

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S
SERVICES**

Independent Reviewing Service

ANNUAL REPORT 2021/22

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2020/21

The Independent Reviewing Service has provided a high standard of service to children in our care throughout 2021/22, with performance remaining relatively stable despite the ongoing challenges of Covid 19.

The service has moved towards returning to a similar model to pre-pandemic, however we have learnt that for some children the online approach has been beneficial for their engagement and attendance at the meeting and with professionals in the process.

In summary the findings are:

What's working well?

- Review meetings held within statutory times scales maintained at above 94%, and the 6% out of time rearranged in the shortest time frame
- The offer of virtual reviews for some children has provided flexibility in the service to meet the needs of individual children
- IROs have continued to prioritise quality and compliance, utilising the challenge and resolution process, and with significant impact
- IROs use the informal resolution process effectively which prevents delay in resolution and reduces the need to then progress to formal challenge

What are we worried about?

- We need to work with children and young people on how they want to participate in their reviews, virtual or in person
- There is a need to improve the timeliness and challenge around adoption timescales
- We need to improve performance and challenge around the timeliness of social work reports for the meeting, and whether these are shared with children, families and carers in advance of the meeting

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 for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership.

This report provides:

- The purpose of the service and legal context
- Governance arrangements
- 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 highlights key activity and performance undertaken in 2021/22 and in respect of 775 children. It draws from quantitative and qualitative information from the Insight reporting system and service reporting mechanisms.

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'.

2. Purpose of the service and legal context

The Children Act (1989) and the Adoption and Children's Act (2002) (Home Office) 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".

3. The Core Responsibilities of the IRO

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

- Ensure the child is central to all planning and decision making
- Ensure the child's wishes, views and feelings are given full consideration
- Be satisfied that each child's care arrangement is meeting their needs
- Ensure that each child knows how to contact you between reviews
- Make sure each review process results in clear, robust and informed judgements about the progress of the care plan
- 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
- Challenge where there is drift in care planning and where necessary escalate to formal dispute resolution
- Be satisfied that plans for permanency have been identified by the second review
- Be satisfied that the corporate parent is meeting the requirements of the care planning regulations
- Pro-actively chase progress of the child's care plan and the implementation of review decisions
- Determine whether a review needs to be convened when there is a significant change/event in the child's life
- Champion the rights and entitlements of children living in care including their right to advocacy, legal support and redress through complaints and challenges
- 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
- 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. This mission statement sits alongside RMBC's commitment to all of the children in the borough, that they will be:

Resilient, Successful and Safe

Why am I here – What's going to happen? (Building Resilience)

- The child will always have a positive, sensitive and accurate understanding of why they are in care and what the plan is for them, they will have homes which are stable and supportive
- 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. (Building Success)

- 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
- The child's achievements will be celebrated within the review process and we will build upon the strengths demonstrated

How will you deliver for me? (Ensuring Safety)

- 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
- The IRO service will work supportively, 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

4. Extended Functions of an IRO

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

- Significant health, medical events, diagnoses, illnesses, hospitalisations, serious accidents
- Agency Decision Maker decisions in relation to permanence

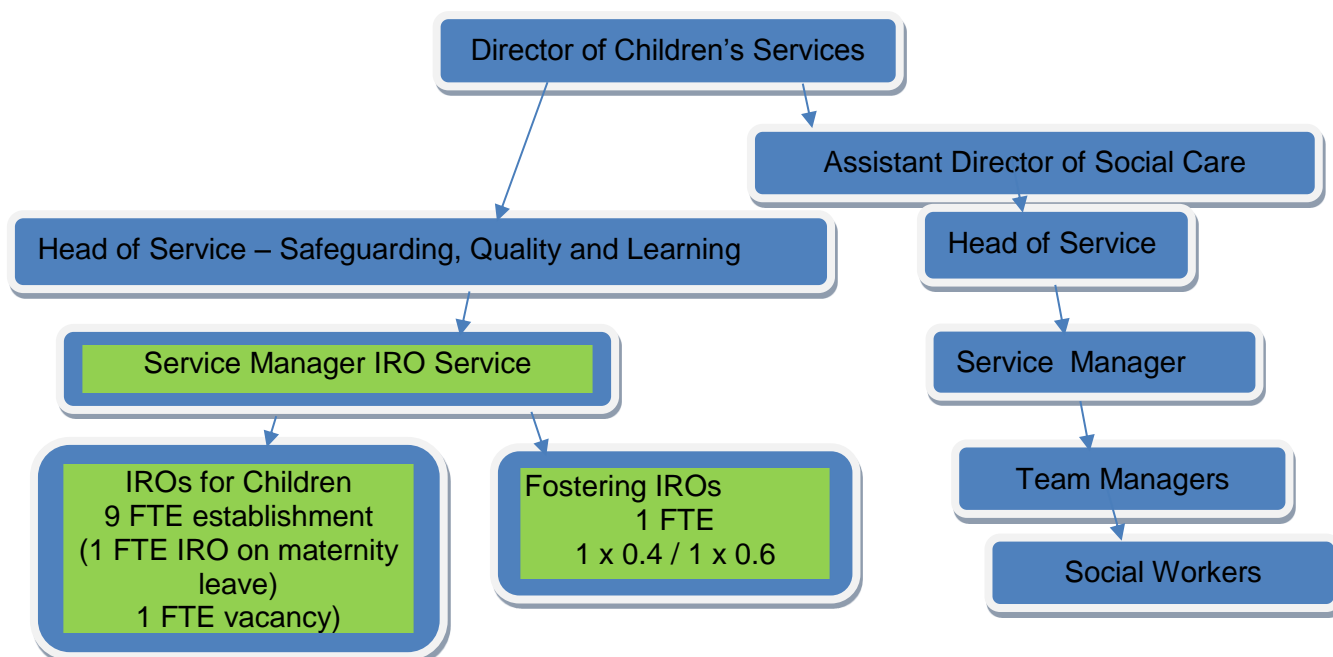
Furthermore, the statutory guidance sets out when an additional review must be convened prior to any of the following changes being implemented:

- 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 like many other authorities, a small number of children are at times accommodated in unregistered settings for short periods, for these children reviews take place on a monthly basis, this is to ensure safety and quality of care provision for those children, and to drive the plan and provision for the child to be cared for within a registered setting as soon as possible. These settings and the review process for the children placed is discussed in this report.

5. RMBC Children’s Services IRO Service

The IRO Team consists of the following staff (in green) as at 31 March 2022:



- The team consists of nine female and two male staff who are all White British, the service manager is male and white British
- Seven IROs were in work on a FTE basis with one IRO on maternity leave, this was supported by a 0.8 agency worker during some of 2021/22
- All IRO's receive monthly supervision and a yearly PDR which is reviewed at six months
- Team meetings are held twice monthly to provide updates to the team and focus on performance and service development
- All IROs have link teams across CYPS social care, they attend team meetings throughout the year and are the point of contact for any general issues raised and support
- The service manager and an IRO attend the Regional IRO Managers and IRO Group respectively. The IRO manager has taken up a position as regional representative at the National IRO Managers partnership (NIROMP)
- The IRO manager attends quarterly meetings with CAFCASS partners

The IRO handbook recommends an optimum caseload of 50-70 children per IRO in order to ensure adequate performance. IRO caseloads are impacted upon by several factors including:

- Whether the child is in On-going Court proceedings: Reviews are held more regularly within Care proceedings as a consequence of a new LAC status and reviews being required to ratify the final care plan.
- Children placed in unregistered accommodation: These children receive monthly reviews to monitor their progress and address the need for a registered setting.
- Placement moves: A placement move for a child requires a restart of the review process with reviews at 1, 3 and 9 months
- Children placed out of borough: At 31 March 2022 there were 122 children placed out of the RMBC area
- If children, carers or parents request an early review, or if the IRO feels this is necessary
- The number of siblings placed together on caseload: As larger sibling groups often require less separate review meetings to arrange.

6. Progress on the 2021/22 action plan

Area for development	Actions	Progress
Key performance objectives will be met	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minutes within 15 days = 90% • Midway Reviews = 90% • Quality and Compliance (Q and C) check completion in all reviews • Quarterly performance report by the IRO service Manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieved • Midways and Q and Cs at 70% frustrated by capacity and sickness • Achieved
Attendance and Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Signs of Safety (SofS) review minutes template will be embedded into Liquid Logic (LCS) by year end 2022 • IRO visits to children to resume where possible on a 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is now part of the wider LCS update being led by the IRO SM. Completion date end September 2022 • 113 children have not received a face to face or

	<p>face to face basis, all children to have had at least a virtual visit within the previous 12 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new report to be generated to capture IRO visiting data • New children’s consultation form to be launched. • Participation figures for ‘attended and spoke for self’ to increase to at least 35% by the end of the year 2021/22. • IROs to support broader attendance by those in the child’s network and to encourage SWs to consider this in their invitations. • A new data set and analysis to be generated regarding professional attendance at reviews, IROs to record this in all instances • New guidance, setting out the expectations and focus of LAC reviews will be shared with all social work teams. 	<p>virtual visit in the 12 months to 31 March 2022</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieved • Achieved • Achieved, currently at 36.9% • Achieved and Continuing • Achieved but requiring further refining • Achieved
<p>Impact and Influence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escalations have increased this year. • Continues

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • The new Quality and Compliance Form is now added to LCS in order to support data analysis – this will inform the quarterly performance report. • 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. • 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. • Where the Fostering IRO identifies inadequate practice, this will be formally escalated through the existing challenge and resolution process. • IROs will be expected to report on delayed adoption and 3+ placement moves and to raise challenge were necessary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continues • Complete • Complete, although the PWP report is quarterly given relative stability of these arrangements • This continues although formal challenges are not often lodged when they should be • This is now in place. • Continues
<p>Looked After Children will have access to Health support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 & Emotional Health) Workstream. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work has been completed regarding this area, see report under Health.

7. 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 reports demonstrates, involving children in their reviews is a central tenet of our practice. 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 professionals cares and children.

“You are the best IRO In have ever had and this has been the best review”

Child felt listened to, there was space for a joke or two.

“The structure of the review really gave me a good insight into the young person’s care and his circumstances- the scaling helped my understand where he was on the various aspects of his care plan in preparation for his pathway plan”

Personal Advisor

(He) is a brilliant IRO because he gets ‘stuff’ done!

Young Person in care

“I like the way each area of the care plan is broken down and discussed in detail as this helps me to think about what scale to give and to think about what I think needs to happen next...I feel like included in discussions and that my voice is being heard”

A parent reflecting on how Signs of Safety has helped in reviews

Young person who chaired his own review.

“I like the structure (of Signs of Safety LAC reviews) because of the what’s working well and what we are worried about. This is because it helps us work out next steps to address the worries. I really like scaling each part of the care plan separately because it gives others a good insight as to how I feel about different aspects of my plan when I scale and sometime leads to further discussion about more actions that can be added to next steps- hearing other people’s scale also helps me to know what other people feel about how I am doing in the different areas of my life and because we scale it at each review I can see when things are getting worse or better.”

Foster carer feedback

“I find the review process quite straightforward and a good opportunity to discuss issues arising since the last review. I consider I have a good relationship with my IRO. I feel I am listened to, treated fairly and appreciated. Whilst the virtual review has its place, let’s face it we all have such busy lives, however the face to face is much better and I do miss it.

The fostering IRO has helped me deal with a very proactive parent. Handled legal issues and general disputes. All of it done in a firm, respectful manner. She has always been available to me for advice which I have found very useful.

I am extremely happy with my IRO”

8. Consistency offered by the IRO

One of the significant benefits of the IRO role is the consistency that this offers to the child. IROs often have over 10 years post qualification experience. They tend to remain an IRO for some considerable time, as the role draws on multiple skills and turnover is low within RMBC with the newest IRO having been with the service for 3 years. Some children have experienced the same IRO for over 5 years, this is invaluable for children that often experience multiple changes in social worker and placement moves.

9. The Profile of children in care

On 01 April 2021 596 children and young people were looked after by RMBC. This represents an increase of 2 children 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 2022 there were 551 children looked after indicating a reduction of roughly 7.5% throughout the year.

9.1 Children ceasing care

216 children ceased to be looked after in the reporting period, compared with 186 in the previous year. A high of 31 Children ceased care in March 2022, compared with a low of 12 children in June. Last year it was identified in this report that more children ceased to be looked after in the second half of the year. 110 children ceased care in the first half of 2021-22, compared to 108 in the second half of the year. This suggests that the upward trend in children being discharged from our care had continued. Notable figures from the table below are

- Despite the cessation of care for an additional 32 children in 2021/22 compared to the previous year. There is no increase in those aged over 18, thus the discharges were achieved through practice rather than purely the child’s age.

- There was 100% increase in relation to children ceasing to be looked after due to moving to 'somebody without previous parental responsibility'. On interrogation this appears to be due to the award of Child Arrangement Orders (CAO) – often in interim Court proceedings. This may have converted to Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) in due course. In addition 12 ICOs, 9 Full care orders, 10 on s20, 1 Placement Order granted (appears to have been incorrectly recorded).
- There has been an increase in SGOs compared to the previous year with 27 being made in this year.
- Roughly the same amount of children have returned home on a planned basis. This suggests that reunification is an area that could reduce strain on the service and that children could have the opportunity to live within their families where safe.
- 48 children have ceased care for 'any other reason'. (24 of these are aged 18)

Reason Ceased LAC	Number Ceased LAC	
	2020/ 21	2021/ 22
Aged 18 (or over) and remained with current carers (inc. under staying put arrangements)	23	20
Adopted - application unopposed	29	26
Adopted, consent dispensed with	5	6
Left care to live with parents, relatives, or other person with no parental responsibility (CAO)	16	32
Moved abroad	1	0
Died	2	0
Care taken over by another LA in the UK	5	5
Returned home - Residence order	7	9
SGO made to former foster carer(s), who were a relative or friend	19	27
SGO made to former foster carer(s), other than relatives or friend	1	2
SGO made to former foster carer(s), other than former foster carer(s) who were a relative or friend	2	2
SGO made to carer(s) other than former foster carer(s), other than relatives or friends	0	2
Planned return home to live with parents (no order)	31	29
Unplanned return home to live with parents (no order)	1	4
Independent arrangement with formalised support	5	0
Transferred to adult social services	2	3
CLA ceased for any other reason	36	48
Sentenced to custody	1	0
Accommodation on remand ended	0	1
Age assessment, age determined to be over 18	0	2
Grand Total	186	216

9.2 Children entering care

In 2021/22 176 children became looked after on 180 separate occasions (meaning that a small number of children became looked after more than once). Admissions are spread without any clear pattern throughout the year with a high of 26 in August 2021 and a low of 6 admissions in May the same year. Notable areas are the 39 children placed within their families; this constitutes nearly 22% of all placements made. In addition to these the Court made orders under section 38(6) for another 20 (11%) of children placed within their networks and requiring assessment.

Placement Type made on admission	No of Episodes	No of Children
Children's Homes	3	3
Placed with parents or other with Parental Resp.	3	3
Independent living (flat/lodgings/friends/B&B)	21	20
Residential Care Home	1	1
NHS / Health Trust or other Establishment	2	2
R38(6) - Court Directed Placement	20	20
Foster placement with relative or friend- not long term or FFA	39	39
Placement with other foster carer- long term fostering	6	6
Placement with other foster carer who is also an approved adopter- FFA	2	2
Placement with other foster carer - not long term or FFA	65	64
Unregistered Emergency Accommodation	8	7
Unregistered Unregulated Accommodation	7	7
Z1 - Other Placement	3	3
Total	180	176

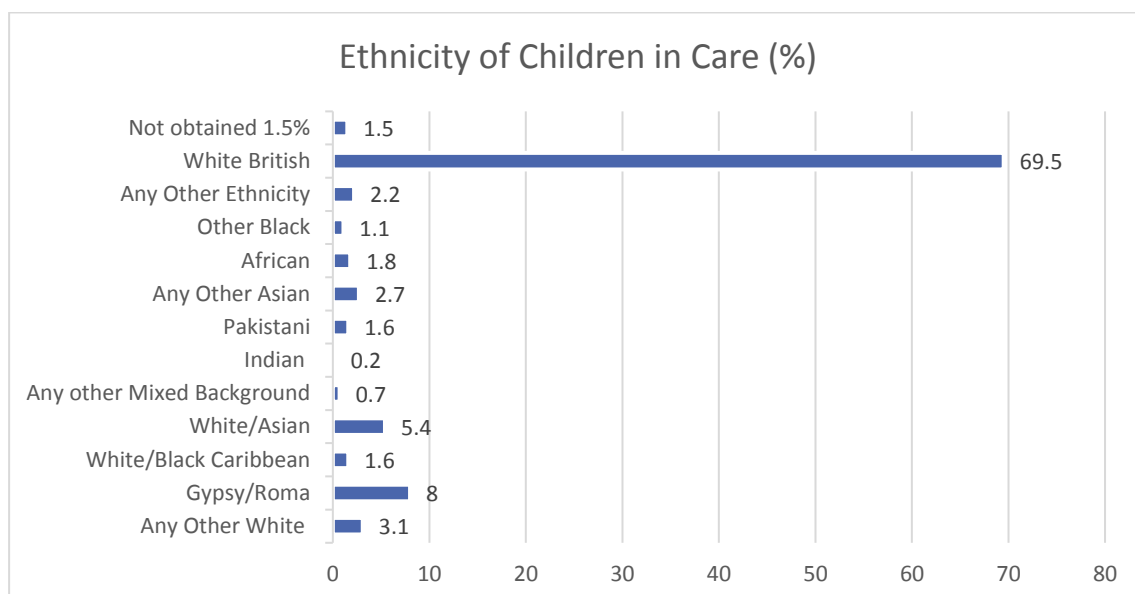
It is also notable that out of the 180 admissions to care, 50% (90) were as a consequence of section 20 (s20). The IRO service manager checks and reports on s20 admissions on a bi-monthly basis and these reports offer assurance that the majority of these placements are appropriate, and that delay in issuing proceedings, where warranted, is minimised. The majority of s20 admissions convert to care orders or return home within a satisfactory timeframe. The IROs have a core role in ensuring delay for all children looked after is minimised. They achieve this through monitoring of the plan and any legal proceedings, scrutiny of information and plans, check and challenge and dispute resolution process.

In addition, children were admitted to our care as a consequence of:

- 72 Interim Care Orders
- 1 remand to LA care
- 12 Police Protection events
- 2 Emergency Protection Orders
- 3 short breaks

9.3. Ethnicity and age of children in care

Current (as of 19.08.22) data shows the distribution of the ethnic backgrounds of RMBC's children in care as demonstrated below.



The 2011 Census (detail on Ethnicity from the 2021 census will be released October 2022) 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 Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population in Rotherham in 2011 was recorded as 8.1%. At present Looked After Children from BME backgrounds represent 29% of all children in care. This is an increase of 2.6% from the previous year. This is disproportionate to the demographics in Rotherham, with for example people from a Gypsy/Irish Traveller background being representing 0.049% of the population of the borough, but with 8% of children in our care from a solely Gypsy/Roma background. Similarly, children from a Black African background are at least twice as likely to be in care, the population of people from this background constituting roughly 0.65% of the borough but 1.8% of those children in our care.

10. IRO Activity and Performance

There were 1753 LAC reviews held in 2021/22, a reduction of 38 reviews from the previous year, with full time IROs holding 216 reviews in the year on average. IROs completed an average of 210 reviews each this year with the highest number being 230 and the lowest being 185 for a full time IRO over the course of the whole year. This disparity is explained by changes to plans for children after allocation, such as placement moves, unregistered provision or IROs adding in additional reviews to track progress. In addition to covering reviews for colleagues.

Over the course of the year 94.4% of reviews were held in time, equating to 1687 reviews undertaken. This is a reduction from 96.2% in the previous reporting year. Review timeliness was impacted upon by IROs covering reviews for colleagues and changes of agency worker, with gaps in between new appointees.

11. Review Reports

All professionals attending the child's review are expected to provide a written report, constituting either a LAC review or Pathway review report. These 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 in order to support collaboration

Pre-meeting Report Timeliness	No.	%	No.	%
	2020-21		2021-22	
5+ days before	414	23.6%	333	26.1%
1-4 days prior	613	35.0%	346	33.6%
Same day	353	20.1%	440	19.8%
After Review	373	21.3%	567	20.5%

As can be seen from the table above, 26.1% of social work reports were received ‘in time’ for the review. Whilst this is an improvement from last year non-completion remains an issue and impacts on the quality of reviews, this also leads to reviews being cancelled.

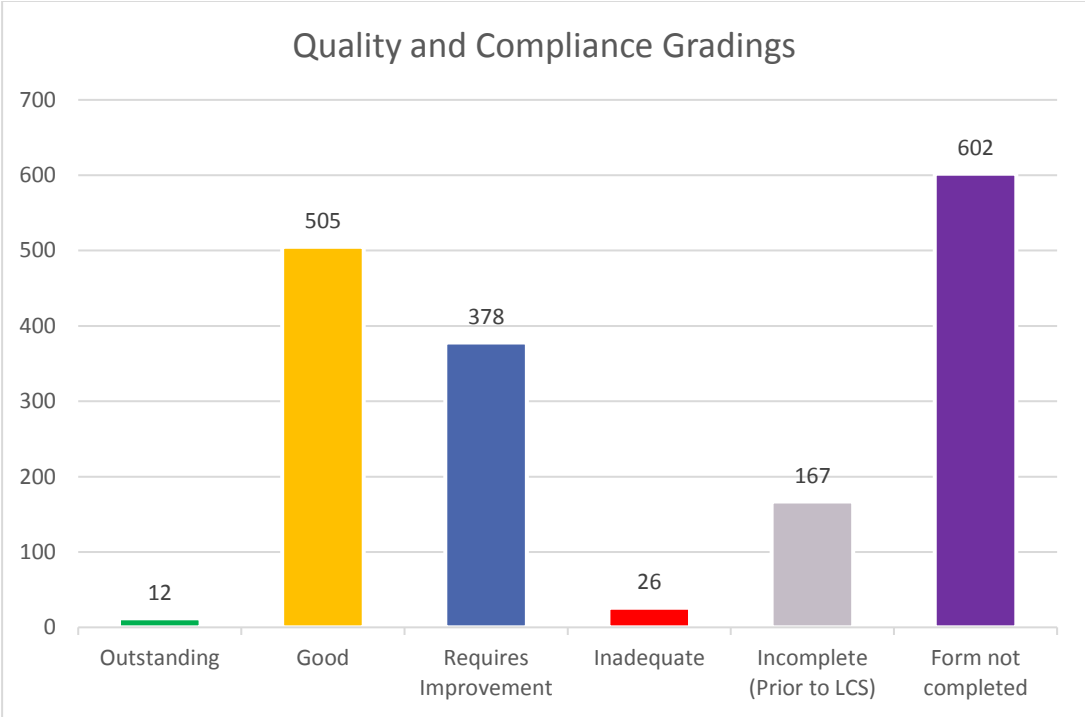
Statutory Guidance states that review recommendations are produced within 24 hours of the review held and distributed within 5 working days. The data suggests that this is achieved. In addition, review minutes should be distributed to all parties within 20 working days of the review meeting. IROs record and complete their own minutes, business support is responsible for distributing such via email and postal services.

12. 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 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 chart above demonstrates, of the 1753 reviews completed in 2021-22, quality and compliance forms were completed on LCS for roughly 64% of reviews since the LCS form was adopted. This low figure is due to many reviews requiring short-notice IRO cover due to staff absence and as a consequence of general capacity issues within the service. Where the form was completed, it was found that 46% of situations for children were reviewed at good or outstanding, with twelve Q and C checks graded at outstanding. A finding of requires improvement was found in 33% of reviews with an inadequate finding made in 2% of reviews (26 Occasions) there were no findings of critically inadequate practice, scaled at either 1 or 0.

The intent of the new LCS report is to generate thematic information in relation to outstanding and inadequate practice, with the aim that this information will support managers to address practice issues and to create opportunities for learning and this data is shared with the LAC service manager in a monthly keep in touch meeting. In relation to inadequate findings IROs found that this was in relation to;

- Assessment and planning on 5 occasions
- Outcome and Impact on 5 occasions
- Child’s views on 2 occasions

In addition, Team Managers are supported through the form to respond to the issues raised and detail any actions needed, the IRO then reviews this response before closing the form down. The aim being to encourage a dialogue a restorative resolution.

13. Formal Challenge and Escalation

Challenge and escalation is a cornerstone of effective IRO practice, with IROs having the ability to escalate to CAF/CASS in the most serious of situations, for independent oversight and resolution. Fortunately, this has not been required.

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.

In 2021-22 20 Escalations were initiated with all resolved at stages 1-2. This is an increase of 3 from the previous year. Formal Challenge Themes were as below:

Key theme	Drift and Delay	Management Oversight	Quality of Provision	Quality of Plan
Specific Issue	No Pre-Meeting Report (7)	Placements with Parents Regulations (5)	Safeguarding Concerns (1)	Changes to family time/plan (1)
Specific Issue	SGO planning drifting (4)			
Specific Issue	Lifestory work (1)			
Total	12	5	1	2

Drift and delay remains the most common theme for concern, with specific factors leading to the challenges made. These challenges led to resolution in relation to SGO plans drifting, although a lack of SW reports was also seen within this category. For 2022-23 this issue will be separated out from drift and delay as this is a more common theme. Management oversight was also an area for challenge with the majority of these issues being linked to outstanding 'sign off' of Placement with Parents regulations. IROs were instrumental in supporting the Local Authority to resolve outstanding regulations for many children. There were no imminent concerns about these placements however the interventions of IROs yielded formal approval and supported clarity regarding the longer term plans. As a consequence of this work the IRO service manager completed a report in 2021/22 and updates this on a twice-yearly basis. Informal challenge remains the preferred route to resolution for IROs with 96 informal challenges and resolutions being recorded this year.

14. Lifestory Work

It is essential for children to have a clear sense of identity, if for example they have been adopted, or for children in care to understand their plan and how this relates to their history. As such 'life story work' has a series of flexible definitions, dependent on what is required for the child concerned, this is discussed and agreed at the review and IROs make recommendations in respect of lifestory work completion.

The extent to which this lifestory work is completed has been captured in the IRO quality and compliance form since November 2021 and to date this indicates that 31.9% of all children looked after have completed lifestory work as required by their circumstances and wishes.

IROs are encouraged to escalate such matters if drift is felt to be unacceptable. This year, only one such formal escalation was recorded, suggesting that IROs accepted the plan to complete this work, or indeed the necessary escalations have not been made. It is expected that all review recommendations address any outstanding explanations for children and if not completed by the agreed timeframe, that a formal escalation is made.

15. Midway Reviews

Midway reviews provide an essential checkpoint for the IRO to measure the progress of the recommendations, this helps to avoid delay and also should allow the opportunity for the IRO and social worker to plan ahead for the next meeting. In 2021/22 898 Midway reviews were completed by IROs. Some children will have had several midway reviews due to their complex circumstances whilst others may not have had a midway review.

At 31 March 2022 midway review performance was at 65% for the service. This has steadily decreased in 2022 as the impact of vacancies within the service has gained momentum.

16. Broader Impact

The IRO service manager continues to complete 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 a steady increase in children looked after under section 20 from 36 children in March 2021 to 49 children in April 2022. A review of these reports has found that:

- Children aged under 5 do not 'drift' in section 20, Care Orders are sought where required without undue delay
- Section 20 is used effectively for those children seeking asylum in our area
- Consent is largely gained and recorded on file when children are placed – the report advises where this has not occurred and as a consequence managers have been informed
- Management oversight on section 20 arrangements and for children returning home is strong
- The IRO footprint and quality assurance for children subject of section 20 is also generally robust
- Children placed under section 20 are often in Public Law Outline (PLO) processes alongside, where drift is identified the IRO service manager is well placed to follow this up as line manager of the PLO case manager.
- The bi-monthly section 20 report is circulated at Senior Management Team (SMT) and distributed to all senior managers in social care

In addition, the IRO service manager produced a report on PLO and Court outcomes in January 2022, alongside the PLO case manager. This report is intended to be completed on a 6 monthly basis. Findings from this report have been revealing and suggest that there is an increased use of PLO and an enhanced understanding of threshold. These factors, alongside the application of the PLO panel appear to have contributed to a reduction in Court proceedings and ultimately 'Care' applications. Timeliness of PLO processes continues to be an area for internal check and challenge. The IRO service manager has collaborated with the Principal Social Worker (PSW) in completing a revised parenting assessment.

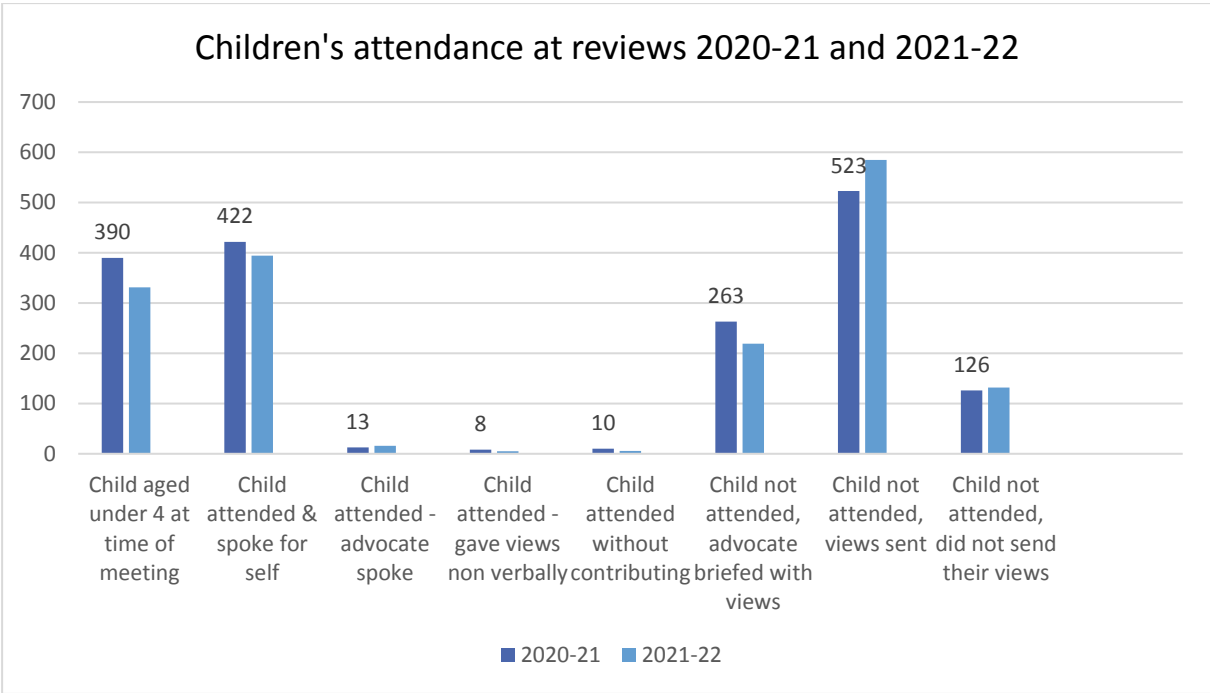
The IROs completed 47 case file audits in 2021/22. This supported the broader learning for the department, and in line with audit practices, offered assurance or challenge with regards to social work practice for those children. The outcomes of these audits is subject to reporting via the Quality and Learning Service and supports system wide learning.

17. Signs of Safety and Success

Rotherham operates under the Signs of Safety (SofS) practice model, which is incorporated in the LAC review process. This model assists IROs to simplify reviews for children and carers and focus upon ‘what’s working well, what are we worried about and what needs to happen?’ This approach supports IROs to meaningfully include strengths in the review process, asking about the positives for children and how this translates to planning– for example in relation to family time, career and educational aspirations, and relationships with others, whilst not missing what needs to change to develop smart focused plans.

18. Participation in Reviews

The majority reviews held in 2021/22 were held on a virtual basis due to continuing restrictions related to the Covid pandemic. Restrictions started to be lifted in the latter part of the year and IROs increased face to face visits to the children on their caseload. Feedback from children and young people suggests that for some of them, virtual reviews work well – sitting in a room with professionals can be daunting and a hybrid approach, where the child can be supported by their carer is preferable. In 2021/22 91.4% of children either attended or gave their views to the review process. In 2022/23 consultation will take place with children and young people on how we can support them to meaningfully participate in their review as we emerge from the pandemic and learn from the experience.



The table above shows that children either attend or share their views in over 90% of reviews. The IROs support children to take an active role in planning and leading their review, where able and appropriate. For example, 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.

The use of virtual reviews has had some success. For example, one child has attended all of their reviews, they enjoys the use of technology, having struggled with larger face to face meetings and rarely attending these. This child is now increasing in confidence and the IRO is looking forward to supporting them to their own meetings.

The newly amended review minutes on LCS will have the facility to record attendance in professional groups, this will support monitoring and reporting on these figures in a more

efficient manner. At present professional attendees have to be created on LCS which is not always possible. In addition, the attendance is ascribed to job role, therefore grouping by profession is challenging.

19. Visits to Children by the IRO

In recent previous years COVID-19 restrictions had a significant impact on the visits IROs made to children in care, the issues linked to the pandemic continued throughout much of 2021/22, lessening in the final quarter of the year. Virtual visits, using WhatsApp or Microsoft Teams became the norm in the context of lockdown, with 94 Virtual visits being recorded. In early 2022, face to face visits resumed as much as possible, targeting those felt to be most vulnerable first of all – children in residential settings including and specifically those out of area, those with additional risk factors risk such as missing or child exploitation risk and or out of education and where there may be other concerns.

Face to face visits to 116 children were completed in the year, with 79 or 68% of visits undertaken in the last quarter of 2021/22.

20. The Health of Looked After Children

IROs monitor the extent to which the health of Children Looked After is checked and any issues addressed. The child's health is a standing agenda item for reviews.

Initial Health Assessments (IHA)

At 31 March 2022, 403 or 94% of children had an up to date health assessment.

137 Initial Health Assessments were completed over the year, with 69.3% being completed within the prescribed 4 week timeframe. The reporting figures have oscillated throughout the year, revealing no particular trend. IROs are expected to escalate undue delay in relation to Initial Health Assessments (IHAs), however no formal escalations on this matter have been raised. The IRO service manager attends the LAC Physical & Emotional Health sub-group and the health check performance is monitored and discussed there with all relevant managers present.

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. In 2021/22 274 SDQs were completed meaning that 60% of eligible children had an SDQ undertaken. Further analysis is needed to understand why 40% of Looked After Children do not have up to date SDQs. In Rotherham the Local Indicator gives a larger cohort of children i.e., those aged 3+ and Looked After for 12 months or more. As a consequence, for these children the performance drops to a completion rate of 49%. This performance has dropped from last year by roughly 10%.

Dental Checks

As at 31 March 2022 Dental checks were completed on 78% of children, this is a significant increase compared to the 32% of checks completed in time throughout in 2020/21 and the 59% reported at the same point in 2021. The IRO service was pro-active in addressing these outstanding checks as IROs felt that the figures were not an accurate representation of what was being reported by social workers in reviews. As a consequence, IROs agreed to contact allocated social workers and encouraged them to update the child's case file.

This had in an improvement in the performance reporting with a jump of over 20% or 86 children from 30 September 2021 to 31 March 2022.

The IRO service manager has also engaged with the Oral Health Lead for RMBC, attending the Local Dental Council for the region. This has enabled discussion in ensuring Looked After Children have access to dental care in the wake of COVID restrictions and IROs have been briefed to share information with social workers and carers for any children with these problems, and will signpost to the 'SMILE foundation' if required.

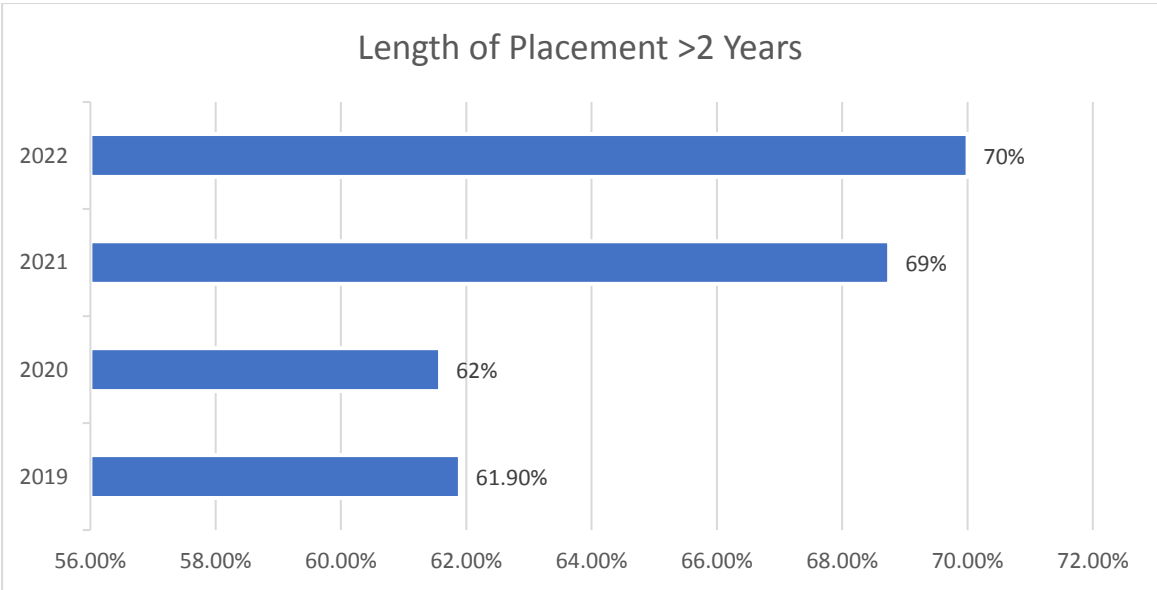
21. Education for Looked After Children

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. Within the review process the IRO is responsible for ensuring the PEP (personal education plan) is up to date and is sets clear aspirations, which are reflected in the care plan. At 31 March 2022 93.7% of PEPs were completed within timescales and is consistent with throughout the year prior, recorded at 94.6%.

The IRO monitors the extent to which the child has 25 hours education and will escalate any concerns as part of the child's review process. 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, via the Virtual Head for Looked After Children. 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.

22. 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, the meeting is chaired by the Supervising Social Work Manager.



As can be seen above, placement stability has remained consistent over the course of 2021/22, improving slightly against last year's figure. Out of a cohort of 241 children (looked after for more than 2.5 years) 169 have been in the same placement for 2 years or more. IROs are encouraged to consider escalation processes if placement moves are considered

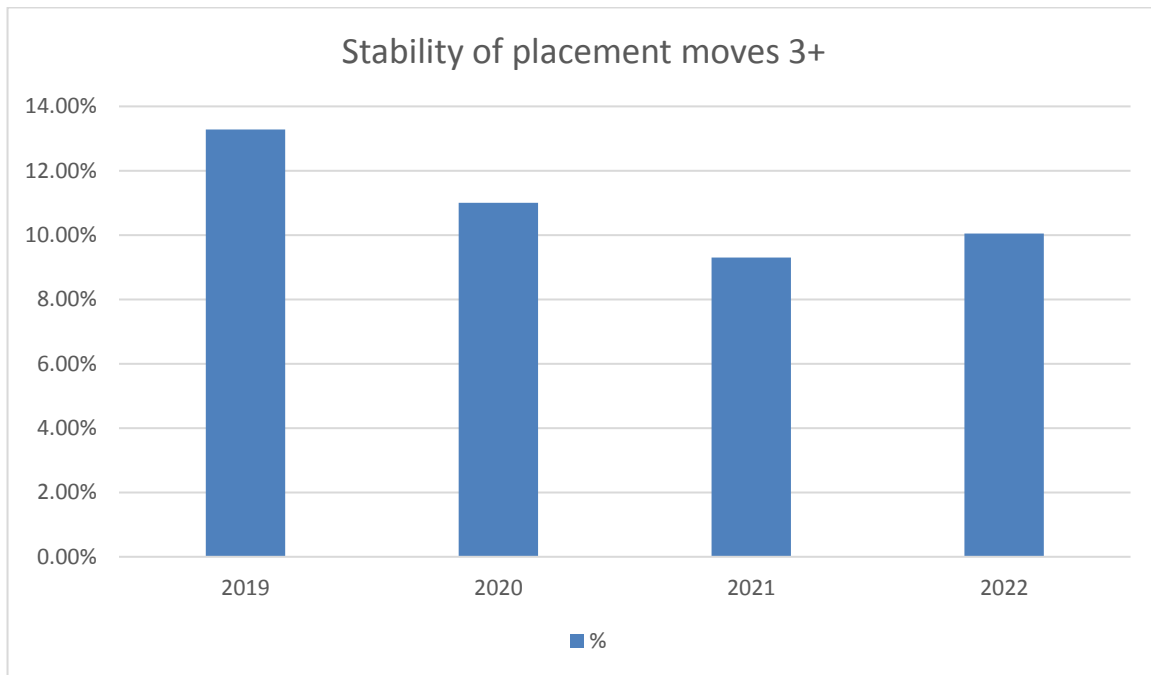
to cause any detriment to the child. During the year, 542 new placements were commenced in total, with 362 of these being placement moves, i.e., for children already in local authority care. This a slight increase on the figure from 2020/21.

Placements end for various reasons, planned and unplanned. Clearly unplanned moves are less supportive for the child and potentially introduce complications and risks. The table below gives some insight into common causes of the placement ending on an unplanned basis.

Reason given for placement ending	Number of children
Carer requests placement end due to placement becoming unmanageable	56
Carer requests placement end other than due to placement becoming unmanageable	20
Allegation (s47)	9
Child requests placement end	16
Standards of Care concern	10
Responsible/Area authority requests placement end	7
Adoption	21

The information above shows that 76 children had their placement end at the carer’s request, and IROs are expected to address any issues where they view the Local Authority has not adequately supported the placement to continue if this is in the child’s interests, this could be linked to fostering social work support for example.

The proportion of children experiencing three or more placement moves has decreased by 1.7% from last year and by 4% from 2018. As illustrated in the table below, 56 children had 3 or more moves in 2021/22, an increase of 2 children. IROs will hold a review within 28 days of a placement move and are responsible for ensuring that the move is in the child’s interest and that children achieve stability as far as possible.



23. Unregistered Care

In 2021/22, 14 children were placed in either unregistered emergency accommodation or unregistered unregulated accommodation. This is accommodation which is not subject to OFSTED inspection, yet is providing ‘care’ to children.

Children placed in these settings have an enhanced offer of monthly LAC reviews in order to monitor quality, provide additional safeguards, and to track placement moves. This year has been challenging in terms due to limited placement options, which can be seen in many other authorities.

Unregistered family settings also fall into this category, whereby family members are awaiting assessment or would not meet fostering regulations. However, in these circumstances the arrangement were in the child’s best interest.

Since June 2022, regular meetings have taken place to monitor the provision of children in registered and unregistered residential care settings. These meetings include representation by the IRO Service Manager and colleagues from Commissioning and Residential services. These meetings promote IRO oversight and feedback in terms of the standards of care provided to children and ensure that these children receive a high level of additional scrutiny.

24. Regulation 44 Visits

Regulation 44 visits (The Children’s Homes (England) Regulations 2015) are completed by an independent visitor, in order to ensure that registered provision such as children’s home are well managed and to report on the standard of care provided. These visits take place on a monthly basis and the independent visitors completes a report, detailing their findings.

RMBC commissions regulation 44 visits to its own children’s homes from an independent agency, these reports are distributed to the allocated IRO for child resident and allocated. IROs share any views regarding the standard of care in RMBC or private homes and their feedback is sought within the meeting referred to in the section above. The R44 reports are

provided to the IRO for consideration as part of the review process. IROs do communicate with Regulation 44 visitors and OFSTED inspectors in order to share their views regarding the provision, this supports OFSTED to make rounded findings in relation to their inspection of children’s homes.

25. Children Placed Out of Authority

As of 31 March 2022, 316 children were placed out of the Rotherham area, this is a slight decrease from 333 as at March 2021, and from 345 at the same point in 2020, as such there is assurance that these figures are gradually reducing.

At 31 March 2022 114 children were placed over 20 miles from their family home, in the following provision:

Number of Children	Type of Provision
26	Residential Children’s Home
6	Placed for Adoption
6	Independent Living
1	Court Directed Placement
1	Residential School
2	Family Placements
71	Foster Care
2	Unregistered Emergency or Unregulated Accommodation

Several of these arrangements are to enable adoption or to remain within their birth family. Long-term fostering arrangements and Residential care constitutes placements for 97 of those children placed over 20 miles away. For these children it is key that their long-term future is considered in terms of the benefits of being closer to Rotherham – this could lead to greater support from their birth network and familiarity as they leave care, conversely for some children a return would increase risk or be against their stated wishes. IROs are expected to monitor, scrutinise and challenge these placement locations if needed in order to ensure that they are in the best interests of the child, for example, a specifically required resource not available in our area. IROs take a firm and clear view about whether these arrangements should be maintained or whether a return to the RMBC area is required and this is visibly endorsed in the review record.

26. Fostering

RMBC employs one full time equivalent fostering IRO (FIRO), in 2021-22, this role was split between 2 part time workers. This has been beneficial in that the two FIROs are able to have flexibility in allocation.

As at 31 March 2022, RMBC employs 125 foster carers. In 2021-22 115 Fostering Review were completed, with 70% of these recorded as being in timescale. The review process supports the information needed to approve foster carers. The FIROs have been developed the challenge and resolution process, bringing this in line with their children’s counterparts. A culture of open discussion between FIROs and team managers has been in place over time and has supported working relationships, whilst the escalation process has been embedded.

27. Adoption

In 2021/22 32 children were adopted, a reduction of 2 from the previous year, with 15% adopted within 12 months of the SHOBPA (Should Be Placed for Adoption) decision, a drop of 8%, this drop is due to various factors in individual circumstances, such as Court reporting and timescales and some complex adoption matters for particular children. IROs chair reviews for children in the adoption process:

- No later than 3 months after authority to place the child for adoption has been obtained;
- At least every 6 months thereafter until an adoptive placement is made.

The IRO monitors the progress in making an adoptive placement for the child, if this is not achieved by the first 6 month review after the placement order was made, the IRO confirms that adoption remains the best plan for the child via the review process.

Where the child has been placed for adoption, arrangements must be made so that an Adoption Review is held:

- Within 4 weeks of the placement;
- Not more than 3 months after the first review unless an application for an adoption order has been made;
- At least every 6 months thereafter until an adoption order has been made or the adoptive placement ends.

Where a child has been placed for adoption but not adopted within 12 months, the child's social worker must present a further report to the Adoption Panel identifying the length of the delay, the reasons and the steps being taken to address any difficulties. The IRO ensures that these steps are taken and raises any concerns that they have regarding this through the challenge and resolution process. In 2021-22 there were no challenges regarding the adoption process. However, it can be seen that 5 children were adopted outside this timescale. For all of the children, the IRO remained informed and sought reassurance that the Local Authority was taking the appropriate steps in relation to progressing the Adoption Order. The issues involved were:

- Complex assessment as siblings had to be separated
- High level of need, with adoption remaining the best plan for the child
- Court delays caused by further expert assessment and hearing availability

Adoption Performance for the past 2 years		
<u>2020/21</u>		
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%
<u>2021/22</u>		
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 305 days Within Timescale 62.5%	Target of 426 days Average of 613 days Within Timescale 28%	15.6%
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The table above is slightly misleading as one child was the subject of complex Court proceedings from July 2017 to September 2021.

28. Children Missing from Care and subject to Child Exploitation concerns

In 2021/22 64 children looked after by RMBC went missing from their placement, with 370 missing episodes in total for those children. There were 24 occurrences of children missing on more than three occasions in the year.

Of the children looked after that were missing in the year 70 were felt to be at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation and 26 Child Criminal Exploitation. Strategy discussions were held on 232 occasions for the children in the missing cohort, although this does not necessarily mean that these were held due to them being missing, all children missing for over 24 hours had a strategy discussion within the year and 22 children in the cohort were without 'Find Me Plans'. In addition, 184 Return home interviews were completed, with 162 return home interviews declined by young people.

IROs are invited to all consequent strategy discussions and ensure that LAC reviews address the current safety plans and required responses and offer challenge if these are felt to be sufficiently robust. IROs are mindful of risks associated with child exploitation and contextual safeguarding – and ensure that review decisions reflect any protective action required. An IRO attends regular focused meetings to discuss practice in these areas.

29. Children looked after and subject to child protection plans

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, progress and legal status. For some children looked after under section 20 and in a PLO process it may be that the IRO maintains the plan, if for example it is anticipated that the child will return home shortly.

At 31 March 2022 16 children were subject of joint CP and LAC plans, all of these plans except one was ended within the subsequent three month initial review period. The outstanding CP plan remains in place due to care arrangements made by the Court.

The IRO and CP service managers meet on a quarterly basis adding additional reassurance to the evidence that delay is minimised, as many children on CP plans are looked after under section 20, the IRO SM's section 20 report offers a further layer of scrutiny. This liaison ensures that communication between the two services is effective and supports the 'birds eye view' that IROs and Child Protection Chairs have as part of their role.

30. Working with Children's Guardians

The IRO and Children's Guardian (CG) share a focus for the child in Court proceedings, the CG and IRO 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 be in contrast to the views of the local authority and the IRO can convey this view, subject to all efforts to resolve any issues, via the CG. Similarly, the CG should keep the IRO briefed on the Court progress and any reason for delay.

Regular meetings between the IRO service and CAFCASS were arranged up until around 2020, these were impacted upon by the pandemic and are being reinstated. The IRO and CAFCASS service manager meet within the PLO panel process and on a quarterly basis. A joint audit completed between CAFCASS and RMBC Social Care was completed in March 2022, this revealed good working relationships and communication between the CG and IRO at the time of the proceedings and until the completion of these.

31. Concluding comments and areas for development

Throughout 2021/22 the IRO service maintained a good level of performance in review timescales. This had a beneficial impact in ensuring the plans for RMBC’s looked after children were carried out. In addition, the evidence offered in the report in respect of children looked after under section 20, on Care orders or in the Adoption process suggests that these children receive a timely and effective level of oversight and engagement from the IRO service. Children played a meaningful role in their review and the IRO supported them to contribute.

IROs have also demonstrated the impact of the review process and their oversight on the health of children looked after, in increasing the uptake and evidence of dental checks.

32. Key Actions for 2022/23

Issue	Action
Key performance objectives will be met	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minutes within 15 days = 90% • Midway Reviews = 90% • Quality and Compliance completion in all reviews • Quarterly performance report and monthly highlight report to be completed by the IRO service Manager and shared with the Head of Service
Attendance and Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance data to be embedded into LCS by December 2022 • IRO visits to return to face to face for all children. The IROs will ensure each child is seen in placement in 2022/23 • Participation figures for ‘attended and spoke for self’ to increase to at least 35% by the end of the financial year 2023. • IROs to support broader attendance by those in the child’s network and to encourage SWs to consider this in their invitations.
Impact and Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All children in unregistered care settings will be closely monitored and will be subject to formal challenge if delay occurs • IROs will seek to confirm and clarify aspirations for all children with pathway plans, to include their educational plans, employment hopes, the vision regarding their supportive networks and housing and any other areas felt important to that young person. IROs will discuss these with the young

	<p>person and ensure their views are central to the review</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IROs and Team managers will meet on a monthly basis to discuss thematic issues and agree plans going forward • The section 20 report will continue on a bi-monthly basis. In addition, deep dive activity regarding children placed with parents is planned for 2022/23, to be supported by the IROs service • The IRO Service Manager and PLO manager will produce a 6 monthly PLO and Court practice report, ensuring IROs receive relevant information to inform their oversight • IROs will ask in each review process as to the Local authority care plan and the rationale for the child remaining in LA care. This includes the plan for family time and what the vision is for this in the longer term.
<p>Children placed in unregistered private care settings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulation (reg) 44 reports for RMBC provision will be shared with IROs, they will ensure that any concerns are taken account of in respect of the child they are allocated to. IROs will ensure that they have sight of Reg 44 reports for any children in private provision • All children placed away from the Rotherham area in private settings will be seen by their IRO in that setting prior to their review and a view conveyed in the review process as to the quality of the care provided
<p>Children at risk from exploitation/significant harm</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IROs will attend the 'Operational Missing Meeting' on a monthly basis to ensure that children looked after receive a swift and proportionate response and that plans (such as find me plans) are sufficient and up to date. Thematic information and feedback to individual IROs will be gathered • The IRO and CP service managers will continue to meet on a monthly basis to monitor to discuss shared activities and performance
<p>Looked After Children will have access to Health support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IROs will continue to ensure dental checks are discussed and updated at every review and escalations raised where required. • All children without a health check in time should be discussed with the LAC nurse and an action retailed in the review recommendations

Lee Durrant
 IRO Service Manager
 Rotherham MBC Children's Services

14 October 2022