



**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS
(CARED FOR CHILDREN)**

**ANNUAL REPORT
2019-2020**

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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 2019-March 2020 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 cared for 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 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 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, 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 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 are not involved 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 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

3. The team

The team of Cared for IROs in Cheshire East has increased in 2019 to reflect the increase in children cared for and is now made up of 10 IROs covering 9.5 posts and the Fostering IRO (FIRO) overseen by the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Cared for Manager. There are 8 female IROs and 3 males, 3 IROs are from the BAME community, one IRO is of mixed heritage and the remaining 7 are White British.

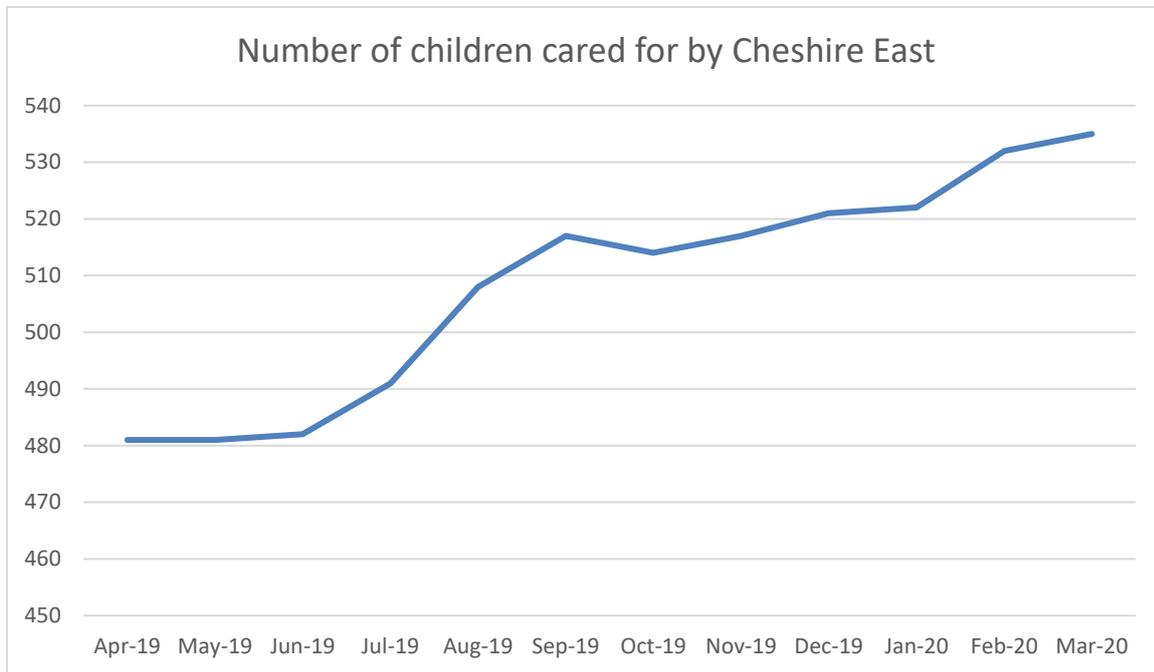
In relation to the children in care we serve this provides a diverse team, at the time of writing just over 85% of cared for children are white British with 15% from other ethnic backgrounds including mixed heritage backgrounds. Currently 52% of cared for children are male and 48% female and so in this respect the team are not representative of the population they serve, as the percentage of male IROs is lower but may reflect the gender balance of the workforce from which the team is drawn.

The team are settled and made up of 9 permanent members of staff including one member of the team who has been employed for over 7 years, 4 employed for over 3 years with 2 new members of the team who joined in August 2019 following an IRO leaving to pursue a different career and the additional post. It is also important to reconse that during 2019/20 the manager to the service was also appointed, which represented an effective succession planning strategy.

At the end of the business year in March 2020, despite additional resource, caseloads of IROs were above the recommended level of 50-70 advised in the IRO Handbook and taking into account the geographical size of the authority and numbers placed outside the borough. Caseloads ranged at this time from 65-85 across the team.

Further measures have been agreed for 2020/21, to aid reduction of caseloads and increase IRO oversight by gradual reducing the number of over 19-year olds whose reviews will be chaired by an IRO as this is not a statutory function. Oversight will remain for those young people where it is felt the

impact of IRO scrutiny remains beneficial if that young adult agrees. The full realisation and benefit of this young person focused reduction will not be for 18 months under the current arrangements.



This graph demonstrates the increase in the cared for population in the past year.

4. Executive Summary

What has gone well?

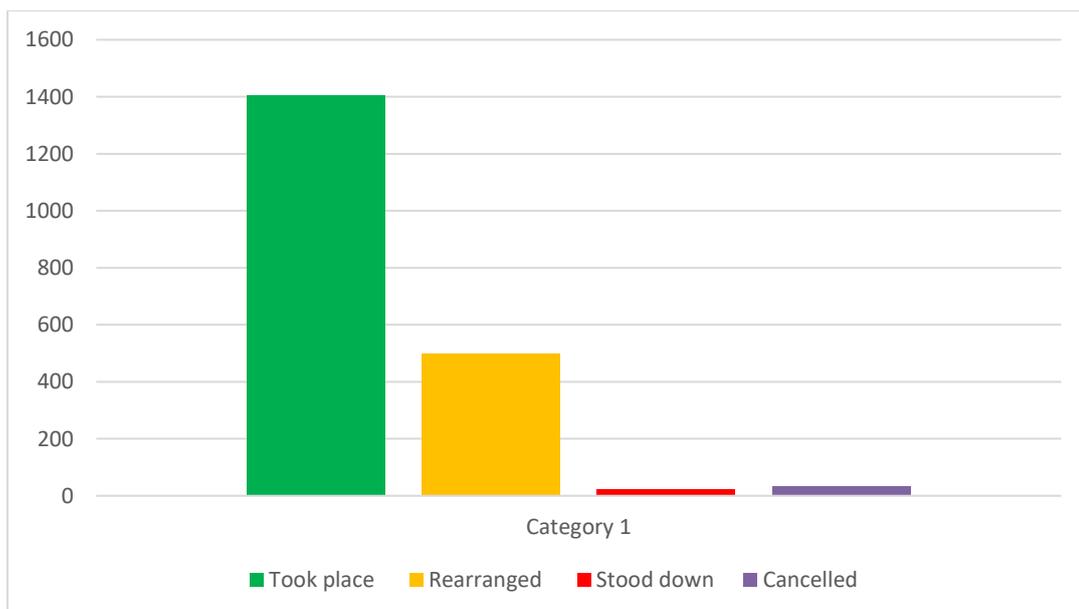
- We have chaired 1403 cared for reviews and 351 pathway plan reviews this year this an increase of 26% of cared for reviews from last year. This will reflect the increase of children into care but may also reflect more reviews taking place due to placement moves
- This year 98% of children over the age of 4 participated in their reviews
- Over the year an average of 62% of children over the age of 4 attended their review this is a slight 1% increase and remains a key area of focus for improvement
- On average 66 % of care leavers over the age of 18 attended their reviews each month - this is positive and an increase of 5% on last year. Engagement of our care leavers as adults is often more difficult as they often have their own commitments and so reviews must be held when they are available to attend.
- We have streamlined our administration processes following an internally led Lean Review to be 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 continue to base our review model around the principles of Signs of Safety providing child centred and interactive reviews for children
- We write a letter to each child following their review as a record of their meeting, these have been well received with positive feedback from children and young people

What are we worried about?

- In total only 27 (1.5%) of reviews and pathway reviews were stood down, this is a reduction on last year which is good. In total 626 (35%) were rearranged whilst this is a reduction of 8% compared to last year this figure is still a little high. Reasons for rearrangements are due to a variety of factors, increased pressure on the IRO team due to higher caseloads, the long-term sickness of one member of the team, as well as a period of difficulty relating to social worker stability in one team in care planning. Often when a social worker leaves it is extremely difficult to go ahead with a planned review date in a child focused way.
- Reflected in the Practice alert report the greatest proportion of alerts continues to be raised for timeliness of care plans being completed ahead of the review by the social worker. This is has improved slightly from last year but remains the single highest reason of practice concern and needs to be an area of improved performance for the social work teams
- Despite the introduction of Signs of Safety and increased numbers in Pre-Proceedings, the number of children coming into care in the past year has continued to rise. This has led to increased caseloads for both IROs and Social Workers
- Whilst child participation in their review remains at a high level of 98%, actual attendance at their review remains around 50-60% throughout the year. We have consulted with cared for children to better understand why this is, they give a variety of reasons for not attending including their dislike of meetings generally but we recognise we need to work across the service, and develop our practice model and approach to see if we can increase this figure

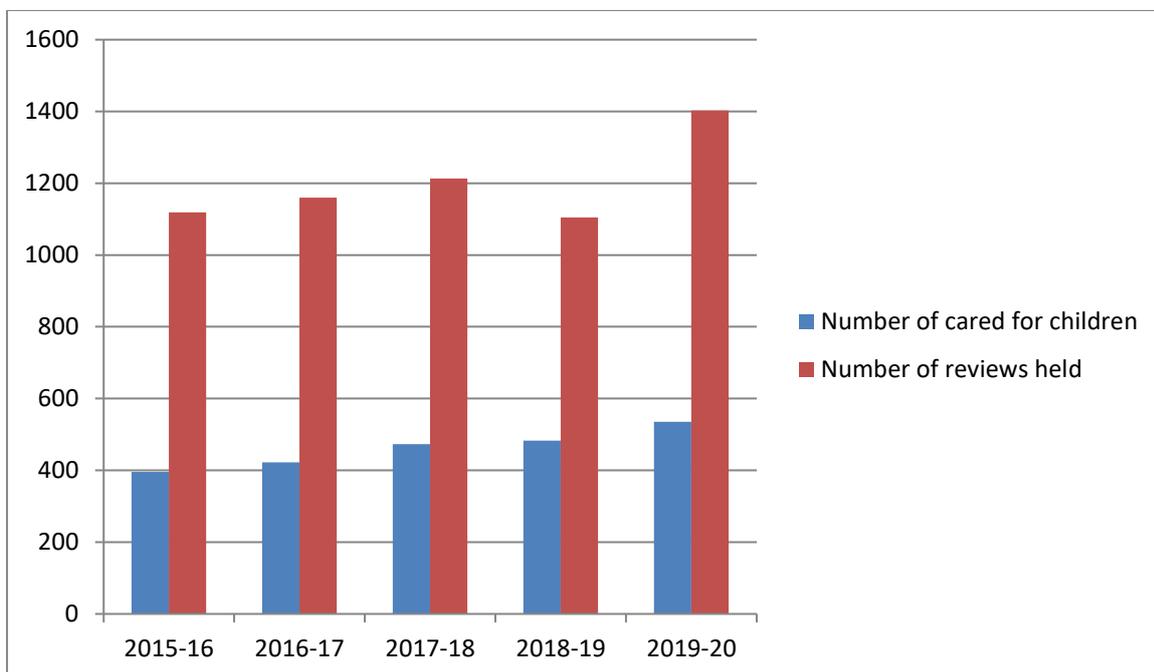
5. Review Activity and data 2019-2020



Cared for Reviews 2019-2020

- Of the total 1,754 review meetings planned to take place in this business year 35% had to be rearranged to a new date.
- Just over 2% of the total cared for and pathway plan reviews were stood down which is a low number and a decrease on last year where 4% were stood down
- Cancellations represent just 2% 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 there is a very small increase on the 1.7% figure of last year.

Review activity comparison last 4 years



Review activity 2019-2020 – Cared for Children (under 18)

Reviews held in timescale

In the past business year 88 % of reviews have been held in timescales. This is slightly lower than 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 much higher number of reviews held. When considering reviews held within 20 days following being stood down, which falls within statutory requirements, this percentage is increased to 90%.

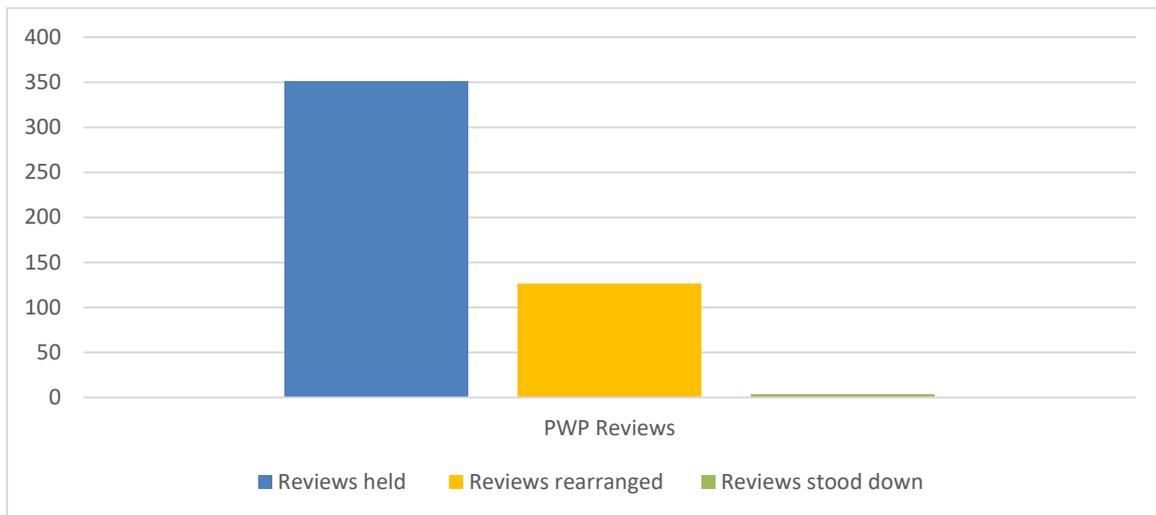
The reasons for reviews falling out of timescales are varied, these include:

- Foster carers going on holiday and forgetting a forthcoming review meaning it needs 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, workload pressure on both IROs and the Social Work teams all leading to reduced ability to be flexible.

Pathway Plan Review activity (over 18's)



Pathway Plan Reviews 2019-2020

- There were 351 Pathway Plan meetings planned for this year and of those 36% were rearranged this is an increase of 6 per cent compared to last year
- Only a 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

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

	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
% of total reviews	10%	13%	15%	14%	7%	18%	11%	11%	5%	12%	15%	5%	18/19
	10%	6%	9%	9%	4%	20%	20%	9%	14%	14%	27%	17%	19/20

The percentage of reviews held as series of meetings has seen some increase particularly towards the end of the business year when we start to see the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. By March 2020 review meetings were being held virtually from the second week, when the technology to support this was crude, leading to an increasing number being held as a series of meetings to complete the review.

This is an area of work which will need some scrutiny and balance, as completing the review as a series of meetings is time taking. However, in some cases it may be more child centred if the child has indicated they want both parents involved but not at the same meeting or if for any reason it has not been possible to have all the people the child would want involved in their review in the same room. Within these figures there are also cases where a series of meetings has had to be held due to awaiting key pieces of work to be completed to ensure the review does not become overdue when a final care plan is due to be endorsed.

Annual reviews

A very small number of children in Cheshire East have annual reviews, where it has already been ascertained that SGO is not appropriate or possible. They are children who are all in long-term settled placements who have requested less visits and intervention to be able to function in their foster family as a "normal child". Regular risk assessments are carried every six months to indicate an annual review remains appropriate and should there be any concerns, any significant event or if the child enters transition planning with a Pathway Plan then reviews revert to six-monthly. Last year only 6 children had annual reviews with one returning to six monthly reviews this year as they now have a pathway plan and another returning to six monthly reviews due to changes in educational needs, we are confident that this is the right decision for these children.

Participation in reviews

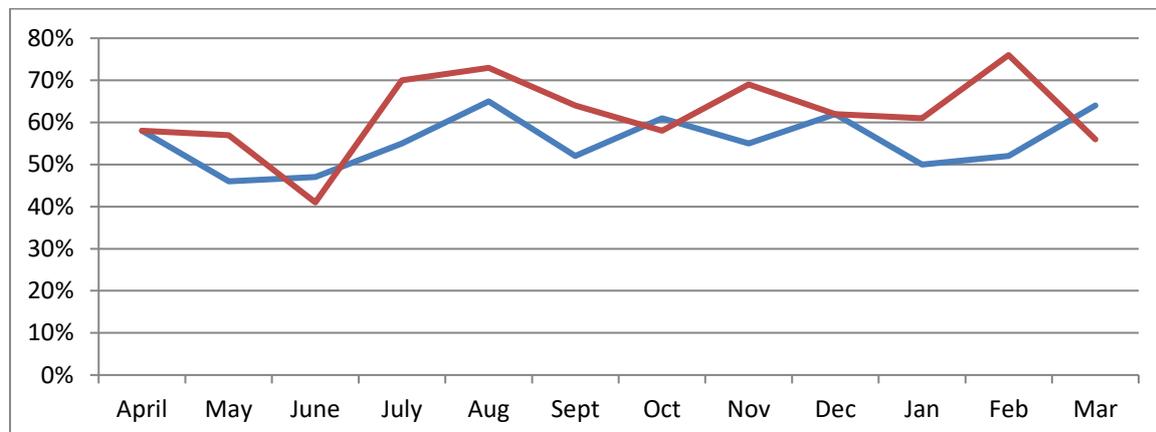
We continue to have a high rate of participation from children and young people's in their reviews consistently achieving between 97-100% throughout the year this is an area of continued improvement as in the last business year participation was an average of 92%.

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 achieve between 56-72%. This practice improvement must also be a focus for improvement across all operational teams as well as the IROs.

We set ourselves a target of 75% to be achieved as part of our Team Plan for 2019-2020. We have in the past year achieved close to this figure and certainly it is an improving picture, but we have not

been able to sustain attendance consistently at this level. A working group in the team has sought feedback from children and young people and social workers this has recently been collated and will inform future planning to increase attendance



Children's attendance at review % of all reviews

Blue 2018-19

Red 2019-20

Consultation

As part of the review process IROs 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 have focused on this area this year with a second working group gathering views and information as to how we can improve the consultation process. New forms have recently been designed and we have moved over to consultation via email especially in the latter end of the year due to Covid-19 and we have seen an increase in returns we are hoping next year's figures will indicate improvement

Children advise IROs they wish to be consulted face to face or on the telephone. For younger children their views are best collected by a visit which is recorded on their record, these figures are collected and represented in the consultation figure on page. During the latter part of the business year the Covid- 19 pandemic led to a the need to work virtually using technology, it was found that children over the age of 10 were very receptive to the way of working and we found increased engagement in their consultation with the IRO. We aim to take this forward in our Team Plan to ensure we continue to offer children and young people a variety of options to engage with their review.

Recorded Invites/Consultation Forms sent out					Black- 18/19
Y/P	Health	Education	Parents	Foster/Home	Green -19/20
680	536	641	695	679	447
655	492	589	652	530	356

Recorded Consultation Forms received					
Y/P	Health	Education	Parents	Foster/Home	Other
85 (13%)	164 (31%)	249 (38.8%)	87 (12.5%)	197(29%)	29 (6.4%)
70 ((10.6%)	153 ((31%)	160 (27%)	61 (9.3%)	145 (27%)	29 (8.1%)

6. Dispute Resolution and Practice Alerts

One of the key functions of the statutory role of the IRO is to seek resolution to any problem or disagreement arising out the care planning process. It is a core part of their role to scrutinise practice and challenge the Local Authority and hold them to account in relation to achieving good and timely outcomes for children. To do this, IROs must establish good working relationships with Social Workers and their managers in order 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 Practice Alert being raised by the IRO with resolution at this level within 5 working days with the Team Manager. If this is not achieved, then the IRO will escalate to a Formal alert allowing a further 10 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.

What is going well?	What are we worried about?	Future focus
<p>Almost 60% of practice alerts have been resolved at informal level this is similar to the figure last year</p> <p>Compared to the same period in 2019 Good practice notifications have increased by just under 8% from last year now representing over 31% of all practice alerts. This is an improved picture of ensuring good practice is acknowledged.</p> <p>Good practice is being recognised more widely for a wider variety of categories. It is positive that in 4 cases it was considered there had been exemplary practice where the social worker went above and</p>	<p>There remain a high percentage of informal alerts, 53.2% for care plans or pathway plans not being prepared in a timely way for reviews. Whilst this has improved from last year's 61% it still means the child; young person and their parents has not had the opportunity to view or consider the plan of the review in 57 cases this year. It also leads to many reviews being rearranged or stood down which might give a message to children that their reviews are not important or given priority. This also suggests that that action taken from last year has not has significant impact this year.</p>	<p>The current increase in Good practice alerts should be maintained to recognise practice going above and beyond agreed standards the IRO team appreciate this is a fundamental way to improve practice and can aid retention in busy social work teams and link practice alerts to development and learning with a focus on where practice has had a positive impact on the child and their outcomes.</p> <p>We need to remain focused on improving the quality of care plans and pathway plans being completed in a timely way for the cared for review and consider what else can be to</p>

beyond practice expectations. There is also good reflection of social worker's advocating for children who are in our care.

Within the good practice alerts there is evidence of specific good pieces of work, assessments and plans being highlighted. These are examples of the alert system supporting practice and development.

There has been improvement in some plans being prepared for review which has to be given recognition whilst it may still not be where it needs to be

There has been a slight increase in the percentage of formal alerts from last year increasing to just under 12% of all alerts from last year's 10% figure.

There are 4 formal alerts that relate to cases at informal level being escalated due to no response or resolution at informal level.

There were 3 alerts raised due to concerns around safeguarding, one in relation to a Missing from Home meeting not taking place, one due to concern for a Strategy meeting being chaired by a social worker who had not received their registration and one due to a disclosure not being actioned as a Section 47

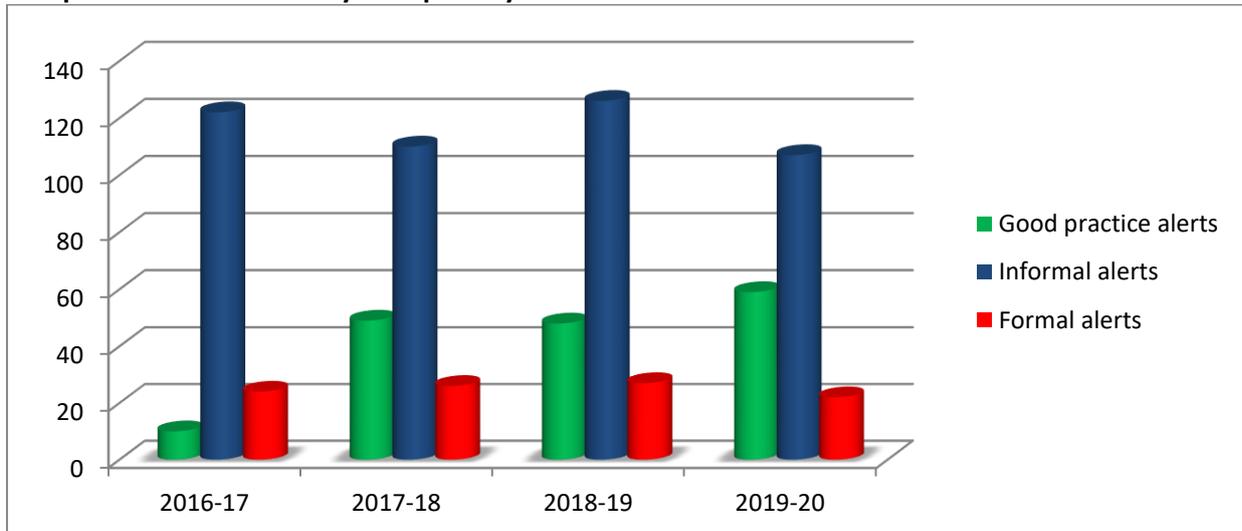
It was agreed alerts would be suspended halfway through March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic impacting on some areas of practice, a reduced framework was re-introduced in April 2020

improve social work practice in this area

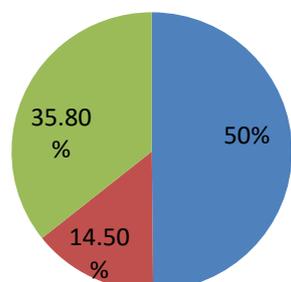
The IRO team need to raise practice alerts more consistently when permanency is not achieved at the 2nd review this was an area agreed as a joint focus but is not reflected well in the data this year.

Some work and review is needed of the Practice Alert process to consider how to improve the impact and reception of practice alerts and whether the current language and framework used could be improved to align it more to practice improvement. It would be beneficial to align more practice alerts with the improvement plan actions accordingly as well as continuing to meet the guidance as outlined in the IRO Handbook.

Comparative data of activity over past 4 years

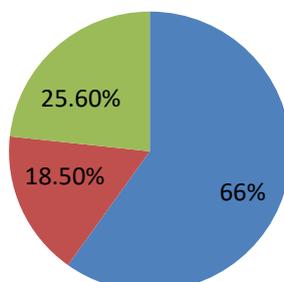


2019/20 Qrt 2



- Informal alerts
- Formal alerts
- Good practice notification

2019/20 Qrt 4



- Informal alerts
- Formal alerts
- Good practice notification

THEMES

Good practice alerts

Good practice alerts in the past year have increased and have centred around the efforts Social Workers and Personal Advisors have made to form good working relationships with the children or young people they work with, in some case exemplary practice has been identified. Examples have included a social worker who attended a young person's graduation on her day off because she knew the young person had no parent who would attend. As well an alert relating to a social worker who worked extremely hard to progress a working relationship with a parent to ensure safe socially distanced contact could be promoted during the Covid-19 crisis, this was not only in line with the child's wishes but supported placement stability and the safety of the young person as it meant the young person did not go missing as she had previously.

This year IROs have also taken the time to identify good pieces of work such as a good assessment, care plan, pathway plan or Life Story work and recognised this via the practice alert system to support development and learning of social workers and provide a benchmark of what good looks like. There is also recognition where social workers have really strived to advocate for the child and whilst most social workers would do this, the practice alerts recognise where above average efforts have been made or a difficult case where the social worker worked effortlessly to make progress in the child's plan.

Informal alerts

53% of informal alerts relate to the care plan or pathway plan not being updated or completed in time for the review. This has been a feature over the last 3 years of reporting although with some improvement seen in the figures this year. It would seem timeliness and preparation for review continues to compete with other demands on the social worker's time and so no great improvement has been seen this year. This is of concern as all children and young people should have had their updated plan shared with them ahead of the review and in the case of Pathway Plans it should have been endorsed by the young person ahead of the meeting. If the IRO is not seeing a completed plan ahead of the review, then neither is the child. It remains the discretion of the IRO whether to go ahead with the review without a written plan and most reviews stood down are stood down for this reason.

Of the remaining 47% of alerts 25% of them relate to statutory visits not being in timescales, or no recorded statutory visits with rest of the themes relating to drift, inaccurate legal status or lack of regulation of the child's placement and the decisions from the previous review not implemented. It is noted there are very few informal alerts raised in relation to permanency at 2nd review not being achieved despite this being an agreed theme, however IROs have identified this is often due to delays in court or due to complex assessments or through delay in parental engagement in PLO therefore not directly attributable to any deficits in care planning for the child.

Formal alerts

Twenty-two formal alerts were raised this year, 27% were escalations from informal alerts with half of these reflecting a disagreement in the final care plan with the IRO being unable to endorse the final plan. Other formal alerts related to a sibling group of 3 where concern was raised for therapeutic input directed by court not yet started for children on a full care order impacting on their contact with their parent and essentially causing a delay in their plan progressing.

Those matters raised in the formal dispute resolution process are of course serious and others to note are concerns for the return of a child to his parent following a Section 47 where it was felt delay was resource led rather than child led again impact on the child is at the route of this alert as a young child out of parental care for longer than he needed to be. Concern for consent removed in relation to another child who was subject to Section 20 status as well as an alert in relation to another sibling group where the IRO did not consider the assessments presented supported the final care plan and was unable to endorse that plan. It is fair to say every one of these alerts resulted in action and resolution in the best interests of all children involved following the escalation and discussion with senior managers.

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

The Local Authority was inspected during this business year and Ofsted provided the following comments about the IRO service in Cheshire East:

“Children are well supported to make meaningful contributions to their reviews; advocacy and the need for an independent visitor is considered in reviews. Reviews are child focused and well attended and they measure the progress of the children’s plans. However, challenge by the IRO is not consistently effective. It does not always provide the level of critical evaluation required to progress children’s cases with clarity and pace”. Ofsted November 2019.

We continue to strive as a team to improve our practice and in the light of Ofsted’s comments are looking at how we can be more consistent and ensure we focus on the impact on the child regarding any issues where there has been drift and delay or where elements of the child’s plan should be challenged to ensure better outcomes. We are also considering how and when practice alerts are used and how they are responded to as they are not currently having the impact on children’s outcomes they need to.

We have introduced monthly peer auditing to aid consistency where we have a thematic approach with IRO’s auditing each other’s work with a follow up plenary session to fully discuss and agree improved practice standards. These audits focus on the impact for the child, evidence of SMART outcomes and IRO oversight and challenge.

The team also take part in audit activity including two thematic team audits a year. This year we have focused on planning for permanency at the four-month review, auditing in October last year and then again in March this year to highlight the barriers being found in practice in relation to achieving early

permeance. These reports have been presented to the Senior Leadership Team in order to inform and improve learning and practice development in this area.

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.

The positioning of the IRO service outside the operational structure and so through their independence and experience the IRO is able to step back and take a broader view on occasions. It remains an important function of the IRO to challenge and hold social workers and their managers to account in respect of any practice that falls below acceptable standards leading to a negative impact on the child.

The IRO's role is always to ensure the child achieves the best outcomes and that the care plan is in line with their wishes and feelings and in their best interests. 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

Example A

A became a looked After Child on 23rd January 2020 following a head injury sustained in the home. Following medical reports, A was accommodated with family friends. A police investigation commenced, and a second medical opinion obtained as there was some conflicting information about how the injury occurred.

The IRO held an initial cared for review and considered and it was shared that following further examination and discussion with the police it was now considered the event was just an accident and

not an injury and a final medical report confirmed it was not a non-accidental injury, this was at the end of a week.

The IRO noted that A had not been returned home the following week despite a decision that he should endorsed at his review. The IRO challenged the social work team manager and it was indicated staffing issues had caused delay and they wished to seek confirmation via a legal planning meeting return home was the appropriate plan. The IRO challenged this was not in the best interest of A and not required based on evidence provided by both police and medics and furthermore work with the child had confirmed it was an accident. The IRO escalated the matter to the Service Manager via Formal Dispute Resolution as it seemed the legal status of Section 20 was no longer appropriate and expressed concern parents had not been updated about the situation and had therefore not had the opportunity to challenge why he remained out of their care. The Service Manager agreed return home would not be delayed and there was no need seek further legal advice based on the evidence available and A was returned home that day to his parent's care. As a young child the impact for A was that he remained out of his parent's care for a minimum amount of time whilst concerns were investigated whilst not losing sight of the rights of his parents and A due to the close oversight of his IRO.

Example B

B came into care four weeks before his 18th birthday, as he was 'homeless and estranged from his family'. B had been living with his grandparents on an SGO grandmother had found it increasingly difficult to manage his behaviour.

When the IRO was allocated he noted that grandmother had been asking for B to be accommodated for a number of months and social care had actually made arrangements for him to move into a local hostel but had not brought him 'into care' when they did so. This is only permitted in the Statutory Guidance in certain circumstances. There was no recording on file that demonstrated that the Statutory Guidance (1) on such circumstances had been followed. Therefore, the date of his being made subject to section 20 Children Act 1989 and accommodated was challenged by the IRO. This date was important as to receive support and guidance after he turned 18, JL needed to have been subject to section 20 for 13 weeks, and as noted if the original date of accommodation he would only have had 4 weeks.

The matter was informally pursued by the IRO to Service Manager level and the matter was resolved with an agreement that he would be entitled to a full care leaver status. B now has the continued support of this status and a Personal Advisor.

Example C

C's situation is similar in some ways to B. He had lived at home with his siblings until November 2013 when he went to live with his Uncle alongside his brother whilst young siblings went into foster care. His uncle sought a Child Arrangement Order, but C was considered within the care proceedings of his siblings Special Guardianship Order was granted, the court indicated Cheshire East had responsibility for the original placement.

As C approached 18 his home situation was fragile, and he returned to Cheshire East to live with his Mum and then back to his Uncle. B eventually presented as homeless and was advised he should approach the authority where he lived for accommodation however this was declined. C approached

Cheshire East and was given emergency accommodation locally and referred into children's services as he was not yet 18. Whilst he was accommodated it was advised to C would not have full Care leaver status as he would have insufficient time in care (13 weeks) before he turned 18. The IRO felt due to his history and the identified duty of Cheshire East noted in the court papers that it would be remiss if the Local Authority did not extend support, especially when C's siblings continued to reside and live in the area and he was drawn back to the area for that reason.

The matter was escalated informally, and discussion took place with the relevant manager who agreed to discuss with his service manager that this support should be offered, this was agreed.

8. Progress on targets from 2019-20

Target	RAG	Progress made
Increase attendance and participation of children at reviews	Green	Attendance has increased at cared for reviews and more so at Pathway plan reviews. Participation at reviews is very high at 98% and remains good
Increase return rate of consultation from parents and partner agencies	Red	This is an area where performance has dipped, there are many reasons why agencies, parents and carers do not return this paperwork. Current ways of working have identified electronic communication has had a better response we also hope to look at how the development of a "portal" to communicate with foster carers might be used to support the review process by both carers and children and young people
Lean review of Invitation process	Green	Completed successfully and has led to duplication of actions being removed, the use of Egress for invitation progress, the improved protection of data by use of Egress as well as actions for future development see below
To seek feedback about our service from children, young people, parents and partner agencies	Green	We have had a small working group collating information over the past year and this has included direct conversations, consultation with care planning team, and meetings with professionals. Feedback has been gathered which is to be used to shape changes to enhance the review process as well as to inform practice
To continue to work with the operational teams to improve stability and reduce placement disruption	Green	Monthly meetings are held with care planning and CP CIN managers which consider thematic issues to improve outcomes for children
To reduce the number of reviews rearranged and to ensure reviews for cared for children	Yellow	This figure remains similar to last year but audits and dip sampling have found a number of reasons by both IRO and SW as to why meetings are rearranged whilst

and care leavers are prioritised across the service

many of these are child centred decisions link meetings with the social work teams are being held to ensure planning for cared for reviews is prioritised

9. Future plans and development

<u>Priority team objective</u>	<u>Impact statement</u> (when you achieve this what will the impact be for C&YP and their families)	<u>Measures of success</u>	<u>Actions needed to achieve priority objective</u>
Relevant Children's Social Care Objective: <i>We will reflect, learn, and continuously improve our practice to provide an excellent service for children and young people</i>			
We will improve on our offer of how we consult with children offering them a variety of means to engage in reviews including the annual foster care reviews	Children's views will be evident in recording of reviews Two outcomes from each review will be provided by the child and will be followed up to ensure they are met at the subsequent review Peer reviews will take place to ensure consistency across the team using child participation as a theme	The child's voice will be evident in the review process in the outcomes from the review Letters to children will be personal and reflect the relationship built between IRO and child or young person Fostering reviews will not need to be stood down as children's views will be prioritised	Provision of options to the child ahead of the review Face to face meetings Microsoft Teams consultation What's app consultation Fostering Portal implementation for ease of access Revision of consultation templates for children wishing to provide views in writing Access to advocacy The FIRO will work with fostering improvement to ensure C4 children's views are obtained early for fostering reviews
Relevant children's social care objective: <i>We will safely and appropriately reduce the number of cared for children</i>			
We will review plans for children including consideration of those who	We will see an increase in children being able to return safely to their families where	Care numbers will reduce, and caseloads will reduce leading to	Good IRO oversight of children's plans Scrutiny of those children coming into care in regular audits to ensure it was the best decision

<p>could safely return to live with their families</p> <p>We will track those children awaiting discharge of care orders and raise formal disputes for those where resources are delaying their plan</p>	<p>care is no longer required</p> <p>Children will not remain in care and will achieve better outcomes by living in their families if safe to do so</p> <p>There will be a reduction in missing from home for those children who seek out their family and where it is assessed they can safely live with that family member if necessary, with support provided</p>	<p>better oversight by the IRO team</p>	<p>Clear C and F assessments available to ensure the IRO is fully informed of the family situation</p> <p>Clearly identified support plans to ensure any return home is sustainable and will provide permanency</p>
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Relevant Children's Social Care Objective:
We will achieve a permanent, safe home for children, young people and care leavers as early as possible.

<p>Focus on achieving permanency at the 4-month review and evaluation of children's plan to ensure the plan is SMART</p> <p>Fostering Annual Reviews will be held on time and will be more robust following review of the process and update of the forms</p> <p>To ensure children are living safely in</p>	<p>Children will achieve early permanency with fewer placement moves</p> <p>All options will be considered early in planning including the option of Special Guardianship to a connected person where possible</p> <p>Outcomes for children will be good with early</p>	<p>More plans of permanency will be achieved by the four-month review</p> <p>IROs will identify any gaps in the C and F assessment at the first review</p> <p>IROs will identify family members to be considered at the first review</p>	<p>IRO s to ensure a mid-point review between the initial review and the 4-month review to ensure outcomes have been addressed</p> <p>The QA checklist completed on each new case will give opportunity to highlight any missing's information such as genogram to enable good preparation for the review</p> <p>IROs to raise practice alerts should a permanency plan not be achieved at the 4 months review due to practice below agreed standards</p> <p>FIRO to feed into fostering review</p> <p>FIRO supporting policy updates in fostering</p>
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<p>good fostering homes that meet their needs by carers who are skilled and trained and meet regulations</p>	<p>identification of where they should safely live in order to have stability</p> <p>Children will feel safe and secure in their fostering settings</p> <p>There will be fewer placement breakdowns as reviews will highlight support needs or concerns</p>	<p>Foster carers will feel supported and well trained and will be resilient providing safe stable placements</p>	<p>FIRO supporting implementation of new Liquid Logic workflow and forms</p> <p>FIRO supporting improvement in participation of children in the fostering annual reviews</p>
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Relevant Social Care Objective:
We will reflect, learn, and continuously improve our practice to provide an excellent service for children and young people

<p>Strengthen QA role of IRO and FIRO to challenge SW and SSW practice that impacts on outcomes for children through use of QA forms, practice alerts and dispute resolution as well as audit activity</p>	<p>Practice will improve across the service and there will be less delay in achieving children's plans</p> <p>Placement stability will increase</p>	<p>Children will have more timely outcomes and plans will be achieved without drift or delay</p> <p>Practice will improve and be consistent</p> <p>Foster reviews will be holistic involving all contributors including children and will support stable placements</p>	<p>Discussion with SW service TMs to agree practice standards going forward for Practice alerts and some shared goals</p> <p>Consistent use of both practice alerts and good practice alerts by IROs and FIRO</p> <p>Ensure use of dispute resolution when in disagreement with the plan to evidence IRO scrutiny and footprint</p> <p>Regular peer audit activity to improve consistency across the team</p> <p>Regular team audits to highlight themes and improve practice</p> <p>Monthly performance data</p> <p>Annual Practice Alert report</p>
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