



INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS (CARED FOR CHILDREN)

**ANNUAL REPORT
2018-2019**

CONTENTS

	Section	Page
1	Introduction	3
2	Statutory role and the legal context	3
3	The team	4
4	Overview	5
5	Review activity <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cared for reviews• Pathway plan reviews• Series of meetings• Participation• Attendance• Consultation	7-9
6	Dispute Resolution and Practice Alerts	10-12
7	Impact	12-15
8	Progress against targets last year	15
9	Future plans	16-18

1. Introduction

This report is a reflective overview of activity and performance in Cheshire East in respect of our Cared for Children and Young People. It covers the period of April 2018 to March 2019 and provides information about the performance and practice of the Independent Reviewing Officer Team in relation to the monitoring and review of care planning in Cheshire East. Additionally it reports on the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) in relation to Quality Assurance through the Practice Alert and Dispute Resolution Policy.

2. Statutory role and legal context

The appointment by local authorities of an Independent Reviewing Officer is a statutory requirement. Their purpose is to ensure that the care plan for a looked after child fully reflects the child's needs and 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 the child.

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 Independent Reviewing Officer. 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 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 Independent Reviewing Officer:

- Chairing the child's review; and
- Monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.

The Independent Reviewing Officer service in Cheshire East sits within the Children's Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit. The service is managed independently of children's operational social work and is therefore offering a level of independence that enables the service to effectively challenge plans, arrangements and the practice of the local authority. The strategic lead for the service reports directly to the Director of Children's Social Care. Independent Reviewing Officers and their managers have no involvement in preparing a child's care plan, management of the case, operational decision making and/or allocation of resources to Cared for Children.

The Independent Reviewing Officer Handbook sets out the statutory roles and duties as well as the strategic and managerial responsibilities of Local Authorities in establishing an *effective* Independent Reviewing Officer service.

The legislative framework regulating services of Independent Reviewing Officers (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 in order to improve outcomes for the children in public care, in particular it specifies that IROs should:

- be social work professionals with at least 5 years post qualifying front line 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 over-view and promote meaningful consultation with parents, carers and others with significant involvement with the child and ensure they are involved and their views have been taken into account 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

3. The team

The team of Cared for IROs in Cheshire East is made up of 9 IROs and a Safeguarding Manager. There are 6, female IROs and 3 males, 2 IROs are from the BME community, one IRO is of mixed heritage and the remaining 6 are White British. In relation to the children in care we serve this provides a diverse team, at the time of writing 85% of cared for children are white British with 15% from other ethnic backgrounds including 3% of mixed heritage backgrounds. Currently 53% of cared for children are male and 47% female and so in this respect the team are not representative of the population they serve, having only 33% male IROs however this reflects the gender balance of the workforce from which the team is drawn and would not be exceptional in comparison with other Local Authorities.

The team are settled and made up of 8 permanent members of staff including 2 members of the team employed in their roles for over 5 years, one for 3 years and the remainder for over a year, additionally there is one agency worker currently covering a post whilst an IRO is acting up as Interim Safeguarding Manager. One contract has been changed from fixed term to permanent this year following a business case put forward due to increased cared for children numbers and need for increased oversight to support improved practice across the service.

At the end of the business year in March 2019 caseloads of IROs were above the recommended level given the geographical size of the authority and numbers placed outside the borough. Caseloads ranged at this time from 60-85 across the team. As a response to a business case was put forward to Senior Managers, one contract was changed from fixed term to permanent and a further half time post was added to the team at the end of the financial year as well as an additional half time administration post to support the team.

4. Overview

What has gone well?

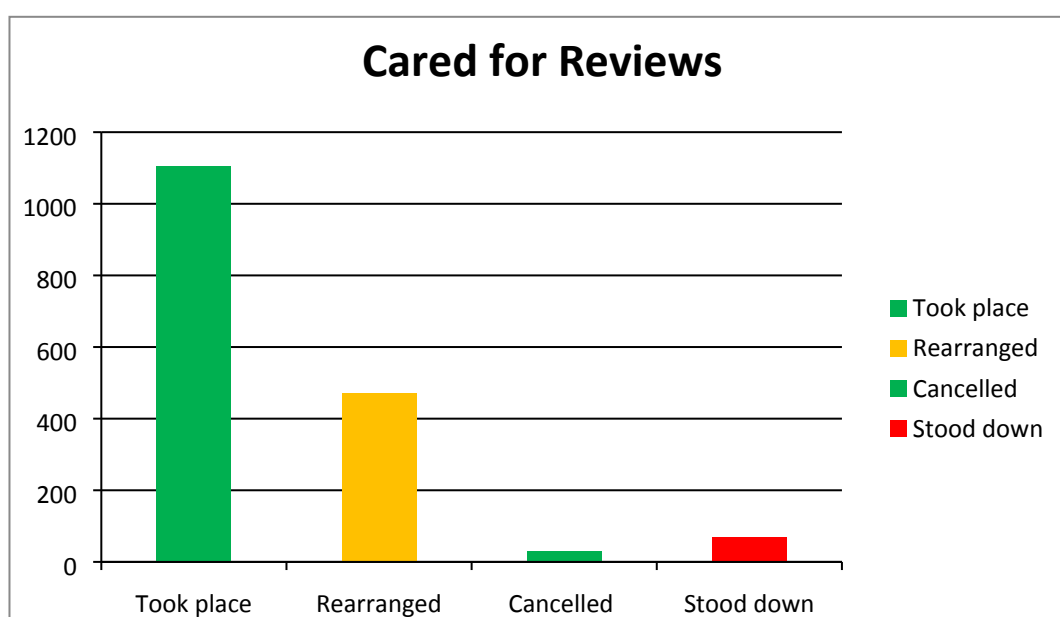
- We have chaired **1481** cared for reviews and pathway plan reviews this year
- We have arranged initial reviews for 151 children and young people who became cared for in the past year.
- On average over the year, 98% of children over the age of 4 participated in their reviews in the past year.
- Over the year an average of 60% of children over the age of 4 attended their reviews
- On average 61% of care leavers over the age of 18 attended their reviews each month - this is positive as engagement of our care leavers as adults is often more difficult as they are adults and have their own commitments and so reviews have to be held when they are available to attend.
- We have recruited 2 new permanent members and our team will grow to 9.5 members in August 2019.
- We have also secured additional business support through an additional post and are in the process of streamlining our internal processes through a Lean Review to make them more effective and to ensure GDPR compliance
- We have been awarded the Investing in Children Award for the 2nd year running, we are the first service within Children's Social Care to achieve this award for a consecutive year
- We have re-developed our consultation forms working with Cared for Children in My Voice to produce a child friendly and short consultation document for children under 16.
- We have developed the review process that reflects the Signs of Safety model to ensure child and family friendly reviews that children enjoy attending. These have included interactive reviews using post it notes and white board paper as well as holding some themed reviews such as a football review and a baking review.
- All C4 IROs have attended Signs of Safety Training. Seven members of the team are now Practice Leads with development sessions taking place every other month led by a practice lead to progress the model in the review process
- We are now writing to children with a record of their meeting in the form of a letter to them rather than sending them formal minutes. This has received positive feedback so far.

What are we worried about?

- The percentage of reviews that needed to be rearranged and stood down is high with just under half of all reviews either being rearranged or stood down. In total 73 (5%) reviews and pathway reviews were stood down with 633 (43%) being rearranged, this is an increase on the previous year and appears to be related in part to some lack of stability in the social

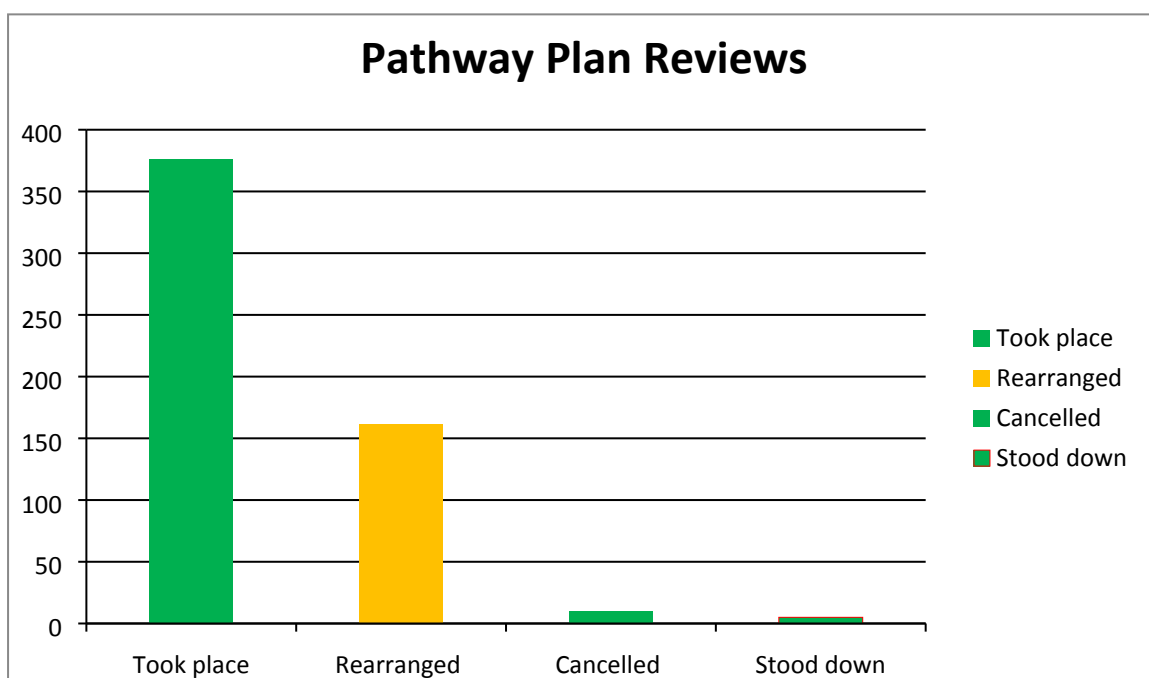
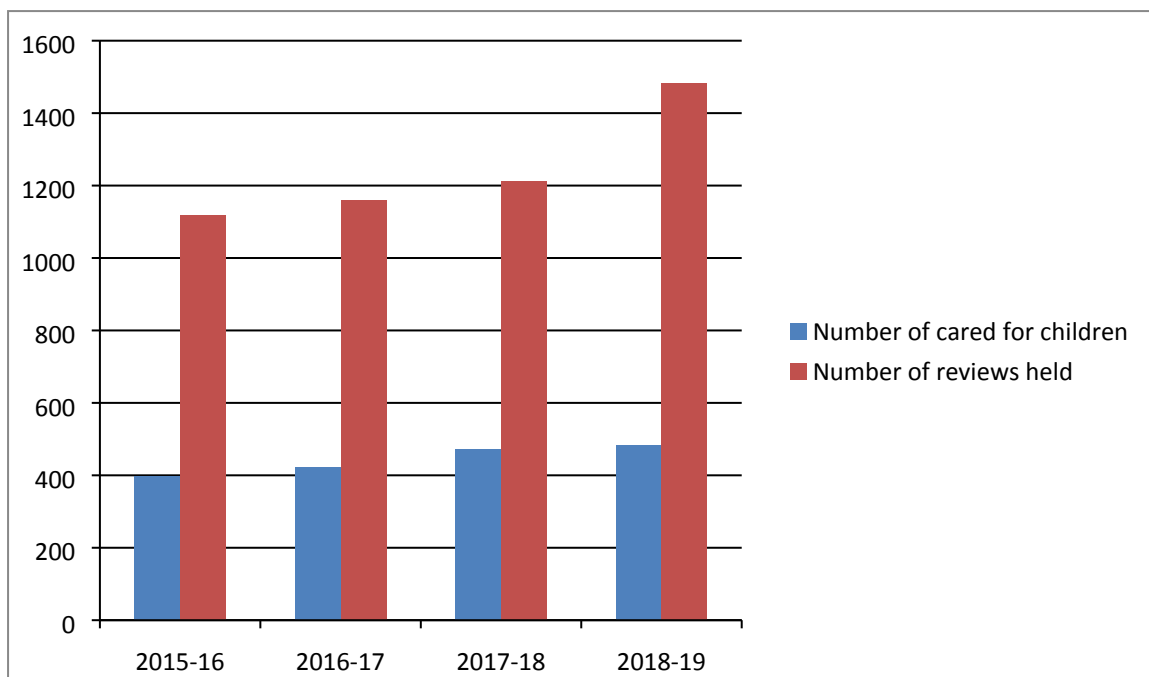
work teams, a busy year with more cared for children and care leavers and therefore more review meetings.

- There is a fuller report and analysis on Practice Alerts in the next section of the report which provides information about the reasons for practice alerts being raised. There are some clear recurring themes; 61% of practice alerts raised in 2018-2019 via the Dispute Resolution Process were due to lack of a care plan being updated and available prior to the review. This issue then leads to reviews being stood down and means care plans are not being shared in a timely way with children and families ahead of their reviews. Despite a busier year for both social care and the IRO team the figures are not dissimilar to last year.
- The number of children cared for in Cheshire East peaked this year in November and December 2018 at 509 this led to considerable pressure on the IRO service as caseloads increased beyond levels to where we could sustain standards, this impacts on the ability for the IRO team to maintain oversight as well as impacting on time spent on team development, audits and specialisms.
- Whilst attendance at reviews increased for over 4's this year we would like this to improve further as the goal would be for a much higher percentage of children (80% plus) to be attending their meeting. This is a focus for 2019/20.
- Almost 45% of our cared for children are placed outside the Cheshire East borough currently. This includes very young children in care proceedings. Aside from the inevitable impact this has on the children in terms of living away from their community and school moves, there is also an impact on the services involved with those children in terms of distance to be travelled. This continues to be a concern in respect of service delivery both in terms of allowing the IROs sufficient time for oversight of their cases, the impact it has on visits to children, and maintaining meaningful relationships, as well as the inevitable cost of travel both in terms of time and expense. The principle would always be for the child to remain within their community.



- Of the total 1,674 review meetings planned to take place in this business year 28% had to be rearranged to a new date.
- 115 Initial Review meetings were held within the year relating to 151 children
- 163 more reviews took place in this business year compared to 2017-18
- Just over 4% of the total cared for reviews were stood down which is a low number and an improvement on previous years
- Cancellations represent just 1.7% of activity and are rare as they relate to when a review has been arranged but the legal order changes so a child is no longer cared for child. For example a child returning home following a period of accommodation under Section 20.

Review activity comparison last 4 years



- There were 553 Pathway Plan meetings planned for the year and of those 29% were rearranged.
- Only a small percentage 0.1% were stood down
- Review meetings are not cancelled and this figure reflects either a change in legal status or a young person turning 21 at which point our service no longer reviews their plan and a pre-planned meeting being taken out of the calendar for those reasons
- 105 more Pathway Plan review meetings were held this year compared to 2017-18.

Reviews held in timescales

In the past business year 90.1% of reviews have been held in timescales. This is in line with the percentage achieved in the last business year 2018-19 but is in the context of a peak in children cared for by Cheshire East meaning increased caseloads and a higher number of reviews held.

The reasons for reviews falling out of timescales are varied, these include:

- Foster carers going on holiday and forgetting a forthcoming review meaning it has to be rearranged for their return.
- Unavailability of the social worker or the IRO due to absence caused by illness, reviews are not able to be covered by people who do not know the child.
- Insufficient time to rearrange a review within timescales due to the availability of the social worker or the IRO.
- Simple miscalculation of the days, where a review was rearranged or stood down the IRO has counted days from the date the review eventually took place rather than the original statutory date.

Many of the above are resolvable issue and possibly down to poor planning however they are also due to understandable difficulties caused by a high level of meetings, work load pressure on both IROs and the Social Work teams all leading to reduced ability to be flexible.

Series of Meetings

The care planning regulations allow for reviews to be completed as a series of meetings where necessary. This might be to allow parents to take part in a separate meeting or due to parental conflict. At times it may be necessary to hold the review with the child and foster carer as one meeting and then meet parents separately. Other reasons for holding a series of meetings may be due to awaiting an expert report in those cases in proceedings where the review is held in timescales but the report is due a few days after the statutory date. Holding the review as a series of meetings allows 20 working days to complete the review process.

Figures for number and percentage of reviews held as series of meetings 2018-2019

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
No.	8	10	12	10	5	14	17	11	4	10	13	4
% total reviews	10%	13%	15%	14%	7%	18%	11%	11%	5%	12%	15%	5%

The percentage of reviews held as series of meetings has fluctuated over the past year and at times has been 15% of all meetings. The concern is that some meetings held as a series are due to poor planning as it might have been possible to have a single meeting with preparation of both child and parents for the meeting or to have held a single meeting with parents attending part of the meeting. The high figures experienced in 2018 are a concern in terms of the impact on both social work and IRO time during a period when number of children cared for was high.

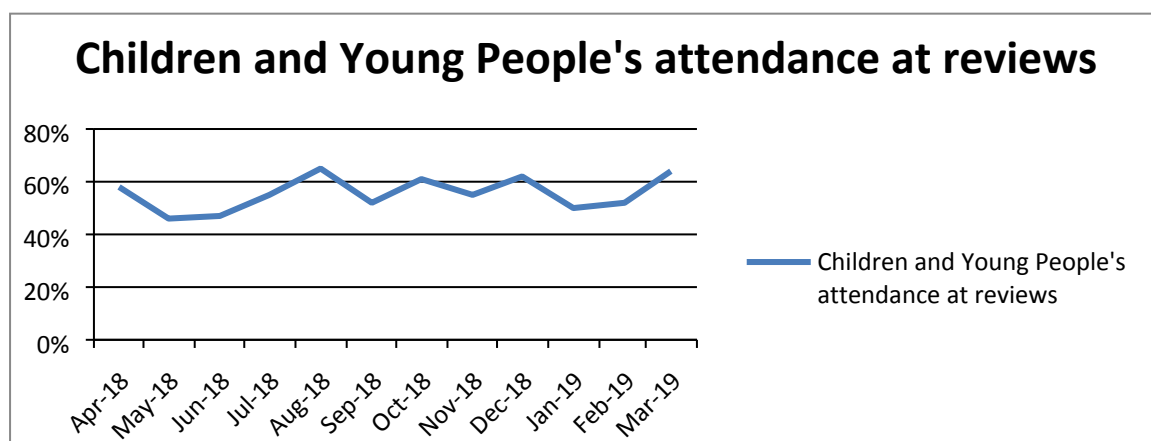
Participation in reviews

We continue to have a high rate of participation from children and young people's in their reviews consistently achieving between 97-100% throughout the year this is an area of continued improvement as in the last business year participation was an average of 92%.

Participation can be through completion of consultation documents, providing views via an advocate or their carers or attendance at the review meeting.

We remain concerned at the figure we are achieving for actual attendance at the review and have set ourselves a high target to improve this as currently whilst it is an improving picture from previous years, we currently achieve between 50- 65%. This has to be a focus for improvement across all operational teams as well as the IROs.

We have set ourselves a target of 75% to be achieved as part of our Team Plan for 2019-20 and a group of IROs are working with others across Children's Services including Social workers, supervising social workers, foster carers and residential placements to see if collectively we can improve this figure and replicate the good practice seen in the cases where children attend and enjoy their review.



Consultation

As part of the review process we are required to consult with the child or young person, their parents, their carers as well as education and health or any significant agency involved in their care plan. Figures for return of consultation documents remain low and do not necessarily represent the true picture. For example whilst foster carers may not always complete the consultation form they attend the review and will report verbally instead. We are looking at this area as part of our Business Plan for this year to focus on improving the number of consultations received where there is no attendance, and working with partners to look at what would make this an easier and more effective process.

Recorded Invites/Consultation Forms sent out					
Young Person	Health	Education	Parents	Foster Carer/Care	Other
680	536	641	695	679	447
Recorded Consultation Forms received					

Young Person	Health	Education	Parents	Foster Carer/Care	Other
85 (13%)	164 (31%)	249 (38.8%)	87 (12.5%)	197 (29%)	29 (6.4%)

5. Dispute Resolution and Practice Alerts

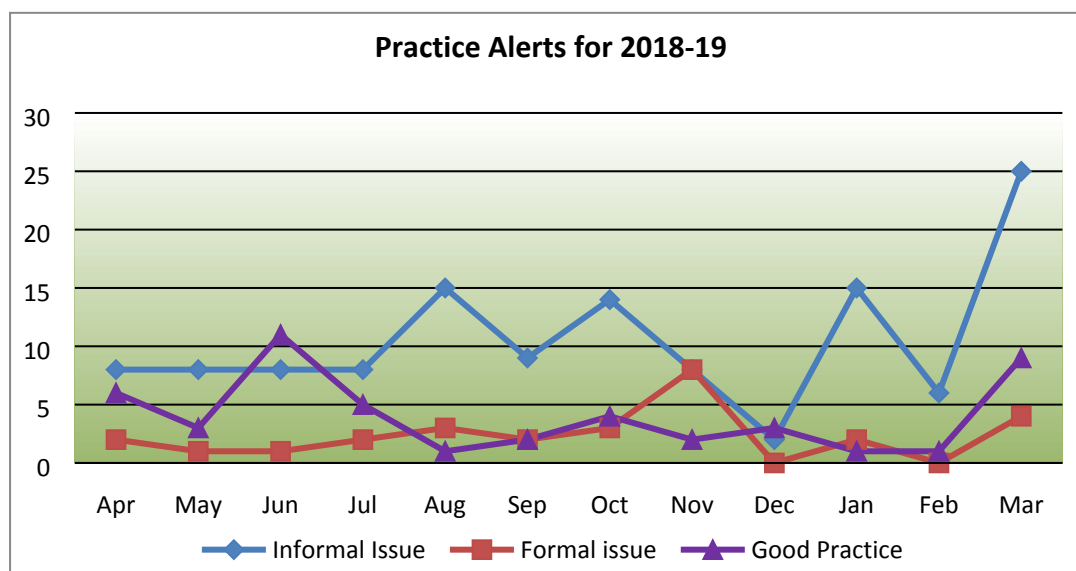
A key part of the IRO role is to be able to challenge effectively when practice falls below agreed standards, where regulations are not being followed and of course where there is disagreement with the care plan put forward. These issues all potentially adversely impact on the outcomes for the child.

The following information outlines the activity of the Cared for IROs for the past year in respect of disputes raised and practice alerts issued.

During 2018/19 the Cared for IROs issued:

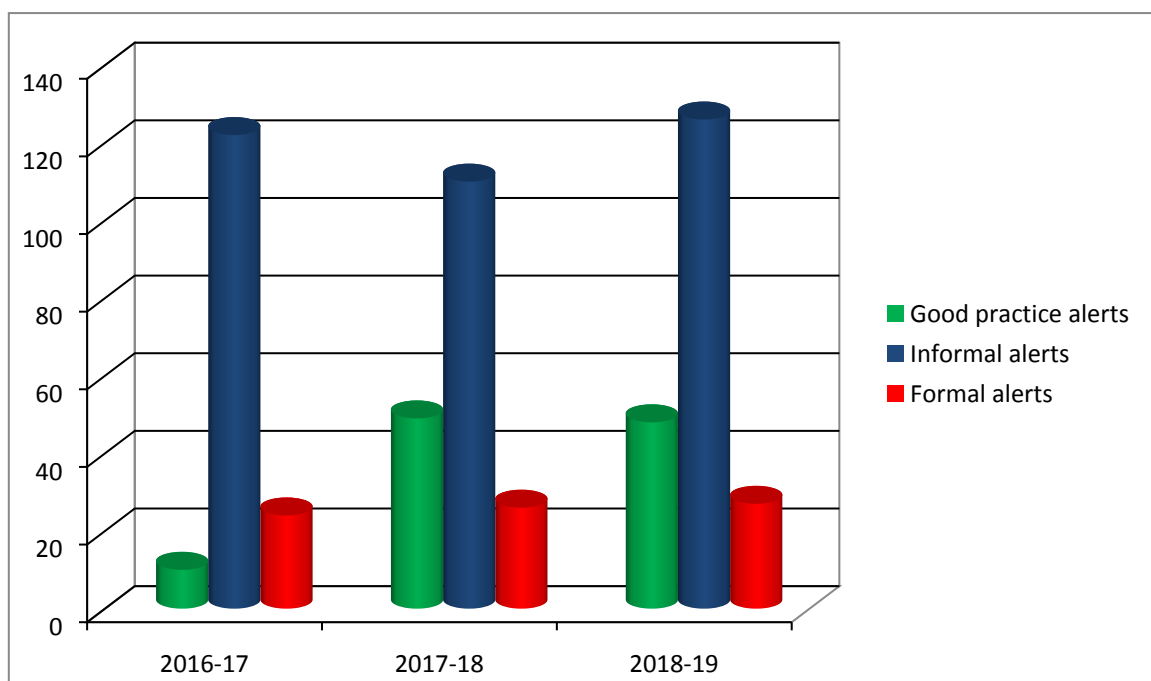
- 153 and 48 good practice notifications. The Practice Alerts were made up of :
- 126 (63%) Informal alerts
- 27 (18%) Formal dispute escalations
- 48 (24%) Good Practice Notifications were also made

The full data breakdown for each month is represented in the graph below:



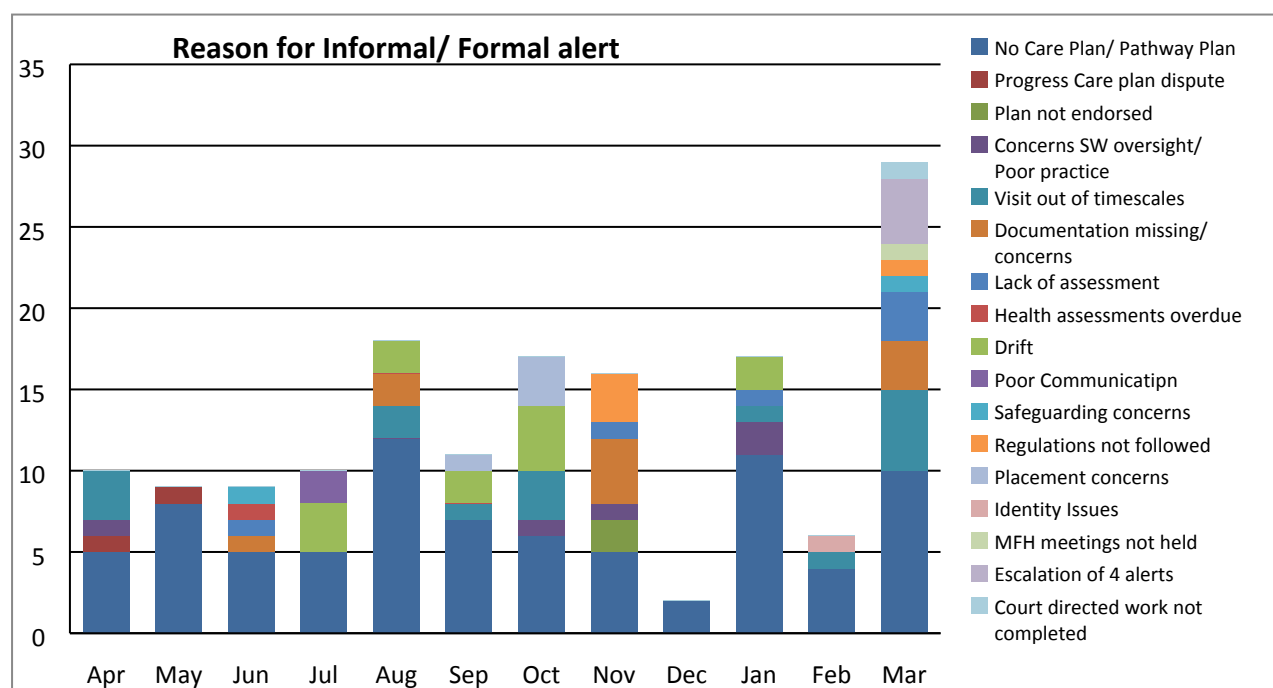
The graph above illustrates that most alerts are raised by the C4 IROs are at an informal level and resolved with only 13.4% of them escalating to formal dispute resolution over the year. Good practice notifications represent almost a quarter of all alerts raised.

Comparison with previous years



There is clearly some consistency in the data this year compared to last year with only a marginal increase in informal alerts however the breakdown would indicate more informal alerts for lack of updated care plans

Themes



Informal Alerts

The most common reasons for practice issues related to no care plan or pathway plan being prepared and updated 3 days ahead of the review in line with care planning regulations. This is also the most common reason for reviews being stood down by the IRO as the child and family have not

had the opportunity for the care plan to be shared with them ahead of the review. This has been an area of focus for the IROs to highlight practice that the service wants to improve so will account for the level of alerts raised in respect of this.

In total 61% of all 126 informal alerts in 2018-2019 related to the lack of a care plan or pathway plan as the main reason for the alert being raised. Whilst improvement was seen between September and December this was not sustained and there remains variable practice. The next most common reason for raising an alert was due to statutory visits not being recorded as completed or out of timescales this was noted in 16 (12%) alerts raised. Additionally other themes for informal alerts are the lack of required documentation, this can relate to missing court documents for the IRO to see or completed Placement with Parent assessments as well as the IRO being unable to locate up to date health assessments on the child's record.

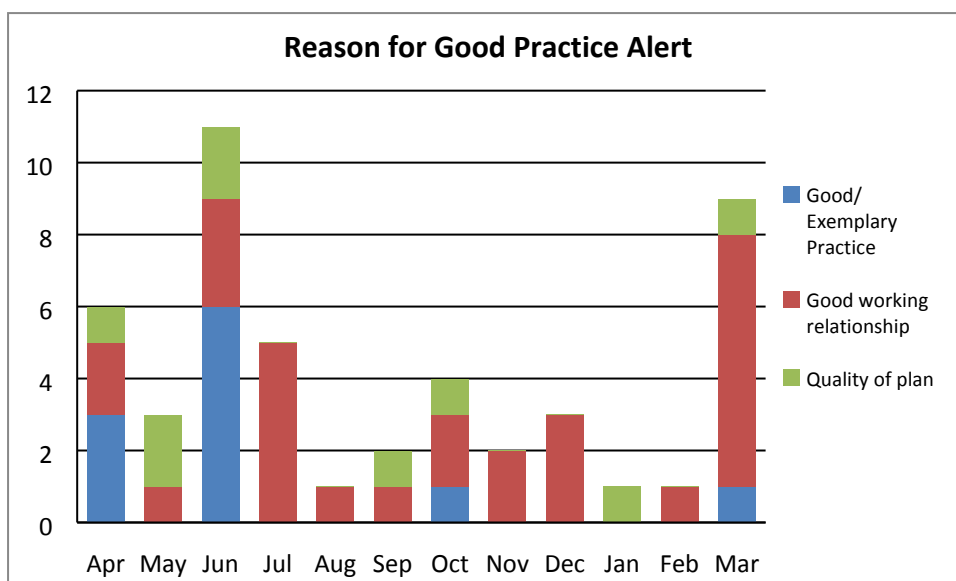
Alerts relating to Safeguarding issues have been rare this year with only one mentioning a Missing from Home Trigger meeting had not been held and another escalated for another safeguarding issue where action was needed. This shows positive improvement.

Formal Alerts

It is positive that only 13.4% of all alerts raised were escalated to Formal Alerts in the past year. This indicates that in most cases where there is a disagreement or concern raised the matter is resolved between the IRO and the Team Manager and does not need to be escalated. A small percentage of formal alerts are raised straightaway at formal level where discussion with the Team Manager has indicated an issue they considered related to service issues or a decision made at a more senior level. Dispute resolution at a formal level is also raised if the IRO is unable to agree to the Final Care plan put forward at conclusion of proceedings.

Most formal alerts in the past year have been raised due to concerns of drift or poor practice that has led to drift. Out of the 27 formal alerts raised 11 (41%) related to this issue. Quality of assessment and compliance with regulations was the second most common reason for raising a formal alert or for an alert to escalate to a formal dispute level, this was noted in 8 alerts, this has involved a number of cases where Placement with Parent's regulations had not been completed and resolution was reached once this assessment was completed. In total 4 formal alerts were raised due to IRO disagreement with the final care plan. It should be noted disputes are resolved prior to Final Evidence being filed often following the provision of additional information or time being agreed for additional information to be obtained. There have been no instances of escalation to Cafcass by the IRO team in the past year.

Good practice notifications



In total there were 48 separate good practice notifications this year. The themes relate to 3 main reasons, a good working relationship with the child or family evident in 30 cases, exemplary practice in advocating for the child in 11 cases and good examples of the child's care plan or pathway plan or a particularly good assessment in the remaining 7 cases. It is notable this year good practice alerts were made every month. However the IROs accept in a busy period with high case numbers the focus is sometimes more on issues to be resolved and not always on recognising good practice. This year quarter 4 brought the most good practice alerts across the year perhaps reflecting the introduction of Signs of Safety and more child centred practice being evidenced. It should also be noted, in many of the good practice notifications more than one reason is stated with good relationship and exemplary advocacy often mentioned.

What has been going well	What are we worried about	Future focus
<p>More than 60% of alerts raised are concluded at Informal dispute level. This means issues can be resolved between the IRO and the Team Manager and concluded within 5 days.</p> <p>If a review was adjourned due to no plan, a swift resolution allows the review to be rearranged swiftly.</p> <p>There is a good understanding of the dispute resolution process and conversations take place readily between IROs and team managers</p> <p>Most alerts are made for a key single issue although may refer</p>	<p>A high percentage of informal alerts, 61% are due to care and pathway plans not being updated in a timely way for the review. This means at times the plan has not been shared with the child or young person in a planned way following a care planning meeting when the plan is normally updated. This percentage has increased since the last business year with 77 individual alerts raised about this issue compared to 43 in 2017-18.</p> <p>The child's plan is not "owned" by the child if they have not been involved in the update or had the plan shared with them by the Social Worker before</p>	<p>We have agreed at joint performance meetings this will remain an area of focus until we see increased practice improvement</p> <p>Signs of Safety is written in the child's voice and is aligned to the need for regular updates and it has been described as being much more about the "here and now" and we hope this will see an increase in plans being made ready for review once the format has been put in place for every child.</p> <p>Recruitment across the service is completed and it is hoped stability, reduced caseloads and increased oversight by Team</p>

<p>to other concerns but categories of alerts are reduced from previous years with more focus on areas of concern.</p> <p>Generally Formal Alerts represent about only 10% of all alerts raised each quarter with the exception of one very busy quarter this year</p> <p>Most alerts do not escalate. Those alerts escalated have done so for good reason where concerns have primarily been in relation to drift and delay</p> <p>There is a good understanding in proceedings to ensure discussion about final evidence with the IRO and for their views to be included in the SWET.</p> <p>Good practice notifications remain at a similar level as last year this would indicate some consistency of good practice.</p> <p>It is noted that good practice alerts are across the service. They often indicate good relationships with the child and their family as well as some instances of exemplary practice in advocating for the child.</p> <p>Disputes have been resolved in the dispute resolution process without the need for escalation to Cafcass.</p>	<p>their review. Whilst the figure above relates to the percentage of alerts raised for this matter the percentage of cases this applies to may be higher as there is always the discretion of the IRO to go ahead with the review if it would be detrimental to the child to adjourn.</p> <p>If there is no updated plan the review has to be adjourned, this can cause delay and drift.</p> <p>Just over 40% of escalations have been about drift and delay this has sometimes been about Social workers having competing demands or about Social Workers changing, meaning assessments have had to be extended or actions have been delayed.</p> <p>Timescales add pressure in court proceedings and the 10 days to resolve a formal dispute is not always available – discussion about likely final care plans need to start early. It needs to be understood that the IRO has to see all evidence that informed the plan.</p> <p>The number of good practice alerts raised is not representative of spoken experience and IROs need to ensure they record good practice notifications as readily as they do Informal alerts. It is noted in a very busy period i.e. when we had over 500 cared for children and over 200 care leavers, the focus is often on what is worrying us rather than the positives.</p>	<p>Managers will ensure fewer escalations due to drift.</p> <p>There is a good understanding in proceedings to ensure discussion about final evidence with the IRO and for their views to be included in the SWET. Legal are aware of need to include views and this is considered in filing meetings.</p> <p>IROs are being requested to ensure at least 2 good practice notifications a month in order to focus on this area. Good practice and Dispute alerts are discussed in joint performance meetings each month with a breakdown of reasons provided this will further impress upon the service to record good practice examples.</p>
--	--	---

* Please note however for the data to be meaningful to the reader, alerts and notifications will not identify every good example of practice encountered by the IRO nor every circumstance where practice standards have not been met; what the data does provide is information on patterns and themes and a clear record of formal disputes resolved in the past business year.

Impact on children and young people: Case study examples from 2018-2019 – Cared for IROs

Example A – Case study - Informal Practice alert

Informal alert raised in respect of AR age 3 as on 1st May as there was no plan available for the review to be held that week. Discussion took place but the care plan was not completed until the day of the review meaning it had not been shared with the child or parent and had not provided the IRO any time to look at the plan ahead of the review. On this basis the review was adjourned the day before it was due to take place and rearranged for the 22nd May 2018 to allow the social worker time to share the plan. Due to the age of the child there was no impact on him in terms of preparation but he is placed with parents and so they were expecting the review and invitations had been sent out for the new date. The IRO was able to convene a new date within 20 days of the adjournment and invites had to be sent out again by the administration team in the Safeguarding Unit. In the response to the Informal Alert the Team Manager acknowledges practice that fell short of requirements and also confirmed a care planning meeting had not taken place and would be put in place before the care plan was updated again in time for the new review date and shared with the family. The review went ahead on the rearranged date. The positive impact of this alert led to a care planning meeting being held to provide a clear update to the care plan which of course led to a much more effective review and a review meeting where the parent felt fully informed of the plan and could impart this in an age appropriate way with their child.

Example B – Case study – Formal Dispute Resolution

A formal dispute resolution was escalated in July 2018 for SA a CWD aged 17. This was an escalation following an informal alert by the IRO in June due to concern for a lack of effective transition planning causing anxiety to the young person. The issue was escalated as the Team Manager had been unable to resolve the difficulty in progressing SA's transition plan as he approached 18 due to lack of progress with Adult Services actions. The Service Manager was able to take this escalation forward and progress the situation with the Adult Service Locality Manager who was keen to avert the escalation and acted to progress a plan for SA with health colleagues. The IRO expressed his views that the case had provided some learning in relation to the transition arrangements for young people in need of support of adult services and the intervention at Service Manager Level ensured a resolution was found and action taken by adult services as agreed. This alert highlighted a situation that required senior managers to effect change and prompted adult services to act when they understood that the IRO could escalate to Cafcass if services were not responding to the child's (as he was at the time) care needs.

Example C – Case Study – Good Practice Notification

Good practice notification for a case involving a young person who was previously an Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child but had obtained right to remain status. The IRO acknowledges the Pathway Plan's quality which contains the young persons views and voice and had clearly been written with the young person alongside the PA and through an interpreter to provide an excellent example of a Pathway Plan with SMART outcomes, clear outline of the young person's lived experience and a plan in line with the young persons wishes and hopes for his future. Additionally providing the young person with a clear reference point in relation to his support and planned future support under the 21+ offer as well as contact details for support agencies he might find useful.

The Team Manager agreed to share the notification and feedback at his forthcoming team meeting.

6. The impact of the role of the IRO in Cheshire East

In a busy year there have been a number of case examples where the challenge of the IRO has led to positive outcomes for children and young people including instances where care plans have been disputed and the IRO dispute resolution process has enabled discussion to take place and the opportunity to pause and reflect on the decisions being made.

Through their independence and experience the IRO is able to step back and take a broader view on occasions. Their role is to ensure the child achieves the best outcomes but also care plan that is in line with their wishes and feelings. Hearing the voice of the child is therefore paramount to the review process.

Where a child wishes to challenge their care plan or indicates they are unhappy with aspects of their plan the IRO can direct a referral to the independent advocacy service (The Children's Society) to support the child or young person to challenge their plan and if required seek their own independent legal advice.

In many cases the Dispute Resolution process is seen to be effective in ensuring further dialogue between the social work teams and the IRO to reach an agreed resolution which meets the child's wishes and ensures the most positive outcomes.

Another important factor which can be seen in the examples below is the relationship that is formed between the child and the IRO who in many cases remains constant at times when social workers may have changed and in cases where the child or young person has fully understood the role of independence.

In the past year there have been a number of examples where IRO intervention has altered the outcome of the plans being made through professional challenge and discussion when needed. Through use of their experience, some professional curiosity leading to some pertinent questions and discussion held where plans have been adjusted or changed to promote better outcomes.

The intervention of the IRO is reflected on the child's record by recording of reviews, case records of consultations and discussions thus providing a clear footprint of the IRO.

An indication of the children where IRO challenge has had an impact are detailed in case examples below:

Child M

Child M

M was placed in the care of his Grandparents following his Mother being sectioned under the Mental Health Act. Care proceedings were concluding and the plan put forward was one of rehabilitation to Mother's care. The IRO challenged this decision raising a Formal Practice alert and highlighted the short period of time that had elapsed, the history of previous mental health deterioration and the impact of this on M. She also highlighted a number of unanswered questions from expert reports that whilst unanswered, indicated the high level of risk that might be presented if M returned to his Mother's. The social work team acknowledged the issues raised and after further court discussion with the Children's Guardian it was agreed the court timetable would be extended from the usual 26 weeks to allow further assessment of M's mother as well as further time for her to evidence stability in her mental health and to request further information from the medics involved. The plan has now concluded, all agreed gaps in evidence have been narrowed and there is a

clearer period of stability demonstrated. The plan is for M to remain with his mother under a supervision order. The IRO role in this case ensured greater scrutiny of the evidence being placed before the court and some key questions to be raised to ensure a positive outcome is achieved that can be sustained.

Child Q

Child Q presented as an unaccompanied asylum seeking child. She was accommodated under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 by the Local Authority. At her dental examination concern was raised about her age by the dentist. This led to the Home Office being informed she was not a child and they transported her to alternative accommodation. The IRO challenged the plan for Q and raised a formal practice alert, she had established that the British Dental Association is prevented from making assessments of age in this way and so she queried the evidence for contacting the Home Office. She also challenged the lack of opportunity given to Q to share any re-assessment of her age and to support her in anyway to obtain advocacy to seek legal advice and appeal her situation whilst still supported by the Local Authority rather than focusing on ending her support.

This challenge also had an impact service wide in relation to USAC seeking support as it highlighted the original age assessment was not Merton Compliant. This has led to the policy in respect of age assessments and the support of USAC in Cheshire East being updated accordingly to ensure improved practice in future.

Q subsequently obtained her legal advice and challenged the Local Authority through her solicitor to obtain an independent age assessment, this was obtained and indicated she was under 18 and she since returned to Cheshire East to be supported as an unaccompanied child and continues to be reviewed by her IRO.

Child P

Child P is a baby born to one of our previously cared for children who we now support as a Care Leaver. Both Mother and baby were placed in foster care whilst assessments were completed during care proceedings which had been initiated due to concern that P's mother would not be able to care for her child independently.

At an early stage in proceedings, the IRO raised a formal dispute resolution when he noted no care planning meetings had taken place to fully involve all professionals available to support the success of a plan for the Mother to care for P independently. He raised concern that if the plan was not more coordinated it was essentially setting the mother up to fail and he highlighted the duty the Local Authority had to the Mother as a former cared for child and now a care leaver to be an effective parent.

It is clear following the formal alert and discussion with the Service Manager a more proactive stance was taken to ensure P could be successfully parented by her Mother. Using the Signs of Safety Model in the review a clear Trajectory was identified and the care plan utilised to ensure a network of support was being built to support them both.

The positive intervention by the IRO in this case has led to P successfully remaining in her Mother's care and now living as an independent family with a future plan to discharge the Care Order in relation to Child P.

Child R

The intervention of the IRO in respect of achieving positive outcomes was raised very early when Child R was still unborn. The mother of baby R was a child in care from a family with acrimonious relationships with Social Care. The IRO raised concern first informally but then formally that the Mother of Child R needed to be seen as independent from her family and given the opportunity to be supported to parent her child. She raised concern that the mother had not been fully advised of the planning for her unborn baby and was likely to present as oppositional to services as this was her experience as a child observed in her family home. The Mother had come into care very late but was clearly engaging in her placement and had indicated to her IRO her willingness to ensure her baby remained in her care.

In this case the IRO advocated well both for the child she reviewed but also for the rights of the unborn child to ensure both received a fair service and that social care ensuring her rights to be supported to parent her child and the additional effort that would need to be made to engage her in this process due to her own family history.

From the point of the alert, clear engagement was evidenced and a supportive Social worker ensured progress was made with R's mother continuing to engage and understand the reasoning for a care order being made in order to achieve her longer term goal. Good practice has been evident on this case subsequently and despite the fact R's Mother still a child herself she is parenting her well independently to date although still sharing responsibility under a care order with the Local Authority plans are being made to discharge the care order.

7. Progress on targets from 2017-18

Target	Progress made
Develop use of assistive technologies to support recording of reviews	Those IRO wishing to use the Dragon technology have been trained and provided with the technology. However currently we are unable to use this from home. Further enquiries are being made as this is a Local Authority issue with current VPN system
Improve number of Outcomes completed within 5 days	This figure was at 76% in 2017, 90% in 2018 but has slipped back to just under 80% this year and is a target area for continued improvement now we have a larger team
Reduction of disputes reaching formal level	In 2017-18 there were 30, this year 27 have escalated to formal level however this is in the context of increased numbers in care
Increase numbers of consultations returned from Health and Education colleagues and parents	This figure has decreased with only 12% return from parents and a 35% return from health and education colleagues. This is an area of work for our current business plan.

Develop joint performance meetings to focus on permanency and stability of cared for children and care leavers	Joint meetings are now taking place monthly with a focus on reduction of placement moves
Submit an application to renew our Investing in Children Award	This has been achieved and the IRO service is has retained this for a second year with the help and support of our cared for children
Joint work across service to improve SDQ scores for children and monitoring of this assessment	An IRO now sits on the Corporate Parenting Health work stream and this is an area they are monitoring.

8. Future plans and development

Target	What needs to happen?
Increase attendance and participation of children at reviews	<p>Working group of IROs to work across the service with social workers, supervising social workers and foster carers to improve attendance</p> <p>Use of Signs of Safety in reviews as a tool to create a more participatory review</p> <p>Development of Signs of Safety practice in the review process</p> <p>Increase IRO contact with children through reduction in cases to build relationships</p> <p>Review templates to record reviews to reduce time taken to record outcomes and the record of the review</p>
Increase return rate of consultation from parents and partner agencies	<p>Working group of IROs to work across the service with health and education colleagues to see what would improve response rates.</p> <p>To evaluate use of email consultations with parents with use of Egress</p> <p>To renew the current templates to ensure they are quick and easy to complete and user friendly</p>
Lean review of Invitation process	<p>To improve the number of invitations that are sent out for reviews by our service.</p> <p>To promote planning for reviews in the social work teams and improve practice in this area</p> <p>To remain GDPR compliant with information</p>

	To reduce time on this task for administration team
To seek feedback about our service from children, young people, parents and partner agencies	To arrange for a feedback exercise to be completed with support of administration team to seek verbal and written feedback about our service within an allotted time period before the year end
To continue to work with the operational teams to improve stability and reduce placement disruption	<p>Chairing disruption meetings</p> <p>Sharing learning from feedback</p> <p>Joint performance meetings</p> <p>Identifying at review if stability meetings need to take place</p>
To reduce the number of reviews rearranged and to ensure reviews for cared for children and care leavers are prioritised across the service	<p>To ensure any adjournments are for the benefit of the child</p> <p>To ensure effective planning and preparation for reviews by both IROs and Social Work team</p>

Karen Chan

Interim Safeguarding Manager

August 2019

OFFICIAL