

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

6 JANUARY 2022

ATTENDANCE OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR ADULTS' SERVICES

Report from: Councillor David Brake, Portfolio Holder for Adults' Services

Summary

This report details the area covered by the Portfolio Holder for Adults' Services that falls within the remit of this Committee and updates the Committee on activity in relation to the Children's Independent Reviewing Office (IRO) for the period April 2020 until March 2021. This team is part of the wider Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. This report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO team in Medway as required by statutory guidance.

1. Background

1.1 The areas within the terms of reference of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Portfolio Holder for Adults' Services, according to the Council's constitution is:

- Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO)

Purpose of the IRO Service

1.2 The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) post is a statutory one supported by legislation. The IRO Handbook (2010), is the statutory guidance relating to care planning and reviewing arrangements for all children Local Authorities care for. The guidance is for children's services, IROs and Local Authorities and it covers the roles and duties of IROs and the strategic and managerial responsibilities of Local Authorities in establishing an effective IRO service. The Handbook should be used with Volume 2 Children Act 1989: care planning, placement and case review and other associated guidance such as Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. The IRO service should report to the Local Authority any gaps in services for children we care for and be independent from the social work teams.

- 1.3 The IRO Service sits within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service under Medway's Children and Adults Directorate. The IRO's are therefore independent of Children's Services areas with decision-making accountability. The IROs are accountable to the Director of People (Children and Adults).
- 1.4 The core function of the IRO service is to review the Local Authority's care plans for children in our care (with some key exceptions for former children who have left our care), monitor, and escalate concerns about the execution of these to ensure best outcomes for these children. The IRO service provides high support and challenge to the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding duties towards children we care for. The core functions of the IRO can be summarised below:
- promoting children's voices
 - that plans for children we care for are based on good, updated quality assessments, plans are effective, purposeful and response to each child's needs
 - help children and young people understand how an Advocate could help them and their right to one
 - prevent any 'drift' in care planning and the delivery of services to children we care for
 - monitoring the activity of the Local Authority as a corporate parent so that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that the child fully understands the implications of any changes made to his/her/their care plan
 - monitoring the performance of the Local Authority's function as a corporate parent in identifying any areas of poor practice, identifying patterns of concern emerging for individual children and for the collective experience children they care for and of the services they receive
 - where the IRO identifies general concerns around the quality of the Authority's services to its looked after children, the IRO should immediately alert senior managers
- 1.5 It is also accepted that in practice, IROs should report on 'good practice' and be seen to promote this as a secondary function and to support improvements.
- 1.6 IROs are qualified, experienced social workers, many of whom have also been previously employed in a management role; their role is commensurate with a Team Manager role in children's social care. The majority of the IROs within the team have been employed within the service for over 12 months; one IRO was recently recruited from within the organisation in February 2021 along with the new IRO Manager.
- 1.7 The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer sits within the IRO service allowing for greater challenge and support to the review of Medway's own foster carers. Last year amendments were also made to regulation 28 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, to provide flexibility in the timescales for reviews of approval for foster carers. The amendment meant a

review of approval had to take place within a year of the approval where this is now reasonably practicable, and thereafter whenever considered necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year.

Structure of the IRO Team

- 1.8 The service comprises of 7.2 IROs, 1 team leader and from mid-March 2021, 0.5 of a Child Protection Chair post has been added into the service for up to 12 months, allowing us to maintain higher practice standards. The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) is managed in the Service and provides extra IRO capacity for up to an additional 12 children. There is a range of ethnicities in the IRO service and strong representation of black and BAME staff (3 IROs are black African, 1 black African Caribbean, 1 IRO White Irish). All the IRO Service identify as female with no male which is a gender gap we acknowledge.
 - 1.9 IRO caseloads fluctuated throughout the year with December 2020 to February 2021 being most busy; IROs covered for a lengthy unplanned sickness of one IRO, sharing their reviews and monitoring activity for their cases during this time. By the end of March 2021 caseloads were high for 4 experienced IROs sitting at either 70 or equivalent for part time staff. The Service was without an IRO Manager from November 2020 until February 2021, with other Quality Assurance Managers covering the Service and offering supervision and support to IROs during this time.
 - 1.10 The IRO Manager has strategic influence and sits on Medway's permanency panel, advises, and supports policy and procedure, is a member of extended CSMT, reports on exceptions in performance data on a weekly and monthly basis and works closely with other Group Managers providing high support and challenge to care planning for our children in Medway. Administration capacity was increased to the IRO Service in early March 2021, allowing some business tasks to be taken away from IROs.
 - 1.11 Most children have kept the same IRO, although some changes occurred for children who were with a previous agency IRO; all these children now have permanent IROs since February 2021 and the team is fully staffed with a permanent workforce.
2. **Impact of Covid-19**
 - 2.1 Over the past year the IRO service has adapted to the challenges of the global pandemic and the requirements of the Coronavirus Act 2020, which, amongst other things, adjusted how Local Authorities discharged their duties to children they care for. In respect of the IRO service the regulations made little change to the statutory framework within which IROs worked, except to the flexibility around 6 months review timescales and an increase in remote working. The amendments to the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, allowed for the additional flexibilities if there were staff shortages and reduced resources due to coronavirus. Regulation 28 was amended to allow visits from the child's responsible authority to be conducted

as soon as reasonably practicable where these visits could not be made within the defined timescales. It was amended to allow visits to be conducted by telephone, video-link or other electronic means. The responsible authority was still required to review the child's case within 20 working days of the date on which the child becomes looked after and to carry out the second review not more than three months after the first. For third and subsequent reviews, regulation 33 was amended to allow reviews to be carried out when reasonably practicable.

- 2.2 During lockdowns and local restrictions during the past year, most review meetings were conducted virtually but all on time.

Virtual working

- 2.3 The IRO service had to adjust to remote full time working with IROs quickly upskilling their use of Medway's IT to achieve this; review meetings and contacts with children took place on Microsoft Teams. IROs kept in touch with children and young people by text, phone calls, WhatsApp, emails and the Mind of My Own application. Some review meetings were able to accommodate reviews taking place at different times during periods of lockdown. This virtual approach will form part of the IRO recovery plan for the service as we consider a hybrid or 'blended' approach to our work in the future.
- 2.4 IROs reported that because of working remotely, they were able to attend more virtual meetings involved in care planning processes such as legal planning meetings and permanency tracking meetings. Whilst they noticed greater attendance at virtual review meetings from other partner agencies, they missed seeing their children, in person in their homes and alone.
- 2.5 At the start of the first lockdown in March 2020, the IRO service considered how this could be a worrying time for the children and young people we look after in Medway and reached out to them. Independent Reviewing Officers sent individual and personalised letters to each child over 5 years of age with a package containing a 'Covid Time Capsule' for them to complete concerning their experience in lockdown as well as health contacts, youth online sessions and fun activity sheets. Feedback at the time from children and carers was positive.
- 2.6 Later in the year, Independent Reviewing Officers supported the Medway Virtual School's digital recording, planning returns to school for the children we look after in Medway. The IRO manager and 3 IROs provided personal feedback and encouragement for the children as part of this digital offer.

Recovery from Covid-19

- 2.7 The IRO service developed a recovery plan in relation to the re-starting of IRO services to all children who we care for from April 2021; this will be reported on in next year's report but from May 2021 it was to involve visiting and seeing children face to face within government guidance. For next year re-connecting

with children and their carers face to face remains a priority for the IRO service with the IROs committed to re-establishing their relationships with children and young people we care for, including those placed away from the local area and in more vulnerable positions e.g., those in residential homes and settings. Nationally and locally IRO manager fora have been considering the best practice for Local Authorities in relation to statutory reviews in the future, such as using a blended or hybrid approach still using IT and considering which if any reviews can be held virtually.

3. Performance

The IRO role in Monitoring Progress between reviews and the IRO 'reviewing cycle'

- 3.1 Throughout this year, IROs continued to monitor children's care plans between reviews at the mid-way stage and record this in children's electronic records. The IRO 'footprint' for children is evident on children's files, which has been acknowledged by both an external reviewer and within an Ofsted Monitoring Visit. However, what has become clear is that performance reporting of this mid-way activity needs further developing to ensure their quality and positive impact in making sure care plans are purposeful and driving best outcomes for children. Going forward, the IRO manager will quality assure several reviews each month through dip sampling. These two activities will support learning is fed back to the service and individual IROs supporting improvements.
- 3.2 Work of the IROs during, before and between the statutory review meetings, known as the 'cycle of reviewing activity' ensures the continual oversight and consideration by the IROs of care plans. Strengthening this process, by placing a greater emphasis on pre-review meeting work, where the IRO will consider firstly key information from all areas of the child's life and meet and consult with the professional and family networks, supports the social work teams and children, and helps us to make sure that children's review meetings are meaningful and that the right conversations are taking place. Where possible children will decide where they want their review meeting to take place and who will attend.
- 3.3 The IRO service is committed to checking out with individual children their chosen terms and language used when talking about their family time, their homes, carers, family members, and to honour this in recordings and our interactions with them by using the same words. This practice is endorsed and supported by Medway's Children and Young Person's Council (MCYPC) who remind us that our language should be tailored to the terms that individual children and young people use in about their experience.
Dispute Notification Resolutions (DRNs)
- 3.4 The IRO Handbook specifically tasks IROs to raise dispute resolution notifications (DRNs) where informal actions have failed to resolve and concerns about children's care plan, that need to be escalated through the senior management structure and the Local Authority is expected to have a

formal process underpinning escalations of these concerns though the senior management structure, with IROs individually having the authority to refer a matter concurrently to Cafcass as well as referring to them at any stage of the dispute process, as an independent advocate for the child when considering their human rights and their best interests and welfare. This can be against the child or young person's wishes too. Medway has a DRN process and no DRNs were raised last year with Cafcass

- 3.5 During the year, 150 DRNs were raised with 159 being resolved. Whilst the majority of these related to IROs raising concerns about poor documentation on the children's files in preparation for reviews or latterly since February 2021, in supporting monthly improvement areas (such as chronologies) greater representation regarding drift in permanency planning, underdeveloped care plans, review decisions not being progressed, PEPs being out of date, and significant events not being notified to the IROs would have strengthened practice in this area. This is an ongoing development area for the IRO service to ensure IROs are challenging practice and outcomes for children, especially where there is drift and delay in children's plans and this impacts on their outcomes and possible 'exits' from care.
- 3.6 'Consistent and good use of Dispute Resolution Notices (DRNs) to evidence high challenge and support to the Local Authority's care plans for children we care for' was a recommendation from last year's report. DRNs are now built into the children's electronic files (Mosaic) and are reported on daily in the datasets available to both IROs and their manager. IROs have started to use PowerBi and Mosaic more as part of their own performance monitoring.
- 3.7 DRNs will be reported on in quarterly reporting from next year and any themes will be considered by the Quality Assurance Performance and Intelligence Board that is chaired by the director of People (QAPIB). In supporting organisational change, the IRO service needs to lead on noticing what 'good' practice looks like. The IRO feeding back to service areas 'signs of success' and how this has positively linked to improved outcomes for children and wider learning will need to be strengthened.

Monitoring our In-House Fostering Carers

- 3.8 Medway's FIRO (Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer) sits in the IRO service and last year reviewed 125 Medway in house foster carers. The role of the FIRO being cited in the IRO service affords greater challenge, independence, and scrutiny. There are other benefits in relation to the proximity of the FIRO to the IROs who feedback strengths and worries about the care our children received from in house carers.
- 3.9 Despite the altered guidance during Covid19, 101/125 or 81% of carers reviews occurred virtually and within timescale.
- 3.10 There is some variation in the supervising social workers reports being prepared and shared for the annual reviews which the fostering service is working hard to address. The FIRO continues to provide support and

challenge mainly through DRNs and in their preparation for reviews. Strengthening the quality for the FiRO reports is an area to progress to ensure that the carers' reviews fully consider how care plans for the children we care for are supported by carers and their supervising social workers and add quality to these plans.

- 3.11 Further work to increase feedback from IROs, Social Workers, children and carers continues to be a priority, as does ensuring all reports are collated and available for carers reviews. Quarterly FiRO reporting will start to take place in 2021-2022, as will FiRO midway review completions with performance reporting being developed from this activity when possible.
- 3.12 Additional business support has been directed to the FiRO to strengthen and support this work and improvements needed.
- 3.13 The FiRO chairs standards of care meetings of which there were 8 this year. From these 8 meetings 3 carers were de-registered and one resigned, 2 remained registered, 1 is subject to a second review (following year) and 1 was subject to an action plan.

Signs of Safety (SofS) and IROs

- 3.14 Medway has adopted a whole system application of the 'Signs of Safety' Practice model during the last year. This is a strengths-based model supporting relationships with children we care for, working with them purposefully, as experts about their own situations, where possible. The approach places children and young people at the centre of plans and emphasises the right conversations about the right plans being undertaken with them wherever possible. Importantly practitioners should challenge their use of language and start to use more accessible terms which children in our care and their families understand and help us create.
- 3.15 The IRO service benefited from a bespoke half a day's training in relation to 'Signs of Success' for children looked after in January 2021; IROs completed the 2-day SofS training, with the 5-day training being undertaken throughout this coming year. IROs are expected to develop as practice leads commensurate with their grade and experience. We have 3 IROs who have undertaken a year's certificate in systemic practice, which further supports this practice model and its development and embedding. Group Supervisions were introduced in regular fortnightly IRO service meetings post February 2021 to support IRO reflection in their work and this modelling to the social work teams.

Supporting and Challenging Social workers, Teams and Services

- 3.16 Themes which emerged over the last year include the ongoing concerns about the nationally challenging picture about foster family, residential and specialist carers and their insufficiency. The current independent review of children's social care being undertaken will inform national policy and support for Local Authorities regarding this pressure (unpublished). For Medway's

children this has meant that some children have not been able to access secure units after Orders have been granted by the courts and several young people being placed in high cost and unregulated care provision. Some of these children have high care needs and are subject to DOLs (Deprivation of Liberty orders). Medway commissioners and IROs worked closely together for such children and IROs regularly reported concerns and their views about how young people's needs are being met or not, when cared for in unregulated settings and before they accessed a children's home setting or another more suitable care arrangement. These children were seen virtually by the IROs and remained a high priority for their monitoring and scrutiny. Individual IROs were copied into the Children's Services alerts (Need to Know) used by the social work teams to escalate significant concerns about children to senior managers (including up to the DCS), and completed them as well, when necessary, ensuring the line of sight by all managers in children's social care was on this vulnerable group of children and all actions possible were taking place. Going forward the IRO service recognises for some older younger people in challenging situations, we need to strengthen practice and be part of the solutions in supporting more confident decision-making by the social work teams and the organisation, to help facilitate their transitions towards independence and exiting care.

- 3.17 **Advocacy.** The ongoing provision of advocacy for our children we care for is of importance and, as such, local authority duties to provide it remained unchanged during the past year. The IRO service has strong links to Medway's commissioned service 'The Young Lives Foundation' (YLF) who provide an advocacy service for children. Last year they worked with 120 children in Medway, which included 80 new referrals for advocacy. This ensured that service users are well represented and had an independent person who could see them and speak on their behalf to their social workers, when they struggled with doing this themselves. Children we care for represented 27% (approximately 33 children) from this cohort with 6 referrals being made by IROs. YLF's referrals started to reduce in the last quarter of the year. YLF were asked to concentrate on children we care for and care leavers. The main issues our children were concerned about were the types of care they received (described as their placements and problems with them) and having help to participate at meetings they attended, including their review meetings. During the year 83 advocacy referrals to YLF were closed with 78% of these being quickly resolved.
- 3.18 **Linking role to service areas.** IROs are linked to specific service areas to develop these working relationships with Team Managers and Social Workers, IROs and the IRO Manager are involved in introductory workshops welcoming new staff to Medway ensuring newer members of staff can understand the role of the IRO and know how to ask for support from us.
- 3.19 **Permanency Planning for children we care for.** To 'improve IRO's monitoring of permanence planning for all children we care for, identifying any drift and delay and improved scrutiny of Section 20 cases' was a recommendation from last year's report. This year IROs have increased their attendance at key meetings such as legal gateway meetings, reviews of care

plans in court, strategy discussions and safety planning meetings because of working virtually.

- 3.20 The IRO Manager sits on the permanency panel and provided challenge and scrutiny for individual children's plans strengthening IRO input to this panel and regular tracking of permanency planning in the service areas. This panel reviews care planning for children we care for, from planning pre proceedings work where care proceedings are considered in relation to the Public Law Outline protocol and guidance, considers long term matching for children we care for to their carers, and other long-term options such as rehabilitation to family members through court Orders or planned returns. The outcome of these fortnightly meetings has maintained stronger management and IRO oversight of children's permanency arrangements.
- 3.21 IRO views are regularly sought and represented in social work statements when applications to family courts are being made when children are in our care. They regularly consult with Guardians representing children from Cafcass, appointed in all care proceedings.
- 3.22 The IRO Manager joins with other group managers in quarterly Cafcass meetings where local successes and areas of improvement are discussed and attends national and southeast regional meetings for IRO managers (NIROMP and SEIROM) to share and discuss local and national successes and challenges in IRO services and ensure wider learning is considered in the service.
- 3.23 S20 accommodations of children and young people remains an area of scrutiny for IROs in the future especially given delay in care proceedings and any potential delay by the Local Authority in pre-proceedings work, mindful of the potential impact for young children's timescales and how delay can negatively affect their outcomes. 67/148 or 45% of children entering care this year were accommodated using voluntary S20 arrangements (with 78/148 or 52% entering through Police Protection, Emergency Protection Orders (EPO), Interim Care Orders and the remaining children remanded to local authority care (2) or made subject to a Placement Order (1).
- 3.24 The IROs chair meetings where children have gone to live with proposed adopters and then for whatever reason this arrangement cannot be supported, and the child is moved to another home and carers. These 'breakdowns' are considered at 'disruption meetings'. There were 3 of these held last year. To strengthen the facilitation, recording and learning from disruption meetings, we will standardise the approaches, the recording of these meetings aligning it with SofS so that learning and its dissemination into the wider organisation takes place. Disruption meetings will be chaired using an appreciative enquiry approach supporting the organisational changes to one of a learning culture. Now that we have an agreed approach to these we can benchmark annually regarding themes and volume.

Children's stability

- 3.25 A key focus for improvement agreed last year was 'Improved IRO monitoring of children in long term placements ensuring children have long term placements identified at earliest opportunity'.
- 3.26 At the end of this year, the percentage of children in long term foster care, defined as 'the percentage of children with long-term fostering as a plan, where the child is in a long-term fostering placement' was lower than the target of 70%, sitting at 61%, but had improved from the previous 2 years showing a positive trend, (49% in 2019 -2020 and 37% in 2018-2019), demonstrating good improvements. The number of children under 16 years who have been with the same carers for 2.5 years or more is lower for Medway's children we care for at 66% than the target of 75%, and for the national one of 69%, but closer to statistical neighbours and the southeast region sitting at 67% and 68% respectively; higher at the start of the year in April at 72%.
- 3.27 I have asked that officers keep this robust focus supporting these improvements ensuring children have as few moves as possible and their attachments to the right carers are supported and planned for as soon as possible.

Timeliness & recording of Review Meetings

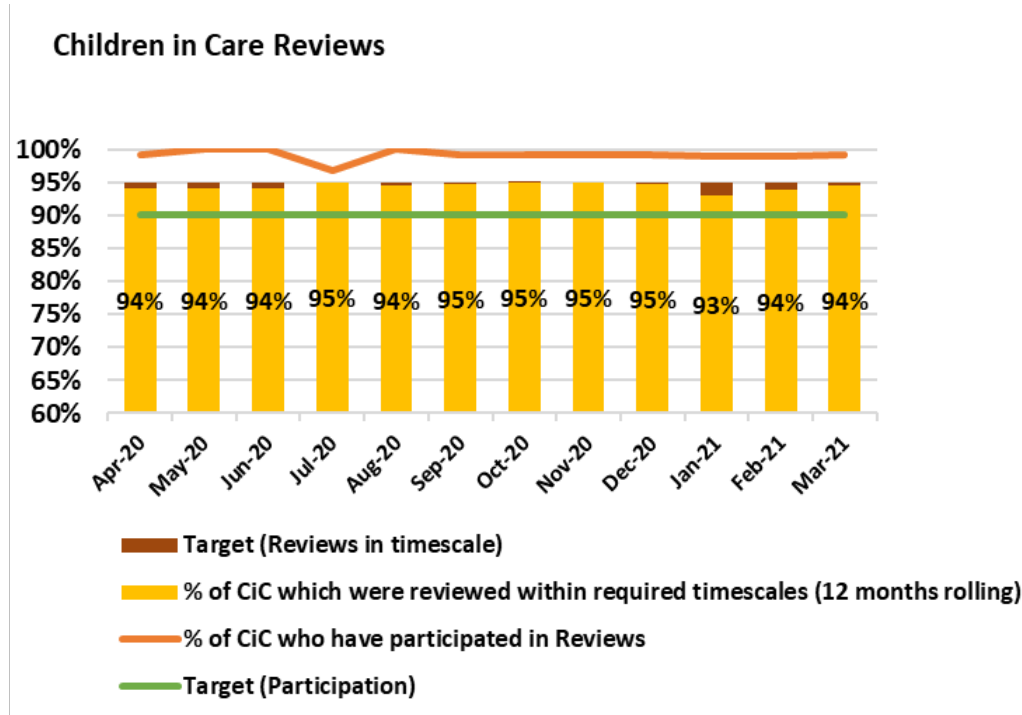
- 3.28 In the 12-month period before 31/3/2021 IROs chaired a total of 1593 reviews for 425 children and young people, with 98.4% of children having reviews which occurred in time or 99.6% of reviews held within timescale; 7/1593 or 0.4% of reviews were held out of timescales for agreed and understood reasons. Children and young people's participation in their reviews, (including their views being represented in their absence) sat at 99.2%. This calculation includes children under aged 4 years who are not able to give their views. During the pandemic IROs, and social work services worked hard to make sure children's views were represented at their review meetings. Last year's annual report asked for an improvement in the timeliness of review meetings taking place to 95% or more, which has occurred.
- 3.29 IROs in Medway follow the statutory guidance in relation to the timing of reviews; a first review is held within 4 weeks of a child coming into care, then a second review within the next 12 weeks or 3 months and then at least every six months after this. Significant changes to children's care plans, including them moving in planned or unplanned ways to different types of care provision, sees the IRO decide as to whether a review should be brought forward. In Medway IROs were always holding a review once a child moved within 4 weeks, then 12 weeks later, sometimes recording these again as their first and second reviews. We will continue to hold a subsequent review within 4 weeks when children move to planned pre-adoptive carers and hold another within 12 weeks to ensure the scrutiny and support is in place for this cohort of children undergoing significant transitions; for other significant changes to children's care plans including their moves IROs will be empowered to decide the frequency of reviews dependent on need. We also need to adopt an agreed way of IROs recording reviews after the second review, as a

'subsequent' review and desist from any practice of re-recording first and second reviews, when IROs bring reviews forward in line with any significant care plan changes, as this affects data and wider performance recording.

3.30 Last year's annual report asked for an 'improvement in the timeliness of review meetings to 95%, and 'improved recording and distribution of review meeting records.' The handbook recommends that review meeting records should be with participants within 20 working days of the meeting being held. This year some delays in recording of reviews were caused by sickness for one IRO and for 2 agency IROs who are no longer in the service. Since February 2021 late recordings by IROs and the distribution of the review record has been a focus of attention; going forward this will be tracked monthly, shared with IROs and any remedial actions and support put into place to ensure improvement. All IROs now complete the record of review meeting within 15 days with a commitment to sending these electronically wherever that is possible, contributing to the council's green agenda. The team has been largely paperless since February 2021.

3.31 After manual interrogation of the data 98.4% of review meetings were held within timescales. The table below also shows children's participation in their reviews, and the targets for these. A particular strength is the level of participation of children and young people in their review meetings, suggestive of the strong relationships Medway's children enjoy with IROs helping children's views be well considered. Participation is calculated as those that have attended a meeting / contributed to the process by means of a consultation form, observation by the IRO, advocacy, submitting a Mind of My Own App note, using an interpreter, and discussing issues directly with their IRO or social worker. Children under the age of 4 are not included within this data cohort.

Table 6. Reviews in timescale 2020-2021



4. Participation and Engagement

4.1 Children and Young Peoples Participation.

- 4.1.1 **Mind of My Own** application, for all children across Children's Services was relaunched last year with one IRO and 10 champions from service areas encouraging its use. The app tells us the numbers of children and social workers have signed up for an account. It reports on the reasons children used it and we have quarterly reports from the consultants provided. The Head of Service for Corporate Parenting has overall led responsibility for further strategic development along with the IRO Manager and one IRO. We knew that at the end of the year 404 social workers had registered for an account and that 283 children and young people had accounts.
- 4.1.2 To strengthen the use of the app and to understand its impact relating to positive outcomes for children, greater interrogation of the quality of its data will be needed. Administration support will be needed to start to collate this monthly and quarterly with the Mind of My Own Champions and the IRO lead co-ordinating this for the whole of CSC. Other development activity would include other service areas to encourage the use of the app (such as child protection conferences), and for partners to encourage its use. Collation of themes would need to inform wider participation strategy work, within the department. Essentially individual social workers know when a child or young person has used the application and will be able to respond to any concerns a service user is raising but the collation of all responses into learning themes for the organisation will need focused and detailed collation each month to draw these out of the data with resources diverted to support this if the organisation sees value from this.
- 4.1.3 **Feedback.** All review meetings ask for child and family members feedback, with FiRO work asking for additional feedback from IROs, social workers and birth children of the foster family for carers' reviews. Whilst these are uploaded to children's individual records and considered at reviews, as with Mind of My Own, greater thematic analysis to inform wider learning for the organisation could occur and would strengthen feedback potentially informing service design and delivery improvements; the number of consultation feedback forms being used in relation to being asked for would be useful to consider in order to improve this aspect of the work and further improvements should involve co-production of forms and consultation methods with care experienced adults with MYCP and the Young Lives foundation.
- 4.1.4 Feedback from the children we care for was canvassed by IROs in March and April 2021. We randomly selected 20 children and young people, posing 5 questions, testing for quality information about the nature of the relationship with their IROs, what they thought their IRO did, and the quality and purposefulness of their review meetings. We were reassured that children we care for understood what the role of their IRO was and described IROs had a responsibility to help them understand their plan and their futures. They described IROs knew them well; a few children stressed they preferred to see their IROs in person and did not like virtual meetings. All except one

child/young person gave examples of what their IRO had helped them with and how they had helped improve things for them- this ranged from accessing music lessons and help at school, to keeping their social worker, remaining with a liked carer. They reported they felt listened to, that their IROs worried about them, and they could tell them things. Several children and young people commented they liked reviews to be small meetings, several preferred not to attend all their review meeting whilst others preferred to be involved. Scaling their review meetings ranged in scores, 11/20 scaled 7 or above and liked their meetings, 6/20 scored 6 or below with 2 saying they disliked meeting 'on cameras', one stating they were not understood by their social worker, one saying they wanted to be heard (and not be moved from their current home), one saying they thought they understood things. 3/20 did not scale the question. Regarding general feedback to us, 9/20 of our children did not have any specific feedback, several asked for no review meetings or to reduce them to annually, one said they did not like review meetings, 4/20 of our children asked for their reviews to be 'face to face' or at their home.

- 4.1.5 **Service observations and dip sampling (audit).** Observations of review meetings and auditing of the IRO work by the IRO manager is an area which will be developed further next year. This would include seeking feedback in person from children and their families. This will allow the service to consider the messages and experiences of children and parents and for reflection and challenge regarding IRO practice and increase the service's knowledge about what's working well and of areas needing to improve. In time it is hope this can be extended to peer and care experienced adults reviewing in both areas.
- 4.1.6 **Working with parents, partners and care experienced young people.** The IRO service has strong links with MYCP and in the next year will seek to consolidate and develop this further. A feedback strategy about the IRO service including the above areas (Mind of My Own and feedback consultation forms) which meets regularly with children and parents either individually or in small groups, will need to be developed and actioned by the IROs and IRO manager. MYCP have agreed to support the co-production of feedback questions and helping us think about the types of questions and feedback service users would like us to consider and embed. Monitoring forms after reviews and feedback from partner agencies will also be planned for. All recruitment for all posts within the service involves care experienced adults being part of the interview panel work (preparation, interviews, and scoring) and producing questions for the interviews.

5. What is working well?

- The IROs are one of the most consistent professionals in a child's life in Medway with most of them having been with the team for over two years
- The IRO team is a permanent member of the Permanence Panel with meetings held every two weeks to review all children in care permanence plans
- The realignment of children in care teams and the adolescent service are showing positive impact for children in care

- The IRO's are consistently monitoring permanence plans and the IRO foot- print has increased
- Participation of children in care has increased in their Child in Care reviews
- Reverse takeover day undertaken and led by children and the Young Lives Foundation showing the day in a life of a child in care
- IRO demonstration of the Mind of My Own App to council members
- Implementation of the Medway Pledge by the MCYPC see appendix 1

6. What are we worried about?

- The changes in social workers for children due to the realignment of social work teams, although we hope that this will stabilise as the teams are embedded in their new services
- The consistency in quality of care planning for all Looked After Children.
- The number of changes of social workers that some children experience.
- The impact on social workers to carry out Life Story work in the current climate where direct contact is impacted by Covid-19
- The impact of children coming into care due to the spike in relation to the impact of Covid-19
- Missing children in care during Covid19 and the additional risks, threats, and vulnerabilities this exposes them to
- Children on waiting lists for emotional and mental health services especially during the Covid-19 period

7. Consultation with young people

7.1 We have worked closely with the Young Lives Foundation (YLF) in relation to our communication with children and young people, including the MCYPC and Corporate Parenting Board. We have sought to co-design the way we write up a Child in Care Review, now writing this as a personalised letter to children and young people from their IRO and this has been well received. We have carried out the interviews for IROs and the new IRO manager with a care experienced young person ensuring that the role of children in care has influenced these appointments.

8. Priorities for 2021-22

8.1 **Quality of Practice**

- Emphasis on the process of IROs 'reviewing cycle' to improve the quality of children's participation, greater focus on pre-meeting preparation work to support relationship-based practice with the children we care for
- Increase face to face visits and review meetings with children and young people
- Improve mid-way reporting and feedback of the IROs and monitoring forms

- IROs to decide when reviews are held for children we care for, with set practice standards shared and agreed with the whole system by December 2021
- Improve Children we care for outcomes through strength-based approaches and care planning
- Support strengths-based practice improvement in IRO service and the wider system; strengthening the role of IROs with service areas as practice leads with a focus on our children's care journey and clear explanations for children and young people
- Contribute to effective permanence planning for our children including plans for their 'exits' from care.
- Strengthen FiRO work.
- Strengthen our children chairing/co-chairing their statutory review meetings

8.2 **Quality Assurance**

- Evaluate impact of IRO activity: strengthen quarterly reporting from the IRO and FiRO service regarding DRNs, service users and partner feedback, audit and observations
- Manually interrogate Mind of My Own responses into CSC with the use of lead champions co-ordinated by IRO leads and increased administration capacity

8.3 **Partnership**

- Strengthen service user Participation & Engagement and feedback to service: feedback strategy in IRO service- for all quarters next year

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None