explored. Young people have joint housing /social care assessments via the new housing protocol and the Children's Advocate is involved to help them understand their options. We would recommend an audit to explore this trend.
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.	IROs are monitoring legal status in reviews and in relation to permanence. For most older UASCs S20 is appropriate and younger UASCs are now subject to Care Orders. We will monitor this percentage and will undertake an audit of S20 cases if required.
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.	An audit was undertaken to explore this. The IROs are monitoring these children closely and an action plan in place. The L&D service are rolling out training for foster carers on attachment and trauma informed practice. This will be an area of focus for the IROs in bringing challenge to reduce the number where permanence is delayed.
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.	This is being monitored by the ISIG and the CPB and IROs are checking they have been set up prior to the first review and will check completion dates at each review. They are satisfied that children are having IHAs and have noted the action to improve timescales could be improved.
There has been a significant increase in the number of UASC children in care – with a range of UASC educational, care and emotional needs.	The Children's advocate has attended all first reviews for UASCs. The IROs are working to increase their knowledge and are keen to see a dedicated CAMHS offer for children in care with an offer for asylum seeking young people being established.
At the end of the year 22 children were on dual plans which reflects that for some children there may be a number of assessments, placements with parents or contact arrangements	Our process of the CP chair becoming the IRO assists with this transition and enables multi agency safeguarding arrangements being in place for a short time once a child comes into care.

which require the oversight of a CP Plan for a time.	
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## 8. Conclusion

Throughout 2021-22, the IRO service adapted to the challenge of living with COVID-19 and has been able to flex and change as the pandemic has progressed. We are now in a new phase of doing more face-to-face meetings while retaining virtual and hybrid options. The service has had a challenging year, dealing with capacity issues within the team alongside a significant increase in children coming into care and on CP Plans. It was positive that Ofsted noted the quality of the reports written to children and we are rectifying the issues about them reporting that they do not receive their reports. We are fortunate to have a stable team of experienced IROs who know the children well and have journeyed with some children and their families from CP conference to leaving care. We have reviewed our priorities and plans for the coming year and aim to maintain our performance on reviews and to deliver the IRO roles and responsibilities set out in the IRO handbook to a good standard for the benefit of children in care in Wokingham.

## 9. The key strategic priorities of the IRO service in 2022-23

- ❖ **To consistently provide good quality reviews for children in care** and make sure children know the plans for their care and have reports which they can access and to work with colleagues in children's social care to ensure that social worker reports are robust and provide an updated assessment of the child's needs at each review, and that the voice of the child, their lived experience is understood and informs the Care Plan.
- ❖ **To raise awareness about and promote the role of the IRO**, the purpose of care planning and reviews to children, parents, carers, social workers and other agency colleagues.
- ❖ **To demonstrate the effectiveness of the IRO service** with clear examples of what difference they are making by seeing children and overseeing the review process. This includes, clearly demonstrating challenge and follow up when care plans are not progressing as planned or when they notice issues within the system or low performance which affect more than one child in care.