

**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS  
(CARED FOR CHILDREN)  
ANNUAL REPORT  
APRIL 2021- MARCH 2022**

# CONTENTS

	<b>Section</b>	<b>Page</b>
1	Introduction	3
2	Executive Summary	3
3	Purpose of Service and the Legal Context	4
4	Profile of IRO Service and Workload	5
5	Review Activity 5.1 Cared for reviews 5.2 Pathway plan reviews 5.3 Participation 5.4 Attendance 5.5 Consultation	6
6	Dispute Resolution and Quality Assurance Alerts	9
7	Progress Against Targets 20/21	10
8	Future Planning	11

## 1) **Introduction**

The annual report will present a reflective overview of the activity undertaken in Cheshire East in respect of our cared for children and young people. It covers the period of April 2021 to March 2022 and provides information about the role and the responsibilities of the safeguarding service, specifically the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). As cited in the IRO Handbook the primary focus *'is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration'*.

## 2) **Executive Summary**

The annual report will provide an overview of the work that has been undertaken in Cheshire East in respect of our cared for children and young people from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, as required by statutory guidance. It will make use of information from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective, draw upon the role and the responsibilities of the safeguarding service and, in specific, the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and how this supports the improvement of outcomes for our children.

This year has continued to see elements of virtual working due to the restrictions from previous years however there has been a gradual return to face to face cared for reviews in line with children and young people's views.

The safeguarding service has within this financial year maintained a full complement of staff with vacancies being covered by agency IROs already in post which has enabled stability for our children and young people. We have been successful in recruiting from operational teams across children's services which supports professional development alongside retaining knowledge and skills they already have of Cheshire East and the children and families we work with.

Despite the many challenges it is evident that the use of the dispute resolution process has been effective in identifying good practice and progress of children and young people's plans. The areas that have required strengthening have been resolved at an informal stage in 87% of cases, 13% needed to be resolved at a formal level. This highlights the positive working relationships that continue to be developed between the IROs, social workers and their managers and the shared goal of improving the outcomes for young people.

During the previous financial year, we entered a global pandemic that forced the service to work differently and enabled us to find different ways to connect with children and young people. This report demonstrates the continued development of the IRO service over the last year and its role in the journey to work towards face-to-face reviews. Towards the end of quarter four we began to move towards the re-introduction of face-to-face reviews in line with our children and young people's wishes.

In January 2022 the IRO Service developed guidance around mid-point reviews to strengthen the IRO scrutiny and ensure that oversight was both consistent and meaningful for the children and young people. This has enabled a collaborative approach with social work teams and has received a welcome response in supporting the progression of children and young people's plans. This will continue to be a key focus over the next 12 months with the quality of the mid-point reviews being strengthened.

This financial year has seen 97% of cared for reviews being held in timescales and rearranged reviews showing a decrease from 30% to 25%. Children and young people's participation has remained consistently high at 99% with 60% being in attendance.

This year has seen successful activity around pathway plan reviews with 90% being held in timescale and only 12% needing to be rearranged. It has also shown that 97% have attended or shared their views via an advocate.

It is evident that children and young people achieving a plan of permanence at the second review has continued to improve showing a 20% increase from 35 to 55%. This will continue to be a priority for the Safeguarding Service in supporting the operational services to achieve permanence at the earliest opportunity for our children and young people. This will be measured by timely reviews to ensure traction with planning, and quarterly dip sampling.

Actions highlighted within the previous year's reporting which have progressed have included regular audit activity both inward and outward facing, IROs supporting with internal training and the consistent use of interpreters at cared for reviews. There has been continued commitment to translate letters that the IROs write to our children and young people.

### **3) Purpose of Service and Legal Context**

The appointment by local authorities of an IRO is a statutory requirement. Their purpose is to ensure that the care plan for a cared for child fully reflects the child's needs, that each child's 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 towards them.

The Children and Young Person's Act 2008, followed by revised care planning regulations and guidance which came into force in April 2011, strengthened the role of the IRO. The statutory duties of the IRO are to [section 25B (1) -1989 Act]:

- 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; and
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

As corporate parents, each local authority, through their officers and members, should act for the children they care for as a responsible and conscientious parent would act. There are two clear and separate aspects to the function of an IRO:

- chairing the child's review; and
- monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.

The IRO Handbook sets out the statutory roles and duties as well as the strategic and managerial responsibilities of local authorities in establishing an effective IRO service.

The legislative framework regulating services of IROs (Children and Adoption Act 2002, Children and Young People Act 2008, IRO Handbook 2010 and Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010) imposes a specific set of statutory duties which all IROs are expected to execute to improve outcomes for cared for children. It specifies that IROs should:

- be social work professionals with at least five years post-qualifying frontline practice and supervisory/managerial experience;
- ensure that children's views are heard, they are aware of their rights and entitlements and receive relevant services and support;
- consult children before reviews to keep their views and input central to the whole review process (particularly during the review meeting);
- maintain overview and promote meaningful consultation with parents, carers and others with significant involvement with the child and ensure they are involved, and that their views have been considered in relation to the care planning and review;
- monitor the local authority's management of the child's case at any time;
- attend any significant meeting or other type of review for the child;
- identify and challenge drift, delay and underperformance and make attempts to resolve them in a timely manner.

#### **4) Profile of the IRO Service and Workload**

The management of the safeguarding service consists of an Assistant Director, Head of Service and Service Manager, all of which are permanent positions. In the latter end of 2021 and early 2022 there were new appointments to the Head of Service and Service Manager posts.

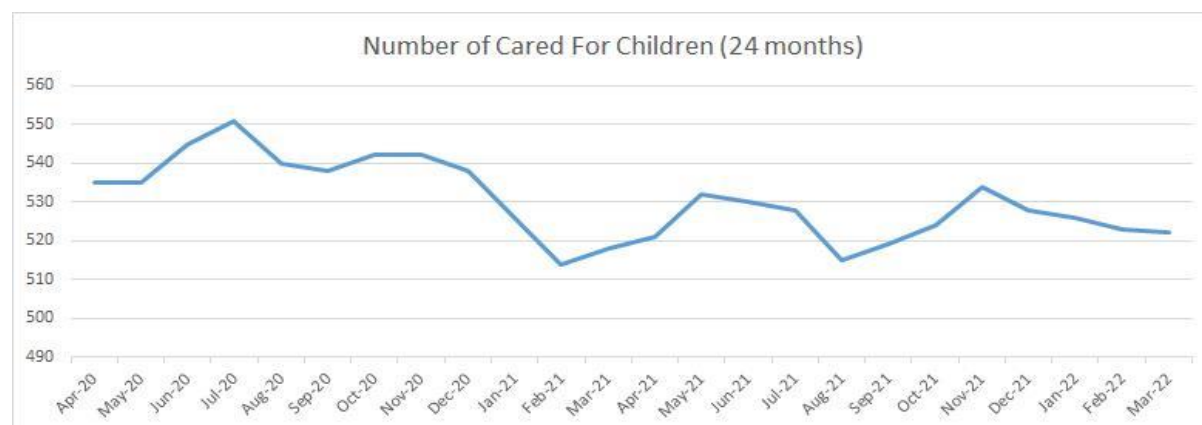
This year the team has seen the service maintain ten cared for IROs along with a part-time fostering IRO (FIRO). The Service Manager has direct line management responsibility for the IROs. The team is strengthened by its broad diverse background aiding the support that is offered to our children and young people.

The team are settled and whilst there have been some changes this has been effectively managed by two agency IROs already in post. There are currently eight permanent IROs with a further two internal candidates recruited which will take the service to a full permanent complement of staff of which all have worked within Cheshire East for several years. Maintaining this level of stability within the team provides a sense of security for our children and young people and ensures minimal impact when changes occur.

The current caseload for the IRO service fell in line with the range set out within the IRO handbook of 50-70.

## 5) Current Cared for Population

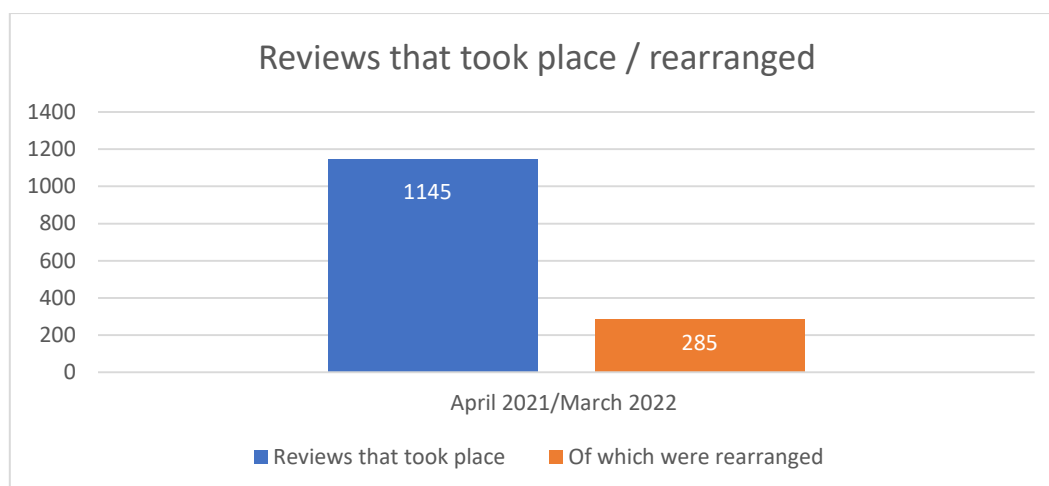
We currently support 526 cared for children, approximately 79% are white British with the remaining 19% from a variety of other ethnic or mixed backgrounds. Following on from 2020/2021 there continues to be more boys than girls in our care with boys representing approximately 56% of the cared for population with no change from the previous year.



The age range of our children varies with 0-4 being the predominant age at 41%, 11-15 at 33% and 6-17 at 26%. IROs also review young people post-18.

### 5.1 Cared for Reviews

The IRO service has chaired 1145 cared for reviews, this is a decrease from the previous year however is felt to be in line with the number of children coming into care over the reporting year. Of the cared for reviews undertaken there were 285 that were rearranged equating to 25%. This is an improvement from the previous year where 30% were rearranged.



There can be multiple reasons for rearrangement, including request by child or carer due to other commitments or request by social worker due to the priority of court. The percentage of rearranged reviews has reduced by 5%, as a service we continue to work with the operational teams to ensure minimal disruption for our children and young people and endeavour to prioritise keeping the cared for reviews in timescales. Many rearrangements have been found to allow time for social workers to complete the care plan to inform the review process.

### **Reviews Held in Timescale**

In this business year 97% of cared for reviews have been held in timescales which is an improvement on the 96% the previous year and reflects the hard work, commitment and relationships of the IRO and social workers.

## **5.2 Pathway Plans Review Activity for our Young People 18-21 Years**

During this reporting period there were 182 pathway plan reviews that were chaired by an IRO of these 90% were reviewed in timescale of which 12% were rearranged. This is not the full cohort as it had been agreed in previous years that any young people aged 19 and over, that did not wish to have an allocated IRO, would be transferred over to the Care Leavers team and a Senior Personal Advisor would undertake subsequent reviews. This is an improvement on the previous year where 23% of pathway plans were rearranged. We achieved a 97% participation rate and continue to take the form of attending the meeting or providing their views through an advocate. At the time of the reporting period data was not collated where pathway plan reviews were completed out of timescale. This is now available and will be reported on in future reporting periods.

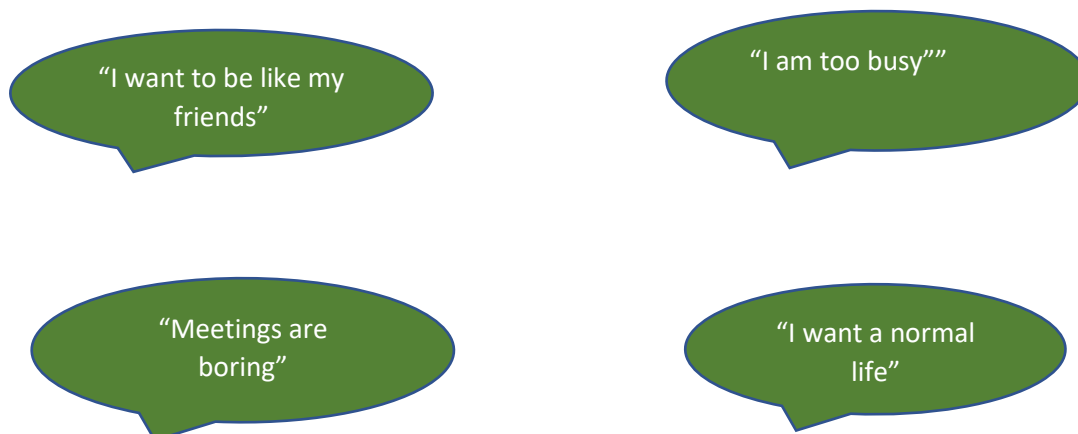
## **5.3 Participation**

We have seen participation remain high with 2021/22 increasing to 99% of children and young people participating in their cared for reviews. Participation can be through completion of consultation documents, providing views via an advocate or their carers or attending their review meeting in person.

## 5.4 Attendance

The IRO service work hard with the operational teams to ensure where possible children and young people attend their reviews. This year 60% attended their cared for reviews, which is a slight decrease from the 68% last year. There continues to be commitment from the safeguarding service to encourage attendance with IROs ensuring they consult or visit with the children and young people prior to the review with additional consultations being sent as part of the preparation for the reviews.

Given the attendance rates at cared for reviews contact was made with a small group of children and young people who were identified as not having attended a cared for review. During discussions with the young people, they advised that whilst they were given every opportunity to attend it was their choice not to attend with them sharing.



The IRO service remains committed to visiting children and young people on allocation and prior to their cared for review, this commitment extends outside of these times if requested by the children or young people. It is clear on children's records that they are being consulted by visits being undertaken.

## Feedback about the service

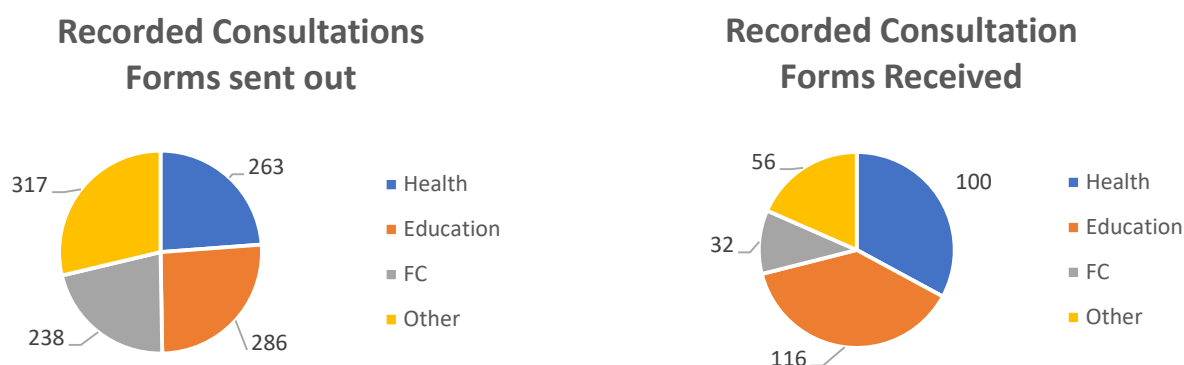
During the previous reporting period in 20/21 there was feedback provided from the Cared for Children's Survey, providing an overview of their views in relation to cared for reviews and the role of the IRO. The next survey was scheduled for May 2022 with the findings being ready to share in the 22/23 report. The IRO service along with the social work teams will examine the results following completion and use this to strengthen practice and support the improvement of children and young people's experiences.

## 5.5 Consultation

As part of the review process IROs are required to consult with the child or young person, their parents, their carer's, and key partner agencies involved in their care

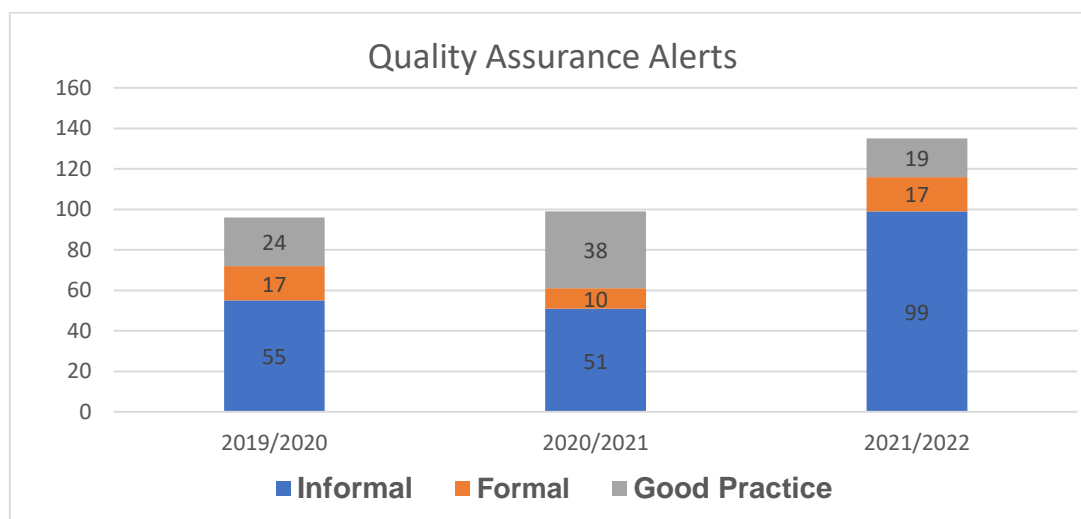


plan. Figures for return of consultation documents remain low and do not necessarily represent an accurate picture. For example, whilst foster carers may not always complete the consultation form, they attend the review and will report verbally instead, attendance for foster carers stands at 70%. There is continued developmental work which will capture a more accurate picture of consultations. To further strengthen the consultation process we are sending agency leads from health, education and fostering monthly updates. A workstream has also been set up to strengthen our recording of consultations and provide a more accurate overview which will be fed back to Corporate Parenting Operational Group.



*2021/2022 data set for consultations*

## 6) Dispute Resolution and Quality Assurance Alerts



One of the key functions of the statutory role of the IRO is to seek resolution to any problem or disagreement arising out of the care planning process. It is a core part of their role to scrutinise practice and challenge the local authority to ensure good and timely outcomes for children. To do this, IROs must establish good working relationships with social workers and their managers to be able to affect a good dispute resolution process and with good support of this process by senior

managers. Alongside this responsibility, IROs in Cheshire East also have a role in identifying good practice so learning from what works well for children and young people can also be understood and replicated.

The IRO handbook, legislation, and guidance around the planning for cared for children requires local authorities to ensure they have a good formal dispute resolution in place. Whilst this may look different in each local authority all systems must have a 20 day maximum time limit to resolve any disagreement from the beginning of the process to its conclusion. In Cheshire East this commences with an Informal Quality Assurance Alert being raised by the IRO with resolution at this level within five working days with the team manager. If this is not achieved, then the IRO will escalate to a formal alert allowing a further ten days to reach resolution with a senior manager. If there were still no agreement after 15 days, then the IRO may escalate concern to CAFCASS.

<u>What is working well</u>	<u>What are we worried about</u>	<u>Future focus</u>
<p>There is evidence of there being an increase of quality assurance alerts from 89 to 119 which indicates improved oversight from the IRO Service. This is broken down as follows: 99 informal alerts 17 formal alerts 19 good practice alerts</p> <p>There is regular communication at service manager level to ensure timely responses and appropriate resolutions. The introduction of mid-point reviews will support more regular oversight and the ability for the safeguarding service to support the progression of children's plans and timely outcomes.</p>	<p>There has been a decrease in good practice alerts down to 16% compared with 36% in 20/21.</p> <p>There has been an increase in formal alerts with these representing 14% of the alerts for 21/22.</p> <p>In the main these are related to drift in the children and young people's planning, young people placed in unregulated placements, difficulties around family time and IROs raising challenge in respect of legal status.</p>	<p>Good practice needs to be identified at every opportunity to ensure learning can be taken at replicated for our children and their families.</p> <p>The IRO service needs to ensure they continue to offer a consistent approach to the dispute resolution process to ensure progression of children's plans and timely outcomes.</p> <p>Service managers to meet regularly to discuss themes from the quality assurance alerts and aid future learning across all service areas.</p>

## 7) Progress against targets 20/21

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Progress</u>
<p><b>1.</b> To provide choice in how we consult with children</p>	<p>Internal peer audits around children and young people's consultation have been taking place and a dip sample in June.</p> <p>IROs have ensured interpreters are present at reviews where needed and</p>

	use language line facilities when consulting. letters to children continue to be translated.
<b>2.</b> To use Internal peer audits to continuously scrutinise and improve our practice	Internal peer audits between the IROs have continued with there being a clear framework moving forward.
<b>3.</b> Focus on challenge of drift and delay in discharge of care order cases where children can safely be in the care of the parents	In the main IROs have held timely cared for reviews to support regular oversight of children's plans. Whilst there has been some progression with Discharge of Care Orders the courts have focused on urgent applications which has caused drift and delay.
<b>4.</b> Focus on permanency being achieved at the second review.	There has been some improvement over the past year, but delays have continued due to extended proceedings and a situation where more C2 applications have been made than at any other time.
<b>5.</b> Child-led outcomes incorporated in every review (working in partnership)	All reviews now offer children and young people the opportunity to develop their outcomes and record their own recommendations.
<b>6.</b> We will ensure timely fostering reviews that ensure foster carers meet fostering standards and are well supported	Annual reviews have been taking place however work is continuing in developing a workstream to strengthen performance reporting in this area.

## 8) **Future Planning**

The IROs will feel sufficiently skilled/trained to execute their roles and responsibilities.	Review of the training offer to include IROs with additional focus on CSE/MFH and analysis.
Plans of permanence	This remains a key performance indicator for 22/23 with the safeguarding service continuing to track and support children achieving permanence at the earliest opportunity. Quarterly dip samples will take place and findings shared with operational teams around: Mid-point reviews Children subject to S20/Placement Orders/Care Orders.
Strengthen FIRO role to ensure timely fostering reviews	Develop a pathway on ICS to support accurate reporting data.  Dip samples to take place by service managers to ensure the quality of the reviews and support learning and service development.

Children and young people will receive timely letters following their cared for reviews.	Monthly reporting will take place to support timeliness and ensure this practice standard is embedded.
--	--

Key:

IRO- Independent Reviewing Officer-

CSE-Child Sexual Exploitation

MFH-Missing from Home

ICS-Integrated Children's System's