

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S
SERVICES**

Independent Reviewing Service

ANNUAL REPORT 2022/23

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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 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
- Areas for development

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'.

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 Plan 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".

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

Rotherham operates under the Signs of Safety (SoS) 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.

Mission Statement

RMBC's Independent Reviewing Service exists to ensure that when Children and Young People are looked after by the Local Authority 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

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*

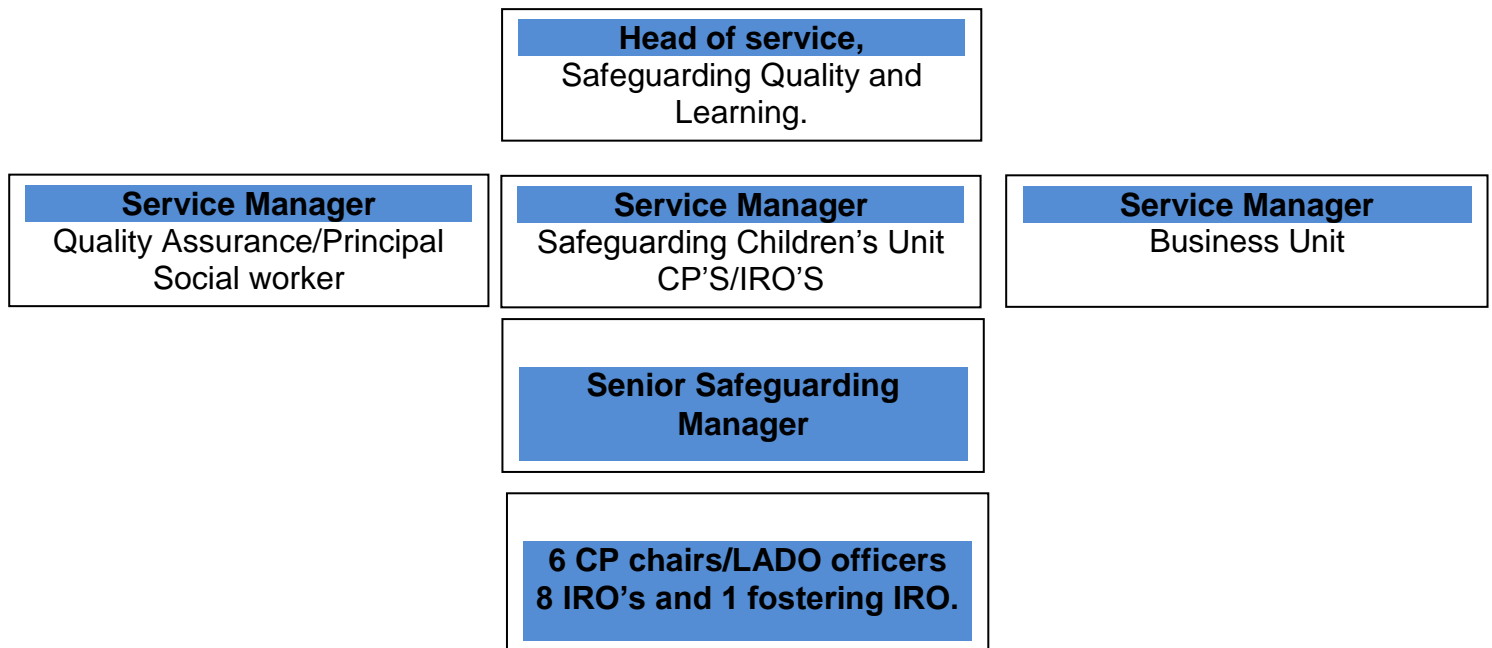
Furthermore, the statutory guidance sets out when an additional review must be convened prior to any of the following changes being implemented:

- *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. There has been revised guidance on the oversight and review of these children, including IRO's holding monthly midway reviews and a minimum of 3 monthly reviews.

RMBC Children's Services IRO Service

The IRO Team consists of the following staff as at 06.06.2023:



The IRO service has undergone 6 month Pilot structure. The Conference Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers are managed by a Service Manager who has overarching responsibility for the Safeguarding Unit. She is supported in this task by the creation of a Senior Safeguarding Manager's Post, who's function is to support the Service Manager with day-to-day delivery of the service, whilst also carrying a reduced case load.

Several CP chairs and IRO's have also taken on a temporary hybrid role, to provide continuity for some of the children they work with.

The Fostering IRO role is currently made up via 2 part time workers. One of the IRO roles is also made up of 2 part time workers.

The team currently engages in:

- *monthly supervision and a yearly PDR.*
- *Team meetings are held twice monthly to provide updates to the team and focus on performance and service development*
- *The IRO's, together with a CP chair have been allocated a Team Link. The purpose of the Team Links and expectations around this have been re-vamped, with a minimum expectation that IRO's/CP chairs attend 3 monthly and provide updates on areas themes or issues arising from*

Performance Reporting. The team links also promote relationships across service and ensure that the Safeguarding Team is visible and engaged.

- *IRO's are also engaged in "bring and learn" sessions as well as development programmes with NQSW's.*
- *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 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 ensuring that the right plan of permanence is achieved for the child.*
- *Children placed in unregistered accommodation: These children receive monthly midway reviews, increased scrutiny and a minimum of 3 monthly LAC reviews.*
- *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.*
- *If children, carers or parents request an early review, or if the IRO feels this is necessary*
- *IRO's have a number of additional meetings that they are required to attend for the child, outside of the LAC review.*
- *The IRO is expected to undertake audit activity as part of the preparation for the LAC review.*

Progress on the 2022/23 action plan

Issue	Action	Progress
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 	Partially achieved Partially achieved Partially achieved Completed.
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 	Partially achieved . Partially achieved with not all children seen in placement. Achieved.

	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 person and ensure their views are central to the review • 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>Achieved.</p> <p>Partially achieved.</p> <p>Partially achieved</p> <p>Achieved.</p> <p>Achieved.</p>
Children placed in unregistered private care settings	<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 	<p>Achieved.</p> <p>Partially achieved</p>

	IRO in that setting prior to their review and a view conveyed in the review process as to the quality of the care provided	
Children at risk from exploitation/significant harm	<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>Partially achieved</p> <p>Partially achieved</p>
Looked After Children will have access to Health support	<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 retained in the review recommendations 	Achieved.

Feedback from Children, Young people, professional and carers

Consultation and feedback are essential 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 these reports demonstrates, involving children in their reviews is the aspiration for all IRO's and considered "Gold Standard" for maximising the voice of the child and involving them in the development of their own care plan. 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.

Feedback from social worker – *'L is a very child centred Independent Reviewing Officer, I have recently been working closely with her in relation to two young people. Unfortunately these two young people were unable to attend their LAC reviews, however, L has visited them both outside of their review to ensure their voices are heard and appropriate updates were shared. L has also gone above and beyond and create pieces of direct work that has then gone onto being shared with the young people. In particular one of the pieces of work captured all of the positive comments that professionals said about the young person and the other piece of work captured the journey and progression that the young person needs to make to reach their goals in a creative and child friendly way.'*

Feedback from Foster carer - *Its been great having you as my IRO, even for a short time as you've kept an eye on us and helped make things work.*



Feedback from a Guardian – *The court valued the IRO's oversight, as she has been IRO for a considerable length of time, her involvement in the community assessment, able to comment on progress and change as well as contributing to the outcome of the support planning was noted. This is a real success story in terms of seeing parents' capacity for change over a period of time and capacity of IROs to be able to see this.*

Professional feedback to IRO: *"I like how you have phrased issues about neurodiversity in a positive way in this child's review, that's written to the child and in their language so that they understand."*

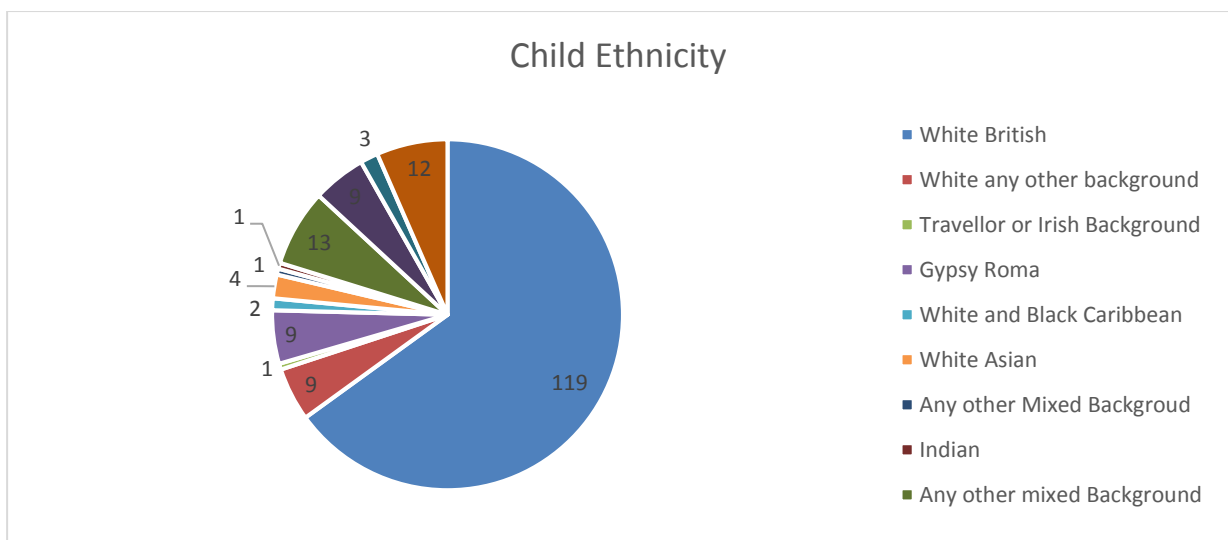
Child about their IRO: My IRO listens to me and makes sure that what I want to say is heard in the meeting. She gets what I want to happen.

Children entering/ ceasing care

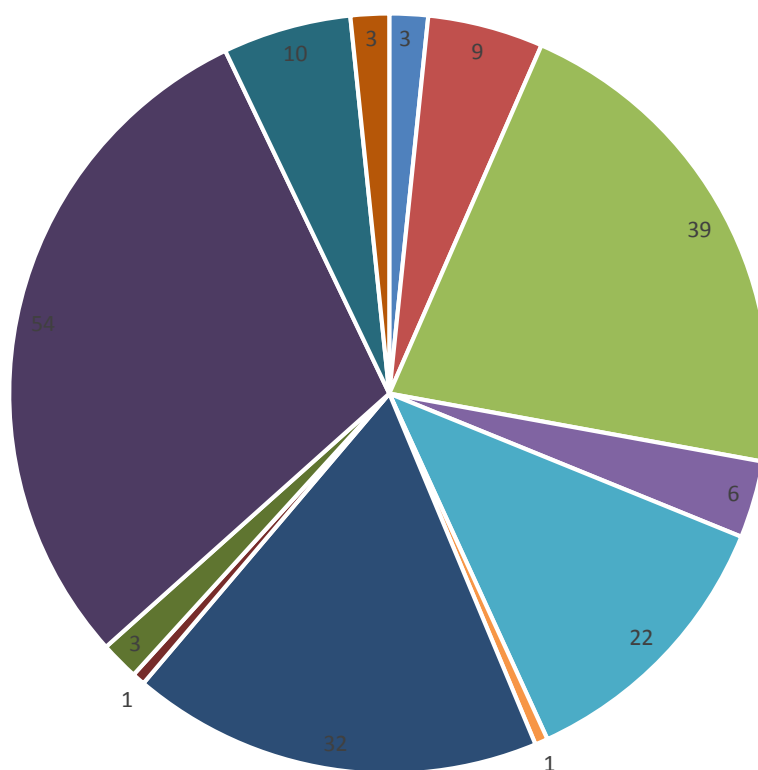
In 2021/22 176 children became looked after on 180 separate occasions (meaning that a small number of children became looked after more than once). In the reporting 2022/23 period, 184 children became LAC on 185 separate occasions, which means that one child was LAC on two separate occasions.

Of the Young people who became LAC, 74 were female and 113 were male

The Ethnicity of these young people were:

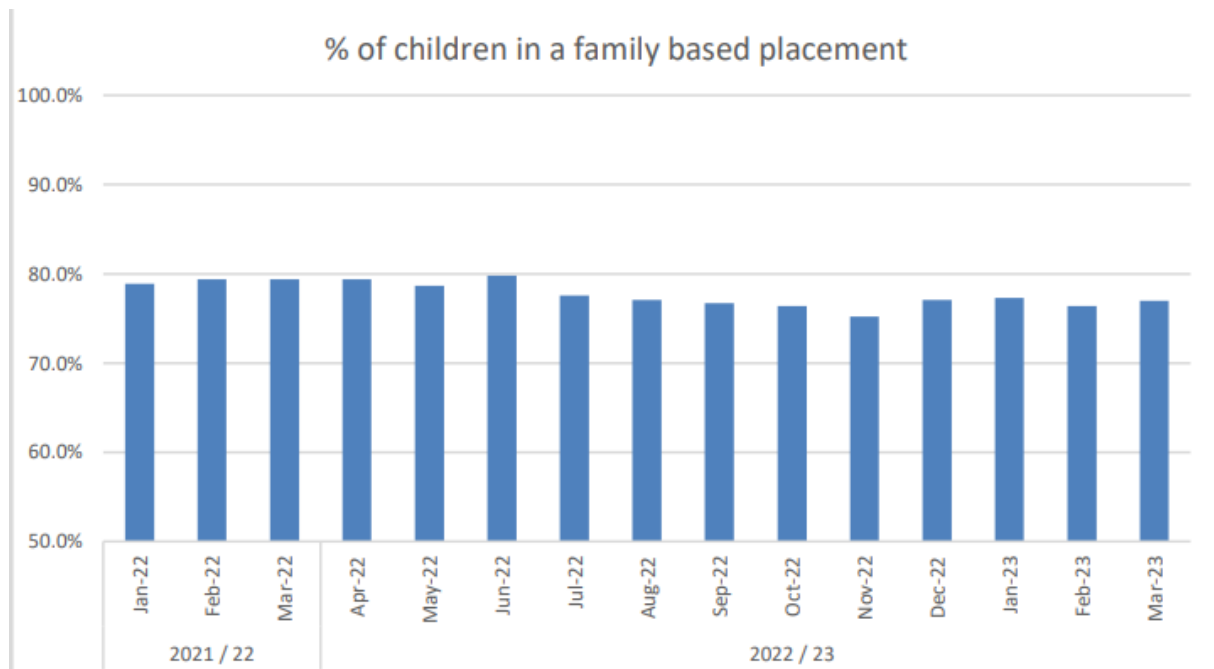


When entering Local Authority Care, the children were placed within the following settings:



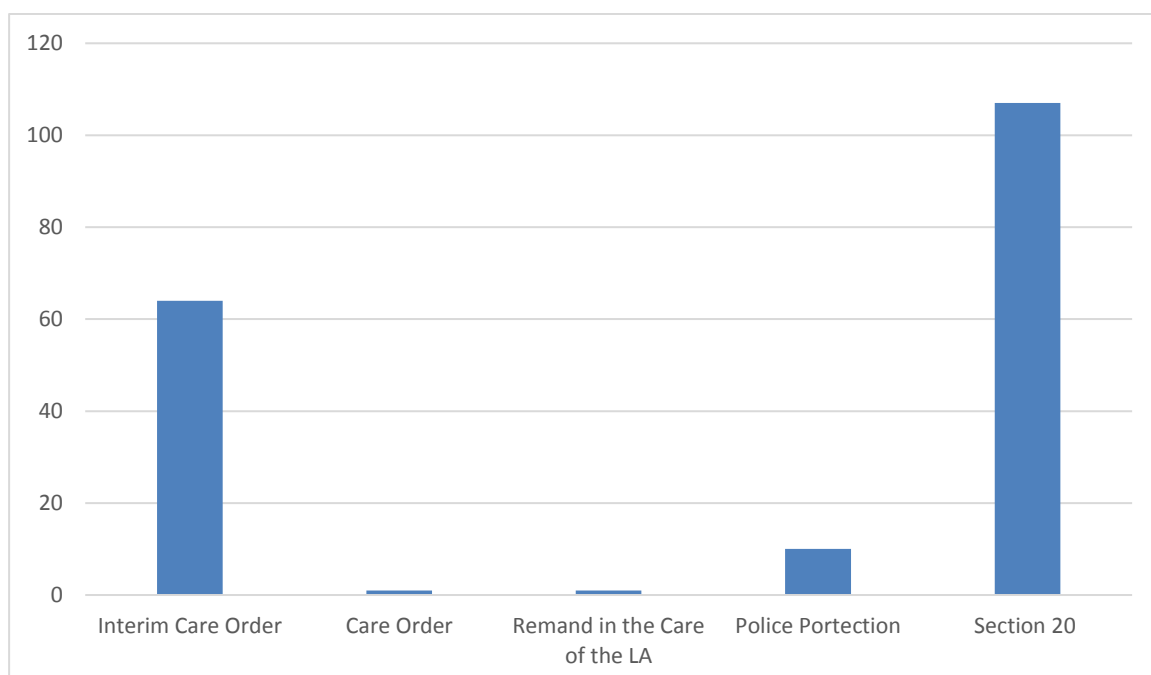
- Children's homes
- Placed with Parents or other with Parental Responsibility
- Indepednent living (Flat, Lodging/Friends/B&B)
- Family Centre or Mother and Baby Unit
- Court Directed Placement
- Residential Schools
- Foster placement with relative or friend- not long term or FFA
- Placement with other foster carer- long term fostering
- Placement with other foster carer who is also an approved adopter- FFA

- It is positive that most children entering the system were offered family-based placements.



- 22 placements were court directed, (38.6) which implies that the LA did not achieve, through the court, its preferred placement.
- 9 were “placement with parents”, dip sampling some of these children suggests that the LA had sufficient concerns but assessments were incomplete that would recommend alternative care plans at the time of the conclusion of proceedings.

Legal status of children entering the care system:



Section 20 remains the main legal status of children entering the care of the local authority. This is slightly up on last year's figures, where 90 children entered care via this voluntary agreement. Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children are also generally accommodated via section 20 arrangements.

The IRO service manager checks and reports on s20 admissions on a bi-monthly basis and these reports offer assurance that most 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.

In the period 01.04.2022 and 31.03.2023, 200 children ceased being LAC which is a reduction on the 216 that being Looked After on the year before. Of these children:

Reason Children Ceased being LAC	Number of children.
Over 18 and remained with carers.	32
Adopted application unopposed	17
Adopted, consent dispensed with	7
Left care to live with parents, carers or other person with no parental responsibility.	24
Died	1
Care taken over by another authority	3
Residence Order	4
Special Guardianship Order	36
Planned return home to live with parents	16
Independent Arrangement	17
Transferred to adult care	2
Ceased for any other reason	50

- There has been an increase in SGOs compared to the previous year with 27 being made in this year.
- There has been a reduction in the number of children have returned home on a planned basis.
- 24 children left care to live with parents, raising queries as to whether this was an agreed plan and if this could have been supported earlier in the child's journey as a LAC child.
- It is positive that some children were given the option and agreed to remain with their carers over 18 years, this includes the "Staying Put" arrangements.

IRO Activity

During the reporting period, one IRO has returned from maternity leave. Agency staff were used to cover this period. One IRO had several months on sickness leave, the children in this instance were absorbed amongst the team. One worker continues to be seconded to the University on a part time basis which promotes links the university and a positive opportunity for shared knowledge. The part time hours have been filled via a secondment opportunity which has been positive for that workers career development.

Despite the absences 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 the team. Some children have experienced the same IRO for over 5 years, this is invaluable for children that can experience multiple changes in social worker and placement moves.

The IRO service has delivered 1600 reviews in the reporting period. In addition to the LAC reviews, IRO's continue to complete several additional tasks to ensure meaningful oversight of the child's care plan. This can include visits, attending various meetings such as Planning Meetings, Strategy Meetings, Disruption Meetings as well as Support and Resolution Meetings. They also maintain connections via Team Links with other parts of the service and contribute where possible to training and development of NQSW's. The IRO's also frequently attend Panels such as Fostering Panel and Missing Panel etc.

Of the LAC reviews that have taken place, 91.7% were held within timescales. This is a decrease on 94.5% of the reporting period from the year before.

The IRO team are expected to undertake Midway Review's to ensure that they maintain oversight of the young people. As of the 1st April 2023, 41.8% of children who have been LAC 6 months or more have had a Midway Review. This is a decrease of 67.5% from 1st April 2022. Midways reviews remains an area for development within the service and forms part of the action plan moving forward. Midway reviews are performance managed in supervision and in meetings the service is exploring what might constitute a midway review.

IRO visits have also re-commenced since the covid period. Reporting data taken on the 17.07.2023 notes that 273 children have been visited within the last 6 months which equates to 52.7%. 116 within the last 12 months. The voice of the child is central to IRO practice, therefore visits are explored in supervision with each IRO to ensure there is planning around this. For those children that perhaps don't want to see their IRO, then alternative ways of ensuring the voice of the child is being explored. One IRO has developed refreshed booklets to try and encourage children to perhaps record their view for their review.

Review Reports

The pre meeting 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 to support collaboration.

There has been internal activity within the IRO service to improve the quality of pre meeting reporting for LAC reviews. An IRO has completed draft guidance for social workers on things that are needed within the pre meeting report. This is now in the process of being distributed.

<u>Timeliness of pre meeting report</u>	<u>Number Completed</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
5+ days before review	388	24.3%
1-4 days prior to review	473	29.6%
After Review	449	28.1%
Same day as review	281	17.6%
No Meeting and/or Report	7	0.4%
Total	1598	100%

Those recorded as “No Meeting/or Report” are meetings that have been held at the end of the search parameter and are still outstanding a report at the time the performance data was pulled.

24.3% of reports were received in timescales, which is a slight decrease on 26.1% from last year. Of particular note, 28.1% of reports were received after the LAC review, which raises questions about the function of these reports given that the review process has been completed. This is an area that has been targeted in very recent months (March 2023 onwards) with clear guidance given to IRO’s, social workers and managers that without a pre meeting report/Pathway Plan a review should not progress unless in exceptional circumstances, eg the impact on the child.

Statutory Guidance states that review recommendations are produced within 24 hours of the review held and distributed within 5 working days. 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 and business support is responsible for distributing such via email.

Care Plans

In all circumstances where a decision is made to look after a child, the child must have a Care Plan completed by the social worker and signed by the relevant team manager, the contents of which include:

- *The child's Placement Plan (setting out why the placement was chosen and how the placement will contribute to meeting the child's needs);*
- *The child's Permanence Plan (setting out the long term plans for the child's upbringing including timescales);*
- *The pathway plan (where appropriate, for young people leaving care);*
- *The child's health plan;*
- *The child's personal education plan;*
- *The contingency plan;*
- *The date of the child's first Looked After Review (**within 20 working days**);*
- *The name of the Independent Reviewing Officer.*

The Care Plan should include the arrangements made to meet the child's needs in relation to his or her:

- *Emotional and behavioural development;*
- *The child's identity in relation to religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background;*
- *Family and social relationships; arrangements for contact with sibling(s) accommodated by the authority or another local authority; details of any section 8 order, in relation to a Looked After Child; details of any order in relation to contact with a child in care; arrangements for contact with parents/anyone with Parental Responsibility/ any other connected person; arrangements for the appointment of an Independent Visitor for a Looked After Child;*
- *Social presentation;*
- *Self-care skills.*

94.8% of children are recorded to have had an up-to-date care plan as of the 31st March 2023. Reporting on Care Planning has recently changed. After the review, the social worker is responsible for updating the Care Plan within 10 working days, in relation to any changes to the Care Plan agreed at the review. Therefore, to ensure that Care Plans remain reflective of the most current LAC review, performance data is now reporting on Care Plans updated 10 days from the LAC review.

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. This form has been redesigned further to explore the impact of care planning on the child and also the quality-of-service delivery. Of 1600 reviews completed, 911 Q and C forms were completed. Given the variation to the Q and C form it is difficult to pull accurate data in terms of scoring however this should be available for the next annual report.

Challenge and escalation is a cornerstone of effective IRO practice, with IROs having the ability to escalate to CAFCASS 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.

Within the reporting period 163 escalation discussion case notes were recorded. This is an increase of 96 on the previous year. 95 formal escalations were raised in this reporting period compared to 20 on the previous reporting year. It is important to note that this current data is heavily relied upon IRO's inputting into a spread sheet, which is inconsistent and under-reported. All of these escalations were resolved at either stage 1 and 2. The overwhelming rationale for the escalations relates to drift and delay – this includes reasons such as no pre meeting reports, delay in discharge of orders, assessments not completed timely or delay in important work such as life story etc.

Throughout the reporting period the use of escalations in challenge has been the focus of development. The process, its use and how as a team the IRO's use this process has been discussed in meetings, away days and individually in supervision. Furthermore, towards the end of the reporting period the escalation process was pulled together in a workable flow chart. Most impactfully was the development of an LCS form to enable escalations to be embedded within the system. This appears to have removed barriers in terms of allowing IRO's to raise an escalation. Whilst the data in terms of this being reported hasn't been captured as of yet via insight, this will enable more significant "grip" and oversight in terms of the escalation process and also monitor outcomes.

Participation in Reviews

Children and young people are encouraged and supported to attend their reviews. In some instances, young people have felt confident enough to chair these reviews themselves which is "gold standard" in terms of the voice of the child. There are a number of examples within the team of young people chairing their own reviews.

IRO's are encouraged to speak with the child prior to the review to discuss where they want the meeting to be held, who should attend and what they want to discuss in the meeting. IRO visits have increased since the pandemic.

Face to Face meeting are now standard practice unless the voice of the child indicates that they would prefer the meeting to be virtual or there is a rationale as to why this is in the interest of the child.

The IRO service work closely with the Rights 2 Rights advocacy service to ensure that those children who require or have requested an advocate are supported and heard in the process.

How the child participated in their review:	Number:	Percentage:
Child aged under 4 at time of meeting	274	17.2%
Child attended & spoke for self	656	41.2%
Child attended - advocate spoke	12	0.8%
Child attended - gave views non verbally	5	0.3%
Child attended without contributing	15	0.9%
Child not attended, advocate briefed with views	100	6.3%
Child not attended, views sent	396	24.9%
Child not attended & did not send views	135	8.5%
TOTAL	1593	100%

It is positive that during this period, 656 children felt able to attend their reviews and speak for themselves. A primary focus of the next 12 months will be to look at how, as a service, we can increase child attendance at their LAC reviews.

The Health of Looked After Children

IROs monitor within the LAC review process the Health Plan accumulated from the Health Assessment and the Dental Checks of the young people they review. The child's health is a standing agenda item for reviews. Drift and delay should be challenged via the escalation procedures if a child's health needs are routinely met without robust rationale as to why (often child refused etc).

Analysis from the borough wide most recent quarterly report notes that Dental and Health assessments are not being recorded in a timely fashion on LCS and performance continues to misrepresent reality.

Initial Health Assessments (IHA)

Within LAC reviews the IRO's will monitor and refer to actions within the Health Assessments. Any undue delay should be escalated as part of the escalation process.

As of the 31st March 2023:

- 376 children had an up to date Health assessment, equating to 93.1% of all children.
- 28 children didn't have a health assessment equating to 6.9%.
- 11 Health assessments were refused.
- 150 initial health assessments were carried out, of those 59.3% were within the 20 day timescale.

Dental Checks

As of the 31st March:

- 350 or 86.6% of children had a recorded up to date dental assessment. (This is an increase upon the previous year where the number stood at 78% and a significant increase of the low of 32% completed in 2020/21).
- 54 young people or 13.4% didn't have an up to date appointment.

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. As of the 31st March 2023 96.7% of children had an up to date PEP.

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.

Data taken from the CYPS performance report notes that:

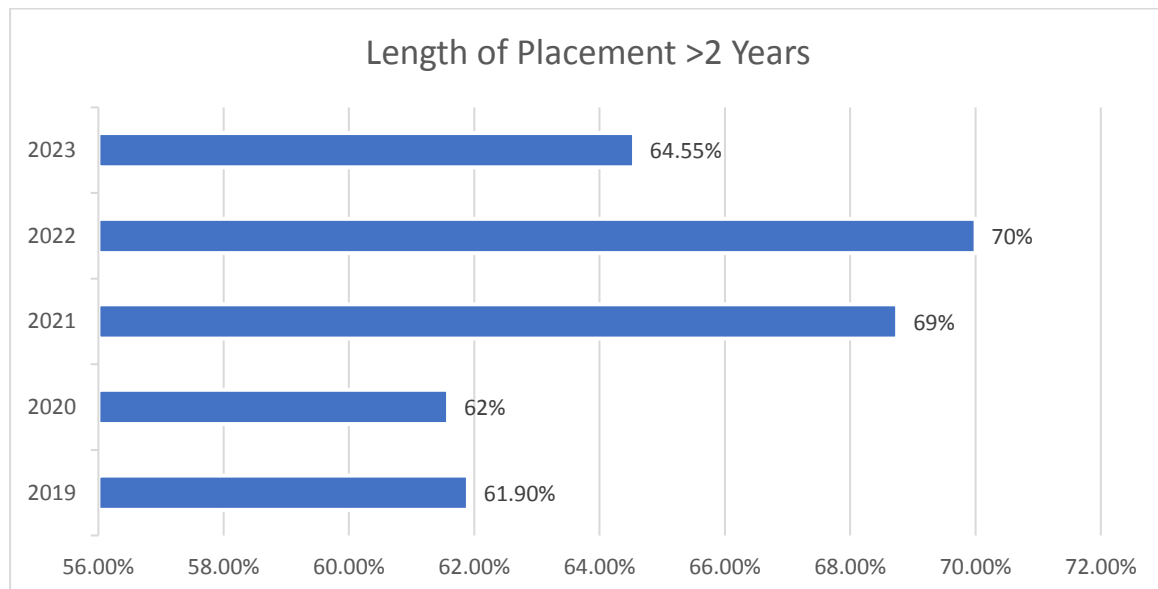
23	looked after children (LAC) were on a part time timetable within the period
1	looked after children (LAC) started on a part time timetable within the period
2	looked after children (LAC) ended a part time timetable within the period
89.5%	of 16 > 17yrs looked after children (LAC) are in education, employment or training (EET)
81.8%	of looked after children (LAC) attending a school with a good or better rating

The report notes:

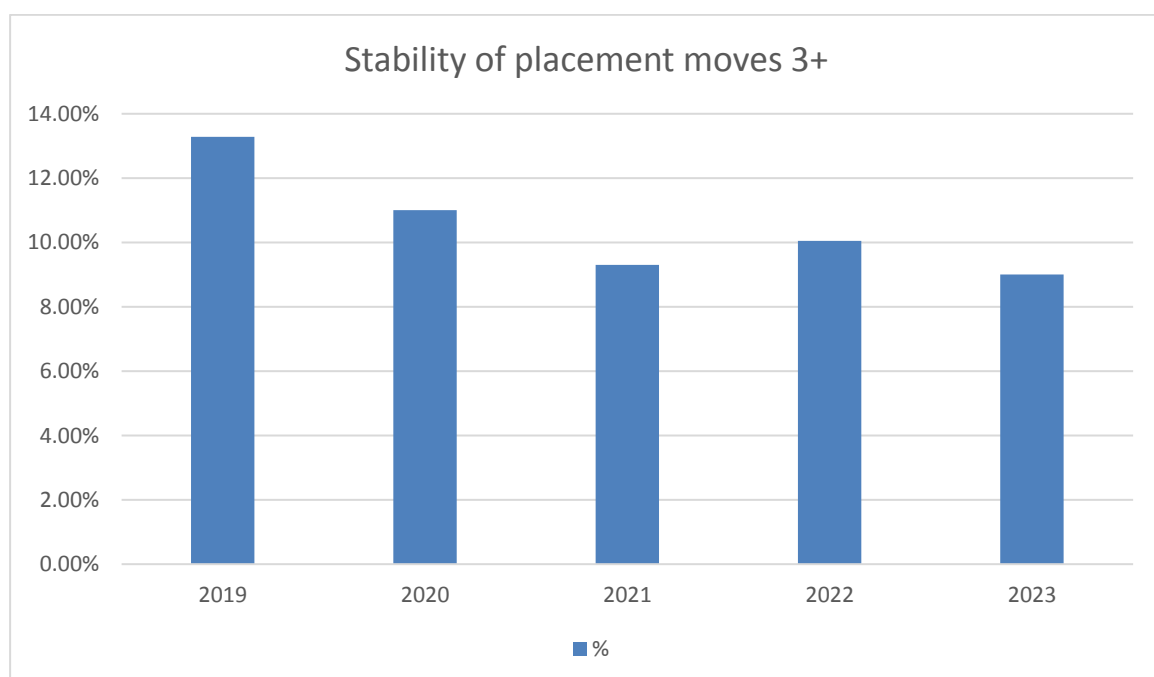
- Attendance has decreased slightly in secondary; attendance is just under 90% although the figure is not entirely accurate (this is the case in both phases) as there are some outstanding attendance marks which need to be collected to give an accurate figure. We continue to support schools in completing attendance tracking and attendance is a regular focus of VS team meetings and 121s.
- This term ePEP has been updated to support tracking of attendance to allow for earlier identification of attendance issues and swifter response and support.
- Persistent absence has increased in this term and as a result, the overall the persistent absence figure for secondary year to date has increased to 26.9% and primary has increased to 11.2% 16-17
- EET figure has increased and was at 85.2% at the end of the spring term. One of the main contributing factors to this improvement is the majority of UASC learners who had been awaiting placements are now in provision.
- The decrease in percentage of children attending good or better schools has been impacted by Ofsted inspections. There will have been children who enter care and are attending schools that are requires improvement. To ensure stability and avoid education disruption, Virtual School do not move children unless there is a significant safeguarding need, a care placement requirement, EHCP changes, or the education offer is so poor that we need to move a school.

Placement Stability

RMBC is committed to ensuring stability for all children looked after. An analysis of the data notes:



As can be seen above, placement stability has decreased by just under 6%, equating to 142 of 220 children who had/have been in placement for over 2.5 years. During the year, 536 new placements were commenced in total, with 354 of these being placement moves, i.e., for children already in local authority care. 9.96% or 54 young people experienced placement instability of 3 years or more. The IRO maintains oversight of placement instability and the impact on the child, reviewing changes in placement and raising appropriate escalations if necessary.



As of 31 March 2023, 301 children were placed out of the Rotherham area, this is a slight decrease from 316 on the previous year. This is a positive decrease, with the preference

being that children should be placed as near to their home as possible, and risk allows which is an important identity consideration for our children and also promotes connectedness to familiar communities, school placement as well as family.

Unregistered/Unregulated Care

In 2022/23, 32 children were placed in either unregistered emergency accommodation or unregistered unregulated accommodation throughout the year. This is accommodation, which is not subject to OFSTED inspection, yet is providing 'care' to children. There was a total of 64 unregulated/unregistered placements used amongst these children within the period. These placements are now illegal with any such placements reported to OFSTED. Unfortunately, during the reporting period, such placements have been used in the absence of other appropriate accommodation.

Children placed in these settings have an enhanced offer of 3 monthly LAC reviews and monthly midway 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.

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.

UASC children

Guidance from the National Transfer Scheme Protocol for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children Version 4.0 (updated on 05 September 2022) notes:

The National Transfer Scheme (NTS) protocol for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) has been established to enable the safe transfer of unaccompanied children in the UK from one local authority (the entry authority from which the unaccompanied child transfers) to another local authority¹ (the receiving authority). Only unaccompanied children that meet the definition of a UASC, as set out in paragraph 352ZD of the Immigration Rules, are eligible to be referred to the NTS. When the NTS first began operating in 2016 it formed the basis of a voluntary agreement made between local authorities in England to ensure a fairer, more equitable distribution of unaccompanied children across local authorities. To meet the overall best interests of unaccompanied children, a fairer distribution of children across the UK helps all local authorities meet their duties under the relevant children's legislation.

Legislation was amended in 2018 to extend the scheme to include local authorities Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. From 26 July 2021, the NTS operated on the basis of a national voluntary rota, into which local authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with UASC at or over 0.07% of their child population, could refer newly-arrived unaccompanied children. However, despite substantial reform the voluntary model

has not sufficiently responded to the scale of intake into the asylum system. On 23 November 2021 the Government took steps to ensure the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) works effectively, and ensures all children are transferred promptly to local authorities to be cared for. On this date, the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration, Kevin Foster MP, wrote on behalf of the Secretary of State for the Home Department to all local authorities in the UK with children's services to signal the Government's intention to direct participation in the NTS.² This is pursuant to those powers set out under Section 72(3) of the Immigration Act 2016 (the '2016 Act') providing for the Secretary of State for the Home Department to direct local authorities to comply with the scheme. From 15 February 2022, following the required representations process, all local authorities with children's services in the UK have been directed to participate in the NTS, commonly referred to as a 'mandated NTS'.

The duration of any mandatory period will be dictated by a range of factors including intake levels, ability to place children in local authority care in a timely manner, and the viability of a return to a voluntary NTS that works effectively. We will keep its operation under review.

As of the 31st March 2023, the local authority had in its care 36 children who were considered unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Combining those that turned 18 and were part of the leaving care service, this increased to 66. All of these children are subject to section 20 agreements. We have begun to see a slight reduction in the number of UASC young people present with the need to be looked after with our UASC cohort increasing from 39 at the beginning of Jan 2023 to 36 in March 2023

Fostering/Adoption

RMBC employs one full time equivalent fostering IRO (FIRO), as in 2021-22, this role was split between 2 part time workers and this continues in 22/23. One worker has stepped down from the role and the hours being covered by a new worker (part time CP chair who has increased their hours). This has been beneficial in that the two FIROs are able to have flexibility in allocation.

The FIROs have been developing 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.

Within the period the fostering IRO's completed:

Total Number of Reviews in Period	167
Total Number of Foster Carers Reviewed	107

During the reporting period, 12 fostering households were approved.

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.

During the same reporting period the following children were achieved plans of permanence via adoption:

Measure	Number	Percentage
Number of Adoptions in Period	24	
Number within 12 months of Shobpa	7	29.2%
Number placed within 12 months of Shobpa	15	62.5%
Number placed within 426 days of BLA	12	50%
Number matched within 121 days of PO	19	79.2%

Children Missing from Care

In 2022/23 59 children looked after by RMBC went missing from their placement, with 296 missing episodes in total for those children – a decrease from 370 episodes on the previous years. There were 17 occurrences of children missing on more than three occasions in the year again a decrease of 24 from the previous year.

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.

Conclusion and Key Actions for 2022/23

The key priorities of the IRO service in the next reporting year will be:

- The child's voice in terms of their review experience will be captured formally, to improve the service offered. This will include inviting the LAC council to team meetings, implementing the voice of the child booklets, and also ensuring children's voices are captured prior to their reviews.
- Children will be spoken to about chairing their own reviews should they wish. The service will anticipate an increase in the number of children chairing their reviews.
- All children will be visited within the year. For those children who do not wish to engage with their reviews, they will be offered advocacy services or their views will be collated in alternative means.
- Midway reviews will increase to 80% by the end of the reporting year.
- The Q and C will be embedded within LCS and reporting data will be able to be pulled from insight, which will enable thematic exploration to commence.
- The Escalation process will be embedded within LCS to prevent drift and delay and further evidence the voice of the child.
- IRO recommendations will become embedded within the LCS process to allow greater oversight from Team Managers.
- The minute template used to collate discussion from the review process will be further developed. This will focus on the voice of the child.

As the safeguarding unit as a whole:

- **Improve the timeliness of Initial Child Protection Case Conference** - Work will be completed across the service to ensure all children are heard at an Initial Conference timely. The escalation process will be utilised where needed

Quality of planning will be reviewed

- I. The safeguarding unit will review and scrutinise all children on Child Protection Plans focusing on particularly cohorts of children including teenagers, children subject to multiple periods of planning, PLO planning and children subject to planning for periods longer than nine months. This will ensure that our service is safeguarding the most vulnerable children and young people and those children where planning is not the most appropriate way to manage the risks and concerns are addressed.
- II. Continue to identify and scrutinise themes from escalations, support and resolution sessions and monthly performance themes to the Senior Management Team and performance board to support a clearer service wide and strategic understanding of themes and areas of practice that are outstanding or that require further development

- III. The Quality and Assurance Dashboard will be developed to include the qualitative data and themes for all escalations, Q& C forms, midway reviews, 18-month analysis, PLO analyse support and resolution meetings.

- **Increase the voice of the child** - Advocacy will support children and young people before and within conference. The child friendly plan will be progressed by Barnardo's

Work with partners to increase attendance / contributions

- I. attendance at the headteacher quarterly meeting
- II. work with probation and the police to strengthen their role and contribution

Written by Jo Hacking Acting Senior Safeguarding Manager
With supervision from Joanne McCartan, Service Manager.
03.07.2023