



Together we will make Cheshire East a great place to be young

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT FOR CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS 2024/2025



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Introduction

The annual report will present a reflective overview of the activity undertaken in Cheshire East in respect of our cared for children/young people and care leavers. It covers the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 and provides information on the role and the responsibilities of the safeguarding service, specifically the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). The report will provide information from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective, and how this supports positive outcomes for our children.

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'*.

The IRO's work collaboratively with our Participation team, Corporate Parenting Board and Cheshire East Safeguarding Children Partnership. Our journey continues to model a relational approach based on 'high support and high challenge' to support achieving the aspirations we have for our children, young people, and care leavers.

The IRO's utilise the structures that are in place including informal and formal escalations to support both the improvement of children in care's lived experiences and to better their outcomes.

In line with the IRO's quality assurance role there are a range of activities and performance measures that support care planning for Children in Care. Our performance to deliver timely and effective reviews has seen an 8% decrease during 24/25, identifying that a period of instability and staff vacancies was a contributing factor. This continues to be a key focus area in the coming year.

The report will provide an overview of the performance data including key performance indicators such as timeliness of reviews and children and young people's participation and feedback of their experiences alongside the current profile of our children in care and details around the 'dispute resolution' process and the impact of this.

Despite competing demands the IRO's performance around completing recommendations from the review within the 5 days has continued to increase with the IRO practice standards providing benchmarking to support an improvement in this area for 25/26.

Participation continues to be a strength and at the time of reporting 96% of our children and young people shared their views.



Work has been undertaken to strengthen practice around IRO challenge and escalation to support timely decisions and avoid delay in progressing plans. Whilst in its early stages the newly devised 'Resolution Protocol' has been shared with the service with evidence that this is starting to be embedded in practice seeking timely resolutions in line with the restorative approach that Cheshire East have adapted.

Alongside our cared for children the IRO's have continued to have responsibility for reviewing all care leavers 18-21yrs. The IRO's successfully reviewed 81% of Pathway Plan reviews within timescale and whilst we have seen a slight downward trend from the previous year this is indicative of the instability in staffing that we experienced between September 2024-January 2025 and will remain a focus for 25/26. IRO's continue to build relationships with their young people to support their attendance which this year highlighted that 66% of care leavers attended their reviews.

In person reviews have continued to grow throughout this reporting year with us seeing a 15% increase which currently stands at 55%.

Throughout the year IRO's have supported their continued professional development by attending various training opportunities in areas such as Leadership and management, sexual abuse, reflective supervision and deprivation of liberty. This has not only enhanced their learning but aided them to support the wider workforce and focus on outcomes for children.

The report will highlight the progress on the action set from the previous year and set out our aims and objectives for the next 12 months.

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 each 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) – Children Act 1989 :

- 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.

Profile of the IRO Service and Workload

The management of the safeguarding service consists of a Director of Children's Social Care, Head of Service and Service Manager.

This year the team has seen the service gain two additional IRO's as part of the improvement journey taking our structure to 11 FTE cared for IROs along with a parttime fostering IRO (FIRO). To support changes in staffing and key improvement work the IRO's have been both permanent and agency with varied experience. The Service Manager has direct line management responsibility for the IROs who reports to the Head of Service. The background of



IRO experience is varied ranging from CAFCASS, Child Protection, Permanence, Adoption, Fostering and Frontline management.

Caseloads have varied across the year and between September 24 to January 25, we saw them reach an average of 100, this is clearly outside the IRO handbook which suggests a case load of 50-70. Towards the end of the reporting year the workforce had started to stabilise, and caseloads were starting to reduce. Where possible we aim to keep sibling, groups allocated to the same IRO to ensure consistency. Where a child or young person has articulated that they do not wish for this to happen we have, in the main, supported this view and offered an alternative IRO. In such cases both IRO's are in regular communication to ensure they are working collaboratively.

The IRO's have access to independent legal advice that is commissioned from a local legal firm. When this has been used it has been effective and supported the IRO to be confident in their challenge and ensure the best possible outcome for our children and young people. Within this reporting year this has not been accessed with IRO's feeling that our current internal escalations policy has avoided this level of intervention.

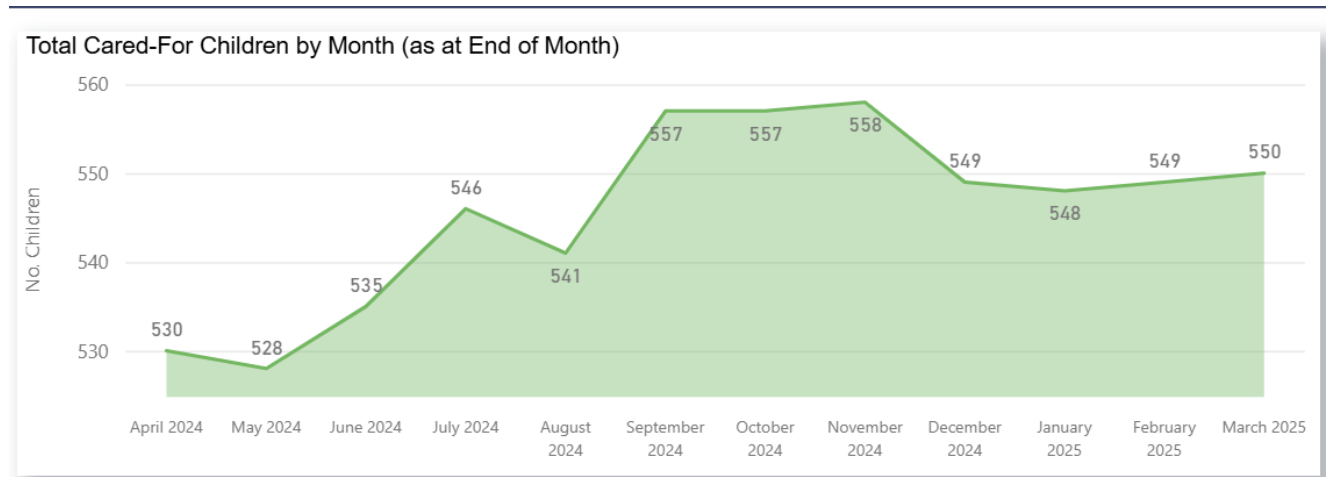
IRO's have links to different service areas such as cared for, care leavers, children with disabilities, adoption, education, and fostering. IRO's attend service meetings for their service on a quarterly basis which allows for the relational based practice to continue and support conversations around themes from both the individual work of an IRO to the collective QA activities that they undertake. This approach also supports timely resolutions, especially in relation to care planning.

The IRO's receive regular supervision and covers personal, performance and practice issues. Within this reporting period there have been monthly team meetings that have taken place which has involved a variety of guest speakers and peer observations to aid learning and strengthen consistency.

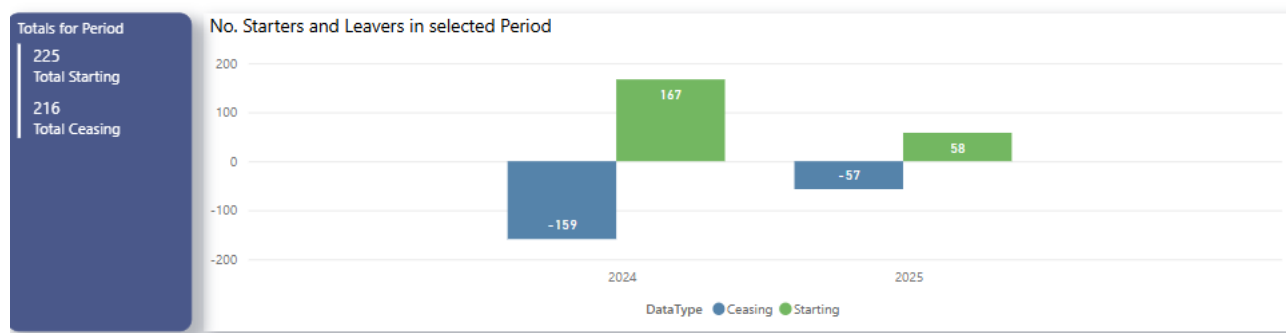
As part of our quality assurance role, we have enhanced our oversight of children in privately fostered arrangements through a dedicated IRO who holds this work. The IRO is alerted when private fostering arrangements have been identified to ensure this is a suitable arrangement. For the duration of the arrangement the IRO will attend regular Child in Need Meetings chaired by operational teams ensuring that the plan is proportionate and meets the current need. Service managers and Head of Service meet at quarterly intervals to raise themes, support awareness across the partnership and strengthen any areas of practice that have been identified.



Profile of our cared for children



This is the current profile of our cared for children within 2024/2025 financial year which highlights the increase in our cared for population at the latter end of quarter three and going into quarter four. It was during this period that the service experienced instability and caseloads significantly increased.



This year has seen the momentum of children leaving care has become more in line with children coming into care however out of these 40% were due to the YP turning 18, therefore they remain allocated to an IRO and the service doesn't see the impact on caseloads that children leaving care can have for IRO services

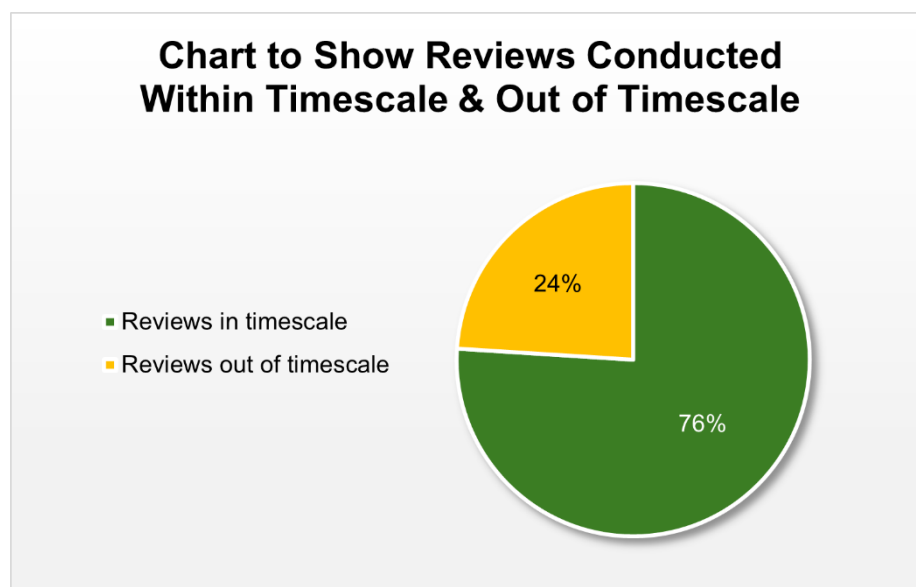
Performance data for Cared for Reviews

The IRO's have chaired 1185 cared for reviews in this reporting period with this year seeing 76% undertaken within timescales. As already highlighted the increased cared for population



and workforce instability has impacted on IRO performance within this area and remains a key focus area. To support timeliness and evidence oversight the IRO's make use of a 'series of meetings' when they are met with unavoidable delay. As a service, we have built in a process to support the improvement of timeliness, and this will continue to be reviewed. There are some operational challenges to ensure care plans are recorded in timescale to support timely cared for reviews taking place and the IROs are working with services to support practice improvement in this area.

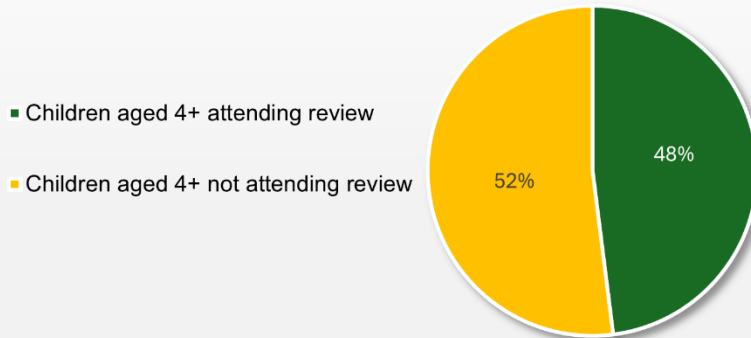
The IROs work hard to keep any rearranged reviews within timescales and work flexibility to avoid delay especially around court timetables. Over the year 249 reviews were rearranged equating to 21% this has remained relatively static from the previous year; however, it is reflective of some of the challenges the service has faced with the instability in the workforce and the impact on operational work



The IRO service work with our children and young people to encourage their attendance at their Cared for Review. In the reporting period, we had 48% of children over the age of 4 attending their review. Towards the latter end of the year the service has developed a platform for children, Young People and their carers to feedback their views and experiences around the review process, this data will be accessible and reflected within 25/26 reporting.



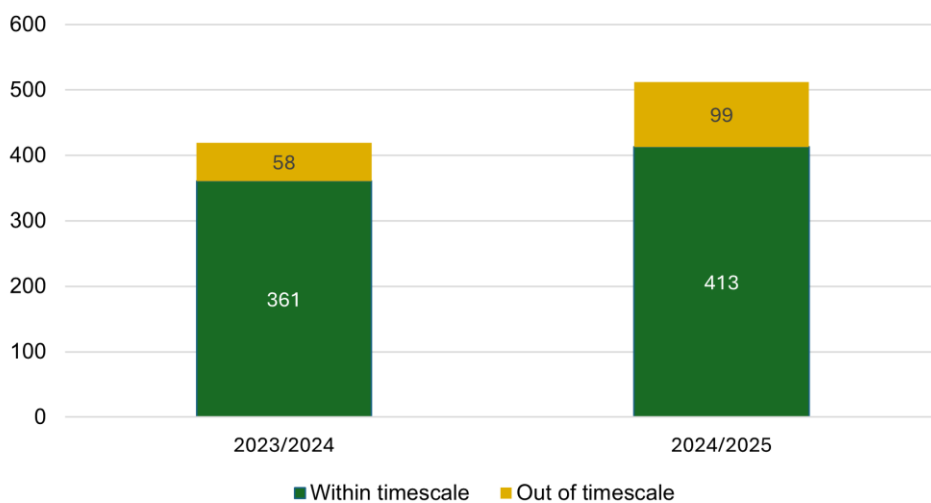
Chart to Show Number of Children Aged 4+ Attending Their Review



Performance data for Pathway Plan Reviews 18-21yrs

IRO's continue to support care leavers within Cheshire East and have this year completed 512 Pathway Plan Reviews with 81% taking place within timescales. Whilst this highlights a decrease from 88% from the previous year this is reflective of the workforce stability from September 24 to January 25.

Graph to Show Pathway Plans Completed Within Timescale & Out of Timescale, with Comparison to 2023/2024



Annual data for Key Performance Indicators

Task	Total Number	Percentage	Comparison to 23/24
Cared for reviews taken place	1185		1233
Cared for reviews held in timescale	1078	76%	84%
Cared for reviews with recommendations completed within 5 working days	776	65%	55%
Cared for reviews with minutes completed within 15 working days	850	72%	46%

There will be some variation to the figures from the monthly performance data that is scrutinised with the IRO's; where the recording of the reviews on the child or young person's records has not been completed, this will not be reflected within the snapshot above. Performance clinics with the IROs continue to address timeliness of IRO recording.

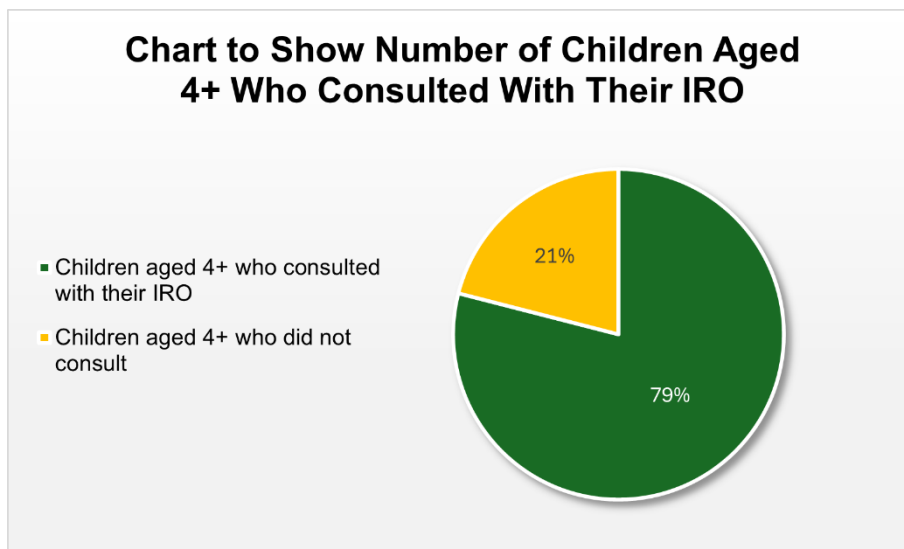
Participation

Children and young people sharing their views for cared for reviews has continued to increase this year and currently stands at 96%. This is something the safeguarding service are incredibly proud of and highlights the efforts that go into building positive relationships with our children and young people.

The IRO's remain committed to support children and young people in attending their reviews; with this year showing that 79% were consulted by their IRO. We do have to acknowledge that some children and young people do not wish to participate in their review. There is an expectation that IRO's ensure where suitable that the children/YP are offered an advocate to support with this.



Furthermore, a proportion of reviews that took place were for children under 4 years old where it was felt it would not be suitable for them to participate in this way, however there is an expectation the IRO's use alternative methods in a manner best suited to the children's needs and abilities to ensure a greater understanding of the children's lived experiences. This is generally through direct observation in home or education settings or through discussion with professionals working with them.



Attendance

The IRO's have continued to work hard to ensure children and young people attend their reviews with them consulting or visiting their children and young people prior to the review. While this is still not where it needs to be this year has continued to see improvements in this area with 48% now attending their cared for reviews. What we see is high levels of engagement with the review, but young people aren't always wanting to attend their reviews. This is something that we continue to explore through the support of our Participation team.

For our Care Leavers, this reporting year shows that 66% attended their pathway plan review, our aspiration is that this figure will continue to grow and again, through work completed with our participation team and feedback that the service receives, we can develop and strengthen the reviews to support this.

Children and young people who are new into care receive an IRO passport which has a picture and small narrative about the IRO, along with information regarding the review. This continues to be well received. Alongside this, consultation forms are also sent to provide our children and young people with the opportunity to express how they wish their review to be conducted and how we can support them to attend. If children and young people have experienced a change with their IRO, we have ensured that they have received an updated passport to support with this transition.



Feedback about the service

- A young person who was due to turn 21yrs sent a message to their IRO: *'I wanna say thank you though. I know we barely speak but I appreciate everything u do in the background. Will be disappointed when you're gone'.*
- Feedback from a foster carer: *'I was thoroughly impressed with the way she conducted her visit. The visit was completely child focused, she engaged with A, spoke to him in a way he could understand but not in a way that felt demeaning, and she seemed genuinely interested when he told her about his interests. Her demeanour brought out the best in him and want them to get recognition for their professionalism and commitment'.*
- Feedback from a parent: *'The kids have said they have spoken to you and said how nice you are and thank you for helping B understand better about the process and what happens after it has really helped him'.*

The IRO's held a session with several of our young people who shared:

I wouldn't focus on the meeting if it was on Teams.

WhatsApp or message would be best.

I prefer face to face meetings, more personal.

Review one hour max.

I don't like Teams, it's too long.

Through the development of an online portal, we are hoping to build on the feedback that we receive to aid learning and strengthen practice with one area being to deliver more reviews face to face in line with the children/YP wishes. We have set a Target of 85% for 25/26.

Our children and young people have also voiced some key themes through the consultations they have with their IRO's as part of their review including;

- Multiple changes in social workers impacting on the ability to develop those key relationships.
- Their plans not always being effective with at time lacking timely progression.
- A feeling that things are 'done too not with'.

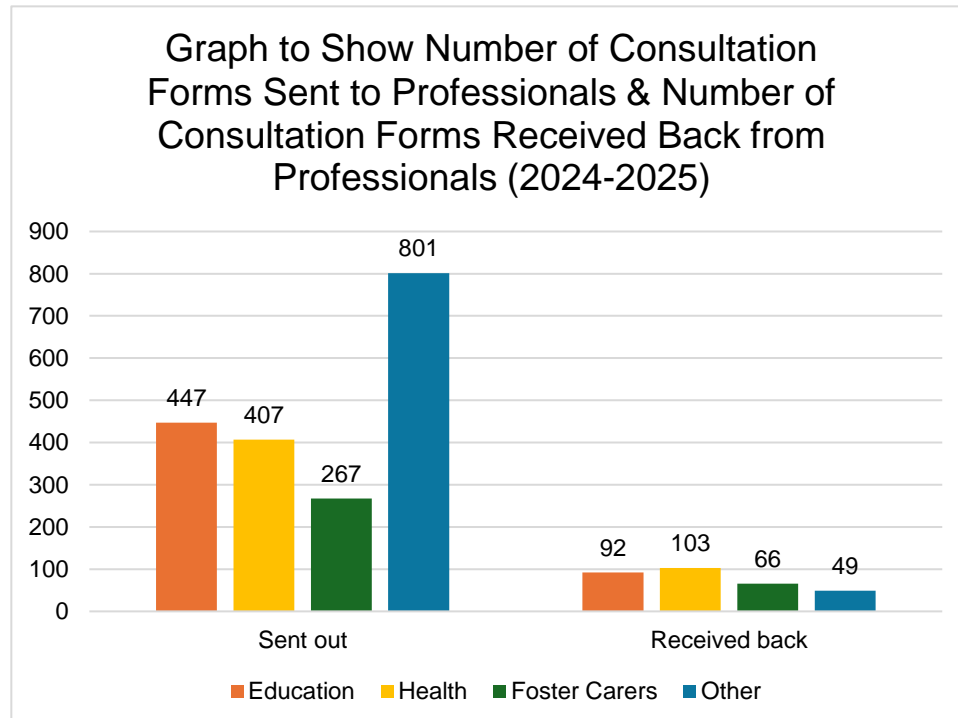


IRO's advocate for our children and young people and in sharing key themes with the social work teams support them feeling involved and listened too.

Consultation with partner agencies

Consultation with partners is important to triangulate information for young people and ensure we have the right information to support planning. The Safeguarding Service endeavours to consult with all key professionals supporting the child or young person. One of the ways we do this is through consultation forms for partners. The performance in this area has remained low with this not being where we would like it to be. Children and young people often voice that they wish for just a select few professionals to attend their review, however it is still important that the IROs consult with wider networks to inform future recommendations and to support plans being progressed. As a service we recognise that foster carer consultations is low however through review of this what we can evidence is that they attend reviews and provide verbal feedback which is then captured within the recordings. This remains a key focus for 2025/2026.

As a service we continue to share this data with our partners so they can also aid the strengthening of this.



IRO's are also proactive in liaising with professionals outside of the consultation process, often through telephone calls to ensure that they are capturing their views and key information that



can be fed into the review and support recommendations and forward planning. This reporting year has seen several partner escalations to police, health, education and housing which have supported progression of children and young people's plans along with ensuring collaborative working where risks have been identified.

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 ensure the dispute resolution process is effective. This also requires senior managers positively supporting this process. Alongside this responsibility, IRO's in Cheshire East are committed to identifying good practice to support the system to learn from what works well for children and young people, so that it can be understood and replicated across services.

In line with legislation, and guidance around the planning for cared for children, local authorities are required to have a formal dispute resolution process 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 is still no resolution after 15 days, then the IRO may escalate concern to CAFCASS.

This reporting year we have developed a Resolution Protocol in line with the restorative model that Cheshire East are working with to support timelier resolutions, with this involving IRO's holding reflective discussions with social work teams and partner agencies. This helps to understand barriers in progressing plans and supporting statutory compliance and aid timely actions that IRO's track as part of their quality assurance function. This new approach is in its early stages.

In line with the revised protocol, we are working towards developing a reporting system which will enable data to support the narrative around this area and will be available for 25/26 reporting.

The IROs have continued to highlight good practice with this year seeing 60 being raised where robust and detailed assessments have been completed/where children and young people achieved good outcomes in a timely manner, and where the development of positive relationships with both children/families and partners have been evidenced. There is acknowledgement that Cheshire East are going through an improvement journey and that some areas of practice need strengthening with a key focus for 25/26 being permanence planning.



IROs are also expected to provide escalation to partner agencies as it is recognised that drift in planning does not always sit with the social work teams. In the year 2024/2025 there were 20 partner escalations raised which in the main were across health, education, police and housing services, the key themes centred around ensuring that adequate safeguards and collaborative working were in place for our children and young people who go missing, ensuring that when difficulties with housing have been identified that these are rectified in a timely manner and don't delay progression of plans and requesting further information from health colleagues to ensure that health needs are captured appropriately within the reviews. Partnership escalations are cited within the IRO practice standards as a key strand of IRO practice to ensure positive outcomes and we will focus on the impact of such escalations in the coming year.

Progress against targets 2023/2024

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Progress</u>
Strengthen the timeliness of reviews, recommendations and letters to children/young people	<p>The IRO's have continue to write to children and this is embedded in practice.</p> <p>There is acknowledgement that as a service we haven't made as much progress regarding the timeliness of reviews and therefore this will remain a key priority for the coming year.</p>
Embed the IRO practice standards	<p>The IRO's are clear around the expectations outlined within the practice standards and continue to embed these in practice.</p>



Improve challenge around drift and delay	This needs to remain a key priority in line with the introduction of the Resolution Protocol to ensure this is fully embedded.
Increase the focus on consultations from partner agencies	Within the year we have developed an online portal to assist with the consultation process. Full embedding of this during 2025/26 is a priority

Key priority areas 2025/2026

1. Strengthen the timeliness of reviews

Due to the workforce instability, we have not made progress in this area and acknowledge that this needs to be a key focus for the coming year. As a service we recognise the importance stabilising the workforce and implementing an increased performance management structure.

2. Strengthen performance around in person reviews

Whilst we have seen an increase in IRO's holding reviews in person It is important that this continues to be a focus. Some of our children and young people within their feedback that their preference would be online meetings. IRO's through consultation will offer this flexibility and ensure children and young people's views are being considered.

3. Improve challenge around drift and delay

The IROs will be consistent in completing mid-point reviews as highlighted in the practice standards to ensure oversight and tracking of recommendations to avoid any delay. Escalations will continue to be a consistent feature with the themes from these being pulled together in a quarterly report and shared service wide to aid learning and strengthen practice.



4. Increase the focus on consultations from partner agencies

As a service we routinely send out consultations and invite our partner agencies to feedback and inform our children and young people's reviews. Whilst there has been an increase, we are keen to strengthen this further as sharing information and working collaboratively not only ensures plans are progressed but ensures identified needs are being met and supported by the right people. We are hoping that the introduction of an online portal will assist partners in providing timely consultations.

