

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021

An annual report of the Independent Reviewing Service for looked after children is required in accordance with the Children and Young Person's Act 2008 and subsequent statutory guidance.

This report has been produced by the Lead Independent Reviewing Officer and provides both quantitative and qualitative evidence in relation to the IRO Service in Southampton.

The report provides an opportunity to:

- highlight areas of good practice and areas for improvement
- identify emerging themes and trends
- report on work undertaken to date
- outline service development priorities for the coming 12 months

1. Purpose of Service and Legal Context

The Independent Reviewing (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the Care Plan Review process to a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for children who are looked after and for challenging drift and delay.

The core purpose of the IRO role is to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's needs and to ensure that each child's wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration. The appointment by local authorities of an IRO is a legal requirement.

The IRO also has a duty to monitor the local authority's overall performance as a Corporate Parent and to bring any areas of poor practice in the care and planning for children in care to the attention of senior managers.

2. Professional Profile

The IRO team is part of the Quality Assurance Unit and is accountable to the Head of Quality Assurance. Our primary focus is looked after children. There is a separate Child Protection Chair team.

We currently have a team of 12 IROs which consists of 10 IROs for looked after children along with 2 Independent Fostering Reviewing Officers who chair Formal Review Meetings as part of the Foster Carer Review process.

Included in the total of 12 are 2.5 fixed term contracts which add capacity to the team. It has been agreed to continue such posts until September 2022 to ensure the size of caseloads enables each IRO to comply with primary legislation. This additional capacity has also added to a feeling of stability within the team (since September 2020) and avoided changes in IRO allocation for children.

One full time IRO has been seconded part time to the role of the Local Authority Participation Officer to March 2022. We have successfully recruited to cover this vacancy.

We retain strong partnership links with the National IRO Managers Partnership and regularly participate in the Communities of Practice events which aims to bring together IROs and encourage sharing of learning and expertise.

We continue to work collaboratively with Cafcass both at individual case work level and through our joint team meetings.

3. Key messages – Strengths and Challenges

Strengths

- Through working with all children looked after by Southampton Local Authority, IROs have provided strategic oversight and intelligence. This is chiefly evidenced via our analysis of the child's views obtained either during the review process or through written consultation, use of the dispute resolution process and our audit activity e.g. children new into care.
- Through the review process, IROs are well placed to assess the quality and effectiveness of the Local Authority planning and support for children who are looked after.
- IROs have used a balance of positive as well as challenging feedback to the Local Authority to support continuous learning and improvement. Positive feedback has been provided to the Director of Children's Services highlighting good practice e.g. direct work with a child. We have also raised challenges via the Learning & Improvement meetings and analysis of the use of the dispute resolution process.
- The IRO Service has provided a consultative role, sharing expertise and knowledge to support effective care planning. This is evidenced by developing an e-learning training programme and provision of drop-in sessions with the Lead IRO.
- IROs have ensured that the child's wishes, views, and feelings are given full consideration within the care planning and review process. This is evidenced by the child participation data. Despite Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns, we have encouraged participation of children in Care Plan Reviews and have sought children's ideas to inform continuous improvements to our service design and delivery.
- In 20/21, 77% of children aged 4 and above participated in their Care Plan Review through writing, use of advocacy and meeting with the IRO.
- In 20/21, 84.33% of children have received either a letter or child-friendly review record following the Care Plan Review to inform them of the outcome of the review.
- Our annual data shows that we have achieved improved timeliness in reviews and recording of review decisions and records.
- IROs have routinely reflected on our own performance to address the quality of our practice via quarterly peer audits. Professional Development Days have also been facilitated quarterly to encourage peer to peer learning.

Challenges

- The provision of a quality service to each looked after child requires the IRO to have sufficient time to comply with legislation. Despite additional staffing, IROs have an average caseload of between 65 and 72. This is slightly above the average recommended maximum caseload for an IRO (50-70) and comparable to our colleagues in the regional network however, the practice and outcomes for children in Southampton remain inconsistent which presents a greater challenge to the IRO Service and significant pressures.
- Between April 2020 and March 2021, 528 'mid-way reviews' were recorded and 111 IRO Alerts raised.
- Despite this improved evidence of IRO scrutiny and challenge, Ofsted have raised concerns regarding the impact of our work. An example of this is that despite raising 28% Alerts to address drift and delay in achieving permanence, we are aware of the number of children for whom permanence has not yet been achieved.
- In response to concerns raised by Ofsted, IROs are also involved in additional scrutiny work for key cohorts of children and regularly undertake additional auditing work with operational teams. Examples of this are children new into care, health of children in our care, young people placed in unregistered and unregulated accommodation and children subject to care orders placed with parent(s). We have introduced IRO Case Discussions to evidence our scrutiny in these areas.
- There are many challenges around care planning which we have highlighted to the Senior Management Team and which are being addressed. An example of this is poor preparation for Care Plan Reviews which necessitated the adjournment of 52 Care Plan Reviews in this period.

4. Performance and Quality Assurance

A total number of 1289 Care Plan Reviews were facilitated in the year 2020/21.

Table 1: Key data

MEASURE 20-21	DESCRIPTION
1289	Number of CLA Reviews Held
676	Number of Looked After Children
192	Number of LAC starting to be LAC during year (distinct)
28.40%	Percentage of children starting to be looked after during year (thus requiring more frequent Care Plan Reviews)

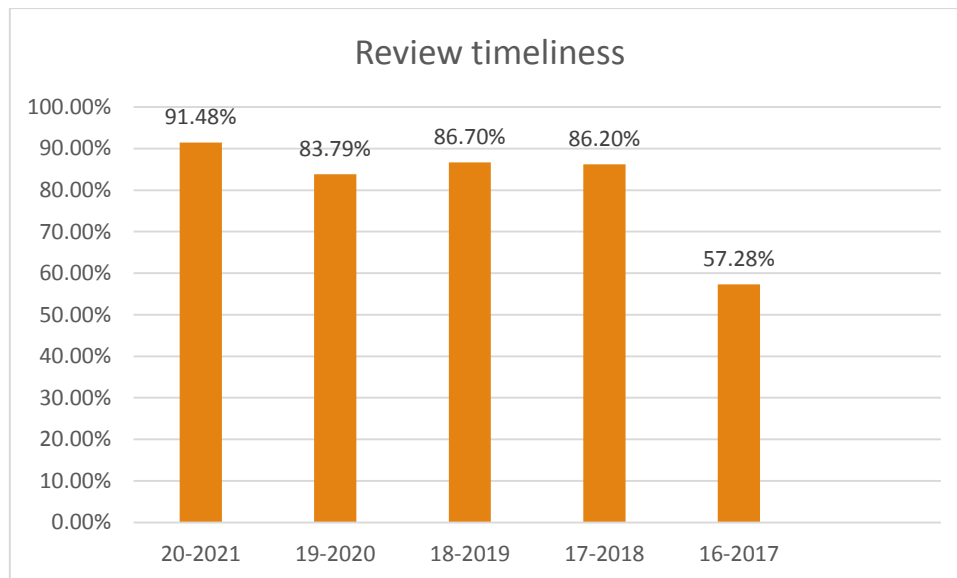
Following the first COVID-19 lockdown in late March 2020, IROs began to facilitate review meetings virtually. We provided clear communication and an organised and flexible approach to ensure participation of children and families.

Performance issues are managed robustly with the IRO team. Regular monitoring of our performance is in place and addressed both at team meetings and within individual supervision meetings. In 2020, we introduced Professional Development Days to support our learning and improvement as well as peer audits which focus on key areas of concern highlighted by Ofsted. Our Service Delivery and Improvement Plan is regularly reviewed at IRO and Quality Assurance team meetings.

We routinely provide an analysis of the use of the dispute resolution process to help identify patterns of concern emerging not just around individual children but also more generally in relation to the collective experience of its looked after children of the services they receive.

Review timeliness

2021-2021: 91.48% of Care Plan Reviews were held within statutory timescale. This shows an improvement in our performance from previous years.



Care Plan Review recordings

In 2019/20, a total of 65.78% of review records were recorded within statutory timescale. In 2020/21, this figure has increased to 85.38%.

Similarly, we have improved our performance in recording review decisions within statutory timescale. At the end of March 2020, 76.69% of review decisions were recorded in timescale. In 2020/21, this increased to 86.37%.

Letters/reports to children and young people

In the period 2019/20, 71.95% (1,003) children received a letter from their IRO following the review. In 2020/21, this increased to 84.39% (1,189)

Table 2: Quarter 1 Performance 2021/22

YEAR/Quarter	Reviews held within timescale	Decisions recorded within timescale	Review records recorded within timescale	Letters/reports sent by the IRO to child/young person following Care Plan Review
Q1 April-June 2021	90.30%	86.29%	90.03%	89.63%
2020-2021	91.48%	86.37%	85.38%	84.39%

Period Q1 2021/22 demonstrates a consistent performance in review timeliness, review recordings and ensuring children receive feedback following the review.

Care Plan Review adjournments

For a review to be productive and sensitive to the needs of each child, time and careful preparation is necessary. The IRO should be provided with or have access to any relevant reports/plans or background information, including the current care plan, the report from the social worker (which should be available at least three working days before the commencement of the review), the current health plan or medical assessment report and the current personal education plan (PEP).

If the IRO is not satisfied that the Local Authority has complied adequately with all the requirements relating to the review, the IRO has the power to adjourn a review. Whilst careful consideration is given to taking such action and any impact this may have on the child, the IRO has to weigh up the relative disadvantages of proceeding with the review on limited information

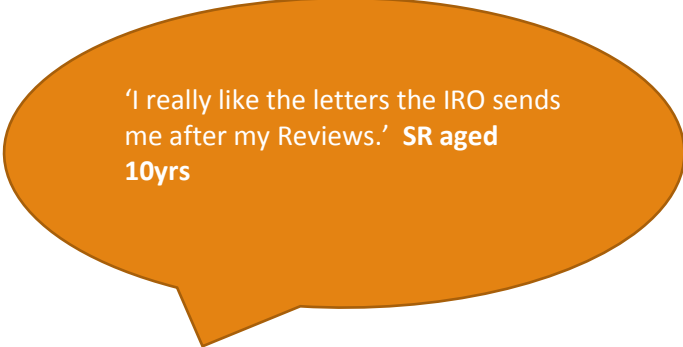
We are often faced with the very basics of care planning not achieved which in turn creates additional work for the IRO whether that is escalating using the dispute resolution process or adjourning Care Plan Reviews.

Between April 2020 and March 2021, the IRO Service found it necessary to adjourn 52 Care Plan Reviews (4%) due to no authorised Care Plan shared with the IRO prior to the review commencing.


Our Service Response

The IRO Service has worked with others to develop processes and training that enables workers to understand the importance of high-quality planning and reviews which focus on permanence. Despite this and use of the dispute resolution process, we have not yet seen an improvement in 2021/22 with 56 Care Plan Reviews adjourned between April and September 2021. This is higher than we would want or expect and has been recognised by the authority as an area that requires improvement. Escalation of concerns around care planning has informed the emergence of quality assurance clinics to be held with managers to improve practice standards, performance and outcomes.

5. Voice of The Child



'I really like the letters the IRO sends me after my Reviews.' **SR aged 10yrs**



'We have nominated our Reviewing Officer as we feel he has listened to us and he helped us to see our brother. Although it took a long time to sort out, he never gave up and he made it happen' **Love Our Children week 2021**

Learning from children and young people's views

In February 2021, amended Care Plan Review Consultation forms were launched to support children and young people to tell us what was important to them prior to the review commencing and to help us recognise key themes.

We also launched a survey in April 2021 to gain feedback from children and young people about how we had facilitated reviews during the Covid pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

At the end of September 2021, we have received and analysed a total of 119 completed consultation forms from children and young people.

Key matters

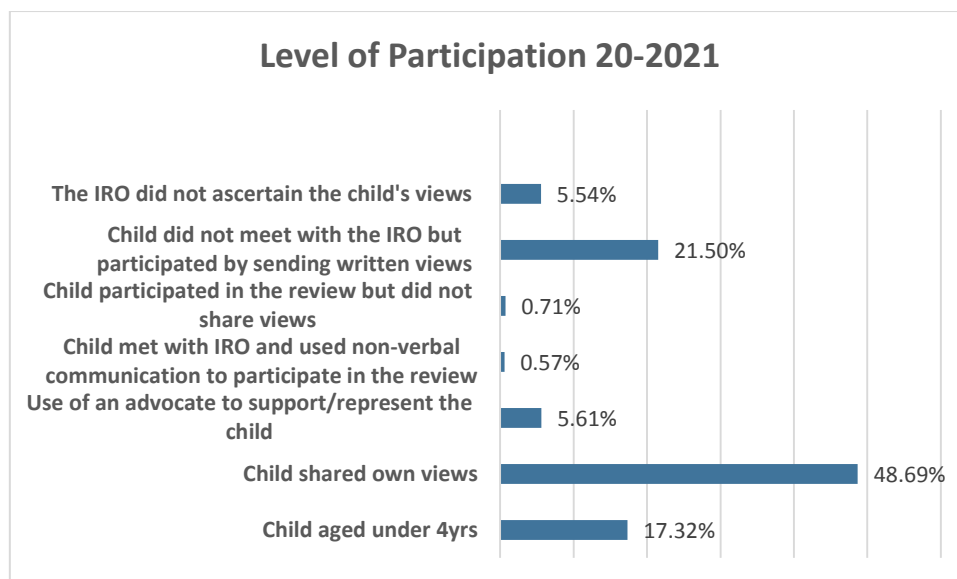
Only 26% of the children and young people who responded had received a written copy of his/her Care Plan.

Less than half i.e. 42% of young people felt involved in the making of his/her Care Plan however, 58% of children/young people responded that they did feel listened to by the Local Authority

At the point of the 2nd Care Plan Review, 87.5% of children and young people responded that they **do not know** what the plan(s) is/are for their present and future care.

Child Participation in the Care Plan Review process

IROs have used a variety of methods to ensure the child's views are known at the time of the Care Plan Review. Despite Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns, we have achieved an increased overall participation figure of 77.14% compared with the previous year's figure of 75.68%.



All looked after children are sent a child friendly leaflet prior to the initial Care Plan Review giving details of their IRO's name, contact number and email address. Children often contact their IRO directly to discuss issues worrying them and the level of contact between Care Plan Reviews is agreed between the child and IRO at every Care Plan Review.

If a child/young person has not participated in the Care Plan Review this is recorded on the child's file. There are various reasons for the 5% of children where the IRO has not ascertained the views of the child. Reasons recorded include decisions made that meeting another professional could be unsettling for the child at that time, young people have chosen not to meet with the IRO, young person have been missing from placement at the time of the Care Plan Review and arrangements have been made to meet with young person at another time.

Foster Carer Reviews

The voice of the child is routinely captured within the Foster Carer Review process. This is a requirement of the Foster Carer Review. As this often provides valuable information to the authority regarding placement stability, we agreed with Fostering Services to collate evidence of feedback obtained from children and record on the child's case-file so that this is evident to the child's social worker and Independent Reviewing Officer.

Advocacy and Independent Visiting

The Advocacy and Independent Visiting provision in Southampton is currently provided by NYAS as a commissioned service.

IROs routinely check that children and young people know about advocacy and how it can support them in having a say in decisions affecting their lives. We have actively promoted to social work teams as well as supporting NYAS to join team meetings to discuss the role of the advocate and Independent Visitor. Leaflets about the service are sent to all looked after children by the 2nd Care Plan Review.

From the end of March 2020 to April 2021, the number of IV matches doubled from 11 to 22.

During the year, the advocacy service has been delivered via a blended approach of both face-to-face and virtual methods. 98 referrals to the Advocacy service were made during the course of the year, in line with the annual service target of 80-100. This was an increase from 2019-2020, when 75 referrals were made.

Appendix 2: NYAS Advocacy and Independent Visitor Services, April 2020-April 2021

6. Qualitative Information – IRO Scrutiny, Challenge and Impact

'The case record indicates that in the last six months, there has been regular communication between the IRO and the social care team. These have referenced significant events such as placement changes and missing episodes. The IRO's input on the case can be evidenced e.g. appropriate queries raised in respect of identity work and suggested strategies to mitigate missing episodes. In respect of the child's family time and education, there has been evidence of strong oversight by the IRO' **SCC Case Audit 2021**

The IRO role is statutory and the work is therefore underpinned by statutory guidance which should be adhered to however, it is not the responsibility of the IRO to manage the case, nor supervise the social worker or devise the care plan.

Once allocated, IROs are expected to provide and maintain continuity and consistency in reviewing a child's care plan whilst they remain looked after. In addition, IROs complete regular case monitoring and liaise with the child's Guardian as well as other professionals as and when required.

Whilst it is the case that monitoring is a function of the IRO role, the demand has significantly increased in terms of case discussions between IROs and social worker following the Ofsted focused visit in May 2021 when it was agreed that IROs would evidence additional scrutiny for key cohorts of children.

IROs maintain regular contact with social workers and monitor progress on permanency and care plans through an IRO Case Discussion conducted either by meeting with the social worker and/or Team Manager or via a telephone call or email with the social worker and/or Team Manager.

These circumstances are often complex and add additional pressure to the work of the IROs e.g.

- 24.30% of looked after children were placed 20 miles + from Southampton as of 31st March 2021.
- There are significant number of children subject of Care Orders and placed with parents, adding complexity, and requiring additional scrutiny.
- There are also significant numbers of children in unregulated and unregistered placements. Similarly, such cases require additional scrutiny and often challenge by the IRO.

This has had a significant impact on our workload and is time intensive most noticeably in work completed between statutory reviews.

Changes in social worker, social worker sickness, re-structuring and changes to systems can all impact on care planning and the delivery of a timely and complete statutory review thus impacting on the child.

Furthermore, the IRO Service is represented in key local authority activities such as:

- Permanence Panel
- Staff Reference Group
- Placement sufficiency/Residential provision
- Health & Social Care Partnership
- Work with the Missing & Exploited children and young people team
- Participation
- Advocacy and Independent Visitors
- Development of Care Director
- Supervision of intern during 2020/21
- Liaison with CAFCASS

Whilst participation in such work may not be part of the IRO core responsibilities, we feel it is necessary to ensure that the IRO Service is consulted and has the opportunity to influence decisions that ultimately impact on the children in our care.

As covered elsewhere in this report, the overall performance of the Service remains very good and has continuously improved over the recent period. However, this will be increasingly difficult to sustain and maintain considering the pressures highlighted unless wider responsibilities can be reduced, or additional resource identified.

Use of the Dispute Resolution Process

One of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the Care Planning process. The Dispute Resolution process (currently known as IRO Alerts) reinforces the authority of the IRO and their accountability for ensuring the needs of the child are appropriately identified and met without delay.

Analysis of use of the dispute resolution process allows us to identify themes, practice issues and timescales for response. Currently a monthly analysis report is submitted to the Senior Managers identifying key issues of concern, how these have been resolved and the impact for the child.

Themes identified have influenced practice thus allowing IRO activity to contribute to the authority's understanding of strengths, weaknesses and plans for improvement

During 2020/21, we have tried to ensure that escalations are child focussed with clarity on the outcome being sought and impact of the resolution.

A key message from the analysis of the use of the dispute resolution process is that the negative perception of IRO Alerts must be addressed to ensure the best outcomes for the child are achieved without delay. We need to ensure that the use of the dispute resolution process is recognised as having influence on outcomes for both the individual and groups of looked after children.

1. Key Matters

(i) Poor preparation for Care Plan Reviews account for the adjournment of 52 Care Plan Reviews in the period April 2020 to March 2021.

30.63% of Alerts raised from 1st April 20 to 31st March 2021 were as a result of no recorded/updated Care Plan and the subsequent adjournment of the Care Plan Review. In 2019/20 this figure was 22.6% (April-March) therefore an increase in 2020/21.

(ii) Timely resolution of concerns

It is positive that most Alerts are resolved at the informal stage of the dispute resolution process i.e. 63.96% however, only 42.35% of Alerts overall were responded to within timescale.

We should be able to demonstrate to children that we are acting on their behalf and be able to evidence how we have resolved any issues of concern in a timely manner.

(iii) Care Planning

Analysis of IRO Alerts raised and audits undertaken by IROs throughout the year evidence inconsistent care planning for children in our care.

Decisions made to adjourn Care Plan Reviews reflect the importance of the child being given the opportunity to contribute to their care plan and to expect that he/she will be given a copy.

IROs routinely check that the care planning process has helped children and young people to have their say about matters important to them and helped them to understand what is happening and why.

As a result of the concerns highlighted above, the Lead IRO has worked with the Workforce Development Team to offer an e-learning training accompanied by a range of resources which offers guidance on the purpose of care planning and review. There is also a strong focus on preparation for the review and the voice of the child. Alongside this training, drop-in sessions have been made available to offer further support to practitioners with the aim of increasing their knowledge and understanding of the care planning and review process.

In response to key themes raised, quality assurance clinics led by the Deputy Director have been implemented to address performance and identify the learning and support needed.

2. Breakdown of all Alerts 1st April 2020-31st March 2021

Table 3: Number of Alerts raised

Reporting period	Number of IRO Alerts
1 st April 2020 to 31 st March 2021	111
1 st April 2019 to 31 st March 2020	163
1 st April 2018 to 31 st March 2019	88
1 st April 2017 to 31 st March 2018	119

Table 4: Level of Alerts raised

Informal Case Management Discussion	91
Level 1 (Formal) Service Manager	20
Level 2 (Formal) Head of Service/Service Director	10

3. Thematic Issue re Children's Savings

Alerts relating to children's savings have been dealt with separately from the normal escalation process.

From July 2019, several IRO Alerts regarding the savings of looked after children have been escalated to the Director of Children's Services.

An interim response has been received and it is acknowledged that to take this matter forward, additional work is required. This work is now in hand and we hope that the matter will be resolved shortly.

4. Main reason(s) for dispute

Table 5: Main reason for IRO Alerts 2020/21

Reason for Alerts	%
Frequency of statutory visiting	21.62%
<u>Practice issues</u> Unregulated placement Gaps in care planning e.g. family time arrangements, missing HCA, communication with parents, frequency of statutory visits Quality of assessments/planning IRO disagrees with CP	41.44%
Preparation for Care Plan Review	30.63%
<u>Permanence</u> Drift and Delay	27.93%

5. Timescale for resolution for Alerts raised in 2020/2021

63.96% informal Case Management Discussions were resolved without the need to escalate to the formal stage of the resolution process

6. Impact

'I would just like to say that I have seen a significant positive improvement in the service that my young people and myself have received with their current IRO. I no longer feel like I am the only one advocating on their behalf and can focus my attention on the day to day stuff rather than the bigger system issues. I know that alerts have been made as I then get csw team on the phone saying 'we have received an alert about' I feel confident that I can contact the IRO between reviews which I haven't in the past. As an overview I feel we have received an excellent service from the IRO in the last 12 months' **SCC Foster Carer 2021**

The outcome and impact of each dispute is recorded on the individual child's file and any agreed action plan is monitored by the IRO.

Examples include:

- Child's views heard and acted upon
- Family time established
- Improved relationships between the child and professionals
- Improved care planning to achieve permanency
- Young Person's needs have been highlighted and are being addressed.

A key learning area for the IRO Service has been to evidence the impact of our work particularly within an authority that continues to be judged as 'requires improvement' by Ofsted. We have focussed on improving our recording of impact and gathering data to evidence impact.

7. Service Development Priorities 2021/22

The plan has been formulated following analysis of the IRO Alerts raised in 20/21, the outcome of IRO Peer Audits undertaken in 20/21 and Ofsted feedback May 2021.

How we will make a difference:

1. IROs will provide independent scrutiny to make sure care plans for children are in their best interests. We will promote high aspirations and seek to ensure the best outcomes for those children and young people.
2. We will ensure that IRO scrutiny and challenge and the impact of this is evident on the child's case record.
3. IROs will ensure best practice in early permanence planning and promote stable care for all children who have entered the care system. This will focus on minimising drift and delay and ensure all options for care have been considered.
4. We will contribute to the local authority permanence panel and other processes to ensure permanency is achieved without delay.
5. IROs will ensure adherence to robust care planning and encourage increased participation of children in the development of their care plans, including consistent and meaningful participation in Care Plan Reviews.
6. IROs will seek children's views, wishes and ideas to inform continuous improvements.
7. We will actively promote children and young people's views about what works in relation to their participation and involvement in reviews.
8. IROs will champion the rights of every child and challenge where appropriate to make sure that these are integrated in policy and practice.
9. We will promote the use of advocacy in a variety of ways
10. Review records will be written in a way that the child can understand their life journey in the future.

11. We will routinely reflect on our own performance to address the quality of our practice.
12. IROs will undertake a quarterly peer audit to inform and support the IRO performance focussing on ensuring that there is clear IRO footprint on the child's case record.
13. Particular attention will be paid to children in the following cohorts: children in unregistered placements, Placement with Parents, children living with a Connected Person where the assessment is not yet complete and children where permanence has not yet been achieved.
14. We will evidence the use of IRO Case Discussions to monitor drift or concerns. Subsequent action plans will be agreed with line managers and recorded on the child's file.
15. We will use data reports to inform us of our progress in our performance and that of the authority.
16. We will use quarterly Professional Development Days an opportunity to reflect on and improve our practice
17. The Lead IRO will ensure that the necessary systems are in place to enable the IRO to carry out his/her statutory support, scrutiny and challenge functions in an efficient manner.

IMPACT ON OUTCOMES FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

- The child's care plan will be relevant and specifically respond to the full range of the child's needs.
- Through permanence, children will have a sense of security, commitment and identity.
- Permanence will be achieved at the earliest opportunity with a range of options for permanence explored.
- Children will be assured of a high quality of care that best meets his/her needs and supports them to be the best in everything they aim to achieve
- Children and Young People will be supported to have their views and wishes heard and considered thus placing them at the centre of all our decision making.

- Children and young people will be able to raise concerns and make complaints.