



Cheshire East

TOGETHER for Children and Young People

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

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT FOR CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS 2023/2024



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Introduction

The annual report will present a reflective overview of the activity undertaken in Cheshire East in respect of our cared for children/young people and care leavers. It covers the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and provides information on the role and the responsibilities of the safeguarding service, specifically the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). The report will provide information from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective, and how this supports positive outcomes for our children.

As cited in the IRO Handbook the primary focus *'is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration'*.

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

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

In line with the IRO's quality assurance role there are a range of activities and performance measures that support care planning for Children in Care. Our performance to deliver timely and effective reviews has stayed fairly static from the previous year which means we continue to look to improve our performance in this area. The report will provide an overview of the performance data including key performance indicators such as timeliness of reviews and children and young people's participation and feedback of their experiences alongside the current profile of our children in care and details around the 'dispute resolution' process and the impact of this.

IRO's performance around completing recommendations from the review within the 5 days has in this reporting year remained static however this is not where we wish practice to be. The IRO practice standards provides benchmarking to support an improvement in this area for 24/25.

Our performance to deliver timely and effective reviews has stayed static which highlights that this is an area for improvement in 24/25. within time this reporting year with there being an increase in participation which stands at 98%. Escalations have continued throughout this reporting year where we have seen a slight increase in informal alerts where improvements have been identified with service delivery. This has been balanced with an increase in the identification of good practice which supports the learning culture service wide.

Alongside our cared for children the IRO's have continued to have responsibility for reviewing all care leavers 18-21yrs. The IRO's successfully reviewed 86% of Pathway Plan reviews within timescale which is an upward trend of 15% from the previous year. And are continuing to



further improve this for 24/25. 61% of care leavers attended their reviews which continues to be a key focus.

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

Purpose of Service and Legal Context

The appointment by local authorities of an IRO is a statutory requirement. Their purpose is to ensure that the care plan for a cared for child fully reflects the child's needs, that each child's wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration, and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's statutory responsibilities towards them.

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

- monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case;
- participate in any review of the child's case;
- ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority; and
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

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

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

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

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

- be social work professionals with at least five years post-qualifying frontline practice and supervisory/managerial experience;



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



Profile of the IRO Service and Workload

The management of the safeguarding service consists of a Director of Children's Social Care, Head of Service and Service Manager, at the time of reporting all the positions were permanent.

This year the team has seen the service maintain ten FTE cared for IROs along with a part-time fostering IRO (FIRO), who have been in post ranging from 18 months to 8 years. The Service Manager has direct line management responsibility for the IROs who reports to the Head of Service. The background of IRO experience is varied ranging from CAFCASS, Child Protection, Permanence, Adoption, Fostering and Frontline management.

We continue to pride ourselves in recruiting internally, where possible, to support career progression within the workforce. Maintaining this level of stability within the team provides a sense of security for our children and young people and ensures minimal impact when changes occur with the operational teams.

Caseloads have varied across the year; however, they have remained between 50-60 in line with the IRO handbook which suggests a case load of 50-70. Where possible we aim to keep sibling groups allocated to the same IRO to ensure consistency. Where a child or young person has articulated that they do not wish for this to happen we have in the main supported this view and offered an alternative IRO. In such cases both IRO's are in regular communication to ensure they are working collaboratively.

The IRO's have access to independent legal advice that is commissioned out to a local legal firm. When this has been used it has been effective and supported the IRO to be confident in their challenge and ensure the best possible outcome for our children and young people. Within this reporting year this has not been accessed with resolutions being sought at an earlier stage.

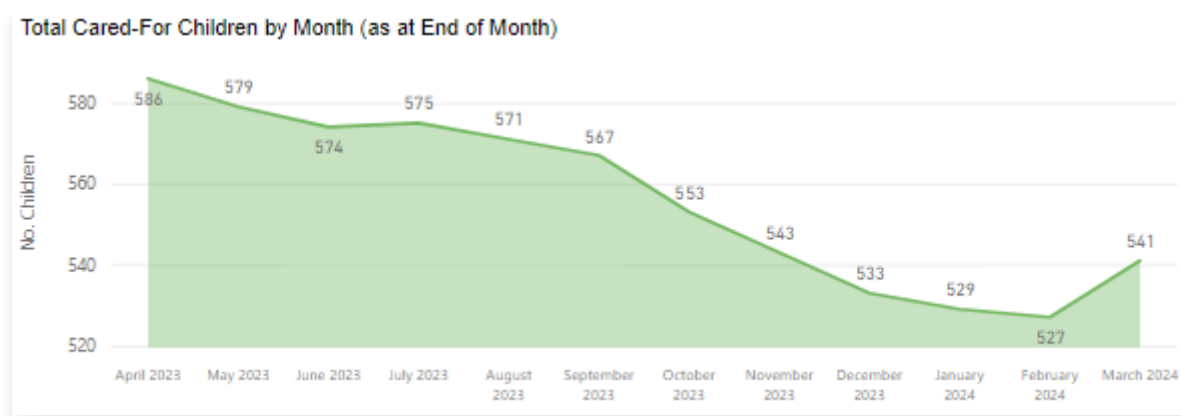
IRO's have links to different service areas such as cared for, care leavers, children with disabilities, adoption, education, and fostering. IRO's attend service meetings for their service on a quarterly basis which allows for the relational based practice to continue and support conversations around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

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



As part of our quality assurance role, we have enhanced our oversight of children in privately fostered arrangements through a dedicated IRO who holds this work. The IRO is alerted when private fostering arrangements have been identified to ensure this is a suitable arrangement. For the duration of the arrangement the IRO will attend regular Child in Need Meetings and complete a quarterly report which is shared with senior leaders at an extended senior leadership meeting to keep them sighted on the current data and any emerging themes.

Profile of our cared for children



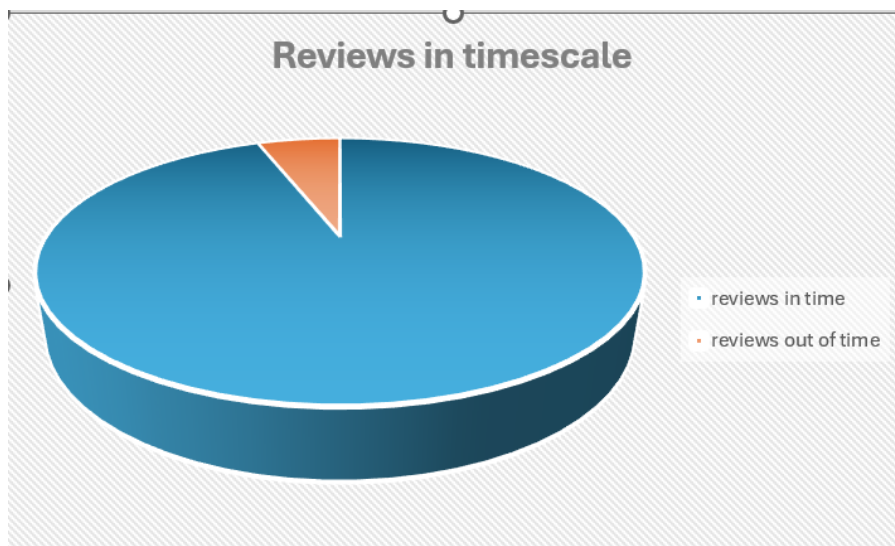
This is the current profile of our cared for children within 2023/2024 which highlights the increase in our cared for population at the start of the year in comparison to the figures at the close of the reporting year. The momentum of children leaving care was significantly less than the rate at which children were coming into care which was contributable to the rise in cared for numbers in quarter one however in quarter two and three there was evidence that children leaving care was increasing and children entering care at a slower rate. We are continuing to strengthen this with our business intelligence colleagues to support our understanding of key themes.



Performance data for Cared for Reviews

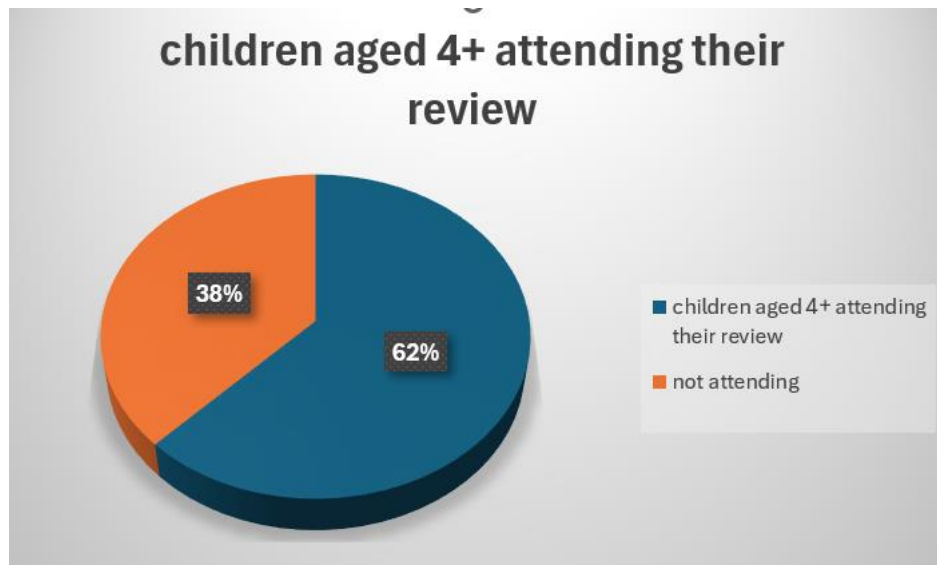
The IRO's have chaired 1233 cared for reviews in this reporting period. Although there has been a reduction in our cared for population the number of reviews held has seen a slight increase which has in the main been attributed to additional reviews to support changes in care plan. The cared for reviews undertaken within this year has seen 94% undertaken within timescales. This is something that remains a key focus area. To support timeliness and evidence oversight the IRO's make use of 'series of meetings' when they are met with unavoidable delay. As a service, we have built in a process to support the improvement of timeliness, and this will continue to be reviewed. There are some operational challenges to ensure care plans are recorded in timescale to support timely cared for reviews taking place and the IROs are working with services to support practice improvement in this area.

IRO's understand the importance of the timeliness of recording and work to be flexible where possible. As a service we recognise the need to ensure reviews are booked in to allow flex in the system if changes are required especially around court timetables or challenges within the workforce. Over the year 531 reviews were rearranged equating to 44%. This is an increase of 11% and is reflective of some of the challenges the service has faced with the instability in the workforce and the impact on operational work. The IROs work hard to keep any rearranged reviews within timescales.



The IRO service work with our children and young people to encourage their attendance at their Cared for Review. In the reporting period, we had 62% of children over the age of 4 attending their review.

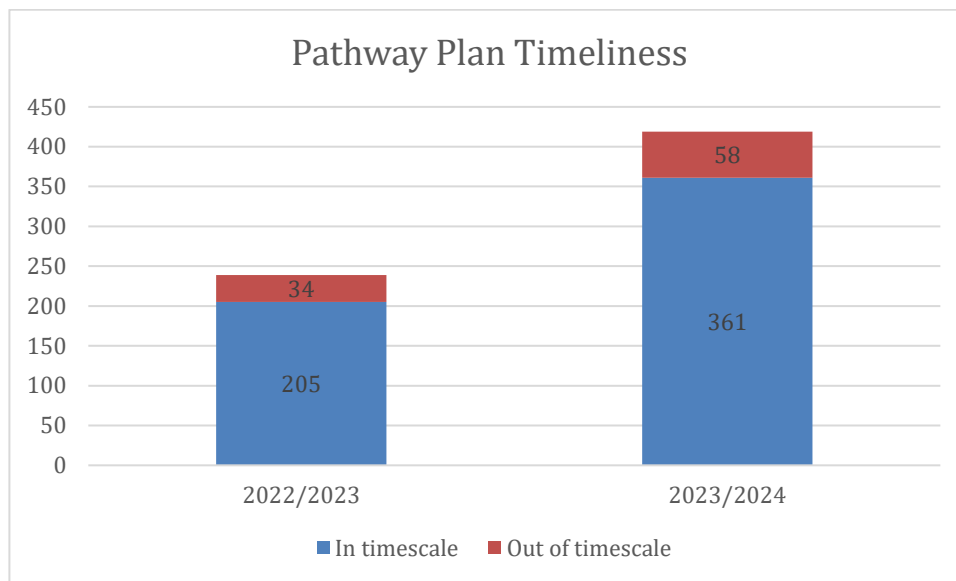







Performance data for Pathway Plan Reviews 18-21yrs

IRO's continue to support care leavers within Cheshire East and have this year completed 419 Pathway Plan Reviews. During this reporting period the service has continued to see an upward trend of reviews taking place within timescale with a 15% increase from last year taking the final figure to 86%. This highlights the positive impact that the safeguarding service has had on overseeing the Pathway Plan reviews. Like the cared for reviews there are times that Pathway Plan Reviews will fall out of timescale; there remains a focus for IRO's to ensure they book reviews in with enough time should the date need to be changed last minute.





Annual data for Key Performance Indicators

Task	Total Number	Percentage	Comparison to 22/23
Cared for reviews taken place	1233		1175
Cared for reviews held in timescale	1033	94%	 Up from 87%
Cared for reviews with recommendations completed within 5 working days	683	55%	
Cared for reviews with minutes completed within 15 working days	573	46%	 Up from 41%

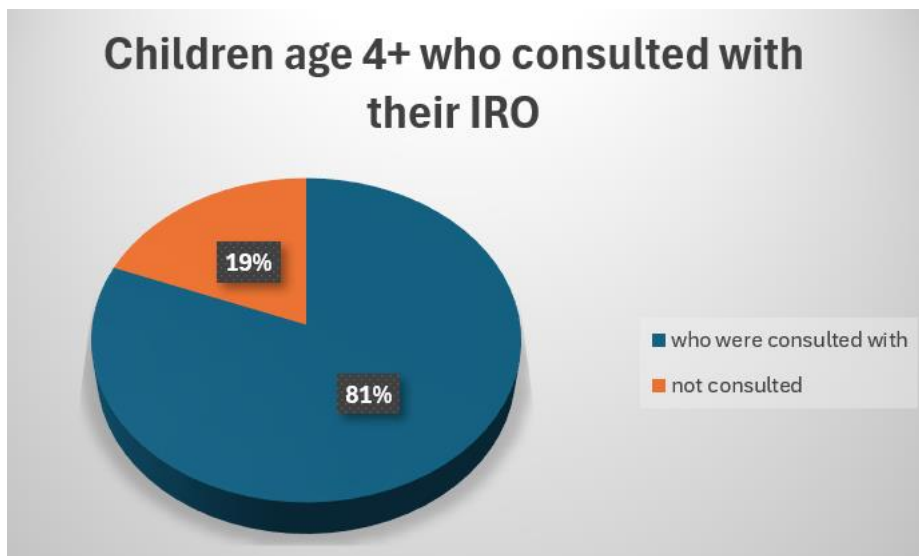
There will be some variation to the figures from the monthly performance data that is scrutinised with the IRO's; where the recording of the reviews on the child or young person's records has not been completed, this will not be reflected within the snapshot above. Performance clinics with the IROs continue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



Participation

Children and young people sharing their views for cared for reviews has continued to increase this year and currently stands at 98%. This is something the safeguarding service are incredibly proud of and highlights the efforts that go into building positive relationships with our children and young people.

The IRO's remain committed to support children and young people in attending their reviews; with this year showing that 81% were consulted by their IRO. We do have to acknowledge that some children and young people may not wish to participate as they are settled and do not want to be identified as being different from their peers. Furthermore, a proportion of reviews that took place were for children under 4 years old where it was felt it would not be suitable for them to participate in this way, however there is an expectation the IRO's use alternative methods in a manner best suited to the children's needs and abilities to ensure a greater understanding of the children's lived experiences. This is generally through direct observation in home or education settings or through discussion with professionals working with them.



Attendance

The IRO's have continued to work hard to ensure children and young people attend their reviews with them consulting or visiting their children and young people prior to the review. While this is still not where it needs to be this year has continued to see improvements in this area with 62% now attending their cared for reviews. What we see is high levels of engagement with the review, but young people aren't always wanting to attend their reviews.



For our Care Leavers, this reporting year shows that 61% attended their pathway plan review, having a stable IRO and Personal Advisor has aided young people's attendance and the aspiration is that this figure will grow in the next financial year.

To support these relationships, any children and young people who are new into care receive an IRO passport which has a picture and small narrative about the IRO along with some information regarding the review. This continues to be well received. Alongside this, consultation forms are also sent to provide our children and young people with the opportunity to express how they wish their review to be conducted and how we can support them to attend.

Feedback about the service

During this reporting year, there was feedback provided from the Cared for Children's Survey which took place between November 2023 and April 2024, this has enabled views to be gathered from our children and young people to understand what they gain from attending their reviews. Some feedback is shown below:



As a service we are always seeking feedback into how improvements can be made, and it was reassuring to hear from our children and young people who shared the following:

- When asked what they want to change - "nothing" "K is brilliant"
- When asked about their IRO - "They are very good", "My previous one was amazing", "Just had a new one and she is fantastic" and "We've just had a new one – again inconsistencies"



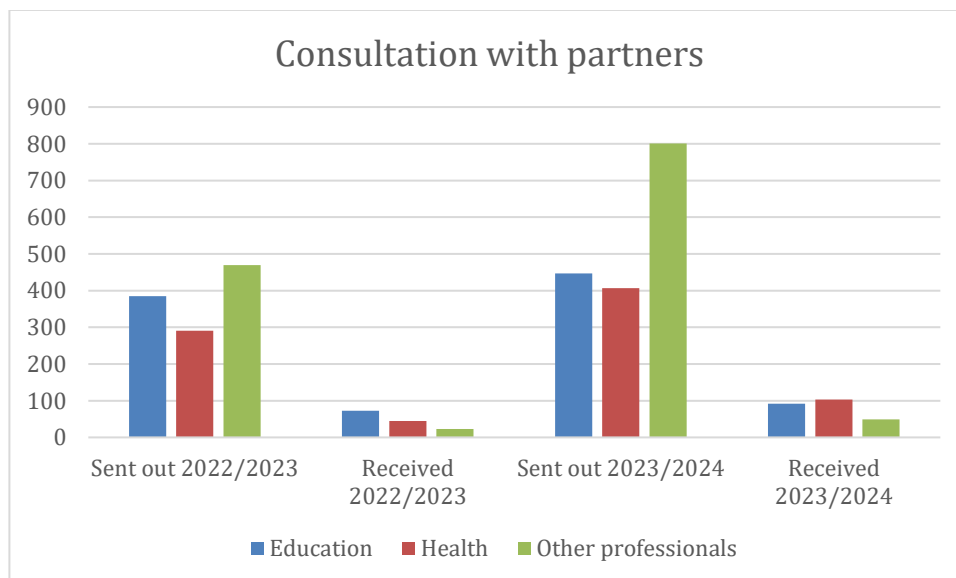
- When asked about how to improve their review - “Make them face to face”, “Don’t let my social worker change things when things are working for me” and “Sometimes communicate more”

As a service we acknowledge that we don’t always get it right for our children, this feedback is invaluable in supporting the improvement of service delivery.

Consultation with partner agencies

Consultation with partners is important to triangulate information for young people and ensure we have the right information to support planning. The Safeguarding Service endeavours to consult with all key professionals supporting the child or young person. One of the ways we do this is through consultation forms for partners. One of the ways we do this is through consultation forms for partners. Whilst the data shows a slight improvement of partners sending back consultations in preparation for the reviews, this is not where we would like it to be. Children and young people often voice that they wish for just a select few professionals to attend their review, however it is still important that the IROs consult with wider networks to inform future recommendations and to support plans being progressed. This remains a key focus for 2024/2025.

As a service we have in recent months started to share this data with our partners so they can also aid the strengthening of this.



IRO’s are also proactive in liaising with professionals outside of the consultation process, often through telephone calls to ensure that they are capturing their views and key information that can be fed into the review and support recommendations and forward planning.



Dispute Resolution and Quality Assurance Alerts

One of the key functions of the statutory role of the IRO is to seek resolution to any problem or disagreement arising out of the care planning process. It is a core part of their role to scrutinise practice and challenge the local authority to ensure good and timely outcomes for children. To do this, IROs must establish good working relationships with social workers and their managers to ensure the dispute resolution process is effective. This also requires senior managers to positively support this process. Alongside this responsibility, IRO's in Cheshire East are committed to identifying good practice to support the system to learn from what works well for children and young people so that it can be understood and replicated across services.

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

Within this reporting year there has been a slight increase in informal alerts and a decrease in formal which is indicative of the relationships that IROs continue to build with social work teams to resolve challenges at a much earlier stage. The data also highlights the growth of good practice that is being identified by the IROs with a significant increase from the previous year. The IRO service tracks all escalations and challenges on a quarterly basis to consider any common themes or trends over time. This supports wider learning across all service areas.

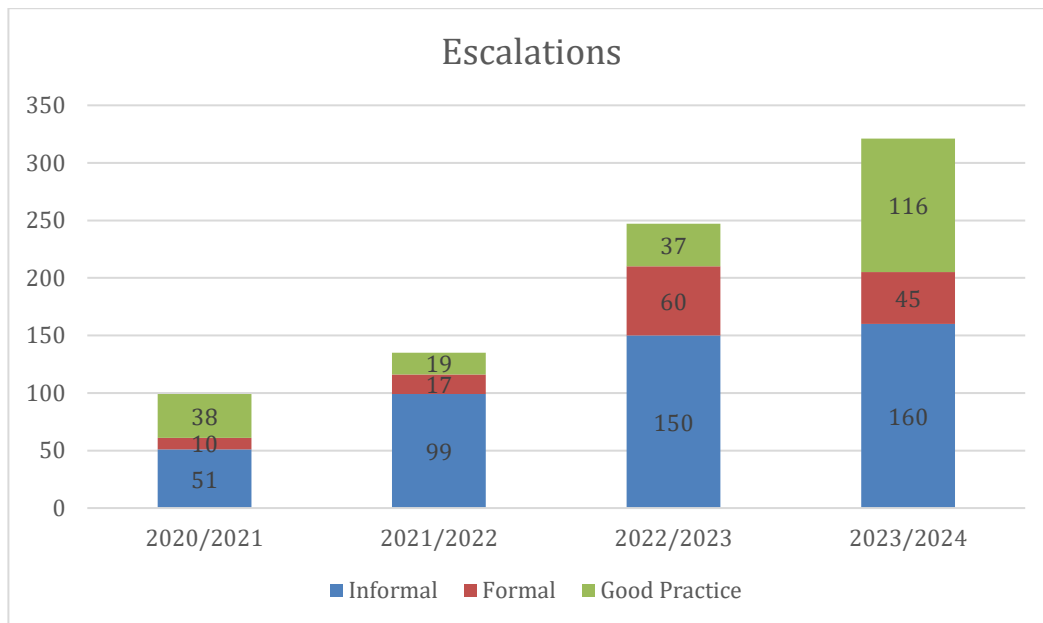
The themes identified within the report completed at the end of this year saw an increase in escalations around noncompliance challenges which as a result saw a positive impact for our children and young people, with more robust planning, less delay, and increased visits/management oversight being evident. What has been recognised is that practice in our system is still not consistently where it needs to be to support good outcomes for children and young people in our care. We are working with our IROs to come alongside teams and social workers to support practice improvement at an earlier stage to prevent drift and delay.

The IROs have highlighted good practice throughout the year where robust and detailed assessments have been completed/where children and young people achieved good outcomes in a timely manner, and if the development of positive relationships with both children/families and partners have been evidenced.

IROs are also expected to provide escalation to partner agencies as it is recognised that drift in planning does not always sit with the social work teams. In the year 2023/2024 there were 27 partner escalations raised which in the main were across health, education, police and adult services. The key themes for the escalations were around delay in transition planning and adult needs assessments, expediting allocation of health professionals for children placed out of



area, suitability of accommodation to support progressing permanence plans for our children and the restrictions that bail condition can have on planning. Partnership escalations are cited within the IRO practice standards as a key strand of IRO practice to ensure positive outcomes and we will focus on the impact of such escalations in the coming year.



Progress against targets 2022/2023

<u>Actions</u>	<u>Progress</u>
1. IRO's will ensure timely distribution of the children and young people's letters.	IRO's continue to write letters to children and young people, and we have seen an increase in letters being completed within the 15 days, however this is still an area for development.
2. Consistent IRO footprint/scrutiny to support progression of children and young people's plans, this will include the completion of mid-point reviews.	We have started to see a more consistent approach to IRO footprint and the completion of Mid-Point reviews however this needs to remain a key focus into 2024/2025.
3. IRO practice standards will be developed to support service delivery.	IRO Practice Standards have been developed and shared with the IRO's.
4. Practice will be standardised with the Safeguarding Service for the Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer to align with child protection and cared for.	Practice Standards have been developed and are awaiting sign off.



Key priority areas 2024/2025

1. Strengthen the timeliness of reviews, recommendations and letters to children/young people

Whilst there has been an increase in this area of focus within this reporting year, it is still not where we would like it to be. As a service we recognise the importance of children, families and their networks receiving timely recordings of the review to ensure they understand the expectations and requirements needed to progress plans.

2. Embed the IRO practice standards

It is reassuring that IRO practice standards were developed at the latter end of this reporting year; however, we need to ensure that focus is given to fully embedding them into everyday practice.

3. Improve challenge around drift and delay

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

4. Increase the focus on consultations from partner agencies

As a service we routinely send out consultations and invite our partner agencies to feedback and inform our children and young people's reviews. Whilst there has been an increase, we are keen to strengthen this further as sharing information and working collaboratively not only ensures plans are progressed but ensures identified needs are being met and supported by the right people. We will continue to share the data with colleagues on a regular basis and highlight any barriers at the earliest opportunity to seek a resolution.

