

# **Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report**

**April 2023-March 2024**

## **CONTENTS**

### **FOREWORD**

#### **1.SERVICE AND LEGAL CONTEXT**

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

**1.2 Profile of the IRO Service in Wirral**

**1.3 IRO Capacity**

**1.4 IRO Learning and Development**

**1.5 Regional and local links**

#### **2.OUR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE DATA 2023/24**

**2.1 Our Children and Young People Population - Children living in Wirral**

**2.2 Profile of Our Children and Young People as at 31 March 2024**

**2.3 Legal status of our Children at 31 March 2024**

**2.4 Specific groups of young people**

**2.5 Outcomes for Children & Young People**

#### **3.OUR CHILDREN STATUTORY REVIEWS**

**3.1 Timeliness of child looked after Reviews**

**3.2 Achieving Permanence**

**3.3 Focus of child looked after reviews**

**3.4 LADO**

#### **4.PARTICIPATION & ENGAGEMENT**

**4.1 IRO Engagement & Visits to Children & Young People**

**4.2 Participation and Engagement of Children in Our Children Reviews**

### **4.3 Advocacy**

### **4.4 What our children, families and professionals tell us:**

## **5.QUALITY ASSURANCE**

### **5.1 The role of IRO in Quality Assurance**

### **5.2 Quality Assurance Framework**

### **5.3 Disputes Resolutions**

### **5.4 IRO Oversight**

## **6.OUTCOMES & IMPACT OF THE SERVICE 2023/24**

### **6.1 Progress made in 2023/24**

## **7.KEY PRIORITIES 2024/25**

## **FOREWORD**

The Annual Report provides an account of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024. It evaluates the effectiveness and impact of the IRO Service in the planning and outcomes for Our Children and Young and ensuring that Wirral Local Authority as a Corporate Parent is fulfilling its statutory responsibilities towards them and remains ambitious in what we achieve with Our Children in Wirral. IROs have a pivotal role to play in ensuring that care plans for children effectively address their needs, consider our children and young people's ascertainable views and opinions, and improve outcomes for them. The aftermath of the global pandemic continues to enable us to find different ways to connect with children and young people. The report demonstrates the continuous development of the IRO Service over the last year and its role in the continuous journey of practice development in Wirral.

### **1. SERVICE AND LEGAL CONTEXT**

#### **1.1 THE ROLE OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER (IRO)**

The role of the IRO is set within a legal context and the framework of the IRO Handbook 2010. The appointment by local authorities of an IRO is a statutory requirement. The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that the care plans for Our Children and Young People fully reflect their needs, ensures that their wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the Local Authority's statutory responsibilities. The statutory duties of the IRO are set out in Section 25B (1) of the Children Act 1989 which are to

- Monitor the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to the child's case.
- Participate in any review of the child's case.
- Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority.
- Perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

The IRO Handbook clearly sets out the statutory roles and duties as well as the strategic and managerial responsibilities of Local Authorities in establishing an effective IRO Service. There are two clear and separate aspects to the function of an IRO outlined in the handbook, which are (i) to chair the child's review meeting and (ii) monitoring the child's progress on an ongoing basis.

#### **1.2 PROFILE OF THE IRO SERVICE IN WIRRAL**

The IRO Service in Wirral sits within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit. The service is managed independently of children's Social Work line management and is therefore offering an appropriate level of independence that enables the service to effectively challenge the practice, plans, arrangements, and impact for Our Children by the Local Authority. The Head of Service for Safeguarding and Practice Improvement reports directly to the Assistant Director of Children's Services. In Wirral we have a team of 18 divided into 11 IROs and 7 CP Chairs who are based within the Safeguarding Children Unit. They are a skilled, knowledgeable, and passionate team, who have a great deal of experience working with children, young people, their families and carers. 2 members of our team hold the post of Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO). 1 member of the team is a Foster Care Reviewing Officer (FIRO). They oversee planning for children who are in our care including those who are privately fostered or placed at home with a Supervision Order.

Separating the role of CP Chair and IRO has allowed us to reduce caseloads from 2022/2023. IRO's now have caseloads of around 70 children throughout the year of 2023/24. This is more in line with recommendations and best practice guidance. This will ensure good quality oversight between reviews to monitor the progress of care planning and children achieving plans of permanence.

The team of IROs is a stable one and 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. Our children will experience the diversity of their inheritance reflected in the people who are planning with them and who can act as role models and support their ambitions.

We have a dedicated Business Support unit which is the backbone of the service. They provide note taking for all our child protection conferences, LADO meetings and Pre-Secure Review meetings. There has been a real focus this year on the timeliness of notes shared with families which is the mechanism by which families have a written record of discussion and agreed outcomes and recommendations in a timely way. The completion of notes have been tracked weekly to ensure these are shared no later than 20 day point. We write our notes and Child Protection Plans narratively to the child. This has been identified as good practice from our neighbouring Local Authorities and also aligns with Wirral's Systemic Practice model.

Business support is a valued area and one which has seen monumental challenges in the year 2023/2024. Staff shortages and sickness has impacted the Safeguarding units ability to hold meetings where a minute taker is necessary. This is a key area of focus for 2024/25 as Wirral implement changes as part of their wider enabling services review process. This will include moving all business support officers to a central business support hub.

## **1.4 IRO Capacity**

In 2023/24 IROs in Wirral chaired 1694 reviews. Service resourcing throughout the year has aimed to ensure that there was an adequate number of IROs in post enabling the service to have sufficient capacity to deliver effective reviews for our children. We have worked hard to maintain caseloads within the range of 50 - 70 children as recommended in the IRO Handbook. We are committed to caseload levels remaining under 70 per IRO to provide the capacity to carry out the duties and functions to a high standard, including sufficient oversight and challenge.

This has had a positive impact on the service with the average caseload at the end of March 2024 being 65, which is a significant decrease from the previous year when the average caseload was 77. This also allows us to have clear and ambitious expectations of staff for delivering a quality service for children and young people.

## **1.5 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.

IROs continued to receive supervision six weekly in 2023/2024. Supervision provided the IROs with an opportunity to reflect on planning, progress and outcomes for our children and the pro forma agenda reflects the Systemic Practice Model to ensure supervision is strength based. All IROs continued to have the opportunity to plan their learning and development in their annual Check In in line with Wirral Borough Council policy. IROs continue to have open access to expert advice through the provision of independent legal advice from Liverpool council and this is seen as a benefit to the IRO service. We know that generally IROs make most use of the independent advice to consider whether an escalation is required at a more senior level regarding a specific element of the Care Plan. An example of the impact of this is the use of Section 20. There have been several legal advice consultations around the appropriate use of Section 20, which led to a specific briefing at a Development Day to consider the shared understanding of the use of Section 20, patterns in practice and the effect on permanency planning for children. This led to greater consistency in understanding and applying case law, and more appropriate challenge and discussion with operational services.

Due to the complexity of S20 cases and need for consistent oversight, the Practice Improvement Team undertake quarterly dip sampling of all S20 cases. The last report was produced on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2023. The areas that are looked at consisted of:

- Decision making

- Management oversight
- Parental consent
- Child's voice
- Reviews
- Appropriateness

This report found that IRO oversight was visible on the children's files, reviews were in timescales and there was clear footprint. One area of learning was that for some children discussions around the meaning of S20 was not evident on the file. These conversations need to be happening and then recorded clearly. This has been shared with IROs so that this can be driven forward.

In 2023/24 we had hoped to continue to support staff to undertake the accredited IRO Advanced Practitioner course. However, the course was postponed. Moving forward to 2024/25 we will have six of our experienced IROs attending the course delivered by Edgehill University. Given we have a number of staff who have completed this already, we continue to benefit from their learning and development in:

- Critical analysis of their role as an IRO with reference to current legislative, policy and guidance frameworks for Our Children in England.
- Critical analysis of the effective approaches to risk assessment and management.
- effective approaches to planning, delivering and evaluation of care and support for Our Children.
- Reflection and evaluation of IROs practice for Our Children to identify strengths and areas for effective professional development.

A development day was held in collaboration with the Practice Improvement Team which looked at the role of the CP Chair and how we can practice systemically within the unit.

Our IROs have completed Systemic Practice training which is Wirral's practice model. IROs also continually improve their knowledge and practice by attending regular training events such as Trauma Informed Practice and Substance Misuse.

Performance meetings are also held monthly which focus on performance data and learning from Audits and offering IROs the opportunity to discuss what is working well and what we would like to improve upon. Staff also have the opportunity to attend Staff Engagement Sessions led by the Senior Management Team and Learning and Celebration events.

Moving into 2024/25 we will be investing in Quality Assurance Training for all IRO's through the Practice Improvement Team. We will continue to upskill our workforce to ensure our 'birds eye view' on practice has a quality assurance focus. We will be in a

position to offer guidance, advice and professional challenge with regards to improving practice.

### **1.6 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 IRO Managers Group shares data and good practice across the North West Local Authorities. The IRO management team are integral to several panels in the Social Work Service 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 the Permanence Panel, MACE Panel and MAPPA meetings. IROs were linked to specific teams in Wirral 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 in their allocated area and this continued using virtual platforms to connect including Team Manager Forum. Moving forward into 2024/25 we wish to improve this connectivity with increased participation in quality assurance activity. The use of informal dispute resolution has also decreased the need for more formal escalations at times.

We are also part of the Child Death Overview Panel (CDOP) for the North West region and chair all of Wirral's SUDIC reviews and ALTE reviews.

## **2.OUR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE DATA**



## IF WIRRAL HAD 100 CHILDREN



## DISPARITY IN WIRRAL

Great disparity exists across the borough, meaning that children and young persons life chances and experiences are markedly different depending on where they live in the borough. This information is illustrated below using data drawn from affluent wards in West Wirral and much more deprived wards in East Wirral. The east and west wards lie less than 6 miles apart from each other.

### West Wirral

I live in an affluent ward in West Wirral. I am **less likely** (below England average) to develop a serious health problem. I can expect to live until I am about **83**.

Families living in West Wirral are likely to be at least £17,000 a year **better off** than families living in East Wirral. Only **3%** of children in here live below the poverty line.

Educational attainment at all ages in West Wirral is **above** the national average. **49%** of 19 year olds are in higher education.

Children here are **6 times less likely** than those in East Wirral to be subject to a child protection plan. **7%** of children in my ward are subject to a CP plan.

Children living in my ward are **25 times less likely** to be taken into care as a child looked after than the most deprived ward in Birkenhead

### East Wirral

I live in a ward in Birkenhead. I am **more likely** (above England average) as someone living in West Wirral to develop a serious health problem. I can expect to live until I am about **74**.

My family is **ten times** more likely to live below the **poverty line** compared with families in West Wirral. Nearly **39%** of children in my ward live in poverty.

Educational attainment at all ages in east Wirral is **below** the national average. **29%** of 19 year olds are in higher education.

Children here are **6 times more likely** than those in West Wirral to be subject to a Child Protection plan. **40%** of children in my ward are subject to a CP plan.

Children living in my ward are **4 times more likely** to have some involvement with statutory children's services than children living in West Wirral.

The latest Office for National Statistics data about income deprivation (December 2022) reveals that Wirral is the 38th most income deprived LA area (out of 316). And, of the 206 neighbourhoods in Wirral, 65 were among the 20 per cent most income-deprived in England. However, 27 neighbourhoods were in the 20 per cent least income-deprived in England, highlighted the disparity which exists across the borough.

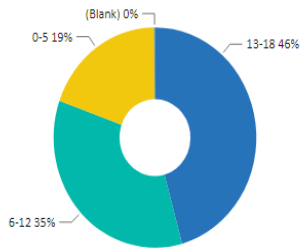
In the least deprived neighbourhood on Wirral, 1.4% of people are estimated to be income-deprived. In the most deprived neighbourhood, 58.1% of people are estimated to be income-deprived. The difference between those two neighbourhoods is 56.7% and that is the internal disparity figure. Wirral has one of the widest internal disparity figures in the country, and closing this disparity gap remains a challenge for all partners.

## 2.2 Profile of Our Children

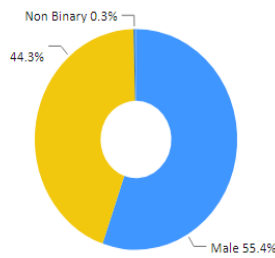
The Department for Education has set figures for the numbers of children who are looked after based on population figures per 10,000. The benchmark set being 83.2 – 95. However, our figures report 116.6 at the end of the year.

In relation to the children in care we serve, as of March 2024 Wirral had 766 looked after. The overall number has decreased from 810 on 31 March 2023. The majority of children and young people (46%) aged between 13-18.

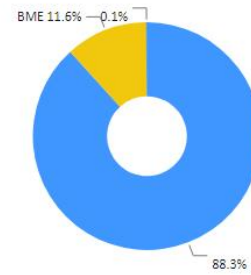
Children Looked After by Age ...



Children Looked After by Gender

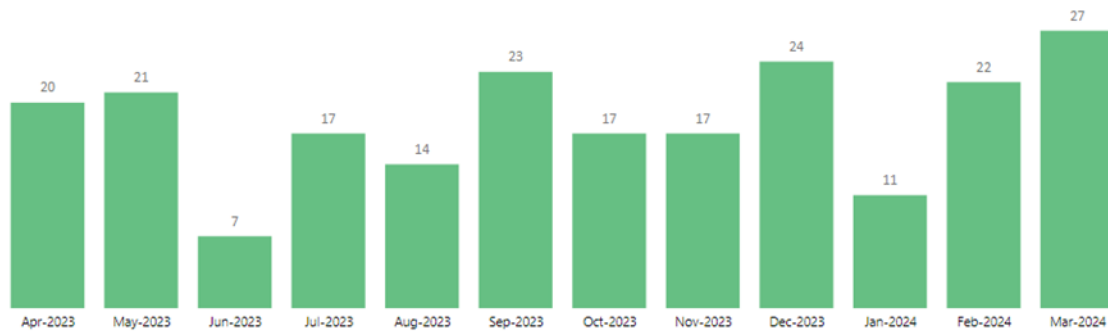


Children Looked After by Ethnic...



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 February and March 2024. The majority of these children (33%) left care to return to parents, relatives or other family members. This can be viewed as an illustration of positive planning for children who ultimately return to live with family.

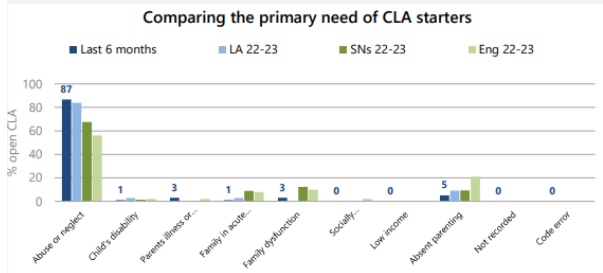
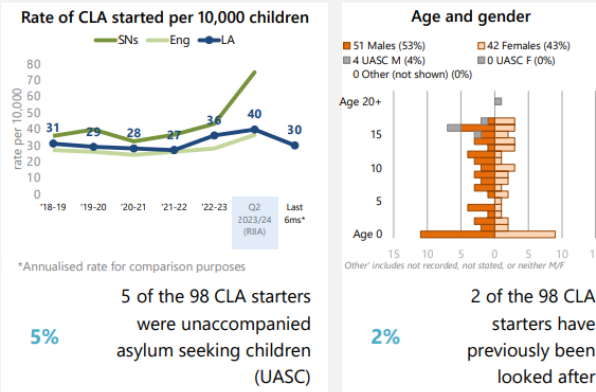
Children Ceasing to be Looked After by Date



**Snap shot of the data and where Wirral compare to our statutory neighbours and England as a whole from October 2023 – April 2024.**

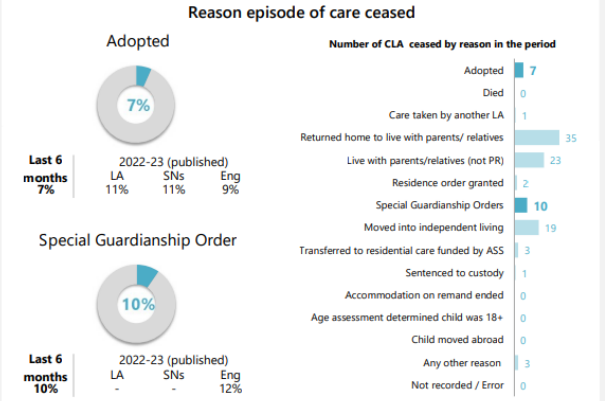
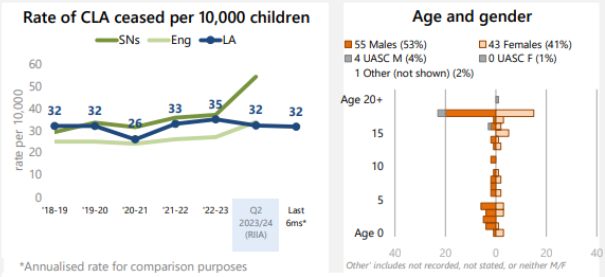
It is important to note that the data shows that Wirral is now in line with our statutory neighbours but above the England national average.

## 98 CLA started in the last 6 months



Children's services Analysis Tool (ChAT) V8.2 - Data to Insight

## 104 CLA ceased in the last 6 months

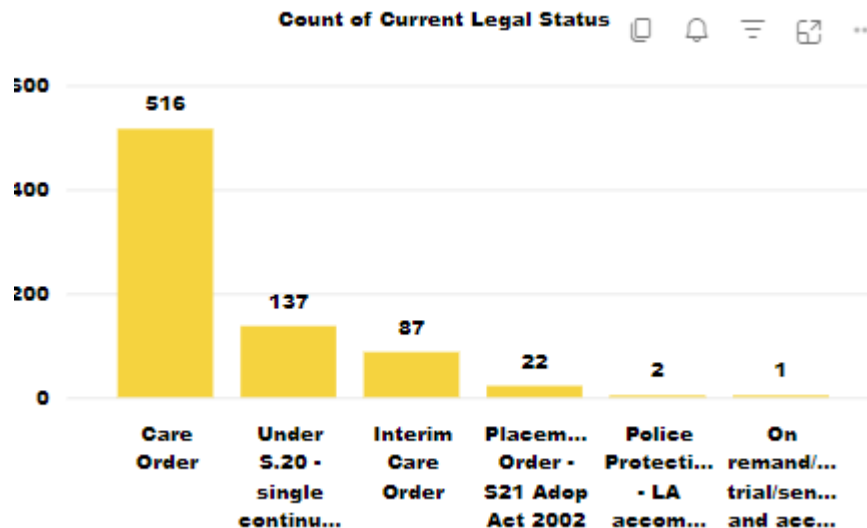


### Children Looked After (CLA)

Total CLA in the last 6 months	881	881	→	The number of children looked after has increased from previous month. Compared to last year, there has been an increase in the number of children ceasing to be looked after and returning to their family home.
CLA started in the last 6 months	98	99	↓	
CLA ceased in the last 6 months	104	104	→	CLA rate per 10,000 is at 118 - in line with statistical neighbours but above the national.
Current children looked after (snapshot)	777	772	↑	

## 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 (87 children) or a full care order (516). 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.

The chart above demonstrates that Children leaving care to live with parents or relatives is the most common outcome.

### 3.OUR CHILDREN STATUTORY REVIEWS

#### 3.1 Timeliness of Our Children Reviews

In 2023/24 91% of Looked after Children Reviews were held in timeframe.

Last year this was 92%

This is a slight change from the previous year's figure. However, there continues to be the focus on improving this in 2024/25 towards our target figure of 100%.

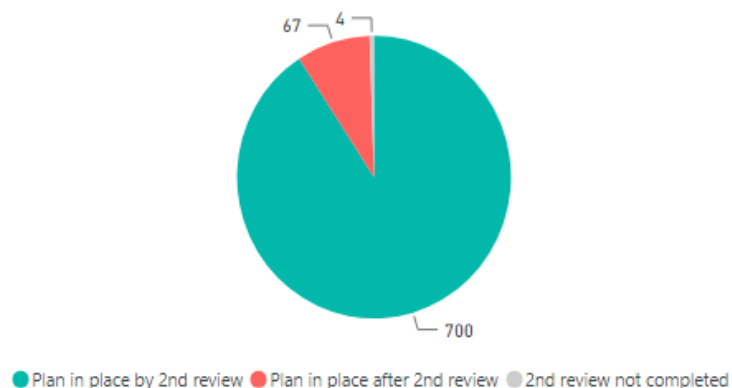
This change could be attributed to the move towards holding the majority of reviews face to face. Challenges with venues and attendance have impacted our figures, however, what we are seeing is that the quality of meetings has improved in terms of: discussions, understanding and future planning. In the last 12 months 1694 reviews were held with in person (51%). In 2024/2025 we want to see this figure increase to 80%. The internal process standards we have implemented now mean that we should be seeing all of our children, under the age of 10, in person.

49% of reviews continued to be held virtually and this was for a variety of reasons including: at the request of the child, at the request of family or children being placed at a distance.

The minutes of reviews continue to be written to the child and young person, avoiding the use of jargon. Ultimately giving children and young people a greater understanding of their care plans. Our children and young people are all sent a copy of their minutes from reviews.

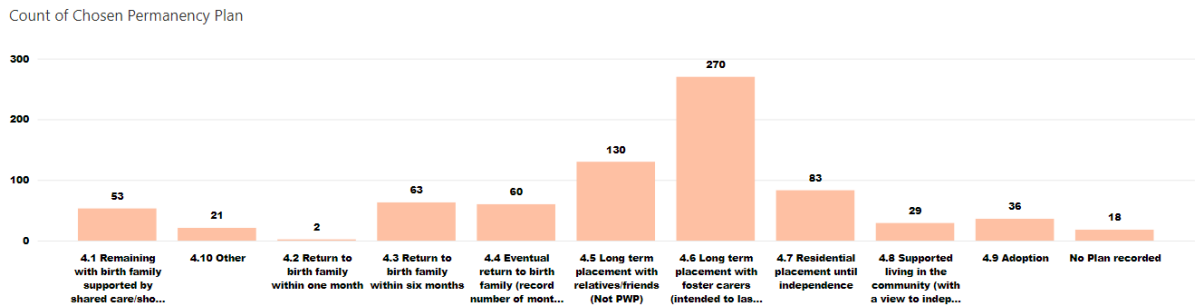
### 3.2 Achieving Permanency for Children and young people

Permanence Plan in place by 2nd review

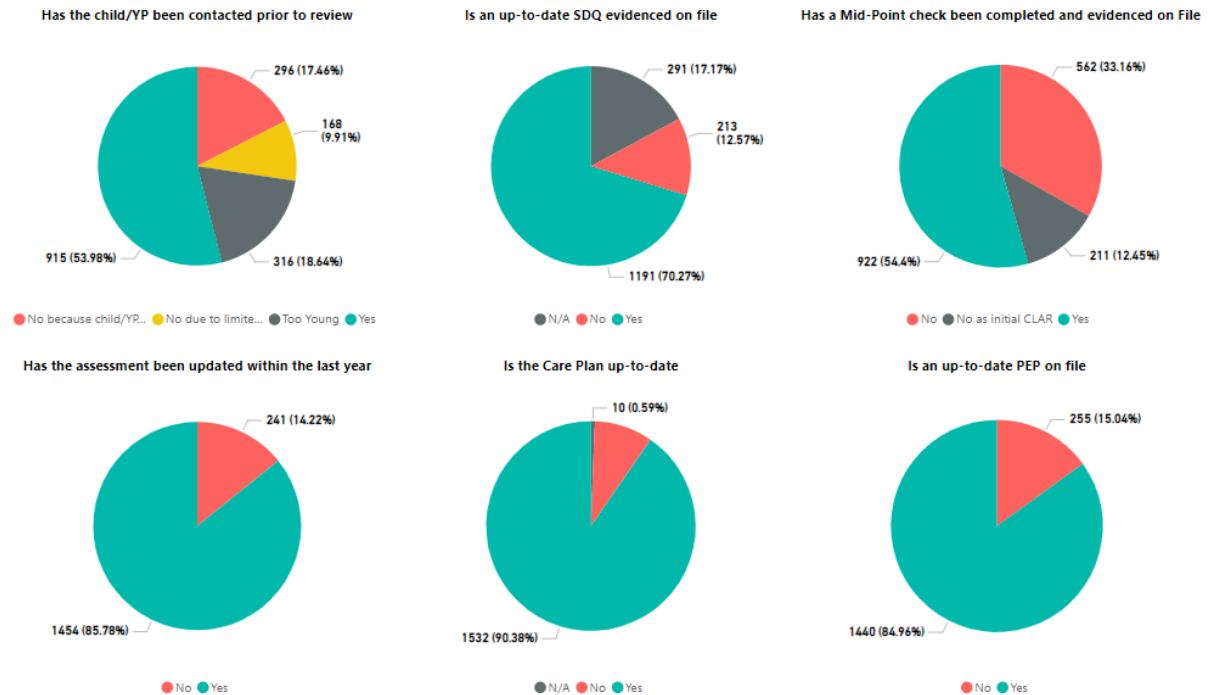


In 2023/24 the end of year figure of children who had a permanence plan identified at the second review was 90%. This is a marked improvement upon the previous years figure of 55%. The expectation is that a Care Planning meeting with focus upon Permanence is held before the child's second review which informs the Care Plan. IROs should be ensuring this takes place. We know this is an area of required improvement for robust planning for children and young people. We know that Social Workers consider the primary and contingency plan for children, but this needs to be clearly and consistently evidenced. The outcome of this for children is that more

children will have secure permanency plans in place by their second review. Broken down below are the plans of permanence for our children and young people.



### 3.3 FOCUS AREAS OF THE CHILD LOOKED AFTER REVIEWS:



The educational needs for our looked after children is a focus area for IROs. For our cohort of children who require an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP) IROs ensure EHCP assessments are progressed in a timely manner and once completed are

recorded on the child's file. The IRO's also consider the EHCP plan ensuring needs are reflected in My Journey plans.

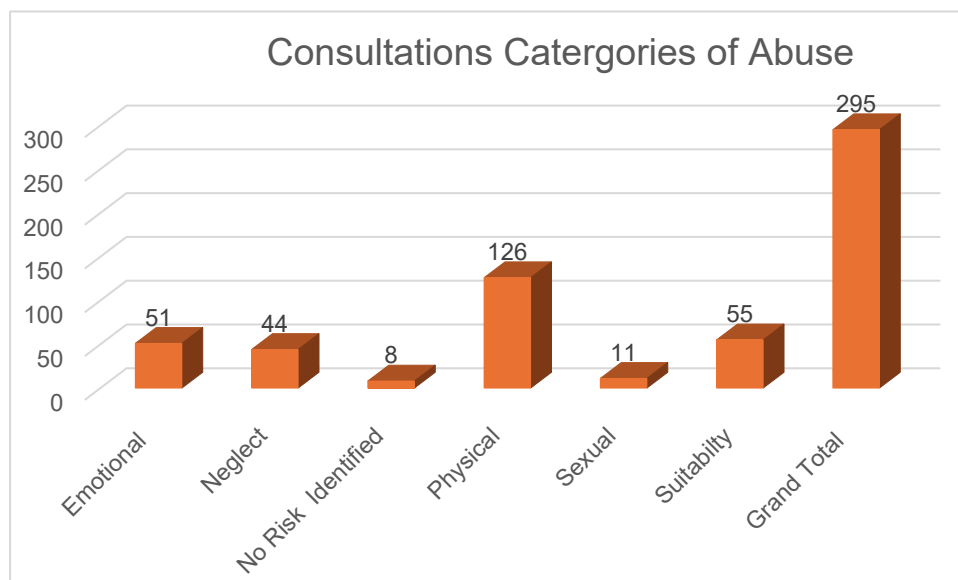
### 3.4 LADO

Wirral has two full time Designated Officers. One of the officer's key role is to focus on referrals from education. 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.

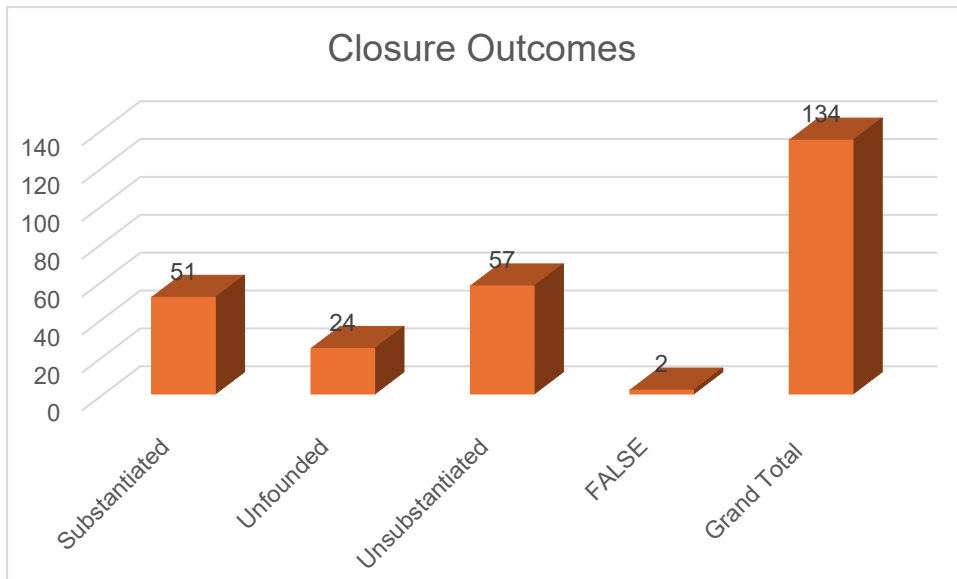
When the LADO is not available the Duty IRO or Managers within the unit act on behalf of the LADO to ensure there is no delay and maintain a level of independence required in exercising the role. Following recommendations from a serious case review 'Scarlett', a new system has been implemented to ensure 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.

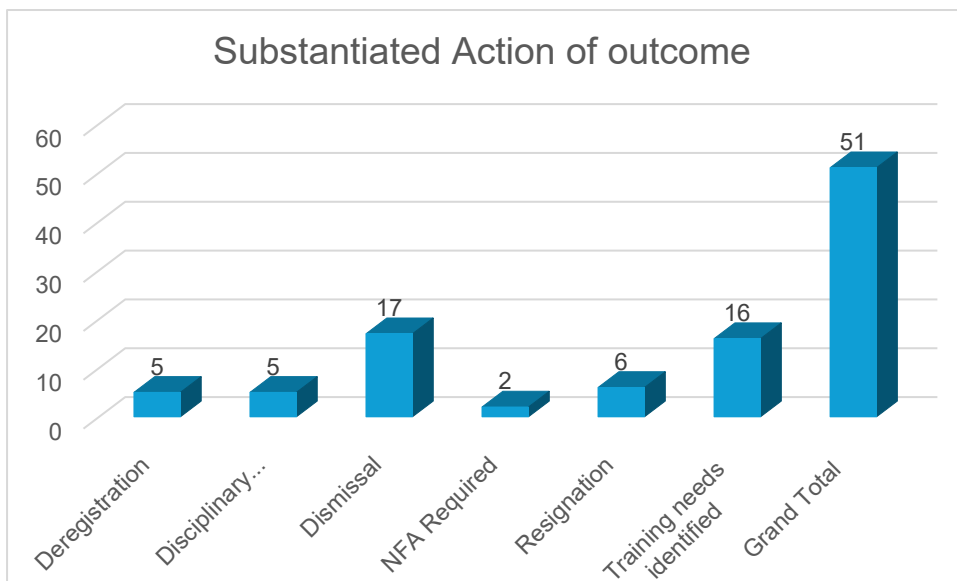
In 2023/2024 there were 295 contacts.



Out of the 295 consultations, the majority was around physical abuse.



Out of the 134 cases that concluded, 51 (38%) were substantiated.



Of the 51 Allegation closed as Substantiated, 20 were referred to DBS/regulatory body as appropriate.

Of the 20 referred to DBS

Dismissal -13 –

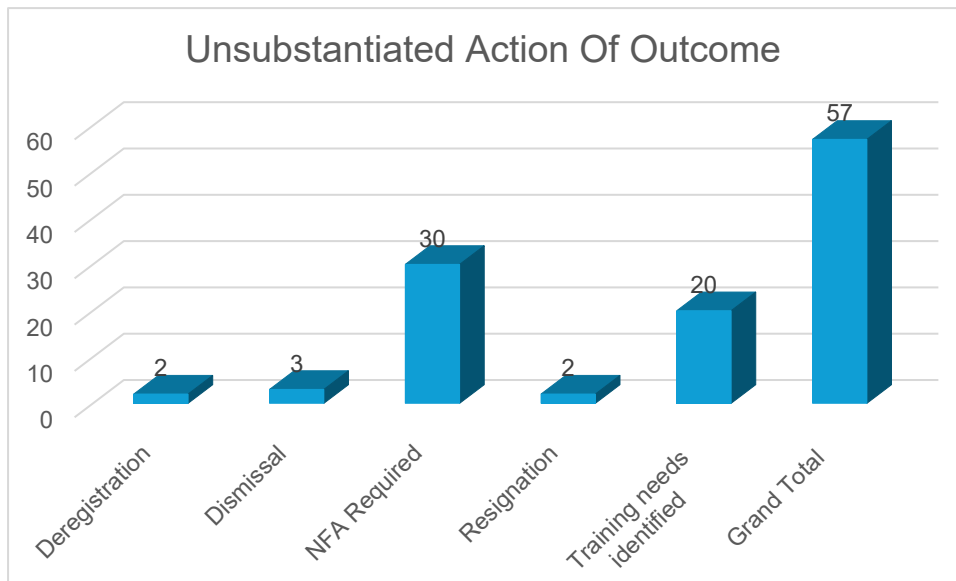
Deregistration -3

Resignation-3

Disciplinary Procedures -1



Of the 62% of allegations that were not substantiated the following action took place:



Of these 57 unsubstantiated allegations :

30 identified that there was no further action that needed to be taken.

20 identified that there were further training needs required

3 resulted in the individual being dismissed from post

2 resulted in deregistration of foster carers

2 led to the individuals resigning from their position.

## 4.PARTICIPATION & ENGAGEMENT

### 4.1 IRO engagement & Visits to Children & Young People

A key part of the IRO role is to ensure that children have been consulted about their views and have their wishes and feelings given due consideration in plans for their care. During the global pandemic we took the decision that this would take place using virtual methods and this was carried out in a variety of ways by IROs ringing carers and young people and arranging video calls or telephone calls. During 2023/24 we continued to use these methods however, this year IROs have focused upon encouraging our children to participate in face-to-face visits and attend their meetings in person. Thus ensuring that maintaining meaningful relationships with children is underpinned by practice that promotes this.

867 visits have been undertaken to our children.

There were 111 failed visits.

For 2024/25 how we capture recording of visits will be adapted and this will allow us to detail the number of visits in person and those which were undertaken virtually.

This year some children declined a visit with the IRO within six weeks prior to the review. When children do not wish to see their IRO a range of alternative methods are offered to ensure they can share their views, set their agenda and be able to influence their care plans. Some children decline the visit choosing instead to attend their review and share their views themselves. Others agree to speak to the IRO on the day before their meeting starts. Every effort is made to ensure the child's voice can be heard, ideally directly from them, but some children choose to ask their Social Worker, parent, foster carer, teacher or advocate to share their views on their behalf.

#### **4.2 Participation and Engagement of Children in Our Children Reviews**

The key priority for Wirral and a primary objective of the IRO service is to ensure children are central to the decisions made about them and that they actively participate in the meetings about their care plans. A key element in delivering this objective is the measure of the young person's participation in the Statutory Review of their care plan and care arrangements. IROs have worked hard and creatively over this period by being in contact with children face to face, over telephone, text, emails, WhatsApp to ensure that children participate and engage in their reviews in a way that is meaningful and that their voices are heard using a variety of methods.

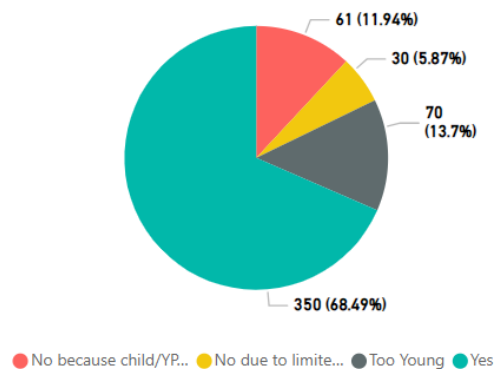
Overall participation/engagement in the review process has remained stable at 82% and whilst this represents a slight decrease from last year's figure of 85% this is positive and reflects the dedication of the IROs in Wirral to ensure that children are given every opportunity to engage through a variety of methods. There had been some anecdotal evidence suggested that the use of technology for children had meant that the participation was greater, however this does not reflect any increase in attendance and the slight dip may be due to Wirral's move towards face-to-face visits and reviews.

1695 reviews were held in this period

51% of reviews were held in person. This is a considerable move forward from the previous year and a move towards the units 2024/25 target of 80%. This will incorporate a minimum expectation of 1 face to face meeting per year and 2 in person visits in between. As stated earlier, our expectation is that all children under the age of 10 are visited in person.

30% of children attended their review, which is a significant increase from last years 20%. Whilst this figure remains lower than our target it is encouraging that children are feeling able to move away from virtual participation. This may well be beneficial for younger children who can struggle to participate meaningfully in a virtual setting. However, for our older children, this remains an option as we accept that they may feel more comfortable.

Out of the 70% of children who did not attend their reviews: 20% were too young, 14% had limited understanding and 36% did not wish to attend.



68% of children were contacted prior to their review to contribute their views.

14% of children were too young to attend or participate in their review.

6% of children did not attend or contribute due to having a limited understanding.

12% of children did not attend or share their views with the review meeting, stating that they did not wish to engage with the IRO. A key priority for the IROs of these children is to meet with them and gain an understanding as to why this was and support them in doing this.

92 children were supported by an advocate.

In 2023/24 100 % of Private Fostering Reviews were held in timescales.

In 2023/24 1 Secure Reviews was chaired by an IRO. This is a separate IRO who chairs these meetings and is independent from the care planning process.

The face-to-face visit and the IROs relationship with the child are significant factors in children feeling supported to attend their meetings. It is clear from the data that there remains room for improvement IROs are keen to improve these figures going forward to demonstrate the robust relationships they have with children to ensure that they are supported and encouraged to attend their reviews. Children are now being visited by their IRO face to face and this will continue to assist in developing a trusting relationship where children and young people would feel supported, feel more able to attend their review, actively participate and cochair. The numbers of children attending and participating in their reviews has always been an area for focus and positive ambition in Wirral. Over the last five years we have failed to see a significant increase in this percentage. As a service we need to review and respond differently if we are to achieve our ambition, this will include how IROs can be creative and demonstrate new ways of working to increase attendance that is purposeful for the child. Whilst we are disappointed in the percentage of children

attending and participating, we are assured that children have continued to participate with the percentage for participation remaining strong. This is due to IROs ensuring that children have the right support to speak or adults they identify who they want to represent them. The IRO represents their wishes, feelings & views of their Care Plan or a key professional or carer represents their voice in the reviews. Children continue to be given choices on how they can participate and IROs are keen to ensure that they are given a variety of ways and people who can represent their wishes, feelings and views within their review.

**The minutes of reviews** continue to be written to the child and young person, avoiding the use of jargon. Young people provide positive feedback regarding this style and report having a greater understanding of their care plans, what people are worried about, how well they are doing and what the next steps are. This provides them with a greater understanding of the agreed recommendations and the responsibility of others in supporting them to achieve. We believe this empowers them to be able to have influence over their planning.

### **4.3 ADVOCACY**

92 referrals were made for advocacy April 23-March 24. Moving into 2024/25 we will be supporting BARNARDOS rolling out awareness raising training, to share awareness of the service and the IRO Service Manager and BARNARDOS continue to build working links together.

We continue to raise awareness of our advocacy offer from BARNARDOS across the wider service, ensuring that where they need it our children are helped to be heard. Barnardo's support children aged 8-18 years and 18-25- year-olds who are care experienced. They also support children who are part of the child protection process.

We use BARNARDOS for our independent visitor service. There are currently 15 children matched.

We have continued to challenge and adapt some of the language that we use in what we say and how we record information about our children and young people. The unit took the lead on this approach in 2019 and we continue to see this having an effect not only within children's services, but also across partner agencies.

### **4.4 What our children, families and professionals tell us:**

Over 2023/2024 we have received some fantastic feedback.

The feedback received for IRO's has been captured by email from practitioners and a connected carer, and the QR codes to the feedback from parents and carers form, and feedback from children and young people form. Whilst the QR code has not

been as successful as we may have hoped, the feedback form was developed with our children in care. As we adapt our approach, moving forward IROs/CP chairs will support families to complete this in person and Operational leads will contact a percentage of families following ICPCs and reviews to gather their feedback.

Feedback is also gathered during visits and in 2023/2024 IROs recorded feedback from 601 visits. From these visits we can see that our children are telling us what they think and feel about their plans.

Significantly, who and where they are living and how family time should look:

***J is happy with his care plan and he likes Mum coming to his reviews*** - This IRO ensured Mum attended the next meeting .

***S told me he loves living with his Dad and that his Dad is brilliant. He doesn't want more or less time with Mum – he wants the same as now.***

***You are both fully aware of who I am and you have known me for a very long time. You are aware that you are to continue to live with Auntie C until your Mum has found a bigger property, you are both eager to live with Mum.***

About how they want other professionals to work with them:

***K does not feel comfortable when different social workers visit him*** This IRO shared this with the Team manager and he was appointed a permanent member of staff as his SW rather than agency.

***C and C said they enjoy me coming to see them but don't like going to reviews with lots of people*** – This IRO adapted how meetings were held

***A likes her new Social worker and feels able to talk to her.***

***C you are aware of my role and like to attend your reviews. You speak for yourself which is brilliant and on my visits you tell me that you are happy with your care plan.***

***T is frustrated about the lack of a social worker and the amount of change*** – This IRO escalated to the Operational Lead and then ensured that T was allocated a permanent member of staff as opposed to an agency worker.

Ensuring that assessments hold the right information and importantly the child's views:

***We agreed that your pathway plan will be looked at again as this does not include your wishes and feelings*** – This young person's pathway plan was then revisited

From this data there are key threads of what families find helpful that can be identified from the feedback which include:

- Advice given being appreciated
- The child being at the centre of decisions made
- The child's needs being the priority
- The IRO being supportive, empathic, knowledgeable, approachable and listening to the families
- The meetings being balanced with concerns for the child and hearing the parents and carers

**Feedback received from parents and carers via the QR Code which the IRO will have facilitated:**

- The support I've received as a connected carer has been a huge benefit to both myself & the children, at times it's been challenging & without the support from all concerned I would've struggled to maintain the placement.
- I find that the children's IRO is very approachable, knowledgeable & understanding, the children have no problem chatting to her & would have no problem discussing any issues they might have
- Our IRO is very approachable and listens to what is being asked and answers appropriately and seems to offer wonderful advice.
- The IRO always gives time for us to speak and gives the best possible help and support,
- IRO was knowledgeable and understanding
- IRO is very approachable
- Happy with the support from the IRO

**Feedback received from children and young people via the QR Code which the IRO will have facilitated:**

How the IRO supported the children and young people:

- Listened to me
- Spent time with me
- Share my views, wishes and feelings
- Supported me to access services

## **Feedback received from the Children in Care Council**

- All shared that they know their IRO and like them

## **Feedback from Professionals**

*✓ The IRO delivered some training on our ASYE development day. She was really approachable and knowledgeable. The ASYEs came away feeling much more confident about the review process and what they should be including in the children's plans and assessments. (ASYE COORDINATOR)*

*✓ I just wanted to give some feedback from our meetings. I find working with you very easy. It is very nice to work with someone that puts the child as priority. You get the job done and always quickly. You are empathetic when needed and I know we can come to you if things are not going to plan. We are very lucky to have you as our IRO. Many Thanks (CONNECTED CARER)*

Changes and next steps: This year we have adapted our tools for consultation with our young ambassadors and have produced QR codes linked to an online form that our children can use to share their views ahead of their review and feedback on their experiences of their review- so that we make sure we are getting it right. These have been widely used.

We are building our links with our Children in Care Council and Our Space and will be planning monthly meetings with them. They have told us that one of their priorities is for the 'have your say documents' to be changed and updated which is something we have now coproduced with them. They also want these to be filled in in person and on paper. This will be implemented for 2024/25.

## **5. QUALITY ASSURANCE**

IROs continue to monitor children's progress and planning between each review. Mid point reviews are undertaken 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. The child and people important to the child are also contacted at this stage and their feedback is crucial. This determines the IRO/CP Chairs next step, which may be follow up conversations, an earlier review or escalation.

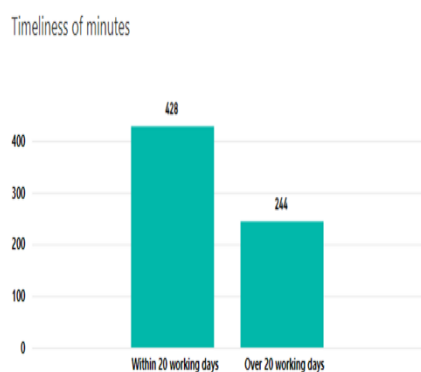
IRO escalations continue to take place informally and formally. Whilst the performance data indicates that there were 342 informal escalations during this time period, the current weaknesses in our performance data needs to be highlighted. At present there are a number of title options within case note recording that mean the same thing. This lack of consistency results in IROs/CP Chairs not selecting the same

case note and thus dilutes the accuracy of the data. This is something that is currently being rectified so that our future performance data in this area gives a more accurate picture and is more easily accessible. Performance meetings are held monthly and escalation data is explored within this meeting and also during individual supervision. Conversations are around 'closing the loop' and ensuring that our escalation process is followed and closed down once resolution is reached.

The escalation process is followed and timely. Initial response to formal escalation is 5 working days. The escalation is to be resolved within 20 working days. During this time period there were 302 formal escalations. 94% have reached a resolution and been closed down within the timescales. 6% have not yet been resolved and are showing as outside of the 20 working days. This is due to a number of issues, including complexity of escalation, delay in achieving service and individual error (not closing down the form properly). The Operational leads from the unit intend to dip sample these cases and analyse the issues further.

In respect of minutes, the unit has focused on the timeliness of these being produced for our children improving. From 1<sup>st</sup> December 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 63% of minutes were completed within the 20 working day timescale. In comparison to the previous years, figures which show that only 54% of minutes were completed within timescales. Whilst this demonstrates improvement – this continues to be an area of focus within performance meetings and individual supervision as we strive to achieve our target of 100%

From 1<sup>st</sup> December 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024:



Previous year:





## 5.1 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.

This year 1082 mid point reviews have been completed. 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.

2024/25 the midpoint form will be developed to be more of a dip sample tool which will focus on the key areas of: voice of the child, driving care plans and impact for our children

## 5.2 Quality Assurance Framework

The Quality Assurance Framework revised in 2023 continues to embed in the Safeguarding Improvement Unit. The Quality Assurance Framework set out not just how we gather information about children's lives but how we evidence that the information that we gather includes the voice and influence of children and young people, and that we can see the impact of good quality of practice through better outcomes for children. The framework promotes the foundation for practice improvement:

- Good Quality Assessments
- Good Quality Plans
  - Impact chronology supports decision making
- Good management oversight
- Voice and daily lived experience of child / young person evident throughout
  - Evidence of strong engagement with parents, family and carers throughout our involvement.

In 2023/2024 Wirral moved away from the previous quality assurance approach of completing audit forms to a model of 'live' auditing. The safeguarding were part of 3 live audits and findings were as follows in respect of IRO involvement:

1 was graded Outstanding, 1 was graded Good and 1 as Requiring Improvement. For the child whose case was considered to Require Improvement, this was a Child Protection case and the IRO oversight was not as strong as it could have been. In order to improve this, reflective discussion took place about the need to ensure that midpoint checks are happening and being recorded. The wider learning was about ensuring we are recording our work consistently on the child's file.

In 2024/25 the unit will be developing their own peer audits and will focus upon improving our direct observations and obtaining feedback from children and families.

The unit also looked at My Journey plans for children, following its launch in August 2023. This dip sample looked at plans from October to December 2023. The quality of the plans were considered with focus upon the following key areas:

- System recording
- Language used
- Written to the child
- Focused

The outcome of this found that when we are writing plans well, in a way that the child and family can understand, we are seeing positive changes. For most, the language used was appropriate and moved away from being overly professional and using jargon. For most, the narrative was written to the child – which has been Wirral's directive since 14<sup>th</sup> August 2023. The sample indicated that there was further work necessary so that Social workers become confident in using this approach, and IROs had a consistent approach to reviewing. This has resulted in IROs working closely with individuals in teams, teams, team managers and the Practice Improvement Team to develop and deliver training so that the plans that are being produced for our children are aspirational, SMART and drive forward change.

### **5.3 DISPUTE RESOLUTIONS: IRO CHALLENGE AND SCRUTINY**

IRO's will review children and young people's plans to ensure these are progressing and achieving plans of permanence in a timely way. This includes monitoring the progress of the plan between Children Looked After Reviews and conversing with a range of professionals, family members and the child. Where there appears to be a delay for children and young people, an IRO will raise a professional challenge called Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). This will involve highlighting the concern or delay with the relevant level of management to achieve the fastest change or outcome for the child.

The Dispute Resolution Process is our formal challenge process, each IRO service must have one. This has been shared with our colleagues across the wider service and is very clear. Central to our challenge is the impact for the child or family we are working with to create a positive outcome or change for them. We commence a challenge at an informal level and can escalate where deemed necessary to create action. There are 3 stages to our formal process however, this does not need to be linear. The challenge will be made at the most appropriate level to create the quickest outcome for the child or young person.

We have issued 644 DRP's for a variety of reasons, themes include drift and delay, practice issues, safety and care planning.

✓ 302 Formal DRP's issued

✓ 342 Informal DRP's issued

Moving into 2024/25 we will continue to provide themes in practice, themes from DRP's and feedback from families to help improve the quality of practice and service delivery from Children's Services. This has included updating the pre meeting reports for CLA reviews, which seeks to improve the consistency of care planning meetings being held.

We also intend to link with the Principal social worker to scrutinise these cases and examine has challenge been effective, what has been the impact for the child and how can we improve this.

#### **5.4 IRO Oversight**

Part of the IROs role is to contribute to improving outcomes for our children with the core purpose being to ensure the care plan for a child fully reflects the child's needs and ensures that each child's wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration. Their role is to monitor the child's progress on an ongoing basis as well as reviewing the CLA Care Plan at regular intervals. To do this it was recognised that we need to: - show regular oversight of the planning process, - monitor the pace of progress and - robustly challenge where there is drift and delay - provide scrutiny of the progress and effectiveness of the child's care plan between reviews. This includes check-ins and mid-point overviews to ensure recommendations are being progressed. It considers the progression of the planning, the voice and influence of the child in the planning, evidence of parental involvement and impact, management oversight influencing the progression and direction of the plan and overall analysis and impact on the child.

Contributing to the 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' Pathfinder work Wirral has been chosen as one of three Local Authorities to be Pathfinders for the implementation of Stable Homes, Built on Love. The IRO service will have a key role in contributing to co-design, and Quality Assurance of the pilot. The team has wide range of professional experience and our expertise in Kinship Care support is likely to be particularly valuable. IROs will have a pivotal role in the oversight and progression of permanency arrangements for children and young people. IROs, therefore, will ensure that the family and child/ young person have been fully consulted about who is important in their life and unlocking the potential of family networks in developing family led solutions for children.

## **6.OUTCOMES & IMPACT OF THE SERVICE**

### **6.1 Progress made in 2023/24**

In writing the 2022/2023 Annual Report we were ambitious in setting out what we hoped to achieve in 2023/2024.

#### **1) Provide children with a variety of methods to participate in their review and encourage physical attendance**

- The feedback from Our Children has helped us refocus on face-to-face visits being seen as a priority and improving the preparation for reviews and encouragement for children to consider how they would like their meeting to take place.
- Co produced a consultation form with our children
- Developed a child and family feedback form. Providing the link via QR code.
- Supported IROs to attend Systemic Practice training with focus upon building relationships.
- Developed ways in which meetings are delivered in line with the systemic practice model.
- Continued to promote the use of narrative approach in planning and minutes.

#### **2) Ensure all children understand the role of the IRO and what the child looked after review meeting is about.**

- Return to in person visits and continuing to encourage our children and young people to participate.
- Development of the consultation form.
- Development of feedback.
- Introduction letters which include a profile of their IRO is sent out to all children and young people when they become looked after.

### **3) Maintain audit and quality assurance activity to improve practice standards and support improved practice across children's social care.**

- IRO's continue 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, Social Workers and other professionals.
- IROS support individual social workers, team managers and teams in improving quality of assessments and plans.
- Feedback tools have been created and utilised
- Training and development of IROs which will continue to embed the council's Systemic Practice Model
- Implementation of a 'live' peer audit tool.
- Attendance at learning and celebration events and sharing findings and themes that will contribute to improving practice.

### **4) Improve the progress in children and young people's care plans to prevent drift and delay.**

- In 2023/24 IROs continued to ensure recommendations from reviews are SMART and tracked by the IRO with clear escalation when not achieved as agreed.
- Part of working group that developed 'My Journey' which is the new Care plan that follows the child throughout their time with services (from Early help, CIN, CP and CLA) ensuring consistency and oversight.
- Increased number of Midpoint reviews is evident and ensures that IRO footprint is demonstrated on the child's file and that plans are tracked and progressed.

### **5) Focus on achieving permanency at the second review.**

- In 2023/24 we improved our consistency in holding midpoint reviews
- Continue to provide the IROs views at legal panel and decision-making meetings
- Ensured that ratifying reviews are held where the LA is proposing long term plans for children to court.
- Reviewed placement with parents' situations and promoted the discharge of care orders for those children who have been at home for over 12 months
- Had oversight and scrutiny of Supervision Orders.
- Plotted out care planning meetings and future reviews.
- Attendance at permanence panel

## **7. KEY PRIORITIES 2024/2025**

## **7. KEY PRIORITIES 2024/2025**

---

### **1) IMPACT AND ACHIEVING PERMANENCE**

- IROs will continue to ensure that children have the right plan in place which supports them to achieve their full potential.
- Child protection planning will be meaningful and help children to live safely with their families. Ensuring the right support is in place.
- For those children who are accommodated, reunification is considered at all review meetings. When appropriate, care orders are discharged.
- Should a child be accommodated then IROs will assess placement sufficiency, when considering placement matches.

### **2) CHALLENGE AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION**

- IROs will raise formal and informal escalation to ensure that the plans for our children are keeping them safe and break the cycle of poor outcomes.
- Independent Chairs are linked to the regional network and will ensure that updates and current ideology are shared and considered.
- Midway monitoring will continue to be scheduled at the Childcare Review to ensure that drift and delay is addressed, and plans progressed.

### **3) PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT**

- IROs will continue to work closely with Social Work colleagues to ensure that children and their families can fully participate in childcare reviews and attend as appropriate and actively promote feedback
- Children will be visited twice by their IRO between meetings so that they can build meaningful connections and have their voices heard.

### **4) CONTRIBUTION TO QUALITY ASSURANCE**

- There is an expectation that there will be a continued commitment to undertake monthly case file audits or observations of practice.
- Themes and trends will be identified and shared with Practice Improvement team so that any training or support needs can be addressed.
- IROs will take part in learning reviews and multi-agency reflective groups