

# **Herefordshire Council - Children's Wellbeing**

## **Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO)**

### **Annual Report**

**2021/2022**

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**The IRO Annual Report 2021/22 will be presented to; Council's Children's Scrutiny Panel, the Corporate Parenting Board and the Herefordshire Children and Young People Safeguarding Partnership**

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The purpose of the service and its legal context

**1.1.1** The Independent Reviewing Officers' (IRO) service regulations are set within the framework of the updated [IRO Handbook](#) and linked to revised [Care Planning Regulations and Guidance](#). The responsibility of the IRO has changed from purely the management of the 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 in the quality of care planning for children Looked After and for challenging drift and delay.

**1.1.2** The National Children's Bureau (NCB) research '[The Role of the Independent Reviewing Officers in England](#)' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings regarding the efficacy of IRO services. The foreword written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson; makes the following comment:

*"The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or whether we are failing."*

**1.1.3** The NCB research highlights where IROs identify barriers to their ability to fulfil their role, or systemic failures in the service to children looked after, they must raise this formally with senior managers. These challenges and the response should be included in the Annual Report.

**1.1.4** The local authority must provide for the children who are in its care; an allocated Independent Reviewing Officer within five days of them becoming Looked After, a first Child Looked After Review within twenty eight days and a second review within twelve weeks of the first review. Following this each child must have a review chaired by their Independent Reviewing Officer no less than every six months and the IRO should have oversight of the effective implementation of the child's care plan in between these reviews. This presents the IRO service with an independent view of not only each child but the performance of the local authority in its provision of care for Children Looked After.

**1.1.5** This provides the Independent Reviewing Service with the opportunity to identify where care plans are not being implemented to meet the child's needs or where proposed care plans might conflict with the best interests of the child and escalate this to ensure the child's needs are met. It also provides the chance to identify good practice.

**1.1.6** In addition to the review of individual children, the IRO Service is also in a position to identify and escalate systemic issues which result in the local authority not fulfilling its duties to children Looked After.

## **2.0 Report summary**

### **2.1 IRO perspective on the performance of Herefordshire local authority related to its care of Looked After Children in 2021/22.**

**2.1.1** The IRO Service undertook 972 Child Looked After Reviews (an average of more than 2 a year per child) and recorded more than 3531 'IRO Oversight' in between these reviews during 2021/22. The IRO will monitor the child's record in between statutory reviews to ensure that actions are being progressed at a timely pace. As a result of this activity, 216 'informal' and 'formal' disputes have been raised recording concerns about unacceptable drift and delay in completing actions or disagreement about the best interests of children when social work teams proposed changes to care plans.

**2.1.2** By far the largest area of escalation has been around addressing drift and delay to care planning with this accounting for 45% of the 216 escalations 2021/ 2022. Another significant area of escalation was no care plan being presented for the Independent Reviewing Officer to review. This accounted for 23% of all disputes. The lack of no written care plan to review means the IRO cannot undertake their role and the local authority is failing to meet its regulatory duties.

**2.1.3** The main themes coming from disputes demonstrate delays in assessment and care planning which directly impact children's right to permanency and right to family life in a timely manner. This demonstrates that the LA is not progressing permanency for children at pace. Although challenged by IRO's through the Dispute Resolution process, this has been hampered by changes of Social Workers in the Local Authority and inadequate management oversight and monitoring to ensure timely progression. Given the current significant pressures on the Local Authority, in some cases, IRO's have not used the escalation process robustly knowing that the shortage of resources would not allow the desired outcome. Improvements were identified in this area to ensure robust challenge from the IRO service via informal and formal dispute resolution process which is followed through and escalated further at the necessary intervals to ensure children's care plans are progressing effectively and within the right timeframe for them. To this end Dispute Resolution process has been reviewed. Weekly Dispute Resolutions meetings have been scheduled between the IRO and Children in Care Service Managers with a plan to involve Team Managers and IRO's within discussion to monitor, progress and resolve disputes within the 20 working day timescales. More recently the escalation process has been used more effectively and a large portion of formal disputes that had not been concluded in a timely manner have now been resolved.

**2.1.4** Accessing CAMHS or other therapeutic support and counselling continues to be a significant issue for children and young people needing these services. The provision of these services have been significantly impacted by the pandemic, however other difficulties such as capacity within CAMHS and therapeutic services, and referral criteria in terms of service provision continue to be an issue. Whilst IROs continue to ensure that referrals are appropriately made by social workers, the non-acceptance of referrals by health services does not then result in exploration of other pathways to meet these needs or use of the multi-agency professional disagreement process to challenge such barriers. More recently the Local Authority has been exploring solutions that could ensure children in care receive the right support for them. To this end agreement has recently been

given for a clinical psychologist to sit within the Fostering service and provide support to foster carers as well as supporting children whose needs are not considered significant enough to meet CAMHS criteria.

## **2.2 IRO Service Performance**

### **Quantative performance targets achieved, practice quality requires improvement.**

**2.2.1** The data received for this annual report records continuing progress in completing work in timescales, a significant increase in the frequency of recording IRO oversights recorded and an all-round picture of a service moving towards a quantative performance culture.

**2.2.2** During 2021/ 2022 the monthly average of Children Looked After in Herefordshire was around 346. IRO's raised 217 formal and informal disputes related to looked after children's care plans.

**2.2.3** Since the implementation of Signs of Safety in February 2021, IRO's have worked hard to embed the language of signs of safety within their work. Although not consistent, there is evidence that some IRO's use the model in their letters to children following their Reviews, as well as in their monitoring throughout IRO oversights. More recently the IRO's have worked together to develop a midpoint review form that incorporates the signs of success element of the model as well as language that cares. Midpoint review forms are written as if to the child and this approach has been taken to ensure that IRO's refrain from using acronyms and keep language simple. During the autumn of last year the IRO's undertook specific developmental sessions to enhance their skills in quality assuring, monitoring and review.

## **3.0 Report**

### **3.1 A review of IROs' core activities and additional tasks. There is a need to establish whether IROs' additional activities compromise independence or capacity.**

**3.1.1** During 2021/ 2022 there has been a significant increase of children coming into Local Authority care. This has meant that IRO's have seen a significant increase in their caseloads with the average caseload across 5.5 IRO's currently being 69. The IRO Handbook states that a caseload of 50 to 70 children in care for a full time equivalent IRO represents good practice in the delivery of a quality service including the full range of the IRO's functions. The IRO service is made up of 3 full-time members of staff and 3 part-time which has meant that they are all currently either at or over capacity. This has had an impact on their ability to develop in areas of interest and expertise. It has also had an impact on their ability to drive improved performance within the Local Authority. In March 2022, agreement was given for the IRO service to recruit an additional full time IRO under a temporary contract to ease the pressures within the service and reduce IRO's caseloads.

	Monthly average of Children Looked After
2020/21	333
2021/21	346

**3.1.2** The IRO Handbook requires the IRO Annual Report to consider if additional activities of IROs compromise either their independence or their capacity to function as IROs. It is unfortunate that the significant increase in IRO's caseloads of children in care during 2021/22 has meant additional activities have had to be postponed so as not to compromise independence or capacity during this year.

**3.1.3** Core activities of the IROs include; preparing for and chairing Child Looked After Reviews, undertaking and recording oversight of cases between reviews with social workers and their team managers, reviewing case files, visits to children in placement, additional consultations with children, parents, carers and other agencies, quality assurance of assessments and plans which contribute to changes in care planning for the child, liaison with CAFCASS Guardians in court proceedings and clarification of legal advice, as well as the escalation of informal and formal disputes to address drift and challenge where there is disagreement in promoting the child's best interests.

Covid-19 impacted on the capacity of IROs to undertake physical visits to children in placements, with guidance being that physical visits, as not for safeguarding purposes, were not to be undertaken. However, IROs continued to meet virtually with looked after children to get their wishes and feelings. Since the lifting of all restrictions in the UK, IRO's have been undertaking a mixture of virtual and face to face visits and meetings. They have prioritised face to face consultations with children under the age of 4, those with disabilities or those who have requested to see them. The increased caseload for all IROs, the anxiety of some IROs, and the personal choice of children in care, impacted on the IROs' ability to complete all children's consultations in person.

## **3.2 Child Looked After Reviews**

**3.2.1** There were a total of 972 **CLA Reviews** undertaken in 2021/22 by 5.5 IROs. The breakdown of this activity is as follows;-

1st Child Looked After Review	140
2nd Child Looked After Review	124
Subsequent Looked After Review	708

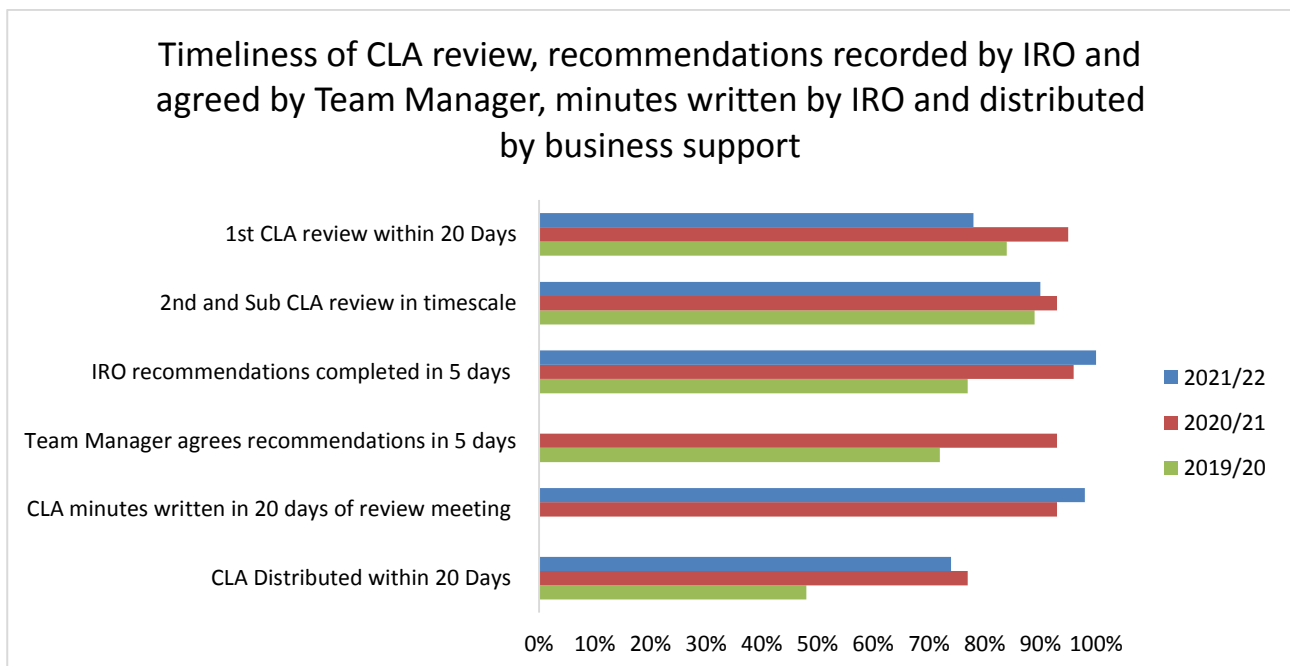
**3.2.2** The data for this year provides a mixed picture in areas of process compliance related to Children Looked After Reviews. There has been a significant decline in the percentage of first CLA Reviews being completed within timescales from 95% the year previous to 78% this year. With the continuous movement of staff and the rise in children coming in to Local Authority care, the IRO service has not consistently been notified when a child has come into care in a timely manner. This has led to these reviews not being held within timescales. Senior Managers have been monitoring this and have set up a manual system to try and resolve this issue. In addition, due to considerable capacity issues within the Business Support Service there has been a slight decline in the percentage of CLA Review minutes being distributed within 20 working days. It is hoped that these issues will

be somewhat resolved with the Local Authority’s revised recruitment strategy and Service Improvement Plan.

**3.2.3** During the year of 2021 and 2022 the Local Authority took an undertaking for all of its children’s files to be audited by an external audit group. The audits undertaken did not highlight any specific concerns about the IRO service although it is noted that drift and delay was flagged up in a number of audits. Auditors were complimentary about the style of CLA Review minutes which are written in the form of a letter to the child. Internal audits by the Head of Service found minutes to be child focused, well written and appropriate for children’s ages and levels of understanding. In addition minutes were found to address most aspects of children and young people’s lives.

**3.2.4** Total IRO oversights in 2021/22 for Children Looked After as at 31.03.22 = **3531** this is a significant increase on the year prior. Dip sampling on the quality of IRO oversights demonstrates that in the majority oversights are focussed on what is working well for the children. Where there was drift or not all needs were addressed, IRO oversight was less consistent. Whilst some IRO oversight resulted in drift being arrested; at other times drift was not effectively prevented.

**3.2.5** The midpoint review template was created by the IRO’s to make monitoring more consistent across the service. This was launched on 1.4.22 therefore it is too early to measure whether this is resulting in IROs picking up issues with drift and delay and working with Social Workers and Team Managers to progress care planning. It is anticipated that the midpoint review template will ensure that the quality of IRO monitoring is consistent, purposeful, and will have more impact on children’s in terms of outcomes reducing drift in care planning.



	CLA Distributed within 20 Days	CLA minutes written in 20 days of review meeting	IRO recommendations completed in 5 days	2nd and Sub CLA review in timescale	1st CLA review within 20 Days
■ 2021/22	74%	98%	100%	90%	78%
■ 2020/21	77%	93%	96%	93%	95%
■ 2019/20	48%	n/a	77%	89%	84%

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Child has minimum 2 or more IRO oversights	84%	100%	98%
Child has minimum 4 or more IRO oversights	Not counted	96%	86%

### 3.3 Raising concerns and disputes

There has been a significant increase in the number of informal and formal disputes raised in 2021/22 from the year previous. This evidences that more challenge is being undertaken by IRO's through the Dispute Resolution process. The resolving of disputes within timescales has been challenging and has been hampered by changes of Social Workers and less robust management oversight. In addition to this IROs have not always been consistent in progressing and following up disputes and this. A review of the dispute process will be undertaken to address this. There are currently significant pressures on the Local Authority in terms of staff retention across all services, including the IRO service, as well as a significant increase in the number of children coming into care. These systemic issues have impacted on the IRO's ability to use the escalation process robustly.

The Formal Dispute process has a maximum period of twenty working days for the Service Managers / Heads of Service to respond and resolve the matter from the date of notification, with a formal dispute meeting taking place by day 15 if the matter appears intransigent or there is no response received. Within this twenty days, depending upon the urgency of the matter, the IRO can set shorter deadlines and can undertake external escalation at any point. The IRO Handbook regulations set out the duty of the IRO to make external escalation if necessary by referral to CAF/CASS.

There have been real challenges in ensuring that formal disputes are resolved within the set timeframes. During the last 3 months weekly Dispute Resolutions meetings, where every dispute is discussed and a plan to progress specific tasks is agreed, have proved effective in resolving them. A large portion of formal disputes that had not been concluded in a timely manner have now been resolved and every effort is being made to ensure incoming formal disputes are resolved within 15 to 20 working days.

#### 3.3.1 Escalated to CAF/CASS

In 2021/22 no children's cases were externally escalated to CAF/CASS Legal by their IRO.



### 3.3.2 Informal disputes

There has been an increase in the raising of 'Informal disputes' in the year of 2021/22 from 91 the year previous to 132. The majority of the informal disputes have been raised due to the following issues:

- Drift and delay in progressing the child's care plan (32)
- Incomplete care plans or pathway plans presented to CLA Review (30)
- Professional differences between IRO and the Local Authority regarding care planning (18)
- No allocated Social Worker/ Personal Advisor (9)
- Outstanding recommendations from previous CLA Review (9)

The remaining informal disputes centre on specific issues for the child.

### 3.3.3 Formal Disputes

There have been 77 Formal Disputes recorded in the year of 2021/22, which is a significant increase from the year previous (29). The majority of these formal disputes have been raised due to the following issues:

- Drift and delay due to issues with care planning (48)
- No care plan/ pathway plan presented for CLA Review (20)

The remaining formal disputes centre on specific issues for the child.

## 3.4 Independent Legal Advice

**3.4.1** Independent legal advice was sought on two occasions by separate IROs during 2021/22. One was an IRO who was seeking advice in relation to a provision of independent legal representation for a young person who was seeking revocation of their care order and who did not feel confident that the court appointed guardian was representing their wishes and feelings. The other was to provide legal advice on what an IRO's position should be with regards to the recording (by microphone & video during virtual Microsoft Teams forum) of Child Looked After Reviews by parents. The IRO was seeking this advice due to this happening during a review of children subject to care proceedings, she had adjourned the meeting given the issue of no consent being sought from attendees.

## 3.5 Compliments and complaints related to Independent Reviewing Officers

**3.5.1** There have been no formal complaints made against IRO's during 2021/22.

**3.5.2** There were sixteen compliments for the Independent Reviewing Officers during 2021/22 that were formally recorded by Social Work Academy and Head of Service for Safeguarding and Review through shout outs, as well as from direct feedback from social workers, parents, carers and schools. Below is a small selection of comments:

- *"I would like to say a big thank you to the IRO team for being the only ones who really supported me through my LAC journey, every IRO which has taken my case has been outstanding. A very good team in which the council should recognise and be so extremely supportive and proud of!!"* **Feedback from a young person**

- *“XX is a tremendous asset to the Hereford IRO team, after taking over from another IRO she had big boots to fill which she certainly did. I’m very thankful to have someone as supportive as XX.” **Feedback from a young person***
- *“There is evidence of regular, meaningful IRO oversight and appropriate challenge where actions have not been completed. Given parents generally cannot attend reviews due to their work commitments, the IRO makes contact prior to and post LAC reviews to obtain their views and feedback On 13.7.2021 there is evidence of tracking actions and driving forward contact arrangements. The IRO consults with xx in advance of his reviews – this has been via telephone, perhaps due to the pandemic – going forward it would be nice to see the IRO visiting xx in person. In addition to this, the IRO ensures midpoint reviews take place and outstanding actions are revisited – with new timescales where there is evidence of drift. LAC reviews take place in timescales, voice of the child is reflected in the meetings – he is comfortable to attend his reviews. Evidence the minutes are sent out within 15 days as per IRO handbook.” **Feedback from an Auditor***
- *“I have just been to a Looked After Child review for xx that was chaired by XX. I cannot praise XX highly enough for her professionalism, honesty, openness and kindness. XX has upheld the council PEOPLE VALUES to the letter. Not only that she has gone above and beyond those values in an effort to help look after the Best Interests of xx, his Mum xx and myself as Mum's supporter. Can you please ensure XX is not only THANKED but she is officially recognised by the local authority for her good practice and for going above and beyond her duty and what is required of her. I have left a LAC review feeling happy and content for the first time in a long time and that is something I never thought I would say. My very best regards and thanks” **Feedback from a parent***
- *“IRO had been brilliant with helping resolve issues quickly and is always available if we need her.” **Feedback from a young person***
- *“IRO is amazing at recognising what the children need and although sometimes it's hard to sort things out she always tries to make things happen. I find her so approachable and helpful and trust her with their care and good decisions for their lives. Thank you.” **Feedback from a Foster Carer***
- *“IRO is nice, helpful caring and funny.” **Feedback from a young person***

### **3.6 Consultations, participation in reviews, advocacy and Independent Visitors**

#### **3.6.1 Consultations with Children**

Consultations with children record when the child or young person has met with their IRO prior to the review meeting. The data also includes when a child or young person has been contacted and invited to meet with their IRO but has declined. As such, the figures includes all children who had direct consultation with their IRO and those children who were given the opportunity to meet with them but it was the child's choice not to meet with their IRO.

972 reviews were held during the year period 2021/22 and 779 children and young people contributed within these meetings. 351 children and young people attended their meeting in person and 428 did not attend but conveyed their wishes and feelings through either their advocate, carers or the IRO. 144 children were under the age of 4 at the time of their review and 48 children and young people did not contribute to their review in any way. This demonstrates an increase in participation from the year period 2020/21. During the pandemic all reviews and consultations were held virtually, however since the lifting of restrictions the IRO's have been making a concerted effort to meet children and young people face to face and more reviews are being held in person.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Consultation with child before their review	84%	96%	99.7%
Participation - Child attends or wishes conveyed by other person / medium	90%	89%	94%

### **3.6.2 Advocacy**

Herefordshire children social care has a 30 hours per week contract with the Advocacy service that is managed by the Complaints department. IROs continue to check at each Child Looked After Review if there are any issues which the child or young person would like the help of an advocate to raise for them on their behalf. Some examples of the support provided by the advocates to young people during the year period of 2021/22 are where one young person sought help from his advocate with finding a suitable placement when his placement with parents arrangement with his mother broke down. Another young person sought support from his advocate to make a complaint about the Local Authority. There has been a request for more advocacy support for children and young people in the Local Authority's care as currently this is being provided by a very small number of advocates. As such, a business case has been submitted to expand the Childrens Rights and Advocacy service to the management board as a pressure for Childrens services. This has been accepted and put through as a budget pressure for next financial year. During the year of 2021/22 there have been a total of 79 children in care who have been supported by an advocate.

### **3.6.3 Independent Visitors**

IROs continue to raise the question at reviews as to whether an Independent Visitor is appropriate for children. The remit of Independent Visitors has recently changed and they are now working with any child or young person in care who wishes to receive this service. Prior to this they would visit children and young people who had little or no contact with their family members or lived in residential environments where continuity through independent visiting could be more constant than social workers or IROs. The role of the Independent Visitor is explained and if the child / young person wants to have an Independent Visitor then the referral is made by the social worker. The provision of this service was invariably affected by the periods of lockdown and restrictions on visiting arising from the pandemic in 2020/21. However during the year period 2021/22 the demand for Independent Visitors has risen, with 29 children being referred for a service. Funding was agreed to increase service provision this year to meet this rise in demand. The IRO's will continually promote the Independent Visitor service during 2022/23 as this ensures children have positive adult connections and monitoring of demand against capacity will continue.

### **3.7 Communication with parents**

**3.7.1** IROs clarify prior to each review if parents have been included on **the invitations** on the convening document and if not, why not. This has been significantly hampered during the year period of 2021/22 due to a high volume of changes in Social Workers as well as capacity issues within the Business Support service. With new Social Workers joining the service and not understanding how the convening system works there has been a rise in situations where parents, along with other attendees have not been informed or invited to the child's review. This has meant that IRO's have had to undertake follow up phone calls or a second meetings to ensure parents' wishes and feelings are captured. It is clear that there appears to be a need for proper induction and training for new Social Workers joining the service to ensure meetings are appropriately convened. At the time of reporting the current training and induction program for new starters is being reviewed and it is hoped that this will help to reduce incidents where parents are not invited to their children's reviews.

**3.7.2** There are processes to improve parental **participation** within the review yet these were impeded by social workers not undertaking designated processes. A problem particularly evident when there is a high turnover of staff and when more children are becoming Looked After at the point of involvement with MASH and Assessment Teams rather than the CP and Court Teams who have more experience of the 1<sup>st</sup> CLA processes. In 2021-22 the parental consultation form was sent out to parents' addresses on the convening forms, but again this required the convening forms to be completed in timescale. Business Support send two reminders to the social worker but if they do not receive the convening form more than 10 days before the review, they do not convene and the social worker has to arrange the meeting.

## **4. Wider issues**

### **4.1 Court judgements and external audits**

**4.1.1** The court judgement of Justice Keehan in March 2021, following on from previous judgements by the same High Court judge, continues to have a profound impact on Children's Services within Herefordshire. Since the publication of the judgement there has been significant turnover of staff service wide. Alongside this there has been a significant rise in the number of children coming into Local Authority care. With these issues combined there have been significant pressures placed on all services within Children's Social Care.

**4.1.2** The role of the Fostering IRO was recruited to in April 2021, with a remit to chair annual 'home reviews' independent from the Fostering Service. This role is line managed within the Safeguarding and Review Service to ensure independence. This has allowed for scrutiny of the quality of care provided by in house fosters carers and whether they are meeting the [National Minimum Standards for fostering](#).

**4.1.3.** Following the judgement service structure within the Fostering Service was reviewed and separated into 4 teams; the Fostering Assessment Team, Fostering Support Team, Fostering Permanence Team and the Fostering Recruitment Team. SGO assessments are now undertaken by

the Assessment Team, however due to a combination of staff shortages as well as the increase in volume of such assessments, independent assessors have had to be commissioned to undertake them. The IRO's are given all completed assessments to consider when ratifying children's care plans and as such have been able to raise any issues in terms of the information held within assessments being completed by independent assessors.

**4.2 Where IROs identify barriers to their ability to fulfil their role, or systemic failures in the service to looked after children, they must raise this formally with senior managers. These challenges and the response should be included in the Annual Report.**

**4.2.1** Barriers to fulfilling the role of the IRO include Care plans and Pathway Plans frequently not being written for the IRO, children and their families, carers and other agencies to consider before the review meeting or sometimes even at the review meeting. This issue continues to be the subject of multiple Formal Disputes throughout this year. The matter has again been raised with senior managers in 2021/22 but it is anticipated that until there is staff stability this will continue to be a problem. The IROs have circulated a bottom lines and expectations document to all teams within each area service to try and tackle this issue on the ground. IROs also provide one to one consultation to social workers as and when needed to make the role of IROs and expectations clear.

**4.2.2** IROs continue to spend too much time re-scheduling or having two or more separate meetings. The additional meetings are not those arising out of reviews where separate consultations with children and parents are necessary but because assessments are not presented or completed to inform changes of care plan. The continuous turnover of staff is a significant contributing factor to this issue.

## **5. Progress as to plans for 2020 – 2021**

**5.1 Development plan for Independent Reviewing Officers.** IROs undertook a six part training programme covering the areas of the independent role of the IRO, positive challenge, rights and participation of children, legislative framework and effective chairing skills. This was delivered by external colleagues from the Independent Audit Group and included local authority solicitors for the legislative framework session. **Program completed in November 2021**

**5.2 A 360 degree feedback loop on how the IRO Service is experienced.** This is now in place and IROs have been distributing short feedback forms after meetings to all attendees of Children Looked After Reviews, to gain the perspective of children and young people, parents, carers, social workers and attendees from other agencies such as education and health. These are returned to the IRO Service Manager with responders choosing whether their feedback remains anonymous or not. The information collated from the feedback loop is collated by the IRO Service Manager and used to improve practices within the service. **Completed March 2021**

**5.3 IRO Service Manager to attend panels.** The IRO Service Manager has been attending these panels to ensure oversight of court proceedings, permanence plans (for adoption, matching long term foster placements, progression to special guardianship and reunification with parents), step-

downs from residential care and the provision of complex services for complex needs which are subject to additional tracking and scrutiny. **Completed and ongoing**

**5.4 Ensure that the payment for Independent Reviewing Officers is competitive to attract the right experienced practitioners to the role.** The regulations require IROs to have at least five years' qualified Social Work experience and be an authoritative professional with at least equivalent status to an experienced Children's Social Work Team Manager. This is not the case in Herefordshire and has not been the case for at least the last five years. IROs are employed at a pay grade below Team Managers, despite this having been raised repeatedly with Directors of Children's Services since 2016 as being contrary to regulations. This was raised again with the Director of Children's Services and following a review of roles and pay structures this was agreed. **Completed January 2022**

**5.5 Improving the quality of Children Looked After Review Minutes.** The feedback received from independent audits and also thematic audits completed in service continue to find that the quality of the IRO letters to children following their reviews is good and child friendly. This will continue to be monitored to ensure consistency in practice. **Completed, and ongoing.**

**5.6 Review the way the Safeguarding and Review Service manages its workload.** Although the service was split in February 2021, there have been significant capacity issues within the IRO service due to the significant rise in children coming into Local Authority care. This meant the IRO's case load had gone beyond 70. A request was made for extra capacity within the service and this was agreed on a temporary basis in April 2022. A full time agency IRO is agreed and should start in May 2022. **Completed and Ongoing.**

## **6. Moving forward**

### **6.1 Structure and profile of the IRO Service**

**6.1.1** Throughout much of 2021/22, the IRO Service was made up of 3 permanent full time employees and 3 permanent part time employees. This stability has enabled consistent peer support during this challenging year. An agency employee will join the service in May 2022 due to the continued rise in the number of children coming in to care. The IRO Service Manager has direct management oversight of IROs in line with manageable supervising responsibilities of these staff members. Agreement has been given for an additional IRO to join the service under a year's fixed term contract. The advertisement for this position is due to go out in May 22.

**6.1.2** A joint Service Away day was held in March 2022 with the CP Chairs to explore the current challenges within Herefordshire Children's Social Care and the impact it has had on our service. This was a meeting in person, held at the council offices.

**6.1.3** Following the departure of the Principal IRO in September 2021, line Management of the IRO Service in 2021/22 has been undertaken by a Service Manager who has been acting up in to the role since December 2021. The permanent position of IRO Service Manager will be advertised in May 2022.

## **7.0 Next step for the IRO Service 2022-2023**

**7.1** The IRO Service Manager will continue to observe the practice of IROs at review meetings and audit the quality of Children Looked after Review Reports, minutes and midpoint reviews. There will continue to be monthly dip sampling of the quality of IRO Oversights to ensure they are focused and purposeful, set out the views of the IROs on the progression of the care plan and where required identify issues in practice. **IRO Service Manager, Ongoing**

**7.2** Weekly meetings with the Children in Care and CP/ Courts Services will continue to take place to review all open formal disputes to ensure that drift and delay identified by the IROs services are dealt with in a timely manner. **IRO Service Manager, Ongoing**

**7.3** IROs will continue to contribute to their own and service development through monthly development sessions in which they will be encouraged to share learning and reflect on case studies. These are additional to the monthly Team Meetings. **All IRO's and IRO Service Manager, Ongoing**

**7.4** IROs will continue to monitor children's permanency plans, and refer children to permanence panel for oversight where there is an identified drift or delay. A new scorecard point to be developed to monitor IROs' performance in term of monitoring the progress of children's permanence plan by the second CLA review and escalate any drift or delay. **All IRO's, IRO Service Manager in conjunction with Mosaic Performance Team Aug 2022**

**7.5** IRO's will continue to build better working relationships within their link services. With each IRO being linked to a service area as a critical friend, it is hoped that generic issues affecting practice can be resolved. **All IRO's, Ongoing**

**7.6** Confirm the permanent establishment for the IRO service. **Head of Service and IRO Service Manager in conjunction with Flexible Futures Service, March 2022**

**7.7** Review the current Dispute resolution policy to ensure additional tier of service management is reflected within escalation timeframe. **Head of Service and IRO Service Manager, July 2022**

**7.8** The annual Service Away day will be planned to explore issues and themes impacting on the service. **IRO Service Manager, March 2023**

**7.9** All IROs to follow the SofS mapping when they conduct the CLA review. The SofS lead will be invited to the Team development sessions to support IRO in fully impeding the model. **All IRO's and IRO Service Manager, Aug 2022**