

**Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting**

Corporate Parenting Panel – 13 May 2022

**Report Title**

IRO Annual Report 2020-21

**Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?**

No

**Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report**

Suzanne Joyner, Strategic Director of Children and Young People's Services

**Report Author(s)**

Lee Durrant – Service Manager Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Service  
[Lee.durrant@rotherham.gov.uk](mailto:Lee.durrant@rotherham.gov.uk)

**Ward(s) Affected**

Borough-Wide

**Report Summary**

The attached report gives an overview of IRO activity during the year 2020-21 with forward planning for 2021-22.

**Recommendation**

The panel is asked to receive this report as for information and discussion.

**List of Appendices Included**

Appendix 1 IRO Annual Report 2020-21

**Background Papers**

None

**Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel**

**Council Approval Required**

No

**Exempt from the Press and Public**

No

## IRO Annual report 2020-21

Error! Reference source not found.

### **1. Background**

The IRO annual report is a statutory requirement providing an update on the breadth of IRO activity within the year. The annual report should be presented to the Council. It will also be published via the RMBC website.

### **2. Key Issues**

- 2.1 The report reflects the work undertaken by IRO Service between April 2020 to March 2021, detailing key performance figures and how the service meets its stated aims and responsibilities to Looked After Children. The report also includes children's views on the service that they receive and actions for the service and wider system for the year ahead.

### **3. Options considered and recommended proposal**

- 3.1 The attached report is for consideration and review by Corporate Parenting Panel.

### **4. Consultation on proposal**

- 4.1 The report is for information and further discussion at Corporate Parenting Panel.

### **5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision**

- 5.1 This report will be shared at Corporate Parenting Panel on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2022. The report includes a clear action plan with timelines for delivery.

### **6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications (to be written by the relevant Head of Finance and the Head of Procurement on behalf of s151 Officer)**

- 6.1 There are no financial or procurement implications

### **7. Legal Advice and Implications (to be written by Legal Officer on behalf of Assistant Director Legal Services)**

- 7.1 There are no legal implications to this report.

### **8. Human Resources Advice and Implications**

- 8.1 There are no direct human resource implications to this report.

## **9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults**

- 9.1 The report and proposals are relevant to all children looked after and the aim of the review and action plan is to improve the quality-of-care planning for children looked after by Rotherham.

## **10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications**

- 10.1 There are no direct implications from this report, but it is noted that the looked after review and care planning processes work to support young people to have influence their plan and to support their right to advocacy.

## **11. Implications for CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions and Climate Change**

- 11.1 There are no direct implications within this report.

## **12. Implications for Partners**

- 12.1 There are no direct implications in this report, but key areas of development and learning are identified where working together can be further strengthened with partners and key actions are already underway

## **13. Risks and Mitigation**

- 13.1 The annual report highlights key areas of positive practice and where practice across the care planning and looked after processes can further be developed and improved. The report has progressed a clear action plan to mitigate future risks. Progress against this plan is being carefully managed via the IRO performance management meetings and wider Service Management Team

## **14. Accountable Officer(s)**

Lee Durrant, Service Manager IRO Service  
[lee.durrant@rotherham.gov.uk](mailto:lee.durrant@rotherham.gov.uk)

Laura Gough, Head of Safeguarding, Quality and Learning  
[Laura.gough@rotherham.gov.uk](mailto:Laura.gough@rotherham.gov.uk)

*This report is published on the Council's [website](#).*



**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICES**

**Independent Reviewing Service**

**ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021**

<b>Section</b>	<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page number</b>
	Executive Summary	4
<b>1</b>	Purpose and Focus of the Report	5
<b>2</b>	Purpose of service and legal context	5
<b>2.1</b>	The Core Responsibilities of the IRO	6
<b>2.2</b>	Extended Functions of an IRO	8
<b>3</b>	Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council Children's Services IRO Service	9
<b>4</b>	Other tasks undertaken by the IRO service throughout the year 2020/21	10
<b>5</b>	Progress on last year's action plan	10
<b>6</b>	Feedback from Children, families and professionals	
<b>7</b>	Profile of children in care	13
<b>7.1</b>	Children Ceasing Care	13
<b>7.2</b>	Ethnicity of children in care	14
<b>8</b>	IRO Performance	14
<b>8.1</b>	Review Reports	15
<b>9</b>	Quality assurance	15
<b>9.1</b>	Formal Challenge and Escalation	16
<b>9.2</b>	Midway Reviews	17
<b>9.3</b>	Broader Impact	17
<b>9.4</b>	Signs of Safety	18
<b>9.5</b>	Audit Activity	19

<b>10</b>	Participation	<b>19</b>
<b>10.1</b>	Visits to the Child	<b>20</b>
<b>11</b>	The health of Looked After Children	<b>21</b>
<b>11.1</b>	Initial Health Assessments (IHA)	<b>21</b>
<b>11.2</b>	Dental Checks	<b>21</b>
<b>11.3</b>	Strengths and Difficulties	<b>21</b>
<b>12</b>	Education for children in care – Personal Education Plans	<b>21</b>
<b>13</b>	Placement stability	<b>22</b>
<b>13.1</b>	Regulation 44	<b>24</b>
<b>13.2</b>	Children Placed Out of Authority	<b>24</b>
<b>14</b>	Adoption	<b>24</b>
<b>15</b>	Children Missing from Care and subject to Child Protection Plans	<b>25</b>
<b>16</b>	Working with Children’s Guardians	<b>25</b>
<b>17</b>	Concluding comments and areas for development	<b>27</b>
<b>18</b>	Key Actions for 2021/22	<b>27</b>

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2020/21**

2020/21 has been a challenging year for all social care staff, for Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) the year has evidenced their flexibility and ability to work independently, although this has also brought about several challenges. IROs often work, in more normal times, quite remotely, attending reviews in schools and placements, often out of borough and writing minutes and records at home rather than spending more time in the car travelling back to the office. As a consequence, the time given over to face to face supervision and time meetings is highly valued as this gives the opportunity for peer support and sharing practice. Restrictions due to Covid-19 have greatly impacted on the service in this respect, and as evidenced in this report there have been several key changes to the manner in which reviews are held, and how children are seen and consulted. Restrictions in attending the workplace have also had an impact on how IROs liaise with colleagues from operational services. The service sets out to proactively hold restorative discussions with managers in order to maintain the focus on the child's experience whilst respecting the efforts that social workers make every day in meeting their needs. Over the course of the year, it is evident that this reduction in face-to-face communication has been a significant loss.

This report sets out the broad areas of focus for IROs and the context in which their job function is delivered. In summary the findings are:

### **What's working well?**

- The number of children in care has remained stable throughout the year.
- The IRO service has maintained a stable staff group and has covered long time illness and maternity leave 'within service'. This alongside an increase in the number of reviews.
- Review performance has increased since the previous year.
- Virtual reviews have become the norm and IROs have adjusted to this new way of working whilst improving on performance.
- IROs have been able to use virtual means to consult with children on over 600 occasions.
- IROs have demonstrated more confidence in using the Signs Of safety review template as a means to focus on strengths and support children to take part in their meetings.
- In a recent Practice Learning Day, it was found that the IRO footprint was evident on the casefile in the majority of children's files looked at.
- IROs have completed case file audits with social workers and families to a high percentage.

### **What are we worried about?**

- Figures for children attending and participating in their review remain relatively low, some children have not wanted to attend their review on a virtual basis.
- It is not yet known whether reviews in school will be possible in the following year.
- Some foster carers have expressed anxiety, linked to a risk of Covid infection, about reviews taking place in their home.

- There is some evidence that Court delays have resulted in delays for children being adopted.
- There has been a reduction in formal challenge and escalation by IROs.
- Social Work reports for reviews are not received in adequate time and have not been routinely shared with children, families and carers.
- Dental check-ups have reduced significantly, there is now a backlog for children looked after, believed to be linked to covid, but requiring focus and improvement.
- IRO caseloads have been generally high throughout the year.

## 1. Purpose and Focus of the Report

The IRO Handbook provides the statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) and their employers on their functions in relation to the case management and reviews for looked after children. The Statutory guidance states that the IRO Manager should be responsible to produce an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Panel and the local safeguarding children board.

This report is written in a format intended to be consistent with the IRO Handbook. It provides:

- The purpose of the service and legal context
- The responsibilities of the IRO
- The development and make-up of the IRO service
- Information relating to performance and children and young people's participation
- Information in relation to disputes and IRO challenge
- Resources
- Areas for development

This Report reflects the performance, oversight and impact of the Independent Reviewing Service in respect of the plans for the borough's roughly 570 children in care during the year 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. The report relies on quantitative evidence produced by the Insight reporting system and seeks to interrogate the thematic issues arising in order to provide a qualitative

discussion in relation to the contribution offered by the IRO service to the children it serves and the wider workforce.

The IRO handbook (Statutory Guidance) states:

**'The IRO's primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration. To be successful, the role must be valued by senior managers and operate within a supportive service culture and environment. An effective IRO service should enable the local authority to achieve improved outcomes for children'.**

Like all parts of CYPs the IRO function and role has been impacted by Covid-19 and the consequent restrictions in place. This report will also discuss the impact of restrictions and the plans going forward for the IRO service.

## 2. Purpose of the service and legal context

The Children Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children's Act 2002 make it a legal requirement for the local authority to appoint an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to each child in care, to participate in case reviews. The IRO has the authority, independent of their employing local authority, to refer cases to the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) should they believe the local authority's plan for the child is not in their best interests.

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 extends the IRO's responsibilities from monitoring the performance of the local authority on 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.

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 Children Act 1989 and the regulations specify:

- the duty to appoint an IRO
- the circumstances in which the children's social care department must consult with the IRO

- the functions of the IRO both in relation to the reviewing and monitoring of each child's case
- the actions that the IRO must take if the social care department is failing to comply with the regulations or is in breach of its duties to the child in any material way

The IRO's primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child in care and to ensure that their current wishes and feelings are given full consideration. It is not the responsibility of the IRO to manage the case, nor supervise the social worker or devise the care plan. Although it is important for the IRO to develop a consistent relationship with the child, this should not undermine or replace the relationship between the social worker and the child.

There are now two clear and separate aspects to the function of the IRO, namely:

- Chairing the child's review meetings
- Monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis

As part of the monitoring function, the IRO also has a duty to identify any areas of poor practice, including general concerns around service delivery (not solely around individual children). The IRO should immediately alert senior managers if any such areas are identified. Equally important, the IRO should recognise and report on good practice.

In March 2014, the National Children's Bureau published an important piece of research entitled 'The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England'. The foreword was written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson who made the following comment:

**"The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment or whether we are failing".**

## **2.1. The Core Responsibilities of the IRO include:**

The National Independent Reviewing Officer's manager's Partnership (NIROMP) offers practice standards for all IROs, namely that the IRO will:

1. ensure the child is central to all planning and decision making.
2. ensure the child's wishes, views and feelings are given full consideration.
3. be satisfied that each child's care arrangement is meeting their needs.
4. ensure that each child knows how to contact you between reviews.
5. make sure each review process results in clear, robust and informed judgements about the progress of the care plan.
6. make sure care plans and decisions have a realistic timescale attached in keeping with the child's needs and a named person to implement them.
7. challenge where there is drift in care planning and where necessary escalate to formal dispute resolution.
8. be satisfied that plans for permanency have been identified by the second review.
9. be satisfied that the corporate parent is meeting the requirements of the care planning regulations.
10. pro-actively chase progress of the child's care plan and the implementation of review decisions.
11. determine whether a review needs to be convened when there is a significant change/event in the child's life.
12. champion the rights and entitlements of children living in care including their right to advocacy, legal support and redress through complaints and challenges.
13. engage with the child's guardian in line with the Cafcass and IRO good practice protocol, to ensure effective communication about the child's care plan.
14. provide both positive and constructive feedback to all the stakeholders to actively promote good outcomes for children.

## **Mission Statement**

RMBC's Independent Reviewing Service exists to ensure that when Children and Young People are looked after by the Local Authority that they receive the highest possible level of care, support and planning. We will do this by adopting an unwavering and steadfast commitment to the following 'Pillars of Practice', with the understanding that we work FOR the child first and foremost.

***Why am I here – What's going to happen?***

- The Child will always have a positive, sensitive and accurate understanding of why they are in care and what the plan is for them
- Moreover, the Child will be an active, informed, and powerful participant in the planning and decision-making process

***I want to be the best version of myself I can be.***

- The IRO will ensure there is a clear vision of success for the child, we will always be aspirational for children in RMBC's care and will hold the Local Authority to account in meeting the child's goals

***How will you deliver for me?***

- We will robustly monitor and review the standard of care and planning that every Looked after child is entitled to and will rigorously challenge areas of concern
- The review will be an inclusive and supportive forum for open and honest discussion between participants, where the contributions of all are valued. The focus will first and foremost be on maximising and developing the child's strength and wellbeing and ensuring that they have a strong and supportive network throughout their childhood and beyond
- Then IRO service will work helpfully, proactively, and positively with professional colleagues across the review spectrum, recognising that we will achieve the best results for the children we work for when we demonstrate honesty, integrity and respect

The statutory guidance makes clear that the social worker must inform the IRO of significant changes in the child's life. Examples of this being:

- proposed change of care plan, for example arising at short notice in the course of proceedings following directions from the court
- major change to family time arrangements
- changes of allocated social worker
- any safeguarding concerns involving the child, which may lead to enquiries being made under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 ('child protection enquiries') and outcomes of child protection conferences, or other meetings not attended by the IRO
- where the child is excluded from school
- where the child is running away or missing from the approved placement
- significant health, medical events, diagnoses, illnesses, hospitalisations, serious accidents
- Agency Decision Maker decisions in relation to permanence

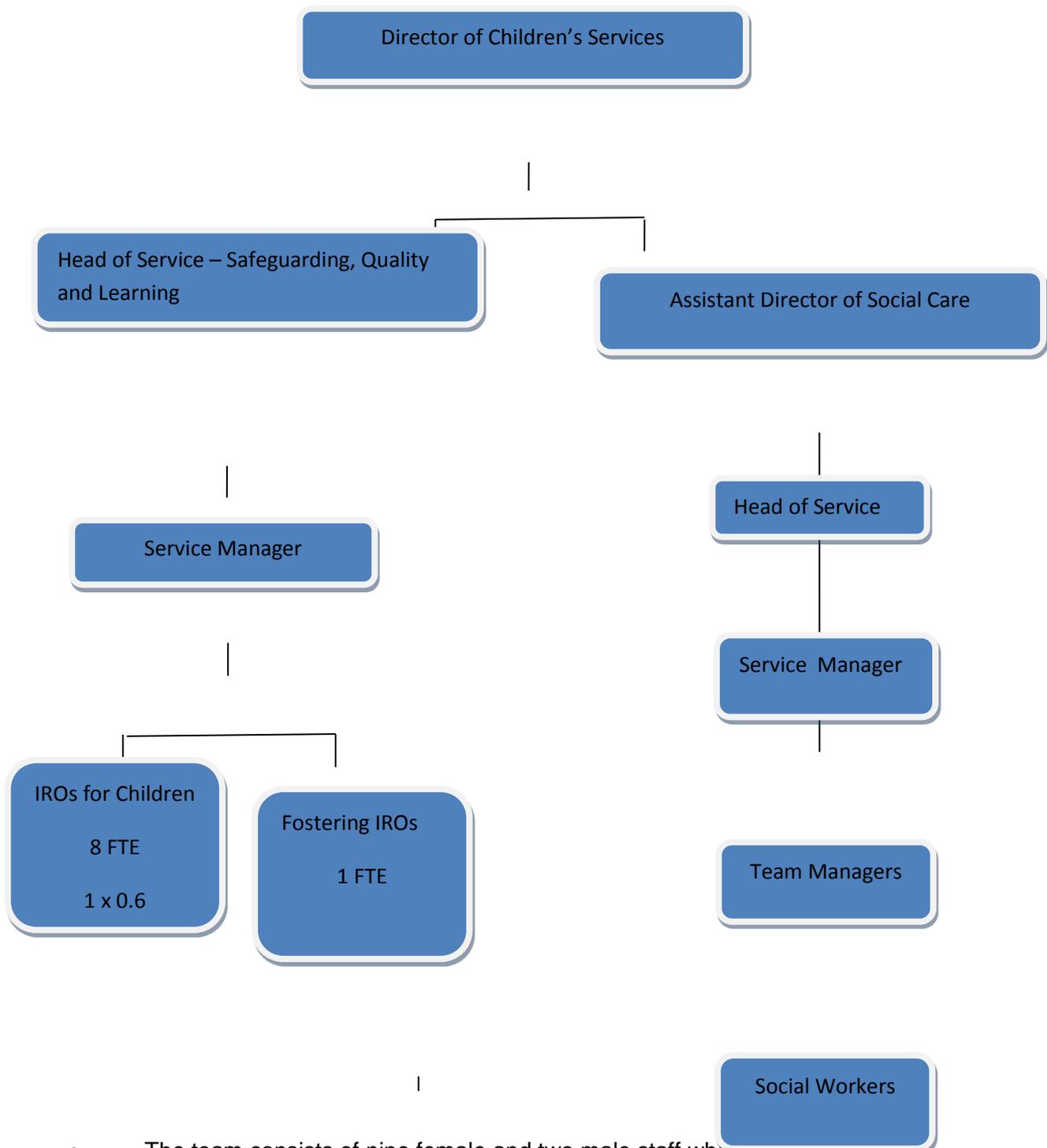
Furthermore, the statutory guidance sets out when an additional review must be convened prior to any of the following changes being implemented:

- whenever there is a proposal for a child to leave care before the age of 18, i.e., for the child to become a relevant child, rather than an eligible child
- wherever there is a proposal for the child to move from foster care, a children's home or other placement, to supported lodgings, or to other kinds of 'semi-independent' or 'independent living' before the age of 18 (i.e., from accommodation regulated under the Care Standards Act to unregulated accommodation)
- prior to children subject to care orders being discharged from custody
- wherever any unplanned change is proposed to a child's accommodation that would have the effect of disrupting his/her education or training
- where a change of placement is proposed that would interrupt the arrangements for the education of a child in Key Stage 4
- When a change of placement is proposed for a child who has remained settled and established with the same carer for a significant period of time

In Rotherham, a small number of children are at times accommodated in unregistered settings, for these children reviews take place on a monthly basis, with the aim of driving the plan and provision for the child to be cared for within a registered setting as soon as possible.

### **3. RMBC Children's Services IRO Service**

The IRO Team consists of the following staff:



- The team consists of nine female and two male staff who are white British
- In December 2020 the male IRO occupying the 0.6 FTE post left the service.
- An agency IRO was appointed from February 2021
- All IRO's receive monthly supervision and a yearly PDR which is reviewed six monthly
- Team meetings are held two-weekly. These meetings are divided between a performance meeting and a more general and developmental meeting
- All IROs have link teams within the operational social work service, they attend team meetings throughout the year and are the point of contact for any general issues raised

- The service manager is male and white British
- The service manager and an IRO attendance the Regional IRO Managers and IRO Group respectively
- The IRO manager attends regular meetings with CAFCASS partners

The IRO handbook recommends an optimum caseload of 50-70 children per IRO in order to ensure adequate performance. On 31 March 2021 full time caseloads were at a level of between 63 and 80 children per IRO. IRO caseloads are impacted upon by several factors:

- **Number of siblings placed together on caseload:** As larger sibling groups tends to suggest less separate review meetings to arrange
- **Location of placement/review:** Reviews away from the local area are time consuming in terms of travel and logistical arrangements, with some reviews requiring overnight stays.
- **Whether the child is in Court proceedings:** Reviews are held more regularly within Care proceedings because of a new LAC status and reviews being required to ratify the final care plan.

There were 333 children looked after outside of the Local Authority boundary at 31 March 2021, with 19 children placed over 100 miles from the RMBC area. Over the course of this year, this factor has less of an impact on IROs' performance due to restrictions linked to Covid-19.

#### 4. Other tasks undertaken by the IRO service throughout the year 2020/21

- Any child, who is subject to a child protection plan and becomes a looked after child, will have their child protection plan reviewed by the appointed IRO
- Review care plans for children who are being provided with short breaks through provision of respite care deemed Looked After Children (regulation 48 of the Children's Act 1989)
- Contributing to wider Trust audit activity, monthly, thematic and following reviews
- Support the Fostering Service with recruitment and training
- Provide ma monthly performance report
- Attend weekly residential and complex needs panel
- Monitoring missing/absent episodes
- Linking with the virtual school
- Supporting social workers and team managers around care planning issues
- Providing support and guidance regarding the use of Signs of Safety
- Ensuring support to children, young people and carers continued during the Covid pandemic

#### 5. Progress on last year's action plan

## Performance

Action	Outcome
Review recommendations will be available within 5 days of the meeting, these will be embedded in the LAC review minutes template (as Next Steps) or if minutes cannot be completed with 5 days, they will be on LCS. IROs will ensure that such recommendations are SMART.	Completed – the IRO report is anticipated to be added to LCS in 2021-22
IROs will produce minutes from reviews within 15 working days, these to be sent out within 20 working days. A report will be generated on Insight to inform performance reporting	The Insight report is complete, this details performance and has supported discussions in supervision when required
Visits to children are expected as part of each review process and should be recorded on LCS as 'IRO visit to child'. A performance report will be requested to support monitoring.	This has been frustrated by restrictions linked to Covid 19 – see content

## Attendance and Participation

Action	Outcome
As part of consulting with children IROs will continue to think about how the people important to that child can be included in their review. It is expected that this should be a creative and broad approach that moves beyond the usual 'carers and parents' attendance, for example friends, cousins, trusted adults and coaches could be considered with agreement and provided confidentiality is maintained. This 'Care Team' approach is intended to support the develop of informal networks for the child so that planning is not a 6 monthly event but a continual event led by the network.	This has been frustrated by restrictions linked to Covid 19 – see content
Children should be encouraged and supported to be instrumental in their reviews. Much is made of children 'chairing' their reviews and whilst this is a positive aspiration, they can only do this meaningfully if they are informed and consulted about their plans. IROs will be expected to comment upon this in the review minutes and plan ahead for subsequent reviews.	IROs highlight the child's views in the review record, they are prompted to record how the child was supported in relation to their attendance and participation. Lifestory work or explanations are central to IRO recommendations and are embedded in the current Quality and Compliance document. The IRO Service has held the 'Lifestory Tracker', with the aim of supporting the Local Authority to

	understand performance in this area. The tracker has been shared with senior management and some improvements have been seen in terms of completion over the course of 2020/21.
If for any reason the child cannot be seen, a rationale will be made visible on the file with a plan for how the child's views will inform the review, and this will also be detailed within the review meeting. The IRO will discuss this with the Service Manager.	Linked to Covid 19 – see content

### Impact and Influence

Action	Outcome
IROs will each have an assigned link team/s, they will attend meetings with SWs and managers and ensure that expectations of the review process are clear – the intention being that reviews will feel similar and that standards will be consistently applied.	Link meetings have been frustrated by Covid 19, however all IROs have a link and meetings have been held on Microsoft Teams. IROs have also started to meet with Team managers from the LAC service on a monthly basis.
Whilst liaison with SWs is key in planning and preparation, the IRO will be expected to enhance and develop 'manager to manager' discussions. This is intended to reduce delay and to ensure that team managers are sighted on key issues regarding the children they are responsible for.	There is more evidence of this in relation to the Q and C process, IROs report that the majority of lower level issues are dealt with by means of informal discussion and escalation.
A new, more thematic Quality and Compliance Form will be launched in Autumn 2020, it is intended that this will generate a response from the TM with a prompt about actions required and that the IRO will then complete the form. The aim to is close the loop on the valuable information contained in the report, at present the impact of these forms is not known and appears limited. More work is needed to develop the manner in which the data collected assists the organisation to understand key learning and development activities, such as with Life story work/explanations for children. Work is ongoing with the performance team to develop a performance report in this respect.	Complete, awaiting upload to LCS – see content for detail

IROs will achieve a midway review target of 90% by the end of the reporting year 2020-21	Not met, currently at 75%, whilst performance has improved meeting this target was frustrated to a degree by non-completion by a previous agency IRO.
IROs and the IRO manager will monitor the progress made in regard to those children in the 'Right Child Right Care' (RCRC) cohort. It is anticipated that IROs will report on these children via the monthly performance reporting process.	Whilst IROs are aware of progress for individual children, they are not reporting into, or taking information away from the RCRC meetings. The IRO Service manager will develop these links going forward.
Escalations will continue to be monitored via the service spreadsheet, thematic information from this will be introduced into the monthly performance highlight report. The IRO manager will retain responsibility for ensuring timeliness for resolution and progression to the next stage required. A renewed escalation process will be presented to SMT for agreement January 2021 and uploaded to Tri-X procedures.	The Challenge and Resolution process has been updated as planned and the tracker is maintained in real time. The process is yet to be updated on Tri-X procedures.

## Signs of Safety

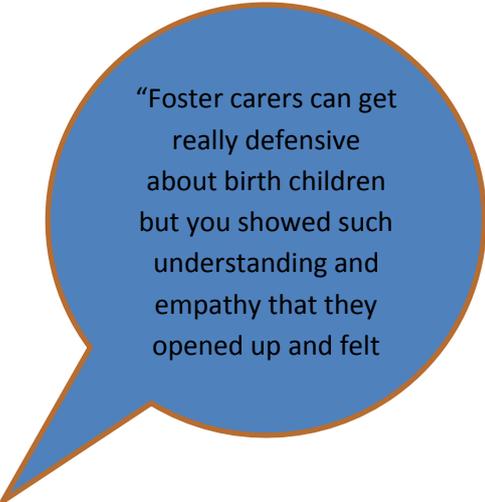
Action	Outcome
Feedback from attendees regarding the template and structure of the LAC review and Review record will be sought. This will inform any necessary changes.	This feedback is currently in progress, IROs are working on a consultation process.
The LAC review record form will be developed for LCS alongside the current updates being undertaken during 2021.	This form is ready to be uploaded on 2021, this sits alongside the broader SofS LCS upgrade action plan.

## 6. Feedback from Children, Young people, professional and carers

Consultation and feedback is essential in order to know that the service we are delivering fits with our aims and has a positive impact on the lives of children and young people. As this report demonstrates, involving children in their reviews is a central tenet of our practice. However,

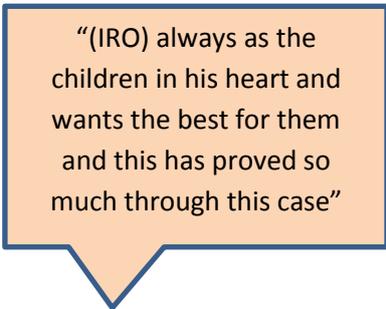
there is no clear mechanism at present for gaining their views and in turn informing the quality of the review process. The feedback below has been offered via the various adults present in reviews. This is positive to read and reaffirms the consistency and impact that an IRO can bring to the lives of looked after children. The aim going forward is to devise a more structured feedback system for professional carers and children.

### Feedback from professionals and carers



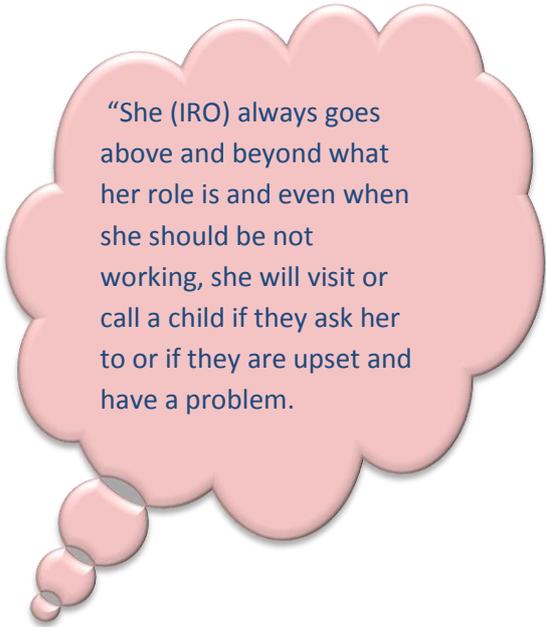
“Foster carers can get really defensive about birth children but you showed such understanding and empathy that they opened up and felt

Supervising SW



“(IRO) always as the children in his heart and wants the best for them and this has proved so much through this case”

Social Worker

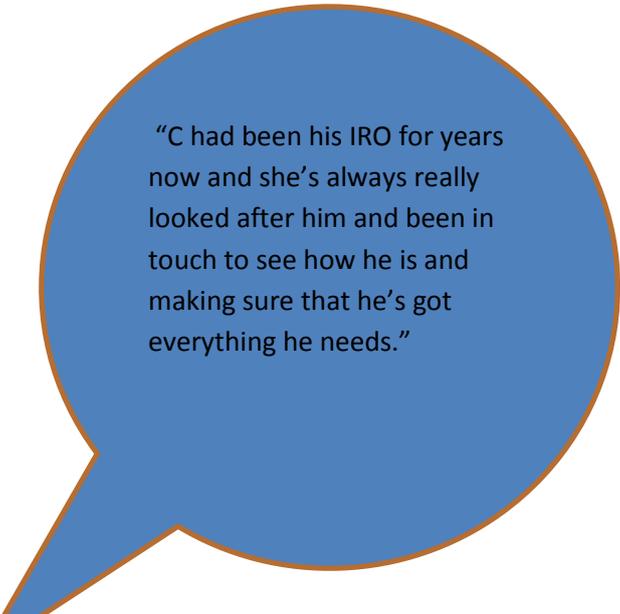


“She (IRO) always goes above and beyond what her role is and even when she should be not working, she will visit or call a child if they ask her to or if they are upset and have a problem.

Foster Carer



“I was greatly impressed by the range of skills demonstrated by the IRO during this review. He chaired the meeting extremely well, making sure everyone had a turn to speak and was able to contribute, he was supportive of parents but able to directly challenge them where needed and did not hesitate to talk about



“C had been his IRO for years now and she’s always really looked after him and been in touch to see how he is and making sure that he’s got everything he needs.”

Social Worker

Foster care

## 7. Profile of children in care

On 01 April 2020 there were 594 children and young people Looked After by RMBC. This represents a decrease of 1 from the 595 children looked after at the same point the year before. This figure equates to 106.1 children per 10,000 of the population and sits in comparison to a statistical neighbour average of 92.0 and a national average of 65.0. By 31 March 2021 there were 596 children looked after indicating that LAC numbers had remained stable throughout the year.

### 7.1 Children ceasing care

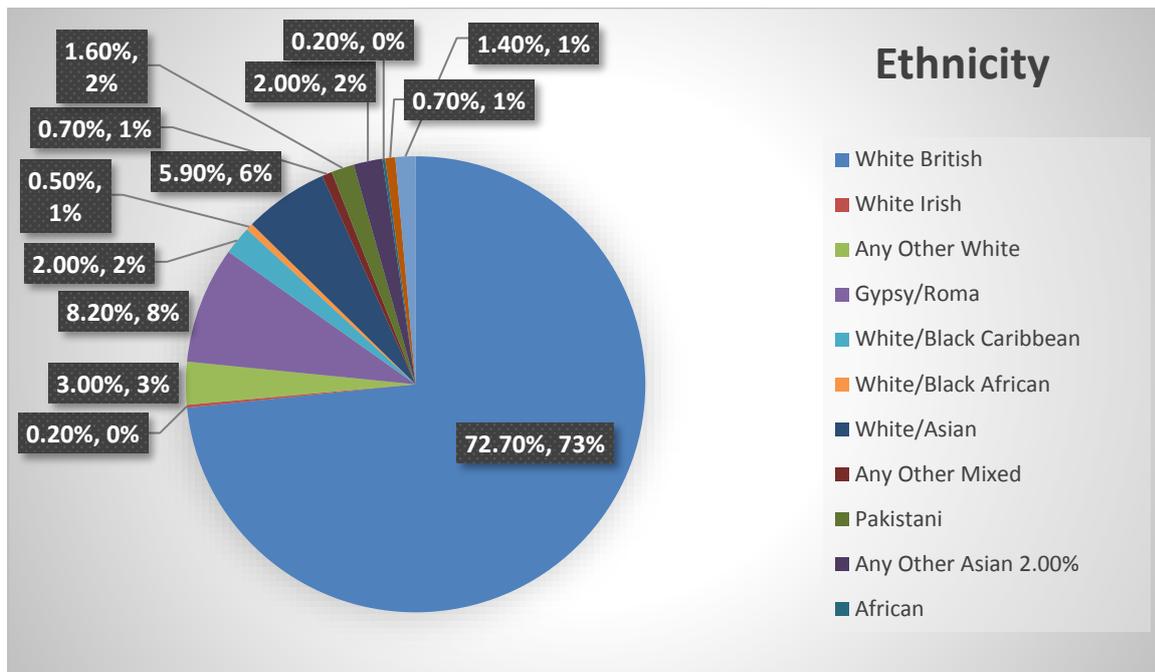
186 children ceased to be looked after in the reporting period, compared with 187 the previous year. Patterns are fairly spread with highs of 23 children ceasing to be looked after in September 2020, January 2021 and March 2021. 81 children ceased to be looked after in the first half of the reporting period against 105 children in the second half. This suggests some positivity in our discharges and the progression of long-term plans for children.

Reason Ceased LAC	Number Ceased LAC
Aged 18 (or over) and remained with current carers (inc. under staying put arrangements)	23
E11 - Adopted - application unopposed	29
E12 - Adopted, consent dispensed with	5
E13 - Left care to live with parents, relatives, or other person with no parental responsibility	16
E16 - Moved abroad	1

E2 - Died	2
E3 - Care taken over by another LA in the UK	5
E41 - Returned home - Residence order	7
E45 - SGO made to former foster carer(s), who were a relative or friend	19
E46 - SGO made to former foster carer(s), other than relatives or friend	1
E47 - SGO made to former foster carer(s), other than former foster carer(s) who were a relative or friend	2
E4A - Planned return home to live with parents (no order)	31
E4B - Unplanned return home to live with parents (no order)	1
E5 - Independent arrangement with formalised support	5
E7 - Transferred to adult social services	2
E8 - CLA ceased for any other reason	36
E9 - Sentenced to custody	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>186</b>

## 7.2. Ethnicity of children in care

Current data shows the distribution of the ethnic backgrounds of RMBC's children in care as demonstrated in the table below.



The 2011 Census revealed that Rotherham has a White British Population of 91.9%, with the largest other communities coming from the Pakistani population (3%) and White Other (1.4% and recorded for people of Eastern European backgrounds). The BME population in 2011 was recorded as 8.1%. Looked After Children from BME backgrounds represent 26.4% of all children in care. This is clearly disproportionate to the demographics in Rotherham, with for example children from a Gypsy/Roma background being 16 times more likely to be in care (based on the 2011 Census figures). Similarly, children from a White/Asian background are more likely to be in care, the population of people from a mixed background (including White/Asian) being 1%. Whilst deeper analysis is needed, it is possible that children have been removed from parents subject to the outcome of investigations linked to Operation Stovewood and historical Child Sexual Abuse.

## 8. IRO Performance

1753 LAC Reviews were held in 2020-21 with full time IROs holding between 194 and 242 reviews in the year.

Over the course of the year 96.2% of reviews were held in time, equating to 1687 reviews. This is a significant rise from 90.8% in the previous reporting year. It is likely that the adoption of virtual reviews due to Covid-19 restrictions has contributed to this increase, as less distance to travel resulted on better availability across review attendees, including IROs. The main reasons for reviews going out of time were.

- Illness of either social worker or IRO
- Illness of foster carer
- No social work report received
- Court appearance of the social worker

Note: Evidence for the above is anecdotal as Insight does not report on cancellation reason, this will be an action for this year

## 8.1 Review Reports

All professionals attending the child’s review are expected to provide a written report, ideally these reports will be collated prior to the review and sent to IRO to prepare for the meeting. The ‘key’ report is completed by the social worker for the child. It is expected that this report will clearly set the scene, detailing the successes and worries over the preceding period and how the plans made for the child have progressed. The report should also set a clear vision for the continued care of the child. It is expected that this report is shared with attendees, including the child where possible, in advance of the meeting.

Pre-meeting Report Timeliness	No.	%
Same day	353	20.1%
After Review	373	21.3%
5+ days before	414	23.6%
1-4 days prior	613	35.0%
Total	1753	

As can be seen from the table above, only 23% of reports were received ‘in time’ for the review. Completion of the report 5 days prior allows time for this to be distributed to attendees. However, again anecdotally, attendees often report not receiving the report. This may have been exacerbated due the virus restrictions, as social workers had not been routinely visiting families/parents and were visiting placements much less over the year. In order to address this, permission to send minutes, reports etc. via email has been one of the helpful effects of covid contingency measures and thus reports could have been shared via email in good time. It is a concern that reports were not completed and shared with attendees prior to the review in over

40% of occasions. IROs report that this can impact of the functioning of the meeting, as new information is shared in the review and participants are not up to date with plans, events etc. Whilst cancellation of reviews where reports are not received has been considered to do this in 40% of cases would have been significantly detrimental to the process and most importantly to over 700 children in 2020-21.

Statutory Guidance states that review recommendations are produced within 24 hours of the review held and distributed within 5 working days. Whilst figures are not recorded for the year the data suggests that at present there are very few sets of recommendations incomplete. In addition, review minutes should be distributed to all parties within 20 working days of the review meeting. IROs record and complete their own minutes, Business support is responsible for distributing such via email and postal services.

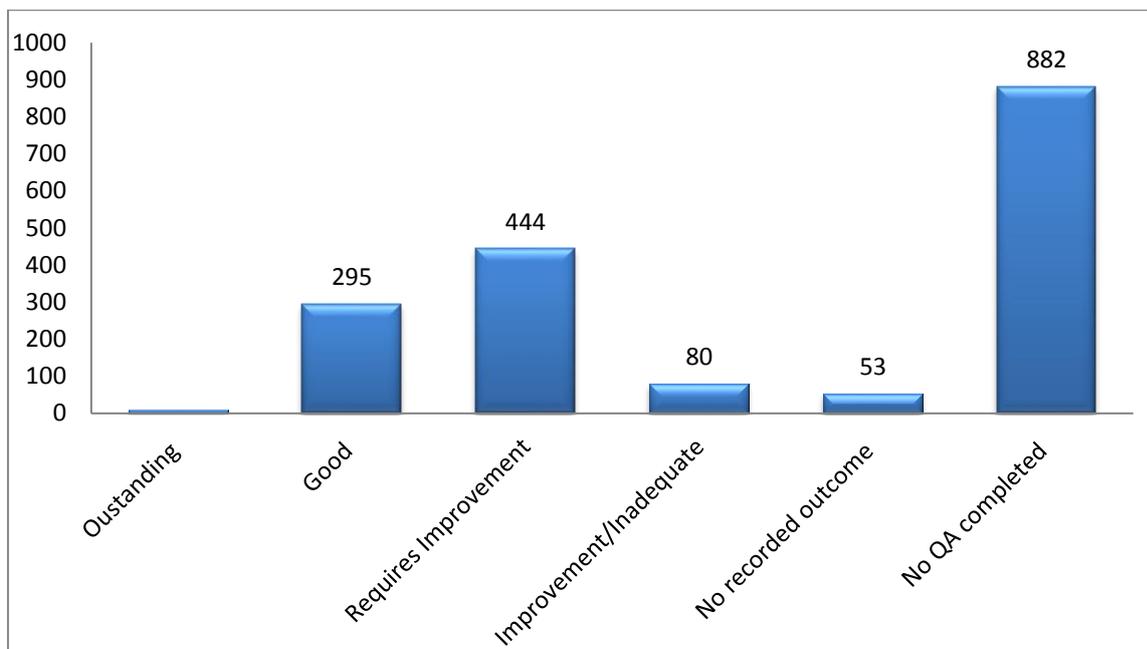
IRO performance in this area is currently captured in the data but does not generate a specific performance report. Thus, each IRO and the service manager can see what is outstanding at a certain point in time, but broader performance figures are not captured. To look at performance in this area at the time of this report it is evident that 34 sets of minutes are overdue. A large proportion of these are with one IRO and it is concerning that of these minutes, several are for reviews held over 10 weeks ago, this has been picked up with the IRO and plans are in place to address this. Minutes and recommendations are updated within each supervision session held and timescales set for completion.

## **9. Quality Assurance**

Central to the IRO role is the quality assurance function. The review itself provides ample opportunity to ensure that the Local Authority is carrying out its duties to those children that it looks after. In the vast majority of these cases, the Local Authority acts as corporate parent, and IROs, with their 'arm's length' independence are key to holding the Local Authority to account.

In preparing for reviews IROs complete a 'Quality and Compliance' Form on LCS. One of the key achievements in the latter part of this year has been the redesign of this form in order to provide a more detailed view of the child's circumstances and the work of the LA, to include scaling. In addition, in devising a 'feedback loop' to the IRO in order to check any actions required or views from the receiving team manager. The form was devised and tested as a word document word prior to embedding it as an LCS form, as such the cohort figures for the year are impacted.

### **Quality and Assurance Grading Outcome**



As the table above demonstrates, of the 1753 reviews completed in 2019-20, quality and compliance forms were completed on LCS in roughly 50% of reviews, as stated the service moved over to testing a new Q and C form on a word document in late 2020. Of these 34% 19.5% (305) situations for children were reviewed at good/outstanding, with ten Q and C checks graded at outstanding. This figure is in comparison to 19.5% the previous year and thus demonstrates a marked improvement in what IROs felt to be the quality of work and impact on the child. As previously, the majority of outcomes were recorded as requires improvement (444). The new reporting mechanism will generate what the key issues in relation to the grading are.

Upon completion the form is then sent to the team manager for their comments. IROs report that they rarely receive feedback about these comments and often do not go back to the report to check outcomes. Many of the forms that I have seen have manager comments along the lines of 'noted' or 'issues raised to be addressed'. There is very little in terms of specific actions to be taken. Inadequate outcomes should generate an escalation however the evidence suggests that this is not always done in every case and over the course of the year many of the escalations raised were at an informal level, via email and thus difficult to track. In my view this lack of 'closing the circle' is a fundamental flaw and does not support a high support/high challenge ethos.

## 9.1 Formal Challenge and Escalation

The most common shortcoming, and conversely success, of an IRO service – identified in a whole range of Ofsted reports – relates to the effectiveness and impact of the IRO challenge and 'footprint'. Where success has been seen in *outstanding* Local Authorities inspectors have commented that.

- “There is good evidence of tracking and monitoring of children’s progress by the Independent Reviewing Officers”.
- “Increased investment in the independent reviewing officer (IRO) service has resulted in reduced caseloads and has improved IROs’ oversight of care planning, which ensures that children’s plans progress. There is a particularly strong system to ensure timely permanence. IROs provide clarity about whether they endorse the local authority plan”.
- “Plans are realistic and time-focused, with independent reviewing officers (IROs) effectively leading reviews and monitoring children’s progress”.

IROs have several avenues for progressing plans and ensuring oversight, this is termed the ‘IRO footprint’. Where there are concerns that a child’s care journey is drifting, or there are serious concerns about the standard of care and social work intervention, the IRO will most commonly revert to a formal escalation. Over the course of this year a revised ‘Formal Challenge and Resolution’ process has been developed (Appendix 1), setting clear timescales and tracking to ensure that resolutions to such issues are achieved effectively and collaboratively.

In 2020-21 17 Escalations were initiated with all resolved at stages 1-2. Formal Challenge Themes were as below:

Drift and Delay	Provision of Services	Quality of Plan
No Pre-Meeting Report	Educational and Therapeutic Provision	Lack of Assessment
Order Revocation		Inadequate Q and C
Placement delay		
<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>

As can be seen clearly, drift and delay and care planning are by far the biggest factors requiring escalation. On interrogation, the most common factors are regarding the lack of a Pre-Meeting Report and adequate assessment. It is interesting to note that no challenges were made in respect of Lifestory work, despite this being a well-known theme of concern for the Local Authority. On discussing this with IROs, they report that the Local Authority has had steps in place to mitigate against this, and that also a lack of Lifestory work was a factor in inadequate Q and Cs. Covid restrictions have also had an impact as relationships have been more challenging to develop as face-to-face discussions have not been held. Much informal discussion is conducted via email, this can be a lengthier process and intent can be misunderstood. That said, there remains a strong culture of informal case discussion and resolution in Rotherham with 45 informal challenges being recorded this year.

## 9.2 Midway Reviews

Midway reviews provide an essential checkpoint for the IRO to measure the progress of the recommendations, this helps to avoid delay and should allow the opportunity for the IRO and social worker to plan ahead for the next meeting.

As it stands Midway review performance is at 75% for the service. This has steadily improved since the report has been generated in late 2019 and is up from 58% at the same point last year.

### 9.3 Broader Impact

IROs are required to be highly experienced and capable social workers, RMBC's IRO service is clear that it has a role in supporting and encouraging best practice and to this end, IROs are expected to offer support and guidance to social workers and to collaborate positively with team managers in order to progress plans. In 2020-21 the IRO Service has continued to maintain the Lifestory tracker on behalf of CYPs, this is an unwieldy spreadsheet however it gives some insight into whether lifestory work had been completed in a timely manner and allows the IRO to offer a view on their influence in this process. The tracker recorded 476 children, representing 79% of children looked after. It was considered that 297 or 49% of children has adequate lifestory work completed, according to their own needs and care journey at the time. IROs commented on the level of explanation needed whether this be a later life letter, words and pictures, timeline, letter, life story book and so on. The practice directed was that these explanations would form a part of the review agenda and the team around the child would agree about what was required, including the child as far as possible. The tracker evidences the IRO impact by means of informal challenge with the team manager and midway reviews. Some of the detail reveals that children have met with a judge, have been involved in creating social stories and for children refusing detailed life story work that they had an explanation as to why they are in care. Reasons for non-completion were related to children being unwilling, children in care seeking asylum and for many, that this is a continuing process.

The aim in the coming year is to cease to use this tracker and develop a simpler means of collating the data and introducing this work to the current Quality and Compliance process.

IROs have completed thematic performance reports throughout the year. For example, in June there was a focus on successes related to virtual reviews. This revealed creative ways in which children were participating in the 'new world' and how virtual reviews have allowed for use of existing technology to make sure that minutes and reports are shared more readily. A copy of the June overview report is attached for reference in the Appendix.

The IRO service manager has this year commenced a review of all children placed under section 20 on a bi-monthly basis, this report gives a qualitative insight into the status and plans for those children looked after under section 20. There has been an increase in children looked after under section 20 from 21 children in July 2020 (the first report) to 36 children in March 2021. The report offers check and challenge on the progress of section 20 plans, whether these are the right course of action in the service manager's view and recommended actions. The impact of this report has seen a greater visibility of senior management oversight on file and in individual cases reviews by senior managers have been prompted with remedial action taken, an example is included in the Appendix.

#### 9.4 Signs of Safety and Success

In LAC reviews, whilst there is due weight given to the past harm, the focus is on the present strengths and current harm and risks, with an emphasis on the best possible future for the children. While the exact future cannot be foretold, certain issues can be anticipated. All children leave care as well as enter care. If as IRO, we can invite parents and the LA and others to consider a vision of that future, a trajectory can be created that maps the simple steps and tests towards that goal. This is referred to as a road map or sometimes as a 'here to there plan'.

Over the course of the year, IROs have become more confident in setting out their expectations of the Local Authority in considering the above principles. At times this has led to healthy debates and discussions about how assessments and plans are created and tested, for example in relation to children returning home to parents. The current review minutes template uses Signs of Safety mapping tool as a means to hold discussions about strengths and aspiration for the child.

Focusing on strengths and inclusion has given some children greater influence in their reviews. **Child A chairs her own reviews and directs care planning – she is supported in preparing for these meetings and formulates her own worry statements and success goals.**

**A foster carer for child Y, reported to the IRO that the Signs of Safety Format supported Y to feel more included in the review, she enjoyed the more open structure and was able to get her views across.**

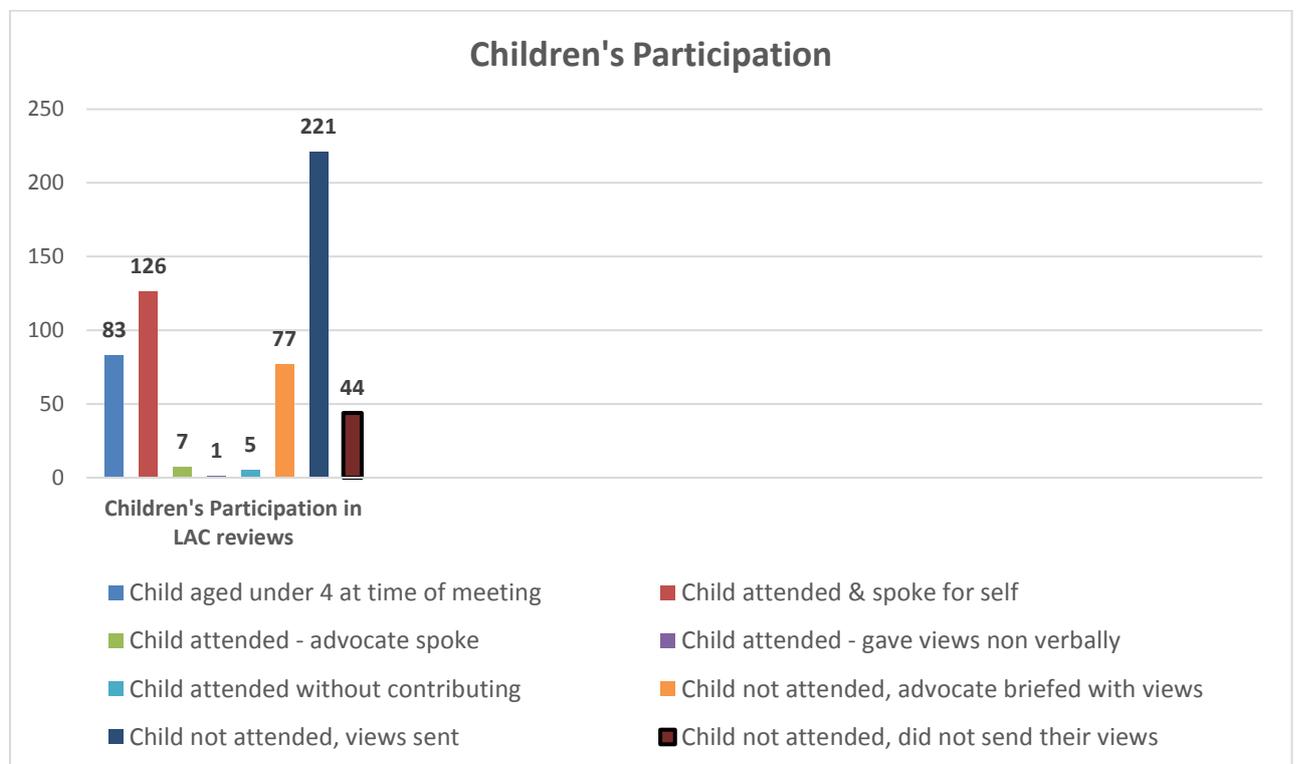
As IROs' confidence in using Signs of Safety has increased there has been evidence that they have been able to support social workers to hold case mapping discussions - the service manager and other IROs have completed several of these sessions throughout the year – and to utilise the approach to assist with setting trajectories for reunification and changes to care plans. Specifically, in relation to situations where risk may increase, such as unsupervised family time and reunification plans, IROs are encouraged to use SofS to ensure that the plan deals with the assessed risks.

## 9.5 Audit Activity

Like all managers IROs are required to complete case file audits, over the course of 2020/21 the monthly audit requirement reduced to a 2 monthly level in order to support completion rates, which were felt to have dropped across CYPS. In 2020/21 IROs completed 46 Case audits out of 55 requested, a completion rate of roughly 84%.

## 10. Participation

The IRO handbook is clear; children's participation in their review is central to the process and should be prioritised, the IRO should be adept at being flexible in these arrangements to have sufficient regard for the child's level of need and their wishes.



The chart above is based on current performance (at last review) as the data is not able to be filtered by date or timeframe. What can be seen is that children either attend or send their views

in over 90% of situations. A significant proportion (14.7% in comparison to 13.3% last year) utilise the advocacy service in their reviews, this equates to 84 children at present. In addition, over 200 children send their views in to the reviews, this is via a variety of mechanisms such as via the IRO, foster carer or social worker. In order to support children to give their views on a more independent basis, the IRO service has recently completed work on a new consultation form, this will be shared at DLT and with the LAC council in the coming weeks. It is positive to see that 221 children – well over a third of those looked after – give their views to the IRO, even though they did not attend. This may well be via electronic means and some consideration could be given to building on this in the post pandemic context. That said, children have not attended in over half of completed reviews. There are several explanations for this:

- Reviews have not been held in schools, as is often the case, due to the pandemic. As such children have not been available to participate when the reviews have been held
- Children have struggled to take part in virtual reviews, the context is more abstract and staying focused when the review is on a screen is more challenging for many
- Some children do not wish to take part in reviews for many reasons, at present this is not reported on quantitatively

However, this non-attendance figure is largely the same as the previous year, and further deep dive work is planned for this year in order to understand the reasoning behind this.

The use of virtual reviews has had some success. For example, **Child M has attended all of her reviews, she enjoys the use of technology, as a disabled child she struggled with larger face to face meetings and rarely attended. She is now increasing her confidence and the IRO is looking forward to supporting her to chair her own meetings.**

The attendance at a review is recorded by the IRO, however the fields added are not clear – for example health attendance is not recorded under the broad heading of ‘health’ but with the professional role of the attendee. Anecdotally, IROs report that carers attend the vast majority of reviews, although this shows as 40% in the table below. In addition, IROs are not consistently recording attendance in the review report and this will be addressed going forward. The data from 2020/21 records attendance as follows:

Role	Attendance	Percentage
Health	110	6.3%
Education	315	18.2%
Virtual School	20	1.15%
Carer/Care provider	692	40%
Children’s Guardian	33	1.9%

Further work to extract more reliable data is planned for 2021/22 to include data regarding attendance by the child’s family and network.

## **10.1 Visits to Children by the IRO**

The IRO Handbook states that the IRO is required to speak with the child in private prior to the first review and before every subsequent review. In between it is considered good practice for the IRO to visit those children whereby IRO contact may be useful. For some children a visit is not always necessary – for example those in stable and long-term placements, who may consider the visit an imposition intrusion into normal life. Over the course of this year, face to face visits to children has been dramatically impacted upon by Covid-19 restrictions, virtual reviewing has meant that children have not always been seen in person, some struggling with taking part in the review. All children have been seen within the year save for 28 Children who had not had an IRO visit since 2019, they would have been due in 2020 and the restrictions in place have likely frustrated this process. That said, ‘virtual visits’ to children were permitted and the data confirms that 52 children were seen in person and 604 virtual visits to children were completed in the reporting period. IROs report that some children have enjoyed the use of WhatsApp as a medium to have a virtual visit with the IRO and to share their views, email and Microsoft Teams has also been used for this purpose.

It is hoped that ‘business as usual’ face to face visits will resume in the near future, and that these would form a part of a broad communication and participation offer to children.

## **11. Health of Looked After Children**

Children in care are supported to have good health, initial health assessments are available for all children when they enter care and they should be completed within 20 days of the child becoming looked after. These continue yearly for children over 5 and 6 monthly for children under 5.

### **11.1. Initial Health Assessments (IHA)**

128 Initial Health Assessments were completed over the year, which equates to 79.5%. This figures dopped throughout the year and the hypothesis is that Covid-19 restrictions had an impact. this is borne out with the evidence that 100% of IHAs were complete in April 2020, reducing to a low 71% in November 2020. It is positive to see that this figures then improved to a figure of 84% in March 2021. IROs are expected to escalate undue delay in relation to IHAs, due to the restrictions in place this did not occur throughout the year. IROs will be expected to ensure that all children cared for receive the correct level of support and that health needs are always met.

For this period 431 Review Health Assessments were completed (92%), with 30 overdue and 7 refused by the child.

## **11.2 Strengths and Difficulties**

The IRO ensures that each eligible child (Aged over 5 and Looked After for 12 months +) has an appropriate strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) which is used to assess the child's emotional and psychological health needs. 274 SDQs were completed meaning that 67.7% of eligible children had an SDQ undertaken in 2020/21. In Rotherham the Local Indicator gives a larger cohort of children i.e., those aged 3+ and Looked After for 12 months or more. Therefore, for these children the performance drops to a completion rate of 57.7%.

## **11.3 Dental Checks**

Covid 19, has had a significant impact on the level of dental checks offered to children looked after. The expectation is that children receive 6 monthly check-ups. At 31 March 2021 68.3% of Dental Checks were overdue, compared to 14.7% at 01 April 2020 – lockdown restrictions coming into force just prior to this date. IROs have a role in ensuring that dental checks are completed, it is the case that formal challenges were not issued in this context. As we are now exiting restrictions it should be expected that compliance in the area will rise, against a backlog of checks. Current figures show that the overdue figure has now reduced to 59.6%, IROs will maintain a heavy focus on children's health and dental care in the year ahead.

## **12. Education for children in care**

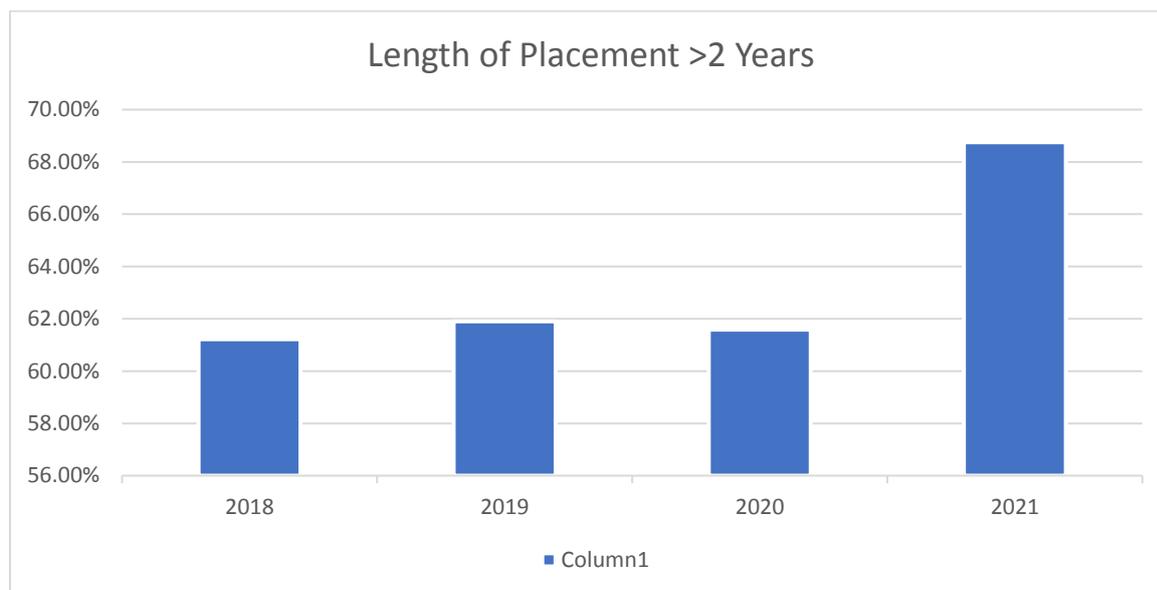
The IRO is responsible for reviewing the personal education plan as part of the statutory review ensuring the child is being provided with the support, they need to reach their maximum potential during the review process the IRO is responsible for ensuring the PEP (personal education plan) is up to date. As of 31 March 2021 94.6%, of PEPs were completed within timescales compared to 87.5% a year before.

The IRO ensures the child has 25 hours education and will raise any concerns as part of the child's review. The IRO quality assures that the pupil premium has been utilised to support the educational outcomes for the individual child. Any concerns are raised with the individual school and the virtual school. Educational provision is overseen for children placed within residential care or complex settings as part of the 'Residential Panel' attended by the IRO service manager. IROs are expected to raise a challenge if 25 hours of education is not provided, there is no evidence that formal

challenge was made in this area in 2020/21, it is likely that all children looked after were not in receipt of 25 hours of education and thus further action may be required in 2021/22.

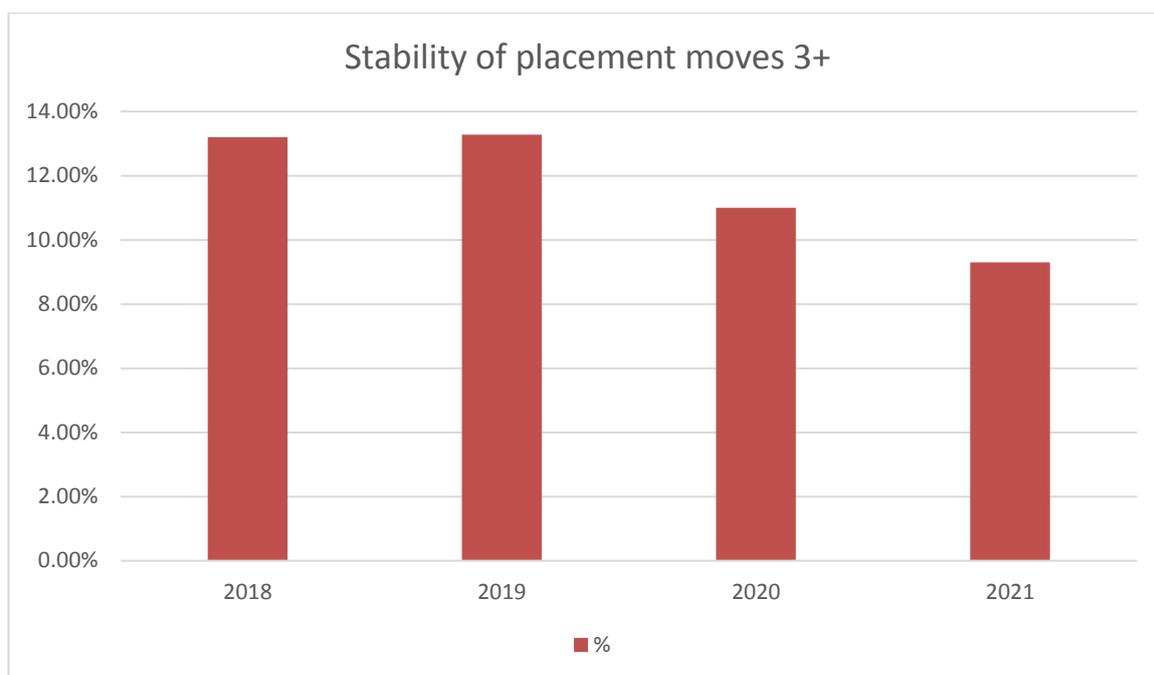
### 13. Placement stability

RMBC is committed to ensuring stability for all children looked after, where this is not possible and children move on an unplanned basis, disruption meetings are held and attended by the IRO. At present the meeting is chaired by the Supervising social work manager.



As can be seen above, placement stability has improved greatly over the course of 2020/21 to its highest figure for four years. At present out of a cohort of 240 children (looked after for more than 2.5 years) 165 have been in the same placement for 2 years or more. IROs are encouraged to consider escalation processes if placement moves are considered to cause any detriment to the child. During the year, 533 new placements were commenced in total with 345 of these being placement moves, i.e. for children already in local authority care.

The proportion of children experiencing three or more placement moves has decreased by 1.7% from last year and by 4% from 2018. 54 children had 3 or more moves in 2020/21.



There are of course times when placement moves are in the best interests of children. For example, a return to family or adoptive placement. IROs are expected to track and endorse the plan regarding placement moves and to escalate concern where these are not felt to be in the interests of children. No escalations were generated for the year 2020/21, as such an action plan will be developed to audit the same cohort in 2021/22 and to communicate on a regular basis with managers about these themes.

Placement Change Reason	Totals
Adoption	24
Allegation (s47)	4
Carer requests placement end due to child's behaviour	44
Carer requests placement end other than due to child's behaviour	21
Change Legal Status and Placement	13
Change of Legal Status only	3
Change of Placement only	195
Child requests placement end	15
Long-term Matching	5
Resignation/closure of provision	3

Respite	4
Responsible/Area authority requests placement end	8
Standards of Care concern	6
Not Known	188
<b>Total</b>	<b>533</b>

As can be seen above, placement changes occur for a variety of reasons, many of which are not known, and social workers should ensure that the file reflects this information accurately. Carers requested to end placements on 65 occasions suggesting a need for disruption meetings for these children. IRO attendance at disruption meetings should be discussed in supervision and updated within the quarterly performance report.

### 13.1 Regulation 44 Visits

Regulation 44 visits are when an Independent Person visits a children's residential home on a monthly basis. It is the job of the Reg 44 Visitor to write a report commenting on the standard of care and safety offered. RMBC commissions regulation 44 visits to its own children's homes from an independent agency. It is expected that IROs have sight of these reports in relation to any children that they are allocated to, to be sighted on the standard of care provided and to be well informed for the purposes of the review. IROs can request regulation 44 reports in respect of any private children's homes via the commissioning team.

### 13.2 Children Placed Out of Authority

As of 31 March 2021, 333 children were placed out of the Rotherham area, this would include neighboring authorities. This figure has reduced from 345 children at the start of the year. IROs are expected to ensure that these placement locations are in the best interests of the child for example, a specifically required resource not available in our area, placements with family members out of borough or long-standing placements where a child has been matched long term with foster carers from outside Rotherham. IROs should take a firm and clear view about whether these arrangements should be maintained or whether a return to the RMBC area is required and should visibly endorse this in the review record. IROs should ensure that files adequately record the whereabouts of the placement and that the local authority of residence is aware of the child's looked after status.

## 14. Adoption

In 2020/21 34 children were adopted. Numbers of adoptions were generally low each month save for September 2020 when 10 children were adopted, this may have been due to a backlog caused by Covid-19 being addressed. Pertinent to IROs 23.5% of those children adopted were within 12 months of the SHOBPA (Should Be Placed for Adoption) decision.

<b>2019/20</b>		
Days between Placement Order and Matching	Days between Becoming Looked After and Adoptive Placement Commencing	Adopted within 12 Months of a SHOBPA decision
Target of 121 days Average of 160 days Within Timescale 72.4%	Target of 426 days Average of 437 days Within Timescale 48.3%	37.9%
<b>2020/21</b>		
Days between Placement Order and Matching	Days between Becoming Looked After and Adoptive Placement Commencing	Adopted within 12 Months of a SHOBPA decision
Target of 121 days Average of 183 days Within Timescale 58.8%	Target of 426 days Average of 470 days Within Timescale 47.1%	23.5%

The table above suggests that whilst timescales are not met for adoption from becoming looked after for just over half of children, the delays are usually minimised at roughly 44 days overdue. Further analysis is required to understand the reasons for this as this could be linked to Court proceedings being delayed, or assessment of family members. The figures from the year previous add weight to this, in the absence of covid restrictions at that time. There appears also to be a delay in finding a placement match which could well be relevant. IROs are required to track and challenge delay, in order to minimise the impact of this on the child concerned.

## 15. Children Missing from Care and subject to Child Protection Plans

In 2020/21 83 children looked after by RMBC went missing from their placement. With 662 missing episodes recorded. 32 of these children were missing on more than three occasions in the year. IROs should be invited to all consequent strategy discussions and should ensure that LAC reviews address the current safety plans and required responses, offering a view and challenging these if not felt sufficiently robust. IROs should be mindful of risks associated with child exploitation and contextual safeguarding – and should ensure that review decisions reflect any protective action required. An IRO attends regular meetings to discuss practice in these areas.

For children subject to Child protection Plans, the IRO will usually cease the plan at the first LAC review, provided there is clarity about the placement and legal status. For some children looked after under section 20 and in PLO process it may be that the IRO maintains the plan, if for example it is anticipated that the child will return home shortly.

## **16. Working relationships with Children's Guardians**

The IRO and Children's Guardian (CG) share a similar focus for the child in Court proceedings, the CG and IRO should communicate at the beginning and end of proceedings and at any other point during the process. The IRO provides valuable insight for the CG in respect of their independent view on the child's circumstances. At times this may contrast with the views of the local authority and the IRO can convey this view, subject to all efforts to resolve the issue, via the CG. Similarly, the CG should keep the IRO briefed on the Court progress and any reason for delay. Whilst the IRO may have limited sway over the Court, they can convey impact on the child, and they will be responsible for overseeing the continued plan after the Court process is finished. As such it is crucial that IROs are clear as to their views and that they visibly endorse the plans of the local authority or seek to resolve these if they do not. Over the course of this year, IROs have given evidence to Court on several occasions, either in writing or in person (via virtual means) where the Court has required clarity from the independent IRO.

## **17. Concluding comments and areas for development**

IROs have continued to chair reviews for children looked after and have maintained participation of all involved, although more effort is needed to ensure that children are given the best opportunity to take part in and to shape their LAC reviews. There is some evidence that using Signs of safety is helping IROs to think more creatively about this. In addition, IROs are supporting meetings to analyse strength, risk and safety for children when the local authority plans are less clear.

The use of the challenge and resolution process needs to improve, this report reveals several areas where delay has been seen or children have endured placement moves and some of these circumstances may have benefitted from robust check and challenge.

The impact of Covid-19 may be felt for some time, specifically in relation to delayed health input but also regarding future practice in reviews. Changes in practice this year and the use of virtual reviewing has had some benefits and a hybrid approach for example, could result in more focused attention on those children in greatest need and greater flexibility for attendees. A proposal for post Covid working has been completed for the Head of Service. In addition, there has been evident delay within the Court arena and IROs should ensure regular communication with CAFCASS colleagues to ensure that they are well briefed regarding the impact on the child.

Going forward the focus of the service continues to be to ensure that children participate meaningfully and with influence in their reviews and that all participants feel valued for their input. This report highlights that child in Rotherham are more likely to be in care than the national average and that those from some BAME backgrounds are more likely still. The IRO service will therefore seek to ask searching questions of the local authority in respect of their plans and assessments, in order to ensure that all children in care need to remain so, and that plans are progressed without undue delay. The plan for 2021-22 is to continue to build on our drive for clear trajectories and planning for all children looked after. Children should not be in care unnecessarily and all opportunities to develop strength within the child’s network should be built upon. This not only creates the potential for reunification but also the possibility of more fruitful lifelong links, to support the child throughout their childhood and their transition to adulthood and independence.

**18. Key Actions for 2021/22**

Issue	Action
Key performance objectives will be met	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minutes within 15 days = 90%</li> <li>• Midway Reviews = 90%</li> <li>• Q and C completion in all reviews</li> <li>• Quarterly performance report by the IRO service Manager</li> </ul>
Attendance and Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The SofS review minutes template will be embedded into LCS by year end 2022.</li> <li>• IRO visits to children to resume where possible on a face-to-face basis, all children to have had at least a virtual visit within the previous 12 months</li> <li>• A new report to be generated to capture IRO visiting data</li> <li>• New children’s consultation form to be launched.</li> <li>• Participation figures for ‘PN1 – attended and spoke for self’ to increase to at least 35% by the end of the financial year 2022.</li> <li>• IROs to support broader attendance by those in the child’s network and to encourage SWs to consider this in their invitations.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A new data set and analysis to be generated regarding professional attendance at reviews, IROs to record this in all instances</li> <li>• New guidance, setting out the expectations and focus of LAC reviews will be shared with all social work teams.</li> </ul>
<b>Impact and Influence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Escalation figures have dropped for the year. All IROs have been requested to review their caseload and ensure they are satisfied that the LA is offering good or outstanding care to those children. The Q and C data will support whether formal challenges should be issued. This is also discussed in every supervision session.</li> <li>• IROs will be supported and encouraged to seek clear and time limited trajectories for children in the review process. The intent is that the provision of care for the child is always purposeful and rooted in the aspirations for that child. The review process should always result in a clear endorsement that the child should remain in care, or alternatively what specific action is required.</li> <li>• Manager to manager discussions have improved over the year, with the creation of the IRO/TM meetings also acting as a helpful touch point. This will continue into 2021-22.</li> <li>• The new Quality and Compliance Form is now added to LCS in order to support data analysis – this will inform the quarterly performance report.</li> <li>• The section 20 report will continue on a bi-monthly basis. In addition, the IRO service manager will complete a bi-monthly report regarding children subject of placements with parents’ regulations, this report will provide a similar analysis and action plan.</li> <li>• Where social work reports are not received in a timely manner the IRO will raise an informal challenge in all cases and hold a discussion with the Team manager. If the report is then not completed within 2 working days, the challenge will be made formal and sent to the manager for resolution.</li> <li>• Where the Fostering IRO identifies inadequate practice, this will be formally escalated through the existing challenge and resolution process.</li> <li>• The IRO Service Manager will produce a quarterly Placement with Parents report, ensuring quality and IRO oversight</li> <li>• IROs will be expected to report on delayed adoption and 3+ placement moves and to raise challenge were necessary.</li> </ul>
<b>Looked After Children will have access to Health support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IROs will ensure dental checks are discussed at every review and escalations raised where required. The IRO manager will seek clarification as to the plan to address the backlog via the AC (Physical &amp; Emotional Health) Workstream.</li> </ul>

**Lee Durrant**

**IRO Service Manager**

**Rotherham MBC Children's Services**