

Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT 2016/17



**IROs' contribution to quality assuring and improving
Services for cared for children and care leavers**

INTRODUCTION

This report provides information on the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and their contribution to improving outcomes for cared for children and care leavers during the reporting year April 2016 to March 2017. This contribution is measured by how well IROs know the needs, wishes and feelings of the children and young people and scrutinise whether these needs are met by the care planning and services provided to children by their local authority and partner agencies acting as the 'corporate parent'. Information contained in the report refers to both cared for children and care leavers due to the IROs in Cheshire East reviewing the plans for both. The report is in line with the statutory requirements. It was completed by the Safeguarding Manager (IRO manager) and based on comprehensive input from all IROs and business support.

This Annual IRO report provides information on how the IROs discharged their statutory duties in improving outcomes for children and young people and how the services to these children have operated. It will to be shared with and scrutinised by Corporate Parenting Board and the LSCB.

THE STATUTORY FUNCTIONS OF THE IRO

Previous annual IRO reports have already set out in detail information about who can be appointed as an IRO, what their statutory duties are and the purpose of an IRO annual report. They also explored what had been published about the IROs' effectiveness in relation to Cared for

Children by Ofsted, National Children's Bureaux and East Anglia University through the research they conducted.

To summarise, the main standards, responsibilities and powers of the IRO service relate to:

- IRO caseloads not exceeding 50-70 children,
- IROs having access to independent legal advice,
- Child's Social worker having a duty to keep the IRO informed about significant issues and changes in the child's life and care plan (Reg.45),
- IROs standing a review down if the child is not prepared or their care plan has not been formulated for the review,
- IROs having a duty to monitor the local authority's performance in relation to the child's case and raising and resolving issues, wherever possible, informally when drift and shortfalls in care planning are identified but, where they remain unresolved or the IRO believes the resolution requires senior manager review, initiating a formal Dispute Resolution Process (DRP) and concluding it within 20 working days,
- IROs having the power to escalate issues to CAFCASS if issues are not resolved, especially where there are concerns that the child's rights may be being breached.

For further information contained in the previous IRO annual reports, particularly for 2014/15 and 2015/16 reporting year, please follow the link below:

<http://cheshireeast.gov.uk/livewell/care-and-support-for-children/are-you-concerned-about-a-child/cheshire-east-consultation-service-cheecs/independent-reviewing-officers-contact-information.aspx>

IMPACT OF THE IROs ON THE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND SERVICE PROVISION in 2016/17:

This year (2016/7) has presented the IRO service with some challenges both in staffing and an increase in demand. The process of ongoing improvement has continued and there have been some significant achievements over the year. Despite the pressures, relatively few reviews fell out of timescales, and, where this happened, the reviews were held within days of the statutory requirement so the impact of any delay for the child was minimised. There is now a well-developed process for notifications to the service when a child becomes Cared for, and for the majority of children, this has worked very efficiently.

IROs have demonstrated effectiveness at a service level; they identified and responded to some themes during the year, particularly the increase in repeat missing incidences for some of our most vulnerable children. Similarly, the increase we have experienced in placement disruptions. In order to ensure effective planning for the child, IROs have seen their children, and their views obtained when changing placements, whether care or educational ones. This included visits to children where there was a plan for the change of the residential provider e.g. due to re-commissioning of the service, where the impact on the child and arrangements for them was anticipated.

Robust monitoring by IROs has remained in place, supported by some new processes, particularly the improved tracking process for children in court proceedings. This has been an example of efficient communication with the Local Authority Legal support officer. This was complimented by a clear focus via the Permanence Tracking panel. Other similar processes eg, the Adoption Decision Making, Complex Needs panel and a new Children of Concern meeting, and long-term

fostering matching panel, promoted good dialogue and a shared focus between frontline staff and the IRO's to promote the best and timely outcomes for children.

A theme for the IROs affecting their capacity to be effective in their oversight of care plans for children, has been the challenge of having sufficient time from when the final care plan is presented, to be endorsed through the relevant review to inform the care proceedings. To address this issue, a work stream on improving the PLO and court processes, ensured that good practice guidance and protocol in relation to timetabling care proceedings, which included sufficient time for IRO acknowledgement of any supporting assessments or statements as well as the final care plan. As a result, practice has improved over the year, albeit the continuous focus on the IRO's views being represented in the final statement needs to remain.

IROs have collaborated with fieldwork professionals and managers on embedding the process of meaningful preparation for reviews, ensuring that invites and consultation forms have been sent and this has led to an increase in the forms received. More can still be done to optimise what information is being gathered before the reviews, in order that no child, carer or parent is missed when considering who should be invited or consulted for the review. Focus on this aspect embodies compliance with statutory requirements and IROs are working hard to ensure that the information, views and perspectives on the care plan are being reflected during the review and within the recommendations.

The IRO escalation process has been further embedded. The quarterly IRO escalation reports are shared with managers and senior leadership team, including any emerging themes. The process is becoming more timely and effective although it does require specific ongoing commitment to ensure that trends and patterns identified by IROs are

analysed and translate into learning as well as actions. The IRO escalation provides qualitative information pertinent and consistent with the plans for optimising services, training for professionals and managers as well as improving specific processes or aspects of the services for our children.

There are specific examples where IROs made an impact on achieving better outcomes for individual children throughout the reporting year. The key themes are represented in the case examples below:

- IROs promoted the child's rights to advocacy and Independent Visitor service as well as their level of understanding about their legal rights and/ or entitlements as care leavers, including a young person who eventually returned to school after 10 months of refusing to go.
- IROs raised good practice notifications to reflect on the good quality of direct work, advocating for the child and/ or establishing partnerships with children and parents during assessment stage or formulating their plans,
- IRO challenged an initial negative assessment of foster carers which considered that they would not meet the long-term needs of a sibling group. An evidenced base challenge based on observation of visible secure attachments and children's as well as carers' clear wishes, led to a successful and happy long-term placement being matched,
- IRO worked closely with the allocated social worker and carers to analyse and review a complex case of a young person with serious CSE issues and missing incidence which then led to greater stability, safety and educational attainment of the young person,
- DRP enabled learning from a case where a child accommodated under sec.20 returned to the parent's care with financial assistance provided to the parent to enable overnight stay after which the child entered care again which captured

implications of such decisions regarding impact on the child and recognition of the subsequent changes to the child's legal status

- Sufficiency of evidence was challenged when 16 year old young person consented to being accommodated under sec.20, at the time when the parent withdrew the same consent, and the IRO identified the young person's limitations when telling the difference about the choices and consequences in relation to specific legal status,
- IRO ensured that unregulated placement issues were explored when children remained in the placement after the viability assessment was concluded as negative and the role of contingency planning at early stages of viability assessments with kinship carer (Reg.24) was explored
- IROs raised issues regarding placement planning meeting and shortfalls with placement plans preventing early information sharing and clarity about delegated authority agreement with child's new foster carers.

PROFILE AND STAFFING

Location and independence of the service:

The IRO team is part of Children's Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit and the team's office is located at Macclesfield Town Hall. The line management is provided by a Safeguarding Manager (C4C IRO manager) who reports to the Head of Service for Children's Safeguarding. The senior management oversight of the service is provided by the Director of Children Social Care accountable for the operational services for children. During the reporting year there were no formal IRO escalations at level 3 and 4 of the formal Dispute Resolution Process to the Director. IROs and the IRO manager work closely with colleagues from frontline teams and, over the reporting

year, were involved in a range of joint working groups and training events.

The IROs have access to independent legal advice via a contractual agreement with an independent legal firm. There were two instances during the reporting year when obtaining such advice was considered but eventually was not needed. The first issue was resolved when the local authority's social worker and manager consulted the internal legal team for advice which was consistent with the IRO's suggestions and in the second instance the IRO held a reflective discussion with the IRO manager which enabled resolution of the matter. In both cases this was a positive outcome for the child.

Structure and characteristics:

In 2016/17, there were 8 FTE posts across the service although towards the end of the year an additional post with 2 year funding was granted as a response to the business case against the increase in the numbers of our cared for children. The service faced significant challenges with having to respond to an increase in demand whilst undergoing an internal improvement process, both of which saw staff turnover and significant churn for the service. The improvement process included recruitment of permanent staff to reduce interim agency appointments and thus provide continuity and stability for our children. This has been highly successful with 4 new permanent members joining the team this year with a range of experiences from other Local Authorities. By June 2017, there were 9 FTE posts with 7 permanent IROs and 2 agency staff and a recruitment campaign underway to reach the target of fully permanent team. All appointed IROs met the criteria for the appointment of an IRO as set out in IRO 2010 Handbook (NB. IRO Handbook constitutes 'a statutory guidance

for IROs and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked after children').

During any changes in staffing, efforts were made to minimise re-allocation rates to children who then saw a new IRO although this was unavoidable for some children. IROs prioritised communicating with children and young people to keep them informed at reviews and via letters about the change and how to contact the new IRO. Alongside impact on the children and the team's stability, the staffing changes challenged implementation of a small number of 2015/16 team priorities

Team sickness rates were not an issue over the reporting year, or indeed the year before. Covers for reviews were required at times and these were planned with as much advanced notice as possible and executed with professionalism and flexibility by other colleagues. In light of changes set out, arriving at good overall outcomes and performance results for the year, particularly in consultation with children, child participation, timeliness of reviews and consistent IRO issue resolution is a significant positive achievement of the whole team.

Furthermore, quality and timeliness of IRO scrutiny and issue resolution and improvement of children's experiences of their reviews remained the central strategic aims alongside development of individual IRO specialisms and strengthening of the departmental and inter-agency relationships.

The IRO team continued to be supported by 3 Business Support workers (2.8 FTE posts). The Business Support team undertook all relevant administrative tasks in relation to the invite and consultation as

well as distribution processes for cared for children and care leavers' reviews as well as relevant review data collection and processing.

Overall, the ethnicity of the team reflected the ethnicity of majority of the cared for children population and correlated with some of the main other ethnic origin groups across the cared for population. Disability rates within the cared for children and care leavers population were not proportionally reflected by the diversity of the IRO team but gender disproportion was less apparent with 3 male and 5 female staff to compare with cared for population.

Specialist skills:

In 2016/17 care plans for children with special needs or disabilities, various legal or immigration status and offending profile, were reviewed by all IROs and two areas of more specialist focus in allocations, namely children under 5 (1.5 FTE posts and 2 IROs) and reviewing Pathway Plans for care leavers (1.7 FTE and 2 IROs).

The review of 'permanence for under 5s' specialism evidenced increasing and overpowering rate of demand due to numbers of children in care proceedings where scrutiny of their permanence plans required a lot of more intensity and presence of the IRO which became untenable after one of the two IRO leads in this area resigned. Sustaining isolation of this specialism was also met with some criticism from other IROs who felt they were becoming detached from ongoing involvement with care proceedings for under 5s and adoption cases, particularly in context of regionalisation of adoption services. Decision was then made to retain thematic lead on permanence and monitor care planning for all children in proceedings but remove the system for allocation of 'under 5s' to any one IRO post holder.

Anticipating the retirement of one of the 2 IROs involved in Pathway Plan reviews, another decision was made about the whole team undertaking these reviews with internal thematic briefing process started in March 2017.

Overall, the following specialisms were developed by individual IROs whose contributions and feedback about the specialist work they undertook has been included in relevant sections of the report:

- participation,
- permanence, esp. for children under 5,
- professional discussion forum on cared for children and care leavers' matters,
- CSE and MHC (Missing from Care) issues,
- transition to adulthood and disability.

Caseloads and additional duties:

The individual IRO caseloads fluctuated throughout the year from 60 – 81 cases with an average caseload of 71. Whilst the average caseload is numerically slightly above the recommended caseload of 50-70, the additional pressure of travel due to the geographical location of the local authority and placements of the children added significantly to the overall workload per each IRO. Additional IRO workload comprised:

- chairing of missing from care Level 2 meetings, some of the CSE conferences for cared for children and disruption meetings for children whose placements broke down after 12+ months,
- regular liaison meetings with Team Managers from CiN/ /CP and PTCT services and sporadic attendance at their team meetings,
- contribution to multi-agency and joint audits,
- supporting scrutiny of ASYEs portfolios,

- participation in regional CAFCASS liaison meetings
- contribution to training/ briefings arranged for other social care and health colleagues.

CPD, learning opportunities and contributing to the learning of others:

Supervision meetings with all IROs occurred in accordance with the local authority requirements. Newly appointed IROs benefitted from both induction and more intense supervision programme. Two of the new permanent IROs completed 'Advance IRO practice' modules at Edge Hill University. The IRO manager complied with the requirement for undertaking individual practice observations of all IROs.

Reflective feedback contributed to setting objectives within respective performance and development plans (PDP) and further learning and consolidation of practice was executed during monthly team meetings and performance challenge sessions.

Individual IROs attended a number of specialist training courses and conference events, including NAIRO (National Association of IROs) conference in October 2016. IROs attended Practice Champions and quarterly Practice and Performance workshops. Specialist team training on NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) was arranged with an external facilitator. IROs have also been ready for introductory training to support testing of new IT technologies (Echo pens and Dictaphones linked to Dragon software). This was in response to IROs' limited capacity and the demands on them producing timely records and reports.

IROs shared specialist competence and experiences with other colleagues representing various services involved with cared for children and care leavers through:

- supporting 3 training courses for school nurses and health visitors
- reading and providing feedback on ASYEs portfolios,
- facilitation of a professional discussion forum 'Time to Share' (T2S).

T2S has been a theme-led forum for any practitioner and agency involvement with Cared for Children and Care Leavers. The bi-monthly meetings were attended by social workers (with many ASYEs among them), personal advisors, residential workers and managers, IROs, YOS workers, Children's Society, Virtual School, Family therapy, @CT, Designated Nurses team, Housing and Transitional team's representatives. The theme discussions during the meetings reflected the changing nature of legislation, policy and procedure but primarily focused on pertinent practice issues. The forum identified and contributed to the improvement or creation of a variety of practice tools or approaches and hence impacted on the outcomes for children. Among those tools and learning from the experience and good practice of others there were:

- a checklist for ASYEs/ newly appointed SWs on initial and subsequent care planning and review core tasks and deadlines,
- a map of the geographical spread of care leavers as well as sharing successes and challenges in achieving good outcomes despite the location
- a significant focus on issues of trauma and resilience in practice, including the health phone application,
- reflection on own/professional resilience and what underpins motivation followed by an open to multi-agency completion to capture views,

- identifying gaps and existing solutions for further priority work with Corporate Parenting Strategy on meeting the needs of UASC and non-EEA cared for children and care leavers resulting in further consultations with housing on the impact of the 'Reducing Migration Funds' policy,
- placement stability/sufficiency for young people.

T2S started in April 2015 and ran for two years until April 2017 when a recommendation was made by senior leadership team to amalgamate T2S into the wider Masterclasses (series of briefings/ training opportunity) agenda. Without consultation preceding this recommendation and the last T2S session taking place only in April 2017, further work is needed to progress with the merging of the two.



IROs' OVERSIGHT OF CARED FOR CHILDREN'S CARE PLANS

KEY STATISTICS

1, 160 statutory case reviews – 41 more than last year

2167 consultations sent and 606 received

91% cared for reviews in timescales

95.4% children 4 and above participated in their reviews

37 children chaired or co-chaired their review

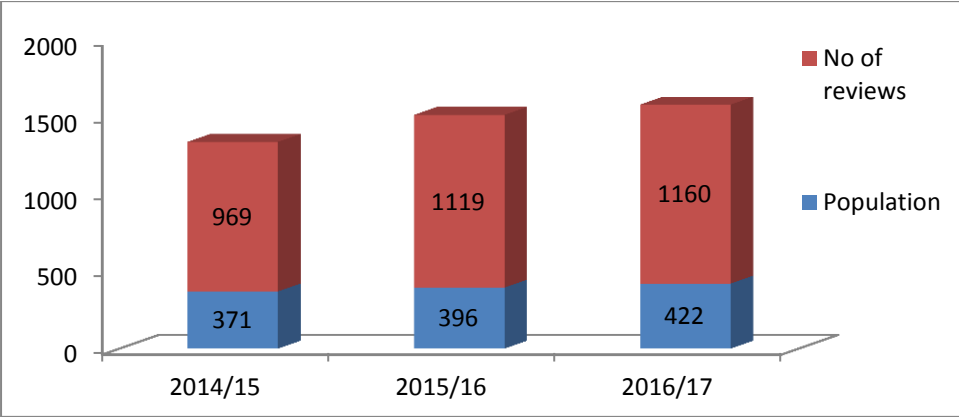
146 practice alerts raised – 122 resolved informally

IROs chaired Disruption meetings for 8 children

It was a challenging year for the IROs in relation to meeting their statutory duties towards children and ensuring their oversight was consistent. The growing cared for population, increase in placement instability and missing incidence for some of the cared for children challenged team's capacity and flexibility, particularly in context of IROs having to accommodate numerous staffing changes throughout the year.

The increase in our cared for population, reflecting national trends, inevitably resulted in an increase in review numbers. There were over

40 more reviews than last year. Although counted as one review, a number of reviews entailed two or more meetings under the option of ‘series of meetings’. This is chosen if gathering everybody’s contributions and endorsing the plan was not possible in one meeting, for example if the young person requests that the parent does not attend their review or there is a restraining order for either parent in place and they thus cannot be in the same meeting. It is anticipated that specific ‘series of meetings’ data report will be available shortly.

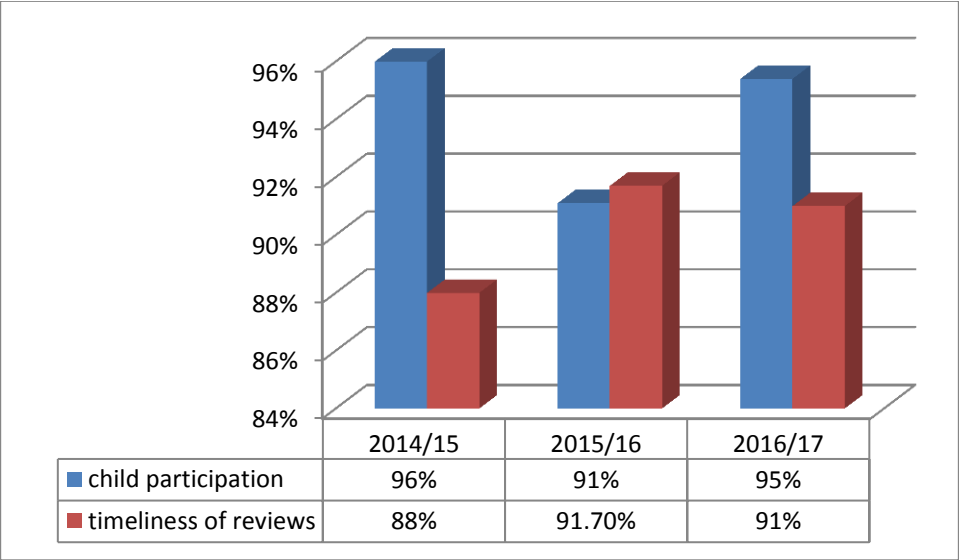


Increase in population and number of reviews - 3 year comparison

Despite increase in demand and staffing challenges, the IROs worked hard to ensure reviews occurred within timescales and children and young people participated in them as fully as possible.

91% of reviews were kept in timescales, which against the significant challenges throughout the year, has been one of the major achievements of the team last year.
95.4 % of children aged 4 and above participated in their reviews, which is 4.4% more children than the year before and similar rate to 2014/15, but with a 20% increase in reviews. The majority of children

were visited in their placements by the IROs before their reviews to ensure their lived daily experiences alongside their views, wishes and feelings about their care plans and quality of received care and other services were understood and reflected in the review.



Timeliness and child participation in reviews – 3 year comparison

The area where a higher anticipated target was not achieved was in relation to the number of children who chaired or co-chaired their reviews with 64 children last year and 37 this reporting year. This is not surprising given the changes of staff and the limitations in establishing working relationships with children by their new (or interim agency) IROs, as well as diminished capacity of the whole team. All other indicators show improvement on last year which, given the context, is a significant achievement of the IRO team and exemplification of the

IROs' professionalism and commitment to the children and young people they work with against any encountered difficulties.



IROs and their role in improving child participation and advocacy:

Over the last year the IROs took an active role in promoting child participation. It was identified that information and correspondence templates sent out to children and young people would benefit from updating, and to aligning to the specific needs of the child. Work has begun, to develop new information leaflets for young people and parents before reviews outlining not only the purpose of the review and

reviewing process but also giving a brief outline of the role of the IRO. The IRO lead on child participation worked with a number of children and young people to create a group keen to meet up and give their feedback to the Safeguarding Unit about key issues and themes pertinent to their care plans, IRO involvement and daily experiences. Another future area of interest for the group will be consultancy in revising the literature sent prior and post reviews to children and young people. It is hoped that the group will not only improve the participation of children and young people but invite a continued focus on the needs and wishes of the child.

Type of service	No of referrals in 2016
Independent Visitor	24 11 for children with disabilities
Advocate	74 C4C - 40% 109 (for 222 children) referrals for CP conferences – 60%

Comparison of advocate and Independent Visitor allocations in 2016

Dialogue with the young people has been integral to the improvement of the functioning of the IRO service. Young people contributed to the appointments of new IROs as the Young People's panel, with its distinctive aim of focusing on the key issues and themes important to them in relation to their IROs.

The independent advocacy provision commissioned by the Local Authority, responded to 74 referrals it received in respect of cared for

children, i.e. 40% of the overall advocacy referrals. As with all workers, the IROs have a clear duty to understand and promote the needs and rights of the child. The IRO lead for participation started to build positive working relationships with the independent advocacy service (The Children's Society), to ensure there was a good level of communication and any identified themes, issues, barriers or delays were addressed promptly. In the past year, IROs and Children's Society worked together in ensuring that young people are being offered an advocate to not only represent their views but also to robustly challenge on the young person's behalf, further ensuring that their wishes and feelings were incorporated within the work that IROs and social workers undertake.

The IRO service participated in the review of Independent Visitors and Advocacy service. It also supported the process of incorporating a new consultation tool for children and young people, including those with disabilities, called MoMo - an interactive, web-based tool which has been agreed to be implemented during the 2017/8 reporting year.

The contribution of children and young people to the work of the Corporate Parenting Board was well evidenced at the beginning of the reporting year with young people attending the Board's meetings together with the managers representing services across the department as well as designated elected members. This year there has been a change of the Board to a Committee and establishment of a new Corporate Parenting Operational Group. Over the next year the reconfiguration of the arrangements for the interface between the new Committee and the young people will develop. The new proposal has been to establish a Shadow Committee composed of children and young people involved in Children and Care Council, although this is

yet to be tested it is expected that this will ensure that our cared for children have a strong voice and can offer effective challenge.

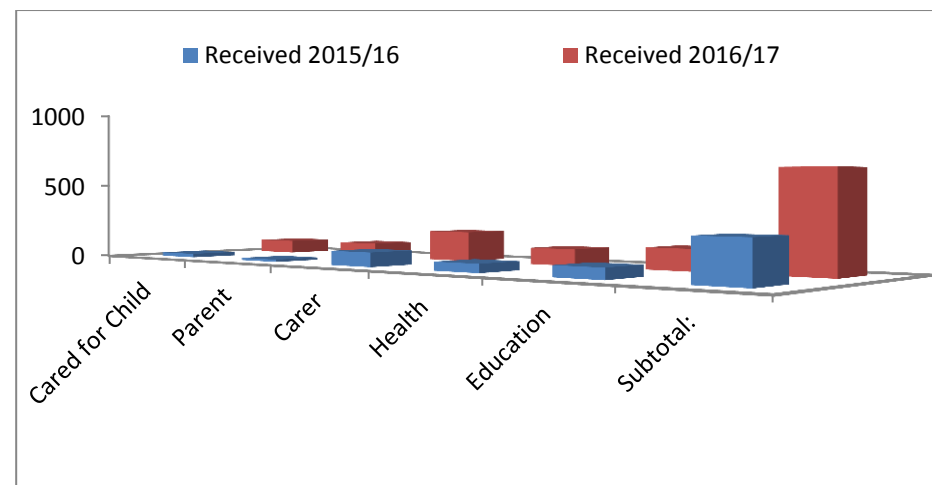
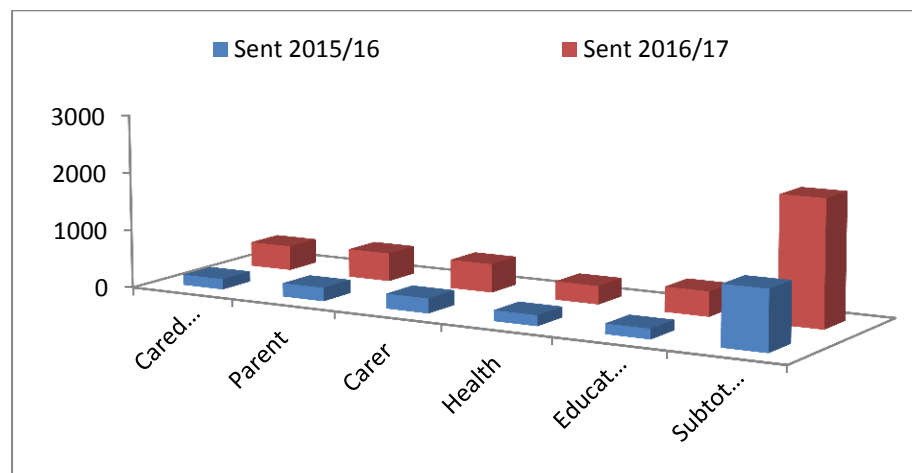
Consultation – Cared for Children and Care Leavers' case reviews

Consultation Form for:	Sent 2015/16	Received 2015/16	Sent 2016/17	Received 2016/17
Cared for Child	182	24	429	87
Parent	233	15	492	91
Carer	256	90	496	191
Health	185	54	319	104
Education	177	67	431	133
Subtotal:	1033	250	2167	606

The invite and consultation process remained one of the focal aspects for improving the overall review effectiveness of the IRO role. As a statutory requirement, this has now been fully integrated across the department although, as a new process, reminders reinforcing the impact of its absence on the quality of preparation for the review have assisted. The main messages are very clear: the best outcomes happen when SWs reply quickly enabling IROs to endorse the invite and consultation lists for these to be sent out in good time before the reviews. This will remain an area of joint activity to ensure that children are placed first and we can get the best outcomes for them from their comprehensive reviews.

Positively, there was an improvement in consultations received from carers as well as from children and their parents which evidences better inclusion of their views. As for the range of received consultations,

there is still work to be done to improve the response rate from health and education professionals.



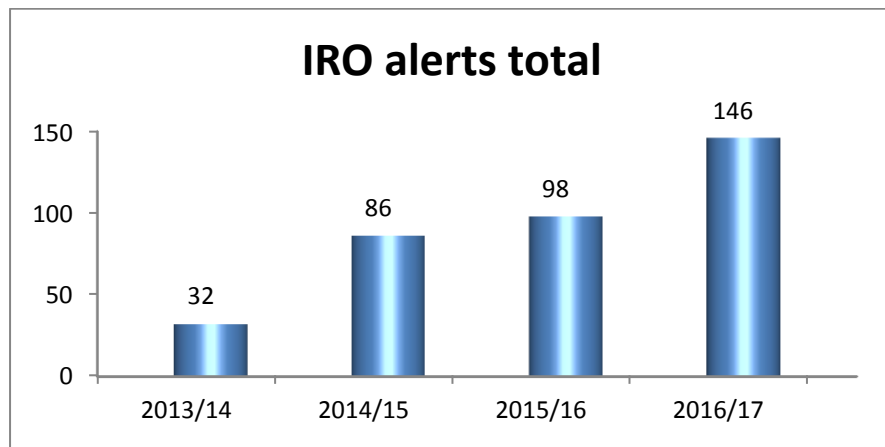
At the same time, similar improvement was also seen with in relation to invites and consultations for Pathway Plan reviews:

The overall performance has seen a marked improvement in forms sent and received compared to 2015/16. Overall, 2167 consultations were sent and 606 received. 7% more children and young people and 14% more carers than last year sent back their consultations before reviews.

The improvement to date is encouraging and a further rise in paper consultations is anticipated. Preparation is also underway for a new consultation method where children share their views via an interactive web based consultation system called MoMo, which is planned to be implemented in 2017/18.

Consultation Form for:	Sent 2015/16	Received 2015/16	Sent 2016/17	Received 2016/17
PWP Care Leaver	106	12	197	21
Parent	5	0	0	0
Subtotal:	111	12	197	21

IRO issue resolution process:



As anticipated, there has been a further increase in issues raised by IROs during 2016/17 in comparison with the preceding 3 years. A critical role and one tested by Ofsted relates to the quality assurance of children's plans and the effectiveness of challenge from the IROs. Increase in numbers may be linked to the increase in our cared for population and number of reviews during the year but it primarily evidences that IROs were scrutinising children's care plans with consistency and rigour. Commitment of the IROs to identify and take action leading to resolution of issues needs to be appreciated in the particular context of the churn the services has experienced last year.

Simultaneously, implementation of the IRO escalation process, as an integral part of child's record system in April 2016 and monitoring of this activity, certainly supported the process of timely communication and issue resolution between IROs and fieldwork professionals.

Type of alert	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Good practice notification			11	10
Informal resolved	30	53	73	122
DRP level 1	2	29	22	17
DRP level 2	0	4	2	7
Total number of alerts raised	32	86	109	156

Practice Alerts and Formal Escalation 4 year comparison

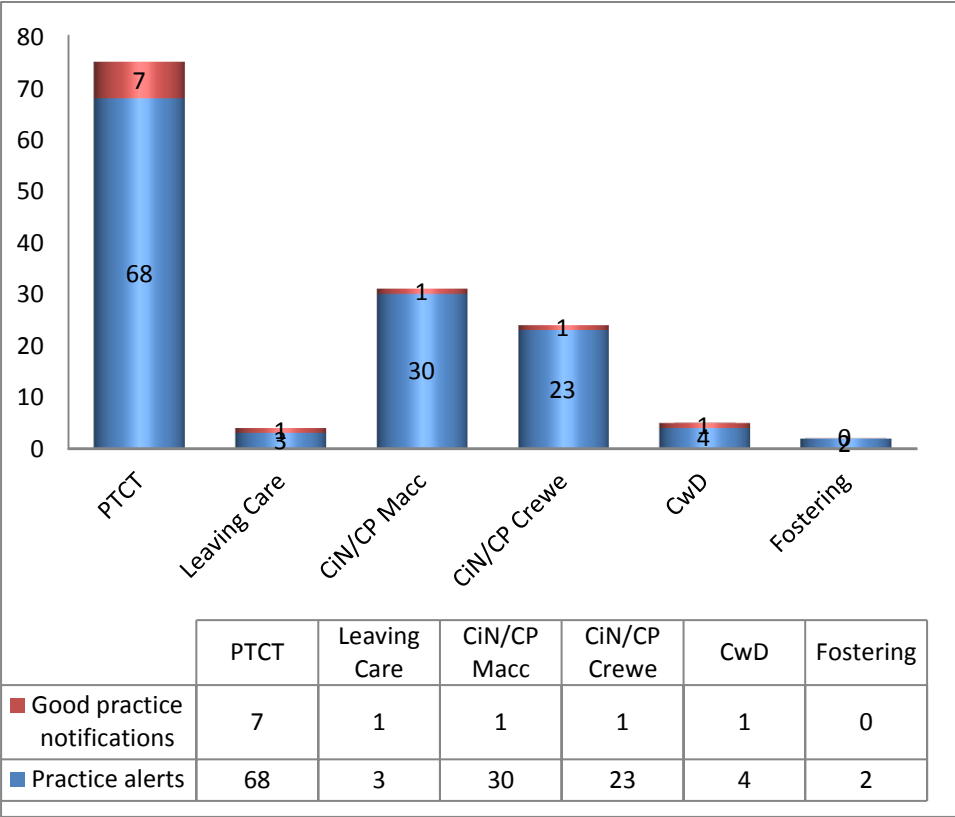
'The role of the IRO is a specialist one which stands alone in the local authority. It is a role that may involve challenging senior managers and may require the IRO to seek legal remedies if the local authority fails in its duties.'

Statutory guidance for IROs and LAs on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked after children, 2010.

Distribution of alerts and good practice notifications across relevant services:

The main disproportion of alerts issued per individual services should be linked to the number of cared for children and the care leaver population managed by these services. This explains why the majority of alerts and good practice notifications were issued to the P&TCT as

the main cared for children’s service. The ratio of alerts per number of cared for children’s cases managed by each of the two CiN/ /CP services is also a subject of further analysis.



There are far fewer children whose care plans are managed by CiN/ CP services although there are specific challenges practitioners on these teams face, mainly due to the often intense and complex nature of the initial stages of care and placement planning, alongside progressing cases to care proceedings.

Overall, the practice of robust IRO escalation of issues to improve outcomes for children is being embedded as an integral part of the care planning and case review process. There have been many good examples where IROs and Team managers, as well as senior managers, have discussed their differing perspectives or the details of the identified improvements, and a more consistent and timely approach to issue resolution has been seen. This improvement developed best where there was stability of staff, both on the IRO team as well as SWs and Team managers. The following aspects were evidenced and found to represent ‘what works’ when improving the efficacy of achieving issue resolution:

- a) retaining a clear focus on how the issue impacts on the child,
- b) IROs and managers holding discussions and meeting up, to share information and their respective views aiming to resolve the issue promptly for the benefit of the child,
- c) IROs clearly specifying what outcomes they would anticipate in relation to all issues they raised, esp. relevant for multiple-issue alerts.
- d) Managers responding promptly,
- e) IROs ensuring they are consistent with raising issues impacting on the child or their care plan which cannot be resolved with the social worker,
- f) Managers identifying systemic and/ or capacity issues affecting social workers and acting to prevent further drift in care planning/ implementation,
- g) Managers using themes from issues raised to identify any learning needs for the team.

The improvement in execution and resolution of IRO escalations reflects the commitment from IROs as well as SWs and their managers to get things right for the Cared for Children and ensure that identical approach is promoted for the children who move on to adulthood as Care Leavers.

Thematic data:

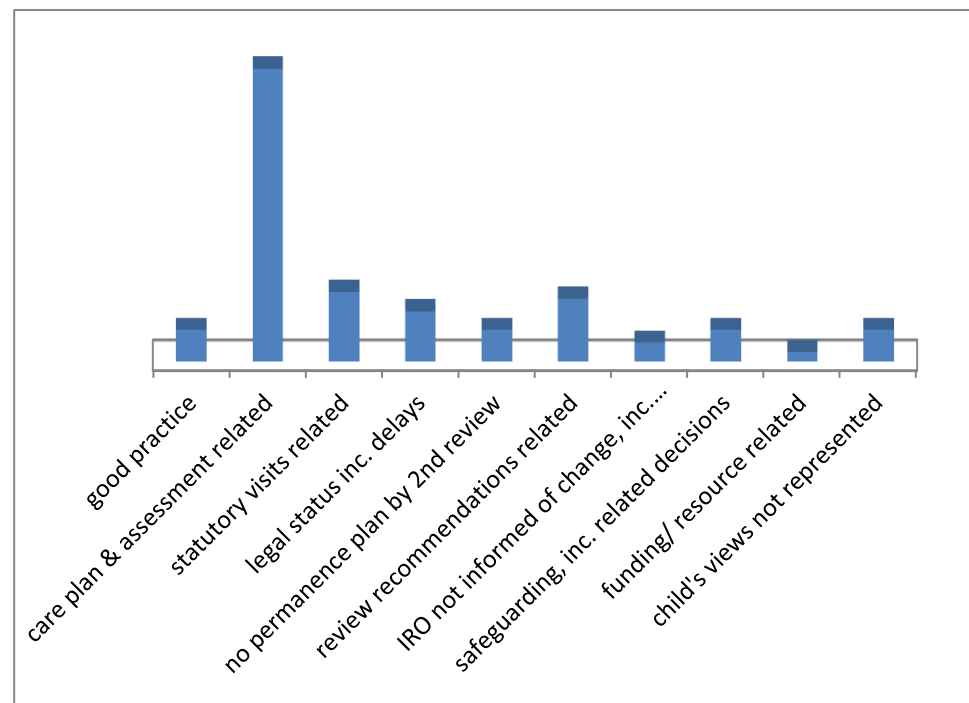
Common patterns from IRO alerts evidence fewer, than last year, issues in relation to statutory visits and overall more attention to the messages from children themselves. Alongside a few instances of lack of clear children's views and wishes in the assessments or care plans, there has been an emergence of good practice notifications identifying children's views being promoted and remaining paramount to the care planning process. Other common themes include:

- care plans not formulated or updated for the statutory reviews,
- drift or delay in relation to progressing care plans, e.g. when clarifying the legal status and securing permanence (inc. revocations of care orders)
- clarity about accommodating young people under sec.20 when prompt homelessness assessments are required to determine best ways to support them when they are the most vulnerable.

Alerts regarding quality of assessments, placement planning and more effective direct work to progress the care plans varied in numbers. The latter included issues regarding Life story work or ensuring there was a good partnership working with children, parents and carers to progress the plans.

Similarly to previous years, IROs evidenced scrutiny of the quality of safeguarding and legal arrangements, which was reflected in alerts regarding management of various risks, e.g. timely completion of Reg.24 assessment, timeliness of placement plan adapted to the negative outcome of the viability assessment or impact of experienced difficulties within parental capacity to protect the child when supporting the plan for the child's rehabilitation with the parent. Among the positive trends, there were no instances identified in Q4 where IROs were not contacted and informed about a significant event which would mean a change to the child's care plan.

Among the positive trends, IROs were gradually better informed about changes and significant events in children's lives meaning potential change of their care plans, with no such instances highlighted in Q4.



Themes within alert summary 2016-17

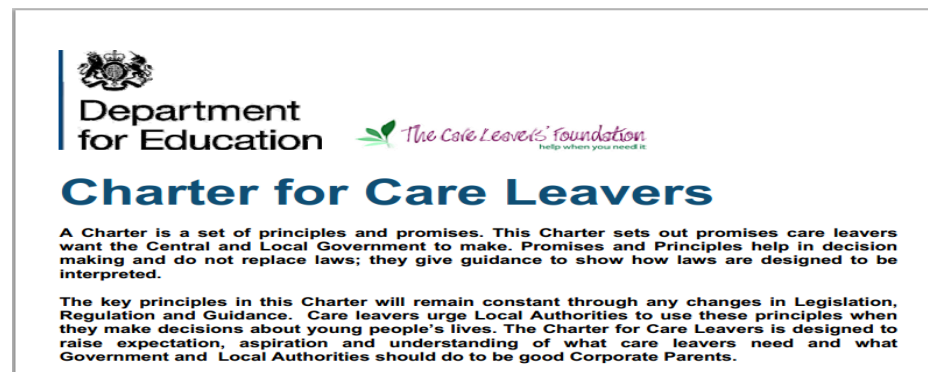
Overall, there were 10 good practice notifications highlighting good and exemplary practice by practitioners in relation to:

- good level of engagement with service users (child/ young person or/ and parent or carer),
- good quality assessment and understanding of the child's lived experience,
- good understanding of children's needs and their lived experience as well as advocating for them or on their behalf.

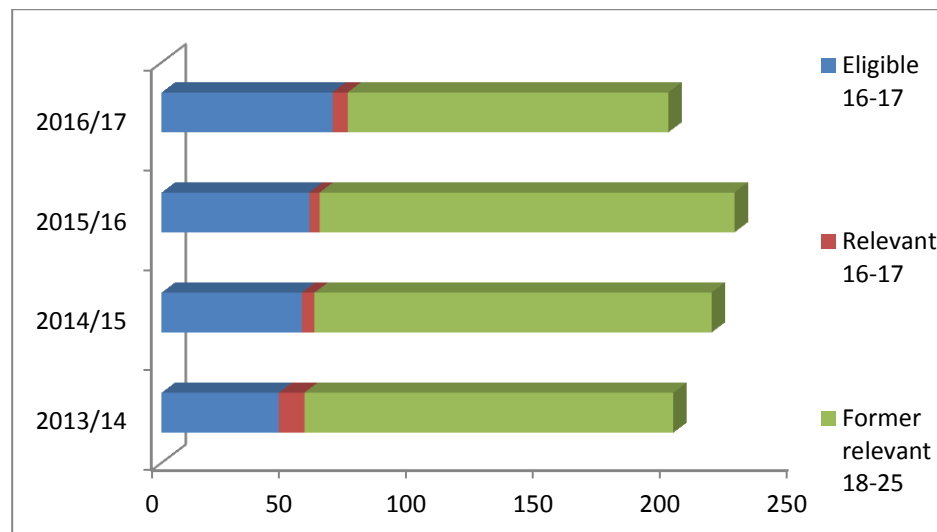
IRO OVERSIGHT OF CARE LEAVERS' MATTERS

Although not an IRO statutory duty, it is recognised as good practice by young people and Ofsted to retain the IROs' involvement when reviewing the care leavers' Pathway Plans. The main benefit is the trust and continuity of relationships between care leavers and their IROs, often established over many years, alongside the independent scrutiny of the Pathway Plans by IROs. A testimony of how much these relationships mean to some of the care leavers is best represented by what one of them wrote to her IRO on hearing she was leaving to retire:

'Apart from the biscuits you bring, you also correct the mistake in the meeting when people call me ... instead of... and you ask the questions I forget or get too nervous to ask. Before I wouldn't expect to get a copy of my pathway meeting unless I asked for it but you always send it to me in the post before my meeting so we can correct it or reflect on things. I know I can be a pain in the backside and my mood is up and down like a rollercoaster especially when a pathway meeting is coming up, you managed to stick with me without a moan or bad word ;) Thankyou for being my Safeguarding officer, I hope you enjoy retirement :).'



Numbers of cared for children preparing to leave care (eligible care leavers) and all care leavers in receipt of services



Reviews of Pathway Plans were led by two IROs in particular although gradually other IROs have been gradually retaining their involvement for the cared for children, they were allocated to, who were becoming former relevant care leavers.

In 2016-17 there were 199 care leavers, aged 16-25, the majority of whom (126) were former relevant aged 18-25, with 7 of these aged 21+ (in education or training), 67 were eligible young people aged 16-17 preparing to leave care and 6 relevant young people were aged 16-17 who were no longer cared for.

a. Care leavers living out of area:

With fewer former relevant care leavers in 2016/17 than a year ago but more relevant and eligible care leavers, there were more care leavers living out of area. The increase in numbers related in large proportion to more teenage placements due to 'absent parenting' (asylum seeking and refugee young people) and 'family dysfunction' and 'family in acute stress' all those reasons consistent with the same trends reported nationally.

The 5% increase in care leavers living out of the area on last year is due to relocating closer/ live with their birth families or partner or to study. The IROs undertook these Pathway Plan reviews in places as distant as Isle of Man, London, Chichester or locations in Wales, Midlands, Yorkshire or Cumbria. In some instances there were additional challenges associated with long distance reviews, mainly around the availability of the care leavers who did not turn up or otherwise were not available for the review.

b. Number of pathway plan reviews and young people participation

No of Pathway Plan Reviews	309	No of YP expressing their views	243
No of Pathway Plan Reviews held within timescales	284	% young people expressing their views	79%
% Pathway Plan Reviews held within timescales	92%	No of young people attending	192
		% young people attending	62%

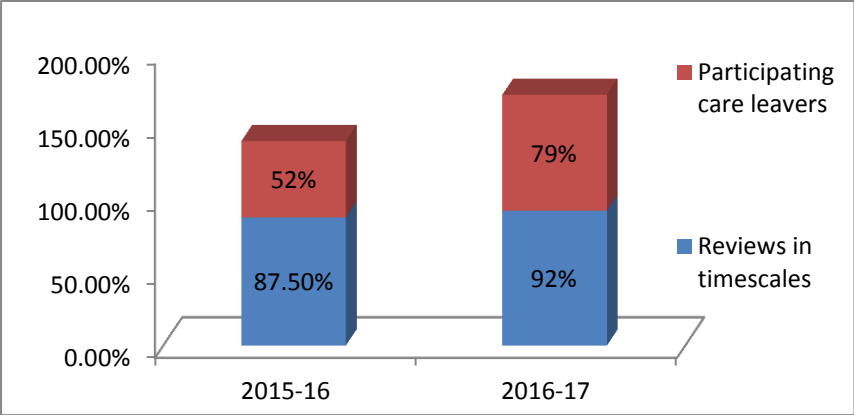
The IROs conducted 309 Pathway Plan reviews, 92% of them being in timescales. Ensuring care leavers' are present at their reviews is crucial but it often means that reviews have to be re-

arranged due to the changes in the young people's college, training or work schedules, at times, leading to reviews falling out of timescales. Despite the above and staffing challenges throughout the year, there has been a 4.5% increase in the timeliness of reviews since last year's 87.5% which embodies a good effort by the IROs to further improve care leavers' outcomes.

Similarly there has been an improvement in care leavers attending and participating in their reviews - from 52% participating in reviews last

Year	FR care leavers living out of area
2013/14	50%
2015/16	34%
2016/17	48 (39%)

year to 79% this year, which reflects the long-term aspiration to engage 100% of care leavers and exceeded the working target of 75% by 4%.



c. Quality of Pathway Plans

IROs have worked effectively with the frontline Leaving Care service to improve the quality of pathway plans. There has been strong leadership within the permanence and through care team to drive this, and the quality of work undertaken with care leavers and the quality of Pathway Plans has improved significantly. The dedication and professionalism of the Team Manager, with the support and leadership of his Service Manager, led to a restructure of the service as a separate team and an increase in permanent Personal Advisors (PAs) supported and supervised by Senior Personal Advisors. This also allowed for specific areas of focus to be driven by individuals within the service, for example: apprenticeships/ career options etc.

Evidence of achieving outcomes quicker through joint working with other professionals and agencies was more evident during reviews.

Improved co-operation with Housing, other regulated and unregulated (under Care Standards Acts) providers, together with Commissioning, through a new Ignition panel helped to achieve this. The issue of care leavers being classed as ‘intentionally homeless’ by Housing has been explored by relevant agencies and it is believed that work is ongoing to ensure these young people’s needs and impact of earlier abuse, neglect and trauma are taken into consideration when assessing and allocating them with relevant accommodation.

The significant improvement would not be possible without the inclusion of the Transitional worker and her team within the work with vulnerable young people who are then requiring support as vulnerable young adults. The new Designated 16+ nurse, providing outreach work to care leavers, alongside ongoing involvement of the Teenage Partnership nurse, have made their clear impact on the overall improved outcomes.

Personal Advisors were evidencing promoting the safeguarding duty towards the care leavers’ own children, where there were concerns about quality of care and parenting and safety, was evident. This is a difficult area of balancing the needs of the parent – the care leaver whom the PA is allocated to – with the safeguarding needs of the care leaver’s child, which requires good co-operation between the allocated child’s Social worker and the PA and ensuring that both are supported. As preventative or supportive measure, further focus and communication to care leavers via the health app or health passports about the IDVA service and relaying information about the support to victims of domestic abuse, could benefit care leavers further.

A small number of reviews had to be stood down or re-arranged due to the Pathway Plan not being updated on time for its review. However, Pathway Plans were more frequently written with the young person and

agreed with them, which is of the utmost importance. There is still a need for improvement in ensuring that the documents are signed by the young people although this is often due to the technicalities of PAs having to input the information onto the system after working with the young people and then taking the Plan to them to sign at the review.

ETHNIC ORIGIN	NUMBERS	%
Any other mixed	1	1%
Any other Asian	0	
African	0	
Any other	10	8%
Any other white	2	2%
White and Black Caribbean	4	3%
White British	102	86%

d. **Ethnicity:**

The ethnicity of our care leavers' population remained primarily white British although there was an increase in asylum seeking young people from various countries as well as emergence of EU nationals aged 18+. There was no marked difference in the ethnicity of the cared for children and care leavers and the ethnicity of care leavers was matched by the IROs' ethnicity, with majority of them being of white British, 1 of Asian and 1 of African origin within the reporting year.

e. **Gender – former relevant 18-20**

Male	61	(51%)
Female	58	(49%)

2 IROs - one male and one female reviewed the majority of Pathway Plans. The female IRO's caseload was dedicated to 18+ care leavers and this specialism made best use of her long-standing expertise, well established relationships with care leavers and established relationships with other professionals, benefitting stability and continuity of professional involvement for the care leavers. The end of the reporting year saw this IRO preparing to retire which led to a decision that all IROs would retain their involvement with 18+ care leavers. This will help to re-balance the gender balance ratio, with 2 further male IROs (3 in total) working with care leavers, alongside 6 of their female counterparts.

f. **Disability:**

For this year, 9 care leavers (8%) were identified as having a physical or learning disability preventing them from work or training (NEET category). The integration and smooth transition into Adult services, when children with special needs move into adulthood, is still variable in terms of best outcomes for children. Ongoing work is focusing on increasing the awareness in Adult Services about the IRO role. There will be a further focus on the optimising the Pathway Plan review process when the Adult services 2017/18.

IROs reviewing their Pathway Plans retained or established their links with Transitional team, Virtual School, Housing and Probation, alongside some professionals from Adult Services. Transitional arrangements remained a specialism of one of the IROs who reported the following:

'As a lead on working with Cared For young people with complex needs who are coming up to their 18th birthday and therefore are making the transition from Children's to Adult Services, I have been involved in a working party that developed a Transition Policy for young people in need of continuing support from Adult Services as they move into adulthood.

I remain involved with a work stream developing a policy on 'Preparation for Adulthood' which is a programme funded by the DfE as part of the 'Delivering Better Outcomes Together' consortium. This is linked to the council's 'Local Offer' for people with Special Educational Needs and Disability. I am the link person with the Children with Disability team alongside a counterpart in Adult Services and attend team meetings to form relationships and facilitate effective communication.'

g. **Education, employment and training:**

- 16 (13%) of care leavers were NEET - not engaged in work, training or education ((this does not include those who are unable to work or who are pregnant or a parent) - this figure is not stable but fluctuates throughout the year, **improved by 2% from 34 care leavers (15%) last year,**
- 10 young people were in Higher Education (3.5%) – **again improvement due to 2 more young people in**

HE than last year with sustained rate of young people in Further Education,

- 16 (13%) were in full time work or training, and **increase of 4% over preceding year.**

h. **Unaccompanied asylum seekers: 19**

There were concerted efforts to make sure that the needs of the unaccompanied asylum seekers/ refugee young people in CEC care (esp. from the dispersal programmed) were recognised and supported well.

Feedback regarding the timeliness and quality of educational/ training support to asylum seeking and refugee young people varied. Some care leavers and professionals confirmed care leavers enjoyed their ESOL course, with their PAs stating that their English improved vastly and their tutor attended some of the reviews for. One of the care leavers attended an extra adult language learning course at South Cheshire College. Discussions about these issues took place as part of the Pathway Plan reviews for these young people, with the report providing overall feedback on the arrangements for this provision.

i. **Accommodation for care leavers:**

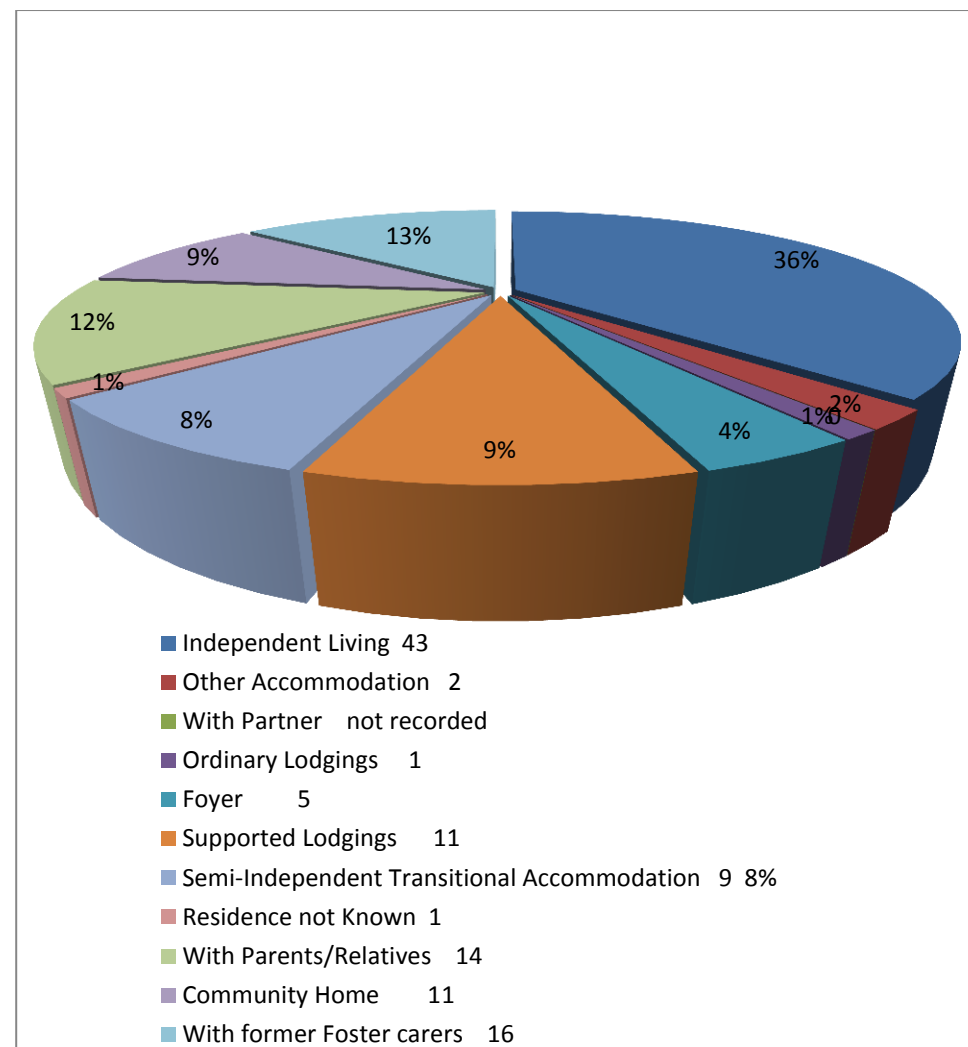
As stated above Ignition panel and co-operation with Housing as well as providers seemed to have made a positive impact. Through the reporting year, there were only 3 care leavers judged to be in unsuitable accommodation as per government definition. This was either due to their being held in custody or in Emergency

Accommodation. Six care leavers were noted as homeless since April 2016 for short periods of time but none were homeless at the time of writing this report.

Independent Living	43	36%
With former Foster carers	16	13%
Other Accommodation	2	2%
Ordinary Lodgings	1	1%
Foyer	5	4%
Supported Lodgings	11	9%
Semi-Independent Transitional Accommodation	9	8%
Residence not Known	1	1%
With Parents/Relatives	14	12%
Community Home	11	9%

Types of accommodation with numbers of care leavers in them

It was identified that there was an opportunity to improve the access to suitable accommodation for our young people at the point of potential entry into care. This led to the IRO service having a clear focus on this area, particularly in relation to the consistent and timely use of the joint protocol between Housing and Social Care. Instances where 16-17 year old young people were initially supported under sec.17, and after a further period of time became cared for under sec.20, constitute a learning opportunity.



This issue is of particular importance given the potential future instances where needs of the young people should be recognised and their awareness of support and entitlements ensured in a timely

manner. It will support prevention of young people, who present themselves at 16-17 as homeless, from sofa surfing or putting themselves at risk as well as provide clear evidence for their eligibility for the care leaver's status and thus relevant post 18 support. It will also evidence consistent commitment by all agencies to implement, research compliant, good practice when older 16-17 years old young people are not treated with any more degree of confidence as less vulnerable and more self-reliant only by the virtue of their age than younger children and young people whose entry into care may be easier.

j. **Parenting:**

Similarly to last year, a small number of care leavers were either expecting a baby or have been a parent already. Relevant assessments and steps were undertaken to ensure that the needs of the care leavers who are parents were met whilst the needs of their children, particularly where there were safeguarding concerns, were addressed accordingly. The IROs ensured good co-operation with involved professionals to achieve the right balance between the need of the parent as well as their child.

THE YEAR AHEAD – IRO TEAM TARGETS AND PRIORITIES FOR 2017/18

This report informs the priorities for the service for next year. The range of the new tasks has been presented in full within the report and this will continue to be built on. The IROs will continue with executing their statutory duties towards children whilst retaining their commitment to

working together with operational services and other agencies to optimise service provision and ensure that individual needs are fully recognised and met and outcomes for cared for children and care leavers in the care of the local authority continue to improve.

The following aspects of service development have been planned to further improve outcomes for our children in 2017/18 year:

- A focus on promoting placement stability by: understanding, promoting and addressing and reducing the placement disruptions for our Cared for Children, with a strong focus on the prevention and management of placement instability and work with the fostering team on keeping children central to the care planning and review process and achieving better outcomes for children who are disrupted from placement; it is anticipated that this will encompass:
 - a) Work with fostering service to link information from disrupted placements with analysis of the carers' approval range issues not changing over time but rather their strengths and weaknesses being reflected by accompanying matching considerations,
 - b) Achieving clarity about consistency of support, including financial, within the policy for Reg.24 kinship carers,
 - c) Work with Family Therapy, fostering service, designated nurses and Virtual school on optimising the use of SDQ,
 - d) Joint working with all teams regarding the learning about impact of trauma on children and the methods for undertaking Life story work
 - e) Helping to promote a culture where the impact of any move for our children is fully understood and informs any decisions about them, ensuring the right support to help them achieve stability is in place at the earliest point.

- Working with the Virtual School on understanding trends and patterns and methods of addressing the needs of underachieving cared for children and young people,
- Closer co-operation with the teams involved with the SEND agenda, in relation to embedding consistent processes for the child between their EHCP reviews and statutory case reviews, in line with the relevant national practice guidance,
- Exploration of impact of implementation of the joint homelessness protocol in cases of cared for young people age 16-17 who ask for support from local authority,
- Development of relevant guide regarding DLA management for foster carers.

