

Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report 2021-2022



**Safeguarding Quality
& Assurance Unit**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since March 2010 there is a requirement that the Independent Reviewing Officer service within each Local Authority will produce an Annual Report of activity, with regards to children in care. This allows scrutiny by the Corporate Parenting Board and Wirral's Safeguarding Children's Partnership along with Elected members and the children and young people themselves.

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the extent to which Wirral Council has fulfilled its responsibilities to these children for the period 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022, including its corporate parenting function. The report includes the findings of the Safeguarding Unit, providing quantitative and qualitative data, contextualising the activity undertaken with supplemental commentary as to the activity of the service and where appropriate identifying themes and trends that require further work.

The overall aim of the safeguarding unit is to ensure that our looked after children are safe, secure and achieve the best possible outcomes. We have high aspirations for their future and encourage children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings. We aim to ensure that all children and young people are supported to access services and are fully prepared for adulthood.

This year there has been a focus on returning to office working alongside the introduction of hybrid meetings for initial child protection conferences. In January 2022 Wirral received an ILACS Focused Visit of children's social care services. The focused visit looked specifically at planning and achieving permanence. Although all forms of permanence were considered, there was a particular focus on, return to birth family, connected (family and friends) care and special guardianship.

2. STATUTORY ROLE AND LEGAL CONTEXT

The role and function of the Safeguarding Unit and the Independent Reviewing Officers is governed by law and statutory guidance. Therefore, the functioning and responsibilities that IRO's exercise in undertaking their duties are embedded in the following:

- *Children Act 1989*
- *Children and Young Person's Act 2008*
- *Children Act 2004*
- *Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2017*
- *Wirral's Safeguarding Children Procedures*
- *The Children Private Arrangements for Fostering Regulations 2005*
- *Fostering Services, National Minimum Standards*
- *Fostering Services (England) Regulations*

2.1 **The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)**

Compliant with the requirements of the IRO Handbook each child and young person will be allocated an IRO who will work with the child. Each Local Authority has a legal requirement to provide an IRO for every child or young person looked after, fundamentally to ensure their Human Rights are respected. Every IRO is required to act in the child's best interests which includes giving the IRO's the capacity to refer cases to the Children and Family Court Advisory Services (CAFCASS). IRO's whilst working for the department are autonomous and can act upon their own volition when they have significant concerns regarding a child's care plan or safety.

The IRO will ensure the child's voice is heard and their care plan is fully reviewed, ensuring it is fully meeting their needs. The service is not part of the operational line management structure of Children's Services, its position is to work alongside the department and be able to independently quality assure the Children's social care activity, offering high support along with high challenge where necessary. The aim is also to provide advice and guidance in order to promote the best possible outcomes for children and their families in Wirral.

The primary focus therefore is to ensure all care planning is promoting the most positive outcomes for a child/ young person by;

- *Providing robust challenge of social care decision making, where there is underlying poor professional practice and when decisions are taken that are not in the child's best interests.*
- *That views of children, parents, carers and other professionals are given sufficient weight in care planning.*
- *Ensure that permanence for children is not delayed and that plans are robust and timely.*
- *The IRO service will monitor the performance of the Local Authority will monitor the performance of the Local Authority and their functions in relation to the child's care plan.*

2.2 Profile of the IRO Service in Wirral

The IRO Service in Wirral sits within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit. The Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) in Wirral undertake a dual role working with children who are looked after as Reviewing Officers and as Child Protection Conference chairs within the child protection arena. Whilst some other Local Authorities have this role separated Wirral have kept this role combined, it provides continuity if a child becomes Looked After, but also keeps IROs upskilled in managing both roles.

The team of IRO's consists of 17 IROs covering 16 posts including the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) who oversees allegations against professionals and volunteers who work with children. There are currently 14 female IROs and 3 males, 2 IROs are from the BAME community and the remaining are White British. The team a stable team are who are made up of 16 permanent members of staff 2 agency workers. The impact of this is that for most children in Wirral they have lasting and stable relationships with their IRO who will have been alongside them in their experience of care.

The IRO's also have a number of additional responsibilities including;

- *Contributing to the Liquid Logic User Group*
- *Attending the Court Liaison group*
- *Attending the Team managers forum*
- *Providing mentoring to colleagues*
- *Bi-monthly Auditing with Performance Improvement Team*
- *Team links*
- *LADO Duty when required*
- *Participating in the IRO regional forum*

Supplemental to the core roles as part of the safeguarding an IRO will be allocated to children and young people who are looked after in the community through Private Fostering. These children and young people are identified in accordance with The Private Fostering Regulations as set out in Part 9 and schedule 8 of the Children Act 1989.

Whilst an important function the impact upon the service remains somewhat limited with only 4 children by the end of the year having been identified and being subject to these regulations.

Service Managers within the unit are also required to chair Sudden or Unexpected Death in Infancy and Childhood Meetings (SUDIC) in line with Working together 2015 and Wirral's Safeguarding partnership procedures, along with Secure Accommodation Reviews (SAR) and Suspected Fabricated or Induced illness strategy meetings. Sadly, we have had 7 children pass away suddenly or unexpectedly this year, requiring the SUDIC protocol to be followed. In 6 of these cases there were no suspicious circumstances or safeguarding concerns relating to the family. For one child safeguarding concerns were raised which led to a Section 47 investigation and subsequent ICPC for the siblings.

2.3 IRO Capacity

It is recognised that for IRO's to function and meet expectations in performance the levels of case allocations per IRO needs to reflect the levels as stated within the IRO handbook of between 50 and 70 cases. Caseloads at the end of the business year averaged at 77. Caseloads have remained broadly slightly above where we would like to be in relation to recommended levels, as outlined in the IRO Handbook. Whilst that figure can be offset by the number of CP cases as a dual role the expectations and level of intervention expected presents a challenge to the service in ensuring caseloads are manageable and children and families continue to receive a good service. The management team therefore ensure that allocations are carefully considered. Individual IRO's caseload consist of a third of child protection cases with the remainder being children looked after.

2.4 IRO Learning and Development

We have continued this year to ensure that IROs in Wirral are equipped with the right knowledge and skills that enable them to scrutinise practice, plans and arrangements for Our Children and Young People effectively. We have achieved this by holding regular team meetings where we examine changes in policy, procedures and particular pieces of research. IROs also continued to receive supervision monthly in 2021/2022. Supervision provided the IROs with an opportunity to reflect on planning, progress and outcomes for our children and young people, along with examining any training or developmental requirements.

In 2021/2022 we supported two of our experienced IROs to undertake the accredited IRO Advanced Practitioner course delivered by Edgehill University. This has allowed them the opportunity to critically analyse their role as an IRO with reference to current legislative, policy and guidance frameworks for our children and young people along with them being able to identify individual strengths and areas for effective professional development across the whole service.

In response to the focussed Ofsted visit in January 22, a developmental day was held, which allowed IRO's to meet as a whole team since the start of the COVID pandemic. The event was well attended by IROs. Guest speakers also contributed to learning on subject areas such as Dispute Resolutions and working with different localities. Particular focus was given to the recent Ofsted feedback regarding the role of the IRO in preventing drift and delay for our children and young people. The importance of completing escalations in a timely manner whilst also ensuring that they are meaningful and have a positive impact on outcomes for our children and young people.

Service meetings are also held monthly which focus on learning from Audits and offering IROs the opportunity to discuss what is working well and what we are worried about. Staff also have the opportunity to attend Staff Engagement Sessions led by the Senior Management Team.

2.5 Regional and Local Links

The IRO Managers attend quarterly meetings with the North West Regional IRO Managers Group. This feeds into the National IRO Manager's Group and the Department of Education (DfE) which considers changes to policy and practice. The North West IRO Managers Group share data and good practice with the other Local Authorities across the Merseyside area. The IRO management team are integral to several panels in which the IRO perspective and overview of planning is valued as part of the decision-making process and over-view of practice. These include Permanence Panel, Multi Agency Child Exploitation panel (MACE), Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements panel (MAPPA) and pre-birth liaison panel.

We have recently re-established our team links following the pandemic. IROs are linked to specific operational team to share their knowledge about good practice, to listen to Social Workers views about the review process and to build links with Social Workers and Team Managers.

2.6 Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)

Wirral has one full time Designated Officer. The LADO has a specific function in overseeing the allegations and investigations relating to professional staff and those in a position of trust where the allegations involve children and young people.

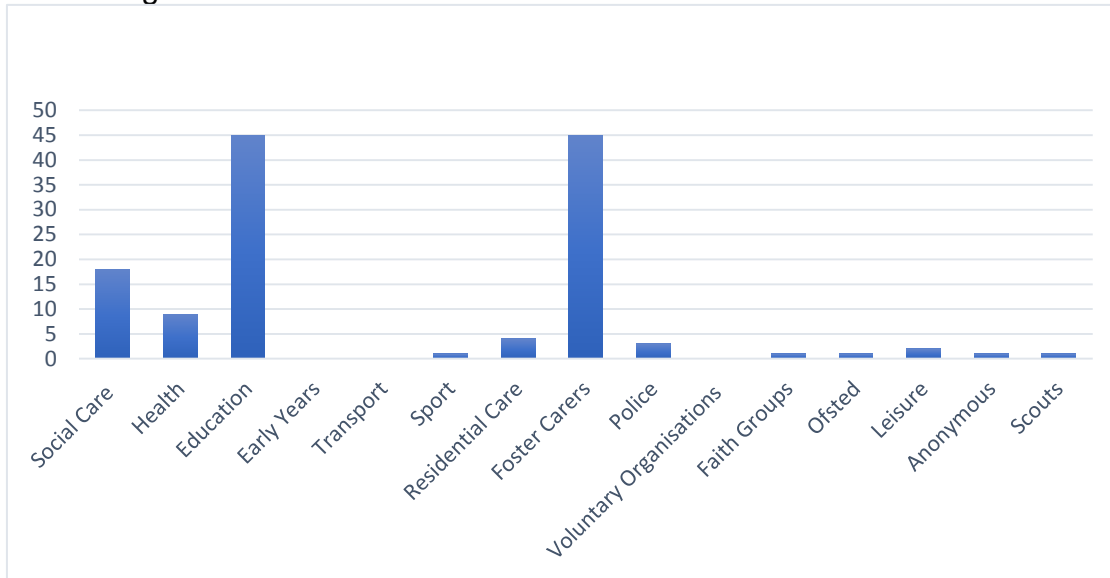
When the LADO is not available the Duty IRO or Managers within the unit act on behalf of the LADO to ensure there is no delay and maintain a level of independence required in exercising the role. Following recommendations from a serious case review 'Scarlett', a new system has been implemented to ensure all referring agencies now complete a LADO referral form to ensure information is recorded effectively and defensible decisions can be tracked and recorded. This is in line with the Scarlett Action plan.

As with the Consultation process the LADO has ensured all open cases have an Initial Management of Allegations Meeting chaired by the LADO, a regular Review meeting and a Closure meeting. All the meetings are chaired by the LADO and notes are taken by the LADO. The LADO has recently been provided a minute taker to assist in this task.

Total number of Contacts (see definition)	No of referrals leading to multi-agency strategy meeting or discussion
Initial Consultation form 159 Referral form 140 Total 299	131

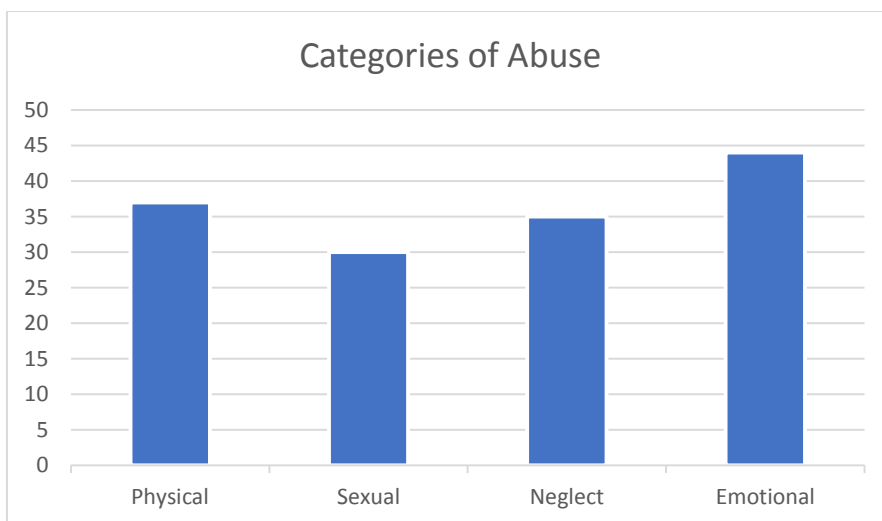
Initial Consultation forms are used as first contact on Wirral, to enable us to record all concerns. A multi-agency strategy meeting would only be held on referrals. The table below shows a breakdown of the agencies who referred to LADO during the reporting period of 2021/22. This is the number of referrals reported to the LADO by an agency, irrespective of where the individual works, e.g. parent attends local police station and accuses teacher of physical assault against her son. Police inform LADO of concern this would be recorded as a police referral. Head teacher speaks to LADO following conversation with child regarding a scout master, this is an education referral.

The highest number of referrals were received from Education and Foster carers.



With regards to categories of abuse these are split into 4 categories:

Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Neglect and Emotional Harm. As you can see from the table below these are equally distributed throughout the year.



A total number of 79 cases were concluded/closed within the reporting period of 2021 /22 regardless of whether they were referred within that period or not. The conclusion date is the point at which there is no further action to be taken by the employer, social care, the police or courts regarding the allegation. 48 cases (60%) were concluded/closed within 3 months, 24 cases were concluded/closed between 3-12 months and 7 cases took over 12 months to conclude/ close. The cases which take the longest to conclude are often complex cases which have

resulted in a police investigation. The LADO ensures that a full closure summary is completed before any case is closed.

There are a number of possible outcomes following a referral to LADO:

- The allegation is malicious
- The allegation is unsubstantiated
- Possible Disciplinary measures for the employee
- A police investigation
- A police prosecution

It is important that the correct definitions are used when determining the outcomes.

- Substantiated – there is sufficient evidence to prove the allegation
- False – there is sufficient evidence to disprove the allegation
- Malicious – there is clear evidence to prove there has been a deliberate act to deceive and the allegation is entirely false.
- Unfounded – there is no evidence which supports the allegation being made.
- Unsubstantiated – there is insufficient evidence to prove or disprove the allegation.

Out of the 79 cases that were concluded 38 (48%) were deemed to be substantiated, 19 (24%) were unfounded and 22 (27%) were unsubstantiated.

3. CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER DATA 2021/22

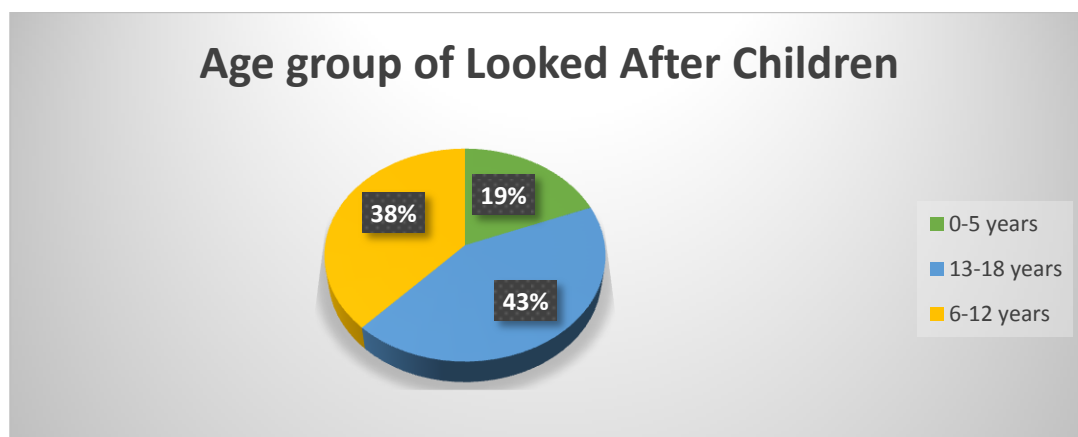
3.1 Children and Young People Population in Wirral

Children and young people aged 0-19 make up just over one in five (22%) of Wirral residents (73,699) and is projected to decrease by 3.5% by 2030. Information on the ethnicity of school children in Wirral indicates that 92% of children in Wirral are White; the largest BAME groups are Asian/Asian British (3%) and Mixed ethnicity (3%). The IDACI (Income Deprivation Index Affecting Children Index) shows that deprivation affecting children is concentrated in the North and East of Wirral, with small pockets in other areas of Wirral. Child poverty data shows that the proportion of children living in low-income households ranged from 4% in Heswall, to 46% in Bidston & St. James ward. Around one in four Wirral primary school aged children, one in five secondary school aged children and over half (1 in 2) of children attending special school were eligible for Free School Meals.

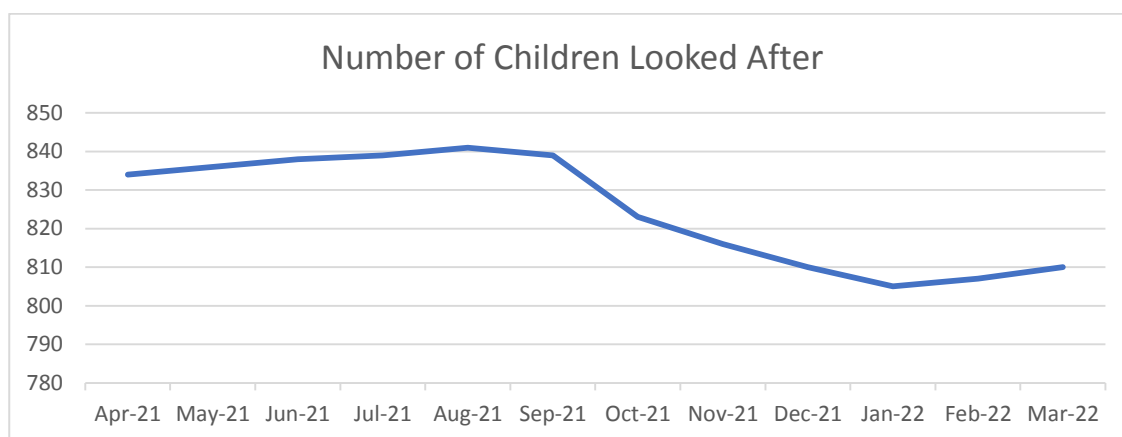
3.2 Profile of our Children Looked After

The Department for Education has set figures for the numbers of children who are looked after based on population figures per 10,000. The benchmark set being 83.2 – 95. However, our figures report 116.6 at the end of the year. This in part was following activity after the Ofsted inspection in July 2016. We do know this resulted in a high number of children becoming Looked After.

In relation to the children in care we serve, as of March 2022 Wirral had 810 looked after children. The overall number has decreased from 841 on 31 March 2021. The majority of children and young people (43%) aged between 13-18.

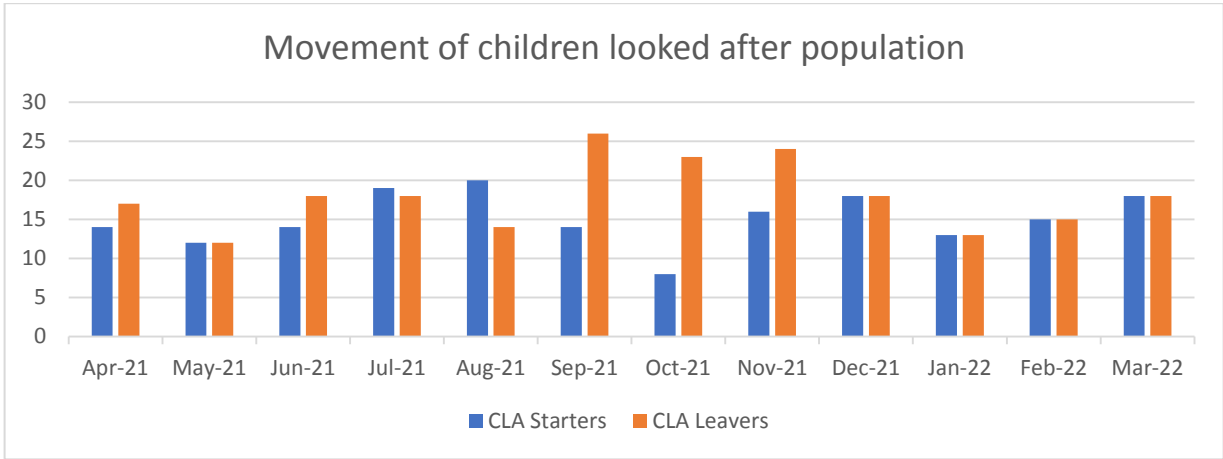


Approximately 89.7% are white British with the other 10.3% from a variety of other ethnic backgrounds. As you can see Wirral's cohort of Looked after children are predominantly White British. 10% of this cohort are recorded as having a Disability. At the time of this report, there are more boys than girls in our care with boys representing approximately 53.5% of the cared for population.



The number of Children Looked After by Wirral has remained largely consistent throughout the year. We have however seen a steady decrease in the numbers from September 21 onwards. To assist in understanding the figures we need to consider whether the reason for the decreased numbers relates to children and young people leaving care or less children entering the looked after system. As you can see from the table below during September 21, October 21 and Nov 21 we had more young people leaving care than entering care due to 29% of children and young people

being rehabilitated home to live with parents or relatives and 12% reaching 18 during those months.



Snap shot of the data and where Wirral compare to our statutory neighbours and England as a whole.

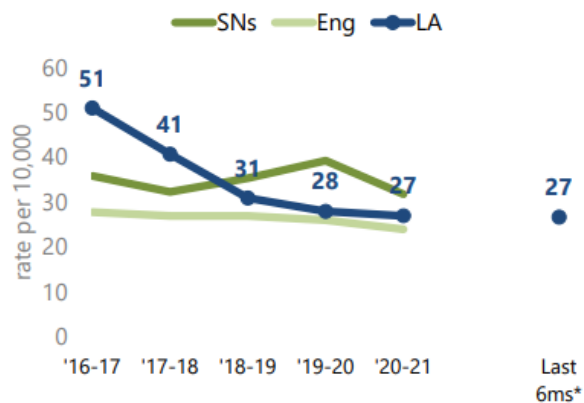
This snapshot records the number of children becoming looked after from 5.11.21-3.5.22

It is important to note that the decrease in Children Looked After is also as a result of less children coming into care. It is positive to note the data showing that Wirral is now is line with our statutory neighbours and England national average.

Children Looked After (CLA) started and ceased in the last

90 CLA started in the last 6 months

Rate of CLA started per 10,000 children

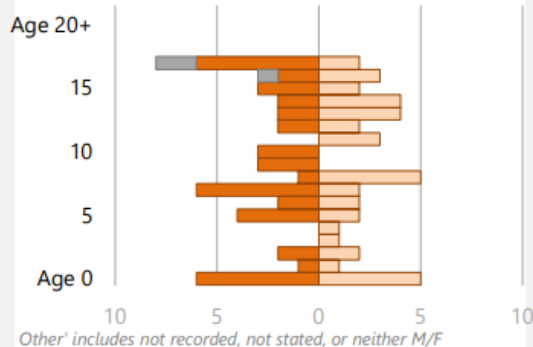


*Annualised rate for comparison purposes

Age and gender

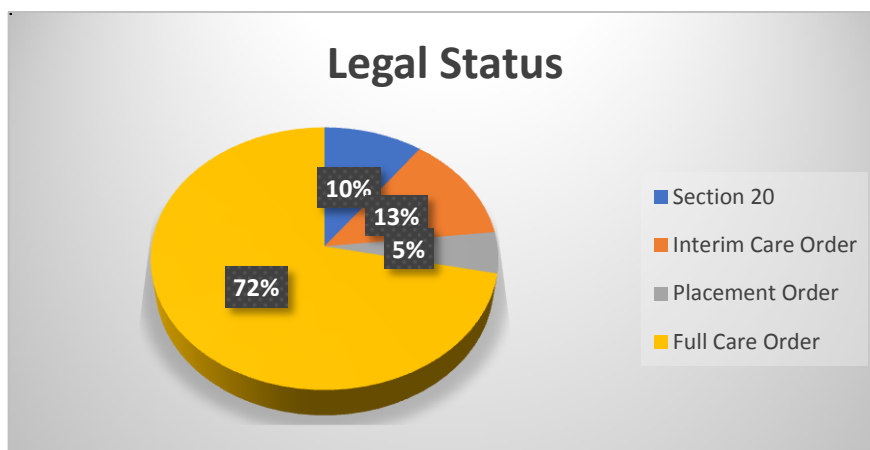
45 Males (50%)
3 UASC M (3%)
1 Other (not shown) (2%)

41 Females (46%)
0 UASC F (0%)



3.3 Legal Status of our children looked after

As you can see from the graph below the majority of our children and young people are subject to either an interim care order (105 children) or a full care order (567). The number of children subject to Care Orders has remained relatively stable over the last 12 months.



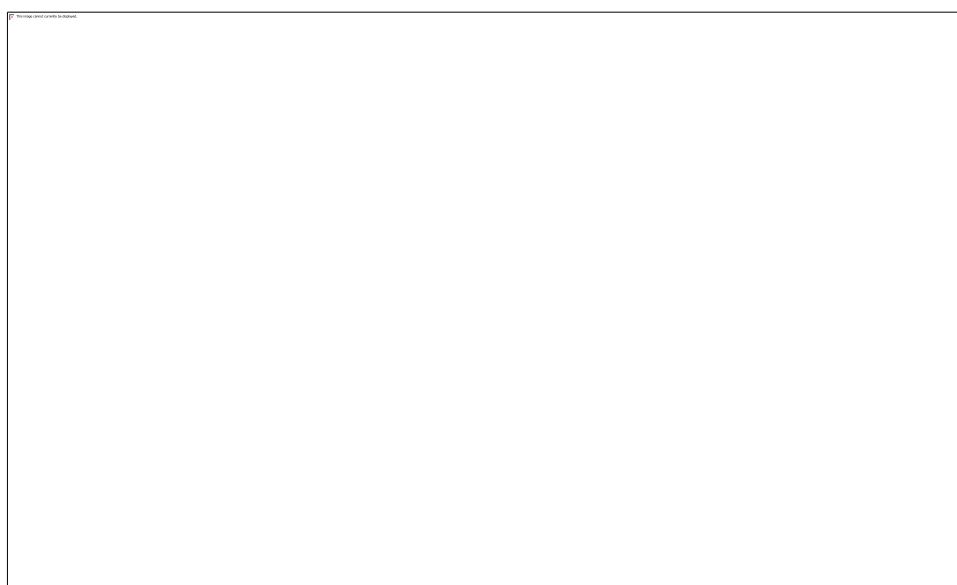
- **Section 20** is a voluntary agreement between the child and young person's parents or whoever holds parental responsibility for the child.
- **Interim care order** is an order that can be made by the court before the final hearing which allows the Local Authority to share parental

responsibility with the child's parents or whoever holds parental responsibility for the child.

- **Placement order** is an order that allows the Local Authority to place a child with prospective adopters.
- **Full care order is an order** which allows the Local Authority to share parental responsibility with the child's parents or whoever holds parental responsibility for the child until the child reaches 18 years or the care order is discharged by the court.

3.4 Outcomes for children and young people

In 2021/22 218 children and young people ceased to be looked after, compared to 170 the previous year, an increase of 28%. The breakdown of children leaving care for specified reasons in 2021/22 is below.



The chart above demonstrates that Children leaving care to live with parents or relatives is the most common outcome. This can be viewed as an illustration of positive planning for children who ultimately return to live with family.

4.0 STATUTORY REVIEWS

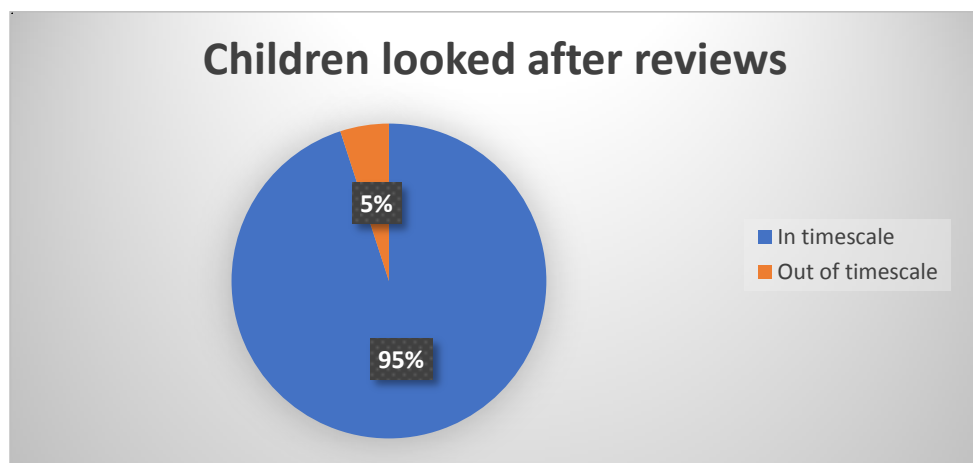
4.1 Children Looked After reviews

A total of 1682 Children's Looked After review meetings were held in 2021/22. CLA reviews are held every 6 months and therefore each looked after child will have their care plan reviewed twice per year. 95% of CLA reviews have been held in within statutory timescales and reflect the hard work and commitment of the Independent Reviewing Officers. The CLA reviews that were held out of time were due to a significant change of care plan resulting in the review needing to

be rescheduled once the care plan was determined or the carer/child asking for the review to be rearranged. These reviews whilst out of time were all completed within 1 week of the original due date.

CLA reviews have remained virtual, resulting in less travelling time and more flexibility in terms of how the review was completed through using technology, therefore performance in this area has been maintained. The data demonstrates that children are having regular independent oversight of their plan and progress against their plan in a timely manner.

The minutes of reviews continue to be written to the child and young person, avoiding the use of jargon. Ofsted recently provided positive verbal feedback regarding the quality and this style of the CLA review minutes. Ultimately giving children and young people a greater understanding of their care plans.



4.2 Achieving Permanence

The term 'achieving permanence' refers to a long-term plan for a child or young person whom is looked after by the Local Authority which has been ratified within the CLA review and agreed by the agency decision maker. In 2021/22 the end of year figure of children who had a permanence plan identified at second review was 66%. During the COVID 19 pandemic there was an increase in applications being made to the family court resulting in Local Authorities across the Merseyside region experiencing significant delays in the court process and timescales. Unfortunately this impacted upon the long-term plan for 34% of children and young people.

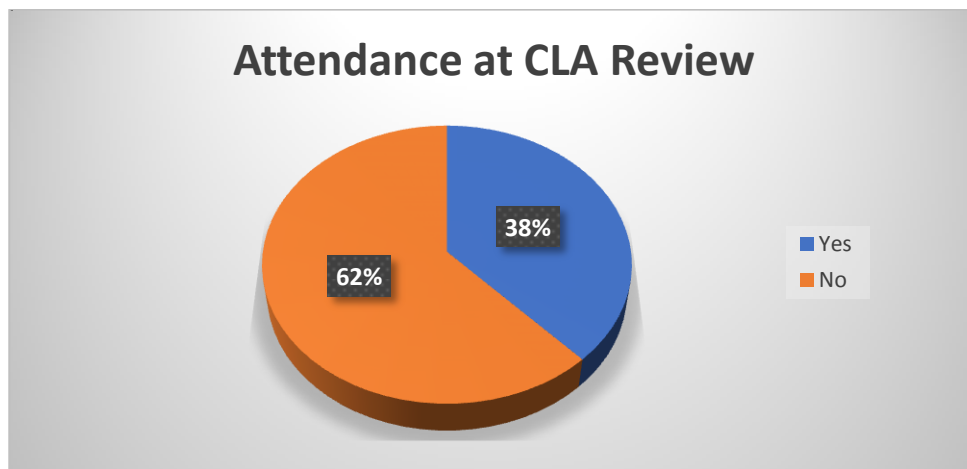
4.3 Pathway Plan Reviews

When a Looked After Child reaches 15 years and six months old, they become a Care Leaver. The Local Authority will initiate their Pathway Plan. There are two parts to a Pathway Plan. Part 1 is all about what the young person needs (leaving care assessment of need) and part 2 is all about their goals and plans. The young person's first Pathway Plan will be completed by their 16th birthday. For this year a total of 354 Pathway Plans were reviewed, 82% of reviews were

held within timescale. 18% were held out of time due to significant changes in the care plan or the carer / child requesting the review be rearranged. These reviews whilst out of time were all completed within 1 week of the original due date.

5.0 PARTICIPATION AND ADVOCACY

The primary objective of the IRO service is to ensure that children and young people are included in the decisions made about them and they actively participate in their meetings. 85% of children and young people participated in the reviews in some form this year however only 38% physically attended the review.



IRO's have regularly reported having more participation from children and young people virtually however this does seem to have translated into them actually attending their review. Most will meet via Teams or the telephone to have a consultation with their IRO - it is sometimes just the actual meeting they wish to avoid. They have also advised by meeting with their IRO they feel they have been to their review and so do not feel they need to attend.

Participation can be through completion of consultation documents, providing views via an advocate or their carers, or attendance at the review meeting. Whilst this is the recorded figure we believe the actual figure to be higher. Given the restrictions in place during that time certain IRO's had recorded that the child had not participated in their review as they were not physically present, despite them contributing their views prior to the meeting either via teams or WhatsApp. The feedback indicated that whilst these young people did not wish to attend their actual CLA review they preferred to give their views in other forms. Moving forward, all young people whom have contributed to their review will be recorded as having participated and in what form.

71% were spoken to prior to their review however only 20% were actually seen in person. This figure has been impacted by Covid 19 pandemic and the ongoing restrictions in place in certain areas at during the year. It is anticipated next years figures will be significantly higher as the impact of the pandemic decreases. The expectation is that every looked after child is seen in person by their IRO once in

between CLA reviews, (every 6 months). This will be monitored in supervision and collated in our performance data.

IRO's are beginning to hold more reviews in person however this is dependent upon an appropriate venue being identified. We are also seeing more children being visited in person and this is something we are now encouraging IRO's to do as we come out of the pandemic.

In Wirral the Children's Rights and Advocacy Service continues to be provided by Barnardo's. The contract specifically covers Advocacy support (including complaints) for Children Looked after and Care Leavers up to age 25. Advocacy support for Children aged 8 and above subject to a child protection plan Age. Children looked after foster care reviews. Provision of independent visitors for Children who are Looked After.

Within the reporting period 2021/22 87 children looked after were supported by Barnardo's in the form of Advocacy or from an Independent Visitor. With regards to feedback from children and young people -

- 100% of young people told us their voice is now being listened to and heard by professionals when decisions are being made.
- 100% of young people now feel more confident in being able to deal with any worries and difficulties on their own.
- 100 % of young people told us having an advocate has made a difference to them.
- 87.5%% of young people now know how to ask for help from other services if they need to.
- 100 % of young people said the service was helpful to them, available at the right time and that their advocate was easy to contact?
- 100 % of YP matched had contact with their IV.

5.1 What's working well

- Return to face-to-face advocacy sessions in schools.
- Advocates have attended 2 face-to-face care planning meetings to support young people.
- Queries sent to safeguarding unit such as social worker or IRO details always responded to quickly by the unit.
- Children & young people having access to advocacy support.

5.2 Challenges

- Increasing numbers of children absent from school due to isolating over recent weeks impacted on face-to-face sessions.
- Previously Social Workers and IROs were all located in Cheshire Lines, working away from the office has made some of the communication more challenging.
- Social workers and IROs need to consistently promote the advocacy service

6.0 QUALITY ASSURANCE

6.1 The Role of the IRO in Quality Assurance

The IRO's role is pivotal in providing independent monitoring of the child's care plan to ensure the children and young people achieve positive outcomes. In Wirral IRO's complete a Midpoint Review whereby they hold a meeting with the allocated social worker and discuss progression of the plan and whether recommendations from the previous review have been completed. This not only evidences their footprint but also allows them to discuss any gaps with the social worker and consider whether an escalation is required. We have seen a significant improvement in Midpoint reviews being completed this year with 1397 (83%) compared to 863 (51%) in (2020/21) being completed for this cohort. The challenge now is to ensure that the Midpoint reviews are leading to better outcomes for children and young people and prevent drift within the care plan.

6.2 Quality Assurance Framework

Quality assurance and learning improvement activity has continued during the pandemic with all planned activity being delivered, to ensure senior management oversight of the quality of service being delivered. Since July 21 IRO's have contributed to bi-monthly case file audits along with the Safeguarding unit managers conducting monthly audits. There are clear expectations that monthly audits will be completed alongside the social worker and viewed as learning opportunities and a reflective space for the practitioner.

From July 2021 to March 2022 A total of **106 audits** were completed.

Of the 106 audits the following grades were assigned:

Good	37
Requires Improvement	63
Inadequate	6

The audits revealed the following themes:

Strengths

- The quality of our social workers is high and their ability to engage with families is consistently seen to be strong.
- It is really positive that impact on child/family was the strongest area of the audit with 55% of cases being graded good for this area.
- Relationship based practice was the second area of strength at 45%.
- Case summaries are now generally presented on the consistent format and almost all observed contained a pen picture of the child.
- Assessments generally up to date.

Challenges

- Some discrepancies in staff supervision rates across social care, with the biggest challenges being experienced within the two Assessment and Intervention Services (this needs to be understood in the context of current pressures).
- Assessments continue to require development in focusing on the 'world of the adult', with this area frequently poorly understood and analysed.
- Assessments do not appear to be routinely shared with parents - certainly this is not universally recorded on files.
- Defensible decision making is not routinely embedded and this needs to be a focus if oversight is to become a significant driver of 'Good' practice, and not simply viewed as a process to be adhered to changes in Social Worker for families.

IRO practice

With regards to specific feedback for Safeguarding Unit audits have evidenced:

Strengths

- IRO oversight was mostly good in the sample audited. There was evidence of IRO's footprint on the case file with case notes being added following discussions with the allocated SW.
- In one case the IRO had raised an informal escalation with a Team Manager and actions were agreed between them, it is referenced how this approach worked well and as a result this section was graded 'good' in this example.
- Reviews were mostly held within timescales.
- Good examples highlighted where the IRO has written the minutes to the child. Examples of the child's voice being recorded within minutes.
- IROs were providing a good level of oversight and challenge in 24 of the 30 cases, in the remaining 6 there was evidence of oversight in 4, however the IROs needed to provide more challenge or escalation.
- In 15 out of 18 Placement with Parents cases there was evidence of the IRO being clear about what was needed and evidence of challenge of drift and delay.

Challenges

- Mid-point reviews were not consistently being done, evidence in some cases and not in others.
- IRO escalations were rare amongst this sample. There was evidence in some cases where escalation would have been justified.
- CLA review minutes were only written up within timescales in 16 out 30 cases audited.

What is going well for children and families includes:

- Parents and carers feel supported by the social worker and listened to.
- Most social workers are contactable either straight away or after a message is left for them.
- During the COVID 19 Pandemic, families commented that they were still supported even though the level of visits and meetings had reduced.
- Having a social worker is identified as being a way to get support for the child and family. This includes referrals to services, support with housing and support with education.
- Most families receive support from other services as well as social care with health, family support and schools being mentioned most.
- Feedback identifies that families understand the system and find it helpful to be able to see what it is that people are worried about. It provides an incentive for them to make changes and see the reds and ambers decrease and greens increase.

In an effort to strengthen our Quality Assurance activity even further audit development sessions were commissioned for all auditors in January 2022. The focus for next year will be to continue with our efforts to develop a learning culture in Wirral.

Each QA cycle has generated improvement actions which need to be embedded, supporting this are increased number of 'Operational leads' essentially practice-focused senior managers who are able to prioritise these actions and embed consistent approaches across the service. This group is now in place with clear and agreed terms of reference in addressing areas identified through quality assurance on an operational level.

7.0 DISPUTE RESOLUTION / ESCALATION PROCESS

One of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. It is expected that IROs establish positive working relationships with the social workers of the children for whom they are responsible. Where problems are identified in relation to a child's case, for example in relation to care planning, the implementation of the care plan or decisions relating to it, resources or poor practice, the IRO will, in the first instance, seek to resolve the issue informally with the social worker or the social worker's managers. The IRO should place a record of this initial informal resolution process on the child's file. If the matter is not resolved in a timescale (within 5 working days) that is appropriate to the child's needs, the IRO should consider taking formal action.

Taking into account different management structures within each local authority there are likely to be some variations in the process, but it will involve escalating the matter in dispute through a number of levels of seniority within the department with identified timescales (5 days) for a response at each stage. The IRO may bypass any stage and progress the dispute to the level s/he considers

most appropriate. The formal dispute resolution process within each Local Authority should have timescales in total of no more than 20 working days.

The IRO has the power to refer the matter to Cafcass at any point in the dispute resolution process and may consider it necessary to make a concurrent referral to Cafcass at the same time that s/he instigates the dispute resolution process.

The individual IRO is personally responsible for activating the dispute resolution process, even if this step may not be in accordance with the child's wishes and feelings, but may, in the IRO's view, be in accordance with the best interest and welfare of the child, as well as his/her human rights.

There will be times when the IRO may be advised that obstacles in the way of resolving the issue are outside or beyond the control of the local authority, for example in relation to staffing, interagency or resources issues. However, if these are impacting on the ability of the department to meet the needs of a child as identified in the child's care plan, the IRO should continue to escalate the issue. The IRO should ensure that all actions s/he takes in an attempt to resolve a dispute are recorded on the child's case record.

7.1 Development of the Escalation process in Wirral

Formal Escalation Forms are now embedded within Liquid Logic. Categories of Escalation are:

- **Failure to Adhere to statutory requirements**

Examples of this could include statutory visits, core groups, not taking place in a timely manner, care / pathway plans of poor quality, reports not including required information, reports not available or not shared with parent/carer.

- **Drift & Delay**

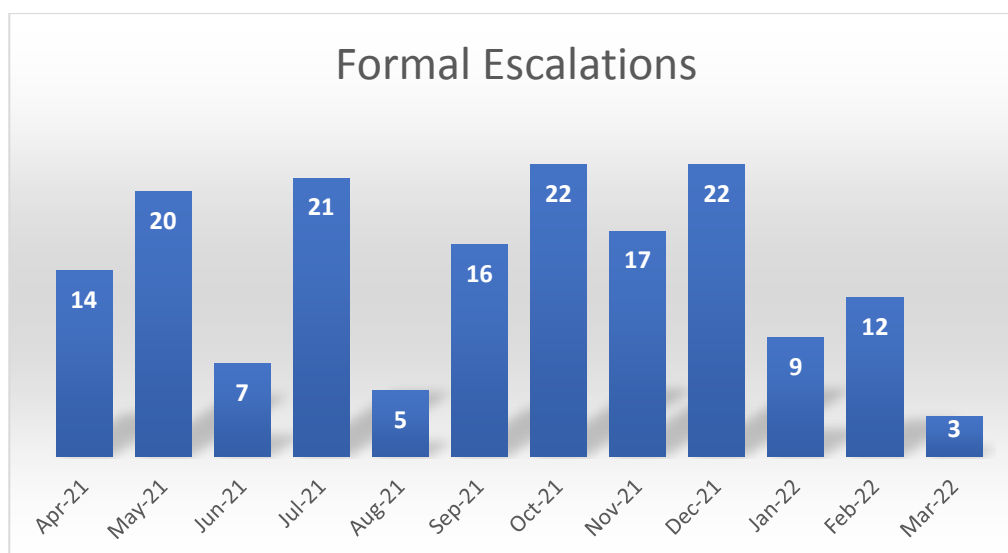
Examples of this could include drift in plan of permanence, actions from CP/CLA reviews not being completed.

- **Disagreement in Services**

An example of this could be where the IRO does not agree with the care plan. It's okay to disagree but this needs to be formally recorded on the child's file.

- **Safeguarding**

An example of this would be where the Social Worker has not responded appropriately/timely to a safeguarding concern.



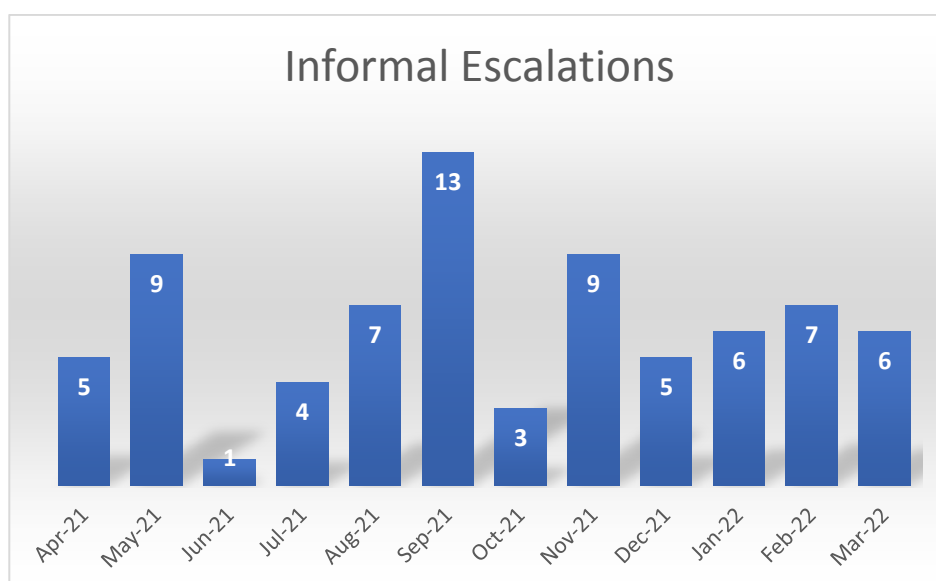
Over the last year we have seen 170 Formal escalations raised. The majority of these escalations (75%) were raised due to concerns regarding drift and delay and Statutory requirements not being met. The number of formal escalations completed has increased this year with only 97 being completed the previous year. However, given the number of looked after children in Wirral it would be expected that more formal escalations are being raised.

The recent Ofsted Focused visit found that whilst the input of IROs is evident in case records, these do not evidence that issues are escalated to managers when relevant or that they lead to actions that reduce delay for children. As a result, not all care plans progress in a timescale that is right for the child. This is something that managers within unit are aware of and are continuing to address. We now have much more robust performance data in this area which includes informal and formal escalations. The escalation form has also been amended to allow IRO's to open escalations and resolve them in a timely manner.

It has been found that escalations are not being consistently used across the team with 4 IRO's accounting for 60% of the escalation activity in the past year. The unit recognises that this is an area we need to strengthen. IRO's need to ensure that escalations are raised in a timely manner and lead to positive outcomes for the children of Wirral and strengthen practice. This is an area that is continually monitored through the monthly performance report by management within the unit and discussed in each supervision. Performance in this area has improved and the unit is escalating more cases appropriately and in a timely manner.

Equally important in the escalation process is how quickly they are responded to and the attitude to the raising of escalations across the service. It is positive to note that out of the escalations raised only 4 were not resolved within the 20 days timescale and most often resolved at Head of Service level. This evidences that when escalations are raised, they are responded to in a timely manner.

We have seen 74 Informal Escalations raised over this period, see breakdown below.



It is positive to note that these escalations were resolved without requiring a formal escalation. This evidences that the concern was responded to quickly and avoided any negative impact upon the child or young person. The majority of these escalations (32%) related to concern regarding drift and delay of the care plan. Failing to adhere to statutory duties accounted for 21% of the escalations however were rectified and responded to before they had any negative impact upon the child or young person. It is positive to note that only 9% of these escalations resulted from concerns regarding safeguarding issues. These escalations were responded to and resolved quickly.

8.0 IMPACT OF COVID 19

During 2021-22 the Coronavirus pandemic continued to impact upon the work within the Safeguarding unit and continued to present challenges. It was recognised that virtual meetings, especially for initial child protection conferences were not supportive of engagement with families. Virtual meetings also presented risks around confidentiality along with a lack of emotional support for families following the meeting.

Over the past year the unit has worked hard to identify a suitable venue for hybrid meetings to be held safely. The safeguarding unit is holding all Initial child protection conferences at Rock Ferry with the IRO, minute taker, Allocated SV and family present in the meeting. Other professionals have the option of joining the meeting virtually however we are now encouraging other agencies to join in person. The ICPC's have been running in a hybrid format since 28/2/22 and feedback has been very positive.

Children Looked After Review meetings remain mainly virtual, with the IRO ensuring prior contact with the child to gain their views and wishes regarding the facilitation of the meeting, including how they wish to be involved or have their views advocated on their behalf. All workers have shown inventive ways of

engaging children such as using What's App and video calls. However, as we move away from COVID19 restrictions, IROs are now visiting children in person and holding some CLA review meetings face to face, dependent upon a suitable venue being identified and subject to risk assessment.

9.0 SUMMARY

9.1 What has gone well

- We have chaired 1682 Child looked after reviews this year.
- We have reviewed 354 Pathway plans this year.
- 95% of all reviews were held in statutory timescale.
- 85% of children looked after participated in the reviews this year.
- IROs have started holding some CLA reviews (where appropriate in person). Since January 22 visits have increased to see children across their caseloads.
- The Safeguarding unit has put in place a performance report which can now track the IRO's compliance with the Practice Standards based on the standards encompassed the IRO Handbook.
- The Strengthening Families Enhancing Futures (SFEF) Model is embedded into practice.
- We continue to have a longstanding stable team within the Safeguarding Unit.
- The IRO's are now participating in monthly case file audits.
- Ofsted were complimentary regarding quality and style of the CLA review minutes.

9.2 What we need to strengthen

- Whilst child participation in their review is 85%, we remain keen to improve attendance figures at CLA Reviews and a focus moving forward with regards to engagement.
- Sufficiency of placements is a continuing cause of concern regarding achieving stability and permanency.
- Escalations are not consistently raised when practice concerns are identified. The management group are clear that there is a higher degree of dialogue and challenge between the unit and social care however this is not consistently recorded as part of the IRO footprint and oversight. Focus in the coming year will be to ensure that all IRO's have a good understanding of their statutory duties and responsibilities with regards to escalations.
- Whilst Midpoint reviews are being undertaken we need to ensure that they are meaningful, ensuring the child's needs are met and preventing drift and delay.

10.0 KEY PRIORITIES FOR 2022/23

Objective	Impact	Measures of success	Actions
Provide children with a variety of methods to participate in their review and encourage physical attendance	More children will attend their review meetings and take part in the actual review	Children and young people will feedback that they enjoyed their review and felt it was their meeting. Increased numbers of children participating in their review evidenced within the checklist	Provision of options to the child ahead of the review. Increased Face to face meetings IRO's will ensure that they are seeing children and young people in person before every review and that their views are clearly recorded. Children and young people will also be encouraged to attend their CLA review. If they refuse then alternative methods will be used to ensure their views are sought.
Ensure all children understand the role of the IRO and what the child looked after review meeting is about	Children will know their IRO and have a relationship with them to ensure they take part in the review	When asked children will be able to name their IRO and what they do and what can be achieved from their cared for review	For IROs to increase face to face visits to children and to keep in touch with them on a regular basis.

Maintain audit and quality assurance activity to improve practice standards and support improved practice across children's social care.	Practice standards will improve and the impact of the IRO in relation to the experience they will bring to auditing activity will bring about shared goals and understanding of what good looks like. Networks and supportive relationships will be developed	Practice improvement will be clear from audit activity more audits will be good	<p>IROs to partake in monthly audit activity with team managers across the service.</p> <p>IRO's to become more 'visible' as we move towards more face to face meetings and have a presence in order to maintain good links with individual Team Managers and Social Workers.</p>
Improve the progress in children and young people's care plans to prevent drift and delay	Children and Young people will have robust SMART care plans that fully meet their needs.	Delay and drift in plans will be reduced and outcomes for children and young people will improve	<p>IRO's to ensure recommendations from reviews are SMART and tracked by the IRO with clear escalation when not achieved as agreed.</p> <p>Increase number of Midpoint reviews to ensure IRO footprint is evident on the child's file and that plans are tracked and progressed.</p>
Focus on achieving permanency at the second review.	Children will achieve early permanency with fewer placement moves	More plans of permanency will be achieved by the four-month review	IRO's to complete the quality assurance on each new case will give opportunity to highlight any missing information such as a genogram to enable good

	<p>All options will be considered early in planning including the option of Special Guardianship to a connected person where possible</p>	<p>IROs will identify any gaps in the Children and Family Assessment at the first review</p> <p>IROs will identify family members to be considered at the first review</p>	<p>preparation for the review.</p> <p>IROs to raise formal escalations if a permanency plan is not achieved at the second review due to practice being below standard</p>
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