

Safeguarding and Performance Independent Reviewing Officer Service LAC Annual Report 1st April 2020 - 31st March 2021



Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary
2. Introduction
3. Legal context
4. Profile of the IRO Service
5. Independent Reviewing Officer Service: Looked After Children
6. What do we know about the performance and quality of practice within our IRO – Looked After Children’s Service?
7. What is the impact for our children and families – IRO: Looked After Children’s Service?
8. What can we do better – IRO: Looked After Children’s Service?
9. Identified areas of development – IRO: Looked After Children’s Service
10. Corporate Parenting Team
11. What do we know about the performance and quality of practice within our Corporate Parenting Team?
12. What is the impact for our children and families – Corporate Parenting Service?
13. What can we do better – Corporate Parenting Service?
14. Identified areas of development – Corporate Parenting Service
15. Independent Reviewing Officer – Service Developments 2021-2022

1. Executive Summary

The Annual Report for the Independent Reviewing Officer Service (IRO) sets out the current performance for the service in 2020-2021 and identifies our priorities for the forthcoming year. The IRO Handbook (7.11) sets out the requirement for an annual report on the delivery of service and the impact of the IRO service on the outcomes for children in care.

For the purpose of this report, the term LAC (Looked After Child) will be used for statutory related references to children looked after by the local authority for example LAC Reviews, and all other references will refer to Children in Care (CiC).

Our response to COVID19

The Coronavirus pandemic during 2020-2021 has presented a time of severe pressure across all of society, and we know this specifically presents a higher level of risk for some children. We have recognised it is especially important that children and young people across Leicestershire continued to receive the services and support that they need and are effectively safeguarded during this pandemic.

The Safeguarding and Performance Service rapidly adapted and changed the way we have delivered services to reflect the COVID19 circumstances. Within 24 hours the Service adapted from facilitation and delivery of face to face meetings, to all meetings being held virtually from March 2020.

Review of arrangements (ROA) meetings have aligned to this approach with them being held virtually, with the IRO ensuring prior contact with the child to gain their views and wishes regarding the facilitation of the meeting, including how they wish to be involved or have their views advocated on their behalf. Feedback from young people has been mixed, some young people feeling more comfortable with the virtual format, others missing the direct face to face contact.

Our staff have been supported to maintain service delivery to our children with support to implement home and remote working models. Staff have made good use of mobile technology to manage day-to-day communications with children and families and used virtual meetings through Skype/Microsoft Teams for key planning and decision-making meetings. This approach has also enabled staff to remain in close contact with their immediate teams and peers to prevent social isolation.

Corporate support for staff and managers has been strong throughout the pandemic with strong communication and support for staff wellbeing, funds for provision of working from home equipment and implementing safe working arrangements in key buildings where staff have continued to respond to service need.

Staff and leaders in Leicestershire have worked tirelessly in the face of this unprecedented time to support the most vulnerable children during this period and have put arrangements in place to ensure scrutiny of the safety and well-being of children and young people we support and care for.

All workers have shown inventive ways of engaging children such as using what's app and video calls. The Corporate Parenting Team have been creative in ensuring children and young people's participation with many groups and activities taking place virtually, including the

continuation of the Children In Care Council, Choir, Corporate Parenting Board as well as other fun activities, quiz and craft events.

Quality assurance and learning improvement activity has continued during the pandemic with all planned activity being delivered, to ensure senior management oversight of the quality of service being delivered. Audit activity has included, but not exclusive to writing to the child, IRO oversight and tracking, LAC health assessment and Placement Order audit. This is addition to the thematic audits completed by all CFS areas.

Key themes within this report

- Timeliness

Performance in relation to timeliness of ROA meetings has been consistently strong over recent years, with improved performance over the past twelve months with the percentage of meetings taking place within timescales increasing by just over half a percent from 98.4% to 98.96%.

At the year ending 31st March 2021, the IRO Service had completed 1524 Review of Arrangement meetings for looked after children. Of these 1508 were within timescales which equates to 98.96%.

A significant improvement during 2020/21 has been with getting records of Review of Arrangements written up and uploaded onto mosaic in a timely manner. In the previous year this was raised as a concern, therefore a plan was developed to aim to have all records written and uploaded within twenty working days of the review with a minimum target of this being achieved in 95% of cases. This was seen as highly successful and this success has continued throughout 20/21. At present we are awaiting tableau reporting against the timeliness, however the data collection used at present by our Business Support indicates this timescale is being met.

Similarly, IRO's now routinely upload all decisions and recommendations from ROA's within 5 working days. This is seen as an important part of the IRO role in ensuring the actions are progressed in a timely way to avoid any drift and delay in getting the right outcomes for a child or young person. Again, the Tableau report to monitor this has yet to be developed however it has been monitored via management dip sampling cases which have had positive findings. In the most recent dip sample of cases from March 2021, out of ten cases sampled eight had the five-day decisions uploaded onto case notes within timescales, one was uploaded one day late. In one case there was a greater delay however it was still found that the full set of review of arrangement minutes were uploaded within the required timescale (20 working days).

- Effective Care Planning

Statutory guidance for care planning states that there should be a permanence plan for all looked after children at the time of the second review of arrangements. In 2020/21 only 27% of children had a permanence plan at second review this is slightly lower than in the previous year whereby 35% of second reviews included a permanence plan. Unfortunately, there are lots of reasons why permanence cannot be agreed at the second review, which may include further assessments needing to be carried out to identify if it is safe for a child to return to live with the parent or carer with whom they lived before coming into care and if this is not possible then what would be the best permanence option for their long-term care.

Permanence plans were evidenced in 72% of reviews subsequent to the 2nd review, although this again is below the 80% figure of last year.

During the first part of the COVID19 pandemic, delays were seen in Court timetabling for care proceedings which would have also impacted on the IRO's ability to ratify final care plans if assessments were still outstanding. As the country adapted to COVID19 restrictions and ways of working, we saw these figures begin to improve.

- **Impact of Quality Assurance**

The quality assurance role of IROs is critical to the development and improvement of the intervention that we provide to children and families and the impact that we have on the outcomes we achieve. IROs have key duties that scrutinise and support the quality, safety and effectiveness of safeguarding practice and policy, care planning and permanence. IROs are central to identifying and sharing good practice and checking the quality and consistency of provision across Looked After Children.

IROs have a statutory role to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child in care and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are captured clearly, central to planning and given full consideration. The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 extended the IROs responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's review to monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's case. Through these changes the IRO has an effective, independent and holistic oversight of the child's case and ensures that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process.

This oversight provides opportunity for independent challenge in decisions identified as not being in the best interests of the child or where drift or delay has an impact on outcomes. An effective IRO service will drive forward improved outcomes for children and young people and will ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration.

Significant work has been completed with the IRO service to develop a rigorous Quality Assurance process which identifies areas of concern as well as areas of good practice. The QA process is now fully incorporated into Mosaic and we have the additional benefit of Tableau reporting, which enables robust data analysis which identifies themes across service areas where targeted work can be completed to address these.

This remains an area of further development to support wider services in understanding the significance of this part of the IRO, thus developing an acceptance of the process and how this aligns with the wider Leicestershire Council's continuous improvement journey, to ensure we are improving service delivery and outcomes for our children and families.

- **Service Development**

In Leicestershire, IRO's have had responsibility for both child protection and children in care functions, through their role in child protection conferences and processes, harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) work with children and young people and Looked After Reviews and care planning. All IRO's have had a combination of Child Protection cases and Looked After Children.

Over the last few years the IRO service has significantly grown in capacity, this has been a result of the increase in children subject to Child Protection Plans and also Looked After Children. In 2018/2019 the IRO service consisted of 13.06 FTE IRO's In 2019/2020 the IRO

service consisted of 15.06 FTE IRO's. To date we currently have 16.1 FTE IRO's in post, who are working across both CP and LAC.

In 2020, the average number of LAC children was 666, this was an increase from the average of 608 in 2019, thus an increase of 58. A full time IRO's held an average FTE case load of 78 cases totally an average of 97.5 weighted cases. At present 1 LAC case is weighted as 1.5 given the extra requirements in relation to the IRO role for LAC, such as having to write the ROA record per child, whereas CP conferences are supported with clerk capacity. This is considerably higher than the recommended caseload within the IRO handbook "It is estimated that a caseload of 50 to 70 looked after children for a full time equivalent IRO, would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service, including the full range of functions set out in this handbook. This range should reflect the diversity and complexity of cases across different local authorities".

As the service has grown, the need to reconsider the service structure became increasingly necessary, as well as to provide the opportunity to focus on the identified improvement needs. Therefore, it was agreed from May 2021, the service would have two focus teams, one on Child Protection and one on Looked After Children. Thus, two teams who have expertise in one area, CP or LAC and drive forward the development plan for that area. This would enable the teams to become experts in the area of work, focus on driving forward the improvement plans and achieving positive outcomes for children. The two teams would also lead on their individual development plans (see below), resulting in a robust, efficient Independent Reviewing Officer Service. With the focus teams, invested growth in the IRO service, this will also enable caseloads to be aligned with the IRO handbook recommendations.

The benefits of having IRO and CP Chairs, would enable the service areas to drive forward the areas of improvement required and provide a highly effective, specialist service to our children and families.

2. Introduction

The Annual Report for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) sets out the current performance for the service in 2020-2021 for IRO services, identifying our priorities for the forthcoming year. The service provision of the Safeguarding and Performance Service is driven by our vision and mission statement and is underpinned by the shared values and behaviours of the Children and Family Services. The role of the IRO service is central to driving forward the Continuous Improvement Plan and promoting the key goals and behaviours set out in the Road to Excellence.

Continuous Improvement Plan 2021 - 2023
The Road to Excellence



Our Vision

For Leicestershire to be the best place for all children, young people and their families

Our Ambitions for 2021 - 2023

- Help every child to get the best possible start in life
- Help children and their families build strength, resilience, confidence and capacity
- Help children in Leicestershire to live in safe, stable environments and have secure attachments
- Help every child to have access to good quality education to ensure they achieve their maximum potential.



Core Values and Behaviours that underpin everything we do

Aspirational
We value high aspirations for our Children and Families.

Being Curious
We value being curious and paying attention to detail.

Collaboration
We value collaboration based on building strong working relationships.

Behaviours

Listening
Understand trauma and it's effects on children and families we work with as well as on our workforce.

Building Relationships
Signs of Safety (SoS) supports our approach with children and families.

Outcome Focussed
Striving to improve the lives of the children and families we work with.

Being Accountable
Everyone is responsible for delivering high quality services.



Our pledge for children

Each member of staff pledges that:

- We will put you (children and young people) at the heart of everything we do and celebrate your uniqueness and diversity
- We will listen and value what you tell us and your voice will inform decision making and help us design services
- We will help you to feel safe and where possible this will be with your family
- We will visit you regularly and help you to understand why we are helping you and your family
- We will make sure you always have a timely and detailed plan and support your aspirations for your future
- If you are not able to be in the care of your family we will make decisions about your long-term plans without delay. (see our promise to children in care).

Our leaders and managers pledge to:

- Challenge and support plans at all levels to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people without delay
- Value and enable good relationships between front line practitioners and families by prioritising a stable workforce
- Create a culture where relationship-based practice can flourish using high quality regular supervision offering high-support and high-challenge
- Understand trauma and it's effects on children and families we work with as well as on our workforce
- Know what is happening in frontline practice through direct observation and conversation with our staff.

How we will do it

Embedding excellent practice

- Intervention informed by robust evidence based decision making
- A joined up approach built on consistent high quality targeted Early Help and Social Care advice within Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans
- Reflective supervision to support effective practice with challenge and robust management oversight
- Clear records to capture the child's journey in language they understand.

Taking the right action at the right time

- A strong whole family approach based on effective relationships between staff, children and families
- Strong multi-agency partnerships across all tiers of intervention
- Preventing delay at all stages especially permanence
- Creating sustainable exit plans and building on family networks keeping families together where this is safe
- Commitment to our preventative work in early support related services (Early Help).

Developing policy and performance

- Practice led recording systems to allow staff to focus on time with children
- Up to date policies, procedures and standards that underpin consistent practice
- Well commissioned services for children in care including alternative education provision
- Strategic approach to support recruitment and retention of staff
- Defining children's services for the future based on staff expertise and innovation.

Being a learning organisation

- Using data and audit to know ourselves well and inform our learning
- Establish a shared value base, owned by our workforce
- Sustain a stable and well supported workforce, celebrating diversity and delivering excellent training and development.
- Being risk sensitive, based on valuing family strengths and using effective safety planning.

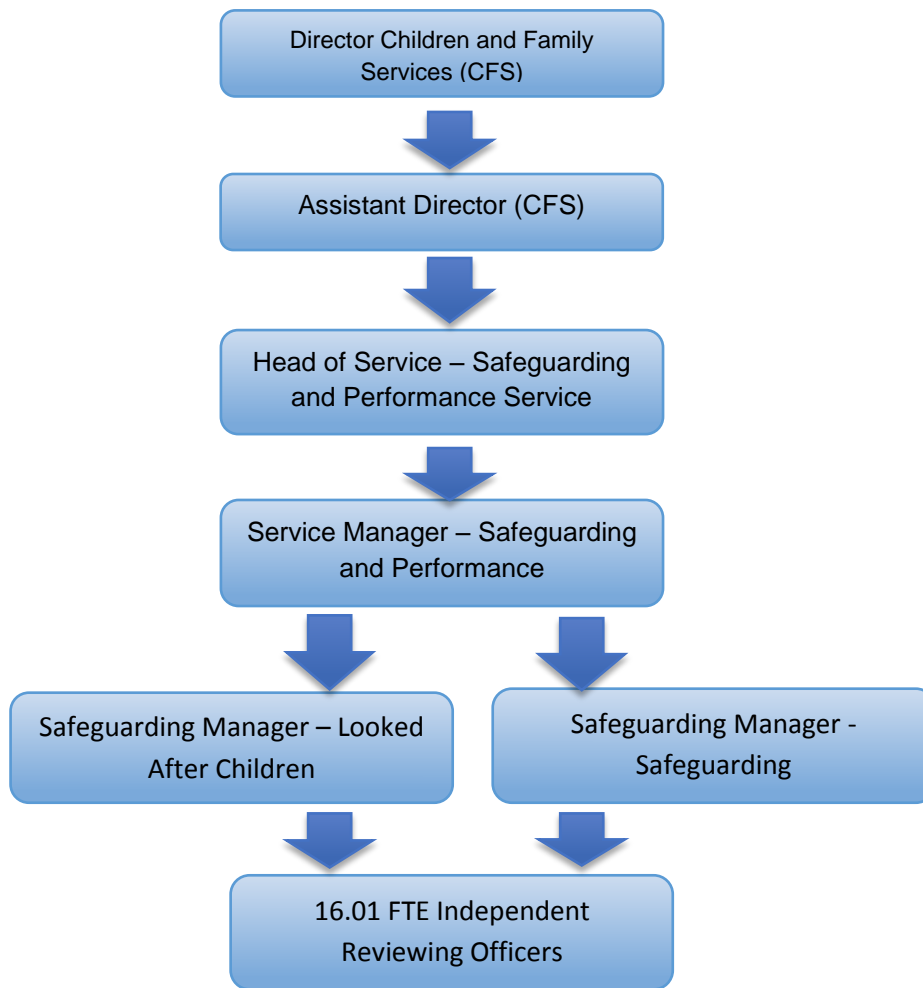
What success will look like

- Effective early help and support will reduce the number of children requiring social work intervention or support through an EHC Plan
- Children and families will tell us that we have made a positive difference to their lives
- Performance indicators evidence improving outcomes for children and young people
- Routine audit shows consistent application of thresholds, improved quality and timeliness of assessment and robust care planning driven by strong management oversight
- We will have examples of where children and families have helped us to develop our services
- Staff will tell us that streamlined systems and processes mean that they can spend effective time with children
- We will retain a highly skilled, committed workforce who have shared values
- Where children and young people cannot safely live at home decisions about legal and emotional permanency are robust and timely.



2706

The IRO Service in Leicestershire sits within the Safeguarding and Performance Service. Whilst the service sits within the Children and Family Services (CFS) and is part of the management structure of Children's Social Care (CSC); it remains independent of the line management of resources for children in care and the operational social work teams. The independence of the IRO ensures that they are able to advocate and challenge for children and families to receive the right service at the right time to both protect and support them.



IRO's have a dual role and responsibility for both child protection and children in care functions, through their role in child protection conferences and processes, harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) work with children and young people and Looked After Reviews and care planning. All IROs have a combination of Child Protection cases and Looked After Children.

The quality assurance role of IRO's is critical to the development and improvement of the intervention that we provide to children and families and the impact that we have on the outcomes we achieve. IRO's have key duties that scrutinise and support the quality, safety and effectiveness of safeguarding practice and policy, care planning and permanence. IRO's are central to identifying and sharing good practice and checking the quality and consistency of provision across the areas of Looked After Children.

IRO's have a statutory role to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child in care and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are captured clearly, central to planning and given full consideration. The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 extended the IRO's responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's review to monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's case. Through these changes the IRO has an effective, independent and holistic oversight of the child's case and ensures that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process.

This oversight provides opportunity for independent challenge in decisions identified as not being in the best interests of the child or where drift or delay has an impact on outcomes. An effective IRO service will drive forward improved outcomes for children and young people and will ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration.

This report outlines the contribution made by the IRO Service in Leicestershire, to quality assurance and the improvement of services for children and young people in the care of the County Council during the year April 2020 to March 2021. It is an evaluative report considering how effectively the Safeguarding and Performance Service has fulfilled the responsibilities of its role and the impact that this has had on children and families of Leicestershire. It is an opportunity to identify areas of good practice and those in need of development and improvement. It highlights emerging themes and trends, providing information that contributes to the strategic and continuous improvement plans of the local authority. The performance measures used to measure success are both qualitative and quantitative data from all areas of quality assurance undertaken throughout children's services.

3. Context

The legal framework and statutory guidance for the IRO role for children in care is set out in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 (amended 2015) and the IRO Handbook 2010.

The Handbook requires an Annual Report to be written and is prescriptive as to content and format (which this report follows) and the expectation that the report is made available for scrutiny by the Corporate Parenting Board, as well as accessible as a public document.

The appointment of an IRO is a legal requirement under S118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, their role being to protect children's interests throughout the care planning process, ensure their voice is heard and challenge the local authority where needed in order to achieve best outcomes.

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'.

4. Profile of the IRO Service

Safeguarding and Improvement Unit

1x FTE Service Manager

2x FTE Safeguarding Managers

16.01 x FTE IRO

There are significant benefits of the IRO service being located within Children's Social Care whilst maintaining their independence. The position allows IRO's to have a good understanding of the key performance indicators and the context in which the Local Authority operates. Enabling understanding of the changing demands and pressures in the Department, including the impact of recruitment and retention.

To be successful, the role of the IRO must be valued by senior managers and operate within a supportive service culture and environment. It is not the responsibility of the IRO to manage the case, supervise the social worker or devise the care plan, but to have oversight to ensure that the child's plan is achieving change and creating positive outcomes for children and families.

IRO's have established professional relationships with social work teams and senior managers which are vital to their quality assurance role, enabling them to provide constructive feedback and challenge where needed, as well as promoting their need to have comprehensive oversight of the strengths and needs of the department. In addition, the role is essential to championing good practice. This in turn enables contributions to improvement activity which have a direct impact on improved outcomes for children and families.

The Safeguarding and Performance Service continues to be very well supported by senior leaders and this is evidenced by the support for the service to continue to grow, with 16.01 FTE IRO's now in post, an increase from 15.06 in 2019-2020. This highlights the recognition of the pivotal role the IRO's have in undertaking statutory duties such as chairing meetings and the broader quality assurance role which supports driving and improving practice.

The quality assurance role of the IRO is central to strengthening the implementation of Signs of Safety. IRO's are Practice Leads role modelling and apply the Signs of Safety approach, our identified values and behaviours and being experts in planning and using networks to strength support and protection to our vulnerable children and enhance how we build the wellbeing for out LAC children. This is underpinned by our Signs of Safety practice framework which underpins our work to improve the lives of children and families living in Leicestershire. Therefore, it is critical that their Signs of Safety knowledge and skills remain comprehensive. During 2020-2021 the IRO service has continued to utilise the bespoke training in Signs of Safety. This training supports the quality assurance role of the IRO's and the progress of embedding Signs of Safety throughout all areas of the work within CFS. These additional training opportunities are continuing into 2021-22 as the department continues to embed the Signs of Safety methodology into its culture and practice.

IRO's play a significant role in the development and delivery of high-quality interventions to children in care and in need of protection. The IRO Service in Leicestershire remains committed to this responsibility. This commitment is supported by the implementation of a service specific Learning Audit Framework (2020-21) which highlights areas of need and provides a framework of observation, peer audit and audit analysis to inform learning and drive forward best practice.

Challenge Meetings – IROs, Assistant Director (AD) & Agency Decision Maker (ADM)

The management group for the Safeguarding Unit meet each month for a Pre-Challenge Tracking Meeting, to discuss cases and themes of concern. It is then considered whether these cases / matters need to be taken to the Challenge Meeting with the Assistant Director for Children's Social Care, or if further actions can be taken in the first instance. A tracking

spreadsheet is kept with a log of these discussions and the cases / themes are followed up with the allocated IRO during supervision or during Team Meetings if necessary.

Following the Pre-Challenge Tracking Meeting, the managers from the Safeguarding Unit meet with the ADM and Assistant Director monthly to discuss identified areas of concern. Cases discussed in this forum are cases which have followed the full escalation process. Given the quality assurance role of the ADM, particularly in respect of permanence, this working together forum is key to identify themes and areas of practice which need further development.

The increasing number of QA Alerts supports with greater oversight and scrutiny earlier in the process. IRO's discuss all QA's and cases of concern with their manager each month in supervision with a view to escalating to the Pre-Challenge process if necessary, however as the QA process has been further embedded during this period there are far more examples of issues being resolved promptly without the need for senior management oversight and intervention.

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS)

The IRO service continues to maintain a good working relationship with CAFCASS Children's Guardians, at both IRO and management level. IRO's routinely liaise with Children's Guardians during Care Proceedings and ensure their views on the care plans are represented. Guardians routinely write to the Safeguarding Unit to confirm when they have been allocated a case under an Interim Care Order and are then invited to children's reviews. In addition to the liaison with the Guardian, the IRO also completes an IRO legal view on the proposed final Care Plan. It is positive that CAFCASS management has expressed a strong commitment to continuing to build productive working relationships between IRO's and Guardians.

Family Justice Board

The Safeguarding and Performance Service Manager attends the Family Justice Board meetings. This enables the IRO Service to have a direct connection into Family Justice Board and the Performance Subgroup of the Board. This assists with the IRO service being kept up to date with any issues arising from the Public Law work that in turn influences IRO practice. It also enables IRO's to continue to be up to date with changes to legislation, policies and procedures, enhancing their oversight of the practice and performance of the local authority in respect to children who are subject to care proceedings. This in turns helps ensure timely care planning and better outcomes for the children. The Service Manager ensures the IRO service is updated of key information via Team Meetings, emails and supervision.

Regional IRO Forums

The IRO Service has continued to engage in the East Midlands Regional IRO forums and has had the benefit of quarterly tailored training and networking days over 2020/21. Each IRO Regional Day has a key theme running through the day with a variety of speakers delivering presentations as well as there being opportunities to work in small groups with colleagues from other areas, to share good practice and reflect on ways to improve services for children and their families.

5. Independent Reviewing Officer Service: Looked After Children

Being a Corporate Parent

The IRO Service within Leicestershire operates within the context of the council acting as 'Corporate Parents' for all of the children and young people that are placed in the care of the Local Authority. Looking after and protecting children and young people is one of the most important jobs that councils do and it is the council's responsibility to ensure that our children are given the care, support and stability that they deserve.

Our Corporate Parenting Strategy states:

We know that we will be successful corporate parents if we really listen to our children and ensure that their views and opinions have meaning in all areas of our decision making, "You said. We did". The impact of this is seen in the enthusiasm, leadership and effectiveness of our children and their participation in our Children in Care Council, Supporting Young People After Care (SYPAC), our Corporate Parenting Board and many more participation events.

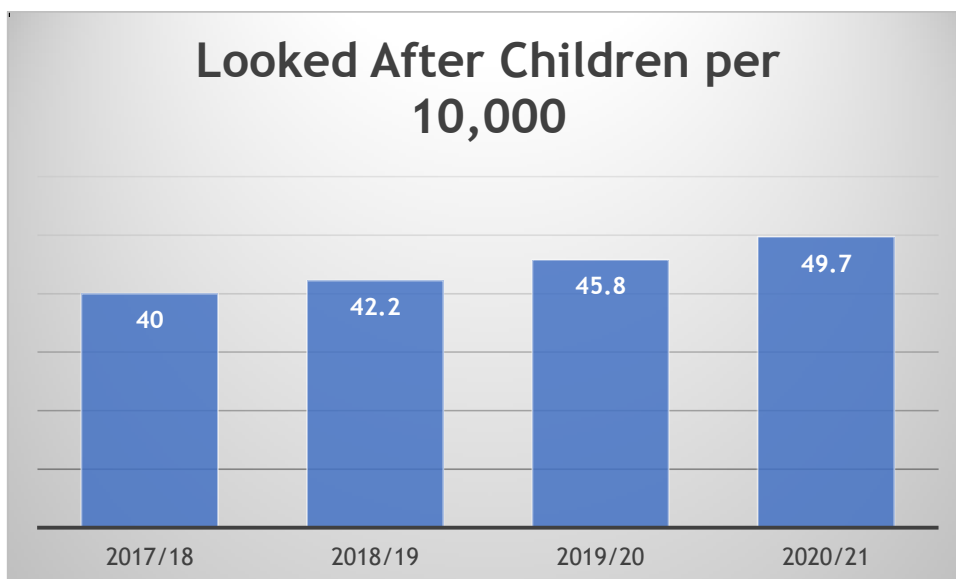
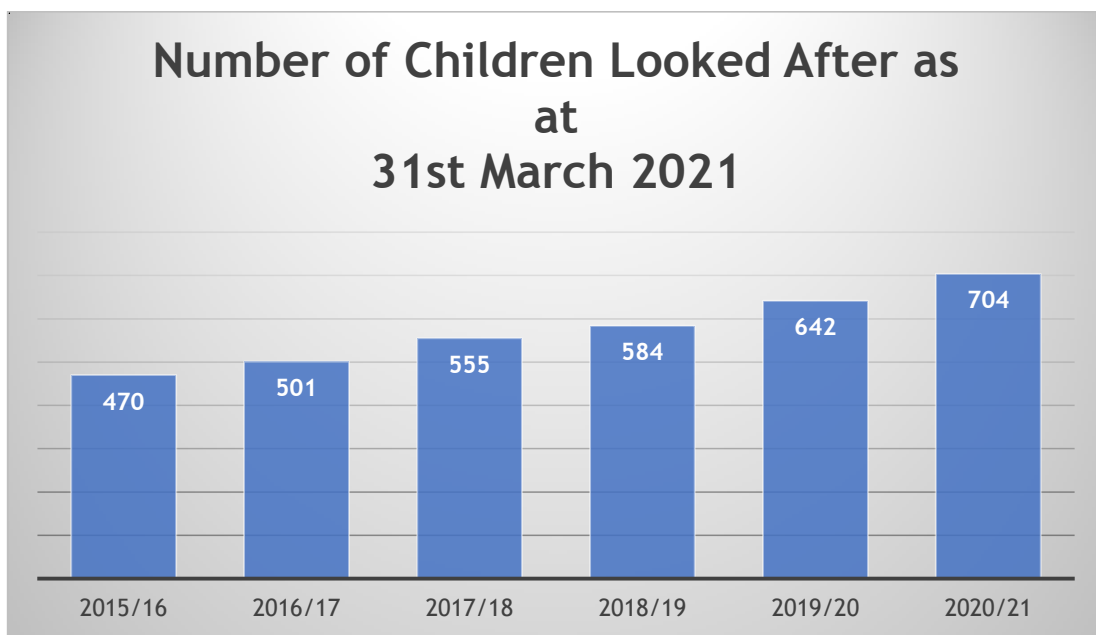
The Corporate Parenting Strategy sets out the responsibilities of Leicestershire County Council as corporate parent to children in care. The Strategy outlines the expectations and key principles that provide the framework for a cohesive and effective corporate parenting response for children in care and Care Leavers. To hold ourselves to account to achieve this Leicestershire developed 'Our Promise' (April 2019) with our children and partners and this underpins the expectations for all.

 <p>We will support you</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide emotional support • Whatever you do we will be there • Ensure all your needs are met • Provide advice, information, practical and financial support • We will make sure that you know what your rights are • Will not judge you if things go wrong. We all make mistakes! 	 <p>We believe in you</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will value your strengths and talents • Support you to overcome any stumbling blocks you face • Support you to achieve your goals • Embrace your individuality • Encourage your aspirations • Support you to succeed in life 	 <p>We will respect your identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will respect your unique identity • Support you to develop your own personal beliefs and values • Accept, respect and celebrate your identity, culture and heritage • Value, respect and support important relationships • Encourage you to express your identity positively 	 <p>We will listen to you</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will listen and respect you • Strive to understand your point of view • Place you at the heart of all decisions • Support you to talk about your worries and happy times • Support you to seek independent advocacy 	 <p>We will support you to find a place you can call home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will do our best to find you a home near to people who are important to you • Ensure you feel safe and secure • As you grow we will support you to learn new skills to support your independence • We are here to support if things go wrong 	 <p>We will inform you</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal entitlements and services • Up to date and accurate information • Support you to access your care records • Provide information throughout your journey • We will support you if you need to make a complaint 	 <p>We will be a lifelong champion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support you break down barriers to other agencies • Work together with other services to better meet your needs • Encourage and support you to make positive life choices • Will make sure you know how to get support when you need it! • Trust and respect you
--	--	---	--	---	--	---

6. What do we know about the performance and quality of practice within our IRO - Looked After Children's Service?

Children in Care

As can be seen from the tables below, the children in care population in Leicestershire has increased further over 2020-21, in keeping with a steady year on year increase over the last 7 years. Leicestershire had an increase in looked after population from 642 at the end of March 2020 to 705 at the end of March 2021. During this time 195 children left the care of the local authority whilst 240 children became looked after by Leicestershire County Council. This equates to 49.7 looked after children per 10,000 which is an increase from 45.8 in 2019-2020 and 42.2 per 10,000 at the end of 2018/19, this compares with an average of 54.7 for our statistical neighbours average as of 1st April 2020.

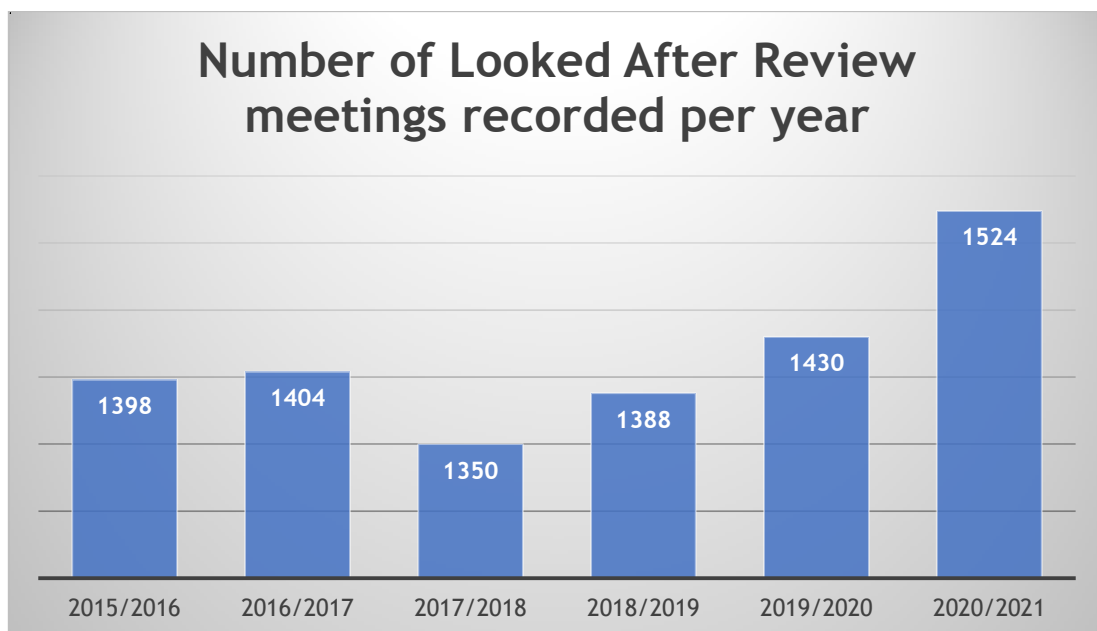


The activity generated from this increase is reflected in the number of review meetings held for children between 1st April 2020 and the end of March 2021 which totalled 1524, this is an increase of 94 meetings from the previous year. The increase of meetings aligns with the increase in the number of children entering care. In addition to the statutory reviews, IRO's can also arrange additional meetings for a number of reasons; including to review a case earlier due to concerns about drift and delay or because there has been a change in the child's care plan, such as a placement move. Meetings may also be arranged where there are concerns regarding risk of placement breakdown, these are agreed at the discretion of the IRO. Within Leicestershire County Council we have good placement stability with 164 having more than one placement in a 12-month period.

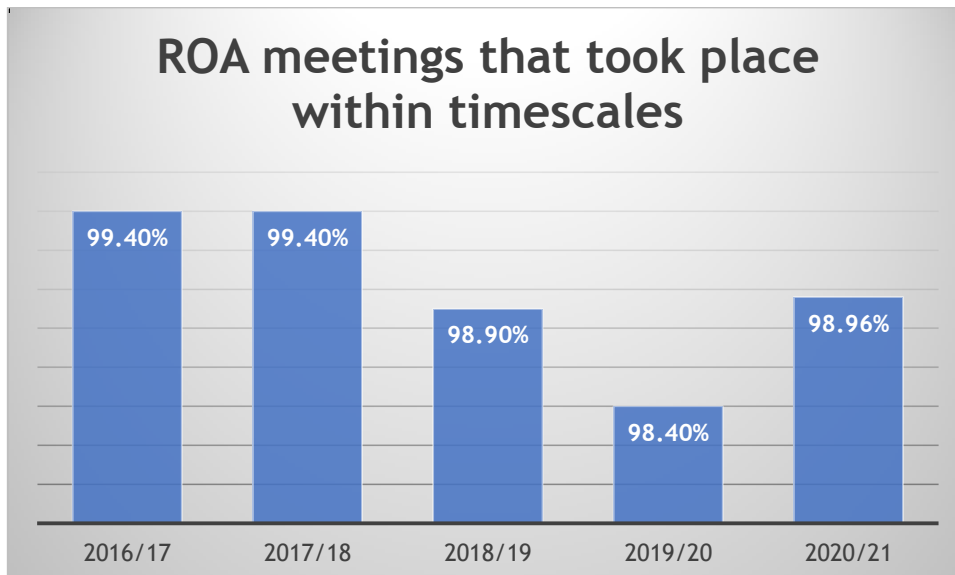
Placements over last 12 months

Number of Placements over the last year as at **01/04/2021**

No of Placements in last Yr	0-4	5-9	10-15	16-17	Grand Total
1	105	117	208	109	539
2	40	21	37	35	133
3	5	1	7	6	19
4	1		1	8	10
5				1	1
6		1			1
Grand Total	151	140	253	159	703



Performance in relation to timeliness of ROA meetings has been consistently strong over recent years, with improved performance over the past twelve months with the percentage of meetings taking place within timescales increasing by just over half a percent from 98.4% to 98.96%.



At the year ending 31st March 2021, the IRO Service had completed 1524 Review of Arrangement meetings for looked after children. Of these 1508 were within timescales which equates to 98.96%. This compares favourably to the previous year in which a slightly lower figure of 98.4% were completed on time. The Safeguarding Unit keep an 'out of date log' to record the reason for each case which does not take place in time. Out of the 16 ROA's that were out of date 9 of these were the initial 28 Day review whereby the child or young person had just come into care and the Safeguarding Unit had not been notified that they had now been looked after, this was either due to oversight or workers not being familiar with the process of booking in the initial review, in one case both the social worker and team manager left the authority shortly after the child became looked after and the incoming staff were not aware of the need for an initial review and on another occasion a young person who was serving a custodial sentence was also placed on remand for a further offence which meant that they became looked after but this was not identified by the locality team in time to arrange a review within timescales. Safeguarding Business Support have good oversight of cases requiring ROA and the timescales for these, ensuring they are arranged within time. Discussions have also been held with Team Managers to ensure their staff are aware of the processes for requesting ROA meetings, thus enabling these figures to continue to improve.

In the remaining six cases the second part of a review had gone out of date following a part 1 meeting being completed within timescales. Four of these cases were delayed with manager agreement as there were either changes in care plan or court timescales which meant that it would be in the child's best interests to wait until a particular issue had been resolved before the part 2 meeting took place. On both final cases which took place out of timescales they were late due to staff sickness.

A significant improvement during 2020/21 has been with getting records of Review of Arrangements written up and uploaded onto mosaic in a timely manner. In the previous year this was raised as a concern, therefore a plan was developed to aim to have all records written and uploaded within twenty working days of the review with a minimum target of this being achieved in 95% of cases. This was seen as highly successful and this success has continued throughout 20/21. At present we are awaiting tableau reporting against the timeliness, however the data collection used at present by our Business Support indicates this timescale is being met.

Similarly, IRO's now routinely upload all decisions and recommendations from ROA's within 5 working days. This is seen as an important part of the IRO role in ensuring the actions are progressed in a timely way to avoid any drift and delay in getting the right outcomes for a child or young person. Again, the Tableau report to monitor this has yet to be developed however it has been monitored via management dip sampling cases which have had positive findings. In the most recent dip sample of cases from March 2021, out of ten cases sampled eight had the five-day decisions uploaded onto case notes within timescales, one was uploaded one day late. In one case there was a greater delay however it was still found that the full set of review of arrangement minutes were uploaded within the required timescale (20 working days).

Another important development over the past eighteen months for the local authority is writing records to the child. The Safeguarding and Performance Service embraced this idea from the start in 2019 by implementing writing ROA records to the child. We have seen during audit activity some excellent examples of ROA minutes written to the child in a clear and sensitive manner. However this approach was not without its challenges not least in finding a suitable style of writing to very young children about decisions that were being made on their behalf, most significantly when it had been decided they were no longer safe to be living with their parents. After much consideration it was agreed that the records should be written not to the child at the age they were at the time the decision was being made but rather at the earliest age they may be able to read and understand their records i.e. the early years of senior school. In the writing to the child dip sample audit of early 2021 ROA's the auditor found that writing to the child was generally well embedded into practice with some excellent examples of work which by writing directly to the child it was clear that the child was at the centre of the decision making as well as explaining the thinking behind decisions in a detailed but sensitive manner. It was also found that this style of writing is well placed to keep a focus on understanding behaviours and difficulties in a way that fits with a trauma informed approach which Leicestershire County Council has now formal undertaken to do.

Participation

The child and young person's voice, their views and wishes are essential to the care planning. IRO's continue to strive towards obtaining this and ensuring children and young people actively participate in the review process. However, due to the COVID19 restrictions during 2020/21 this is in no doubt a significant area that has been affected by the lockdown measures and the fact that most looked after reviews during this year have taken place virtually.

In every year it is acknowledged that not all children will want to attend their meeting and it will be necessary to support their participation in other ways however as the table below show, there has been a consistent pattern of children increasingly attending their ROA's up until this year. Although it is perfectly acceptable for children to participate in their reviews in any way they chose such as via an advocate, sending their written views or asking their carers or social worker to speak on their behalf, nevertheless IRO's always value seeing children and young people face to face and getting to know them and understanding the issues that are most important to them.

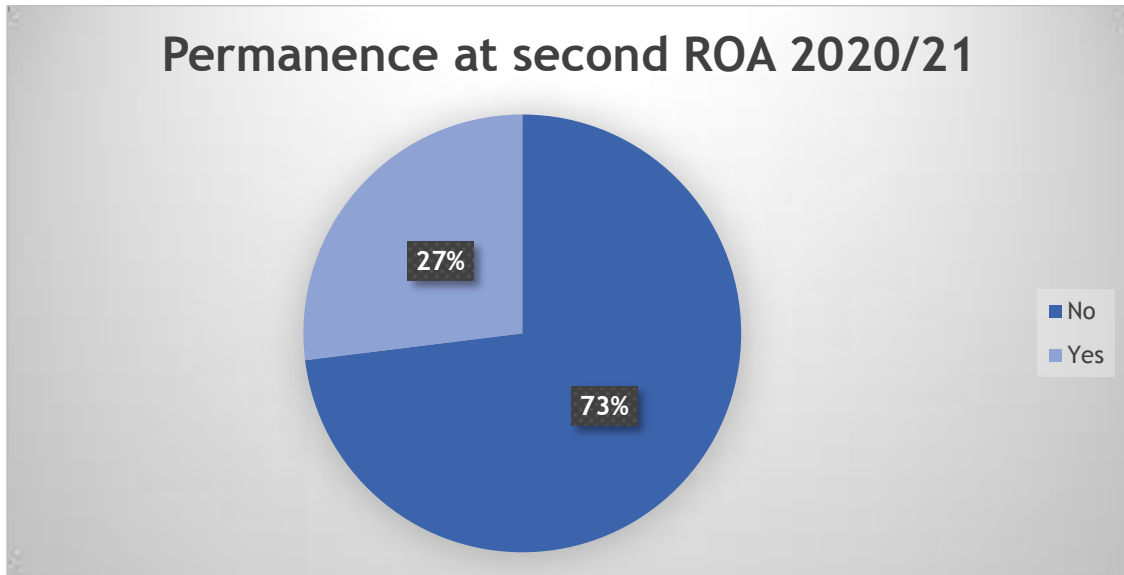
As can be seen below, despite an additional 57 children being in the care of the local authority PN1 shows that 98 less children and young people attended their reviews and spoke for themselves in comparison to 2019/20. It is positive to see that there was only a small increase in the number of children who chose not to participate in their reviews (PN7) with the vast majority of children choosing to participate in other ways – an increase of 186. Prior to COVID19, when completing reviews children or young people may have chosen not to attend the whole meeting, however may have joined for part of the meeting at either the beginning or

end, often this was once they felt more comfortable with those present in the room, this was particularly the case for younger children – thus this would have previously been recorded as the child having participated, if only for a short period. It is key to note, that whilst children and young people have been given the opportunity to join their virtual meetings, for some children joining a virtual meeting may not be something they feel comfortable with, seeing people on a screen and this being less personal. Therefore, they may have asked to speak to the IRO before the meeting to share their views and for these to be advocated on their behalf, this aligns closely with the increase of 186 of young people participating in other methods. Moving forward, with COVID19 restrictions being lifted, IRO's will begin completing the ROA to the preferred method of the child or young person, thus being face to face or via a hybrid model. It is expected IRO's will contact the child prior to the ROA meeting taking place to gain their views on how they wish for their meeting to be facilitated. IRO's are also resuming visits to children to gain their views face to face, whereas during the pandemic this process was completed virtually or via what's app and video calling.

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
PN0: Children under the age of 4	381	363	363	370	404	405
PN1: Children who attend their reviews and speak for themselves	522	550	554	632	659	561
PN2: Those who attend but communicate via an advocate	10	13	4	10	7	18
PN3: Those who attend and convey their views non-verbally	7	3	2	3	0	4
PN4: Those who attend but don't contribute	15	4	11	10	11	7
PN5: Children who do not attend but brief someone to speak on their behalf	74	70	52	98	87	81
PN6: Do not attend but communicate their views by another method	295	399	415	296	450	636
PN7: Those who do not attend/convey their views in any other way	100	50	87	163	103	118

Permanence

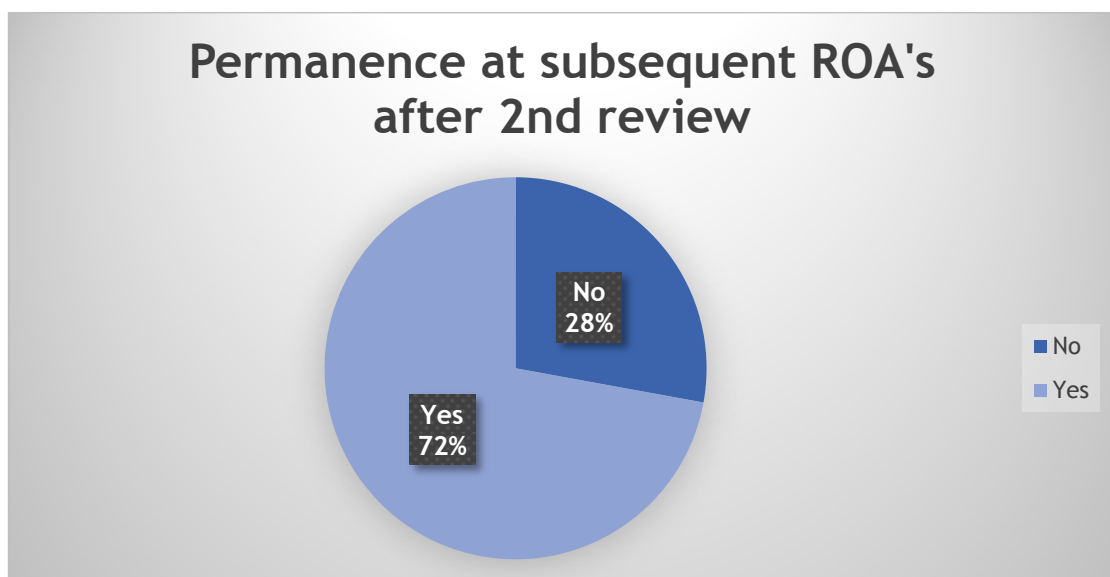
Permanence is described as the long-term plan for the child's upbringing. It aims to ensure a framework of emotional, physical, and legal conditions that will give a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging.



Statutory guidance for care planning states that there should be a permanence plan for all looked after children at the time of the second review of arrangements. In 2020/21 only 27% of children had a permanence plan ready for ratification by the IRO, at second review this is slightly lower than in the previous year whereby 35% of second reviews included a permanence plan. Unfortunately, there are lots of reasons why permanence cannot be agreed at the second review, which may include further assessments needing to be carried out to identify if it is safe for a child to return to live with the parent or carer with whom they lived before coming into care and if this is not possible then what would be the best permanence option for their long-term care.

Permanence plans were evidenced in 72% of reviews subsequent to the 2nd review, although this again is below the 80% figure of last year.

During the first part of the COVID19 pandemic, delays were seen in Court timetabling for care proceedings which would have also impacted on the IRO's ability to ratify final care plans if assessments were still outstanding. As the country adapted to COVID19 restrictions and ways of working, we saw these figures begin to improve.



Securing permanence for children in a timely manner continues to be high on the agenda for IRO's and something which is routinely reviewed during ROA meetings. This is prioritised in line with the Leicestershire's drive to take the right actions and the right time, with a specific drive to prevent delay in permanency.

IRO's will arrange additional ROA meetings to be convened if there are concerns regarding drift and delay in respect of permanence and care planning as well as using the Quality Assurance alert and escalation process. If there are ongoing concerns that do not appear to be addressed through the normal escalation process the case will be referred to the Challenge meeting whereby the Service Manager for Safeguarding, the Agency Decision Maker and Assistant Director meet to look at what are the underlying cause for concern and seek the support of the relevant Head of Service to address these difficulties if necessary.

Beyond having a permanence plan for children in care it is important that a child's permanence is achieved, this means that the child has certainty about their living arrangements and that it has been agreed that those who care for them will be able to meet their needs not only now but right through until they are ready to live independently. This is agreed through the Permanence Panel and overseen by a Head of Service.

Both the Service Manager and Assistant Service Manager – Looked After Children lead are in members of the permanence panel and the QA and audit framework, ensuring rigorous oversight and IRO representation in this forum. Development work is being completed to update the Terms of Reference for this panel to have a focus on permanence being both legal permanence but also emotional permanence, thus ensuring the best outcomes for the long-term care of our looked after children.

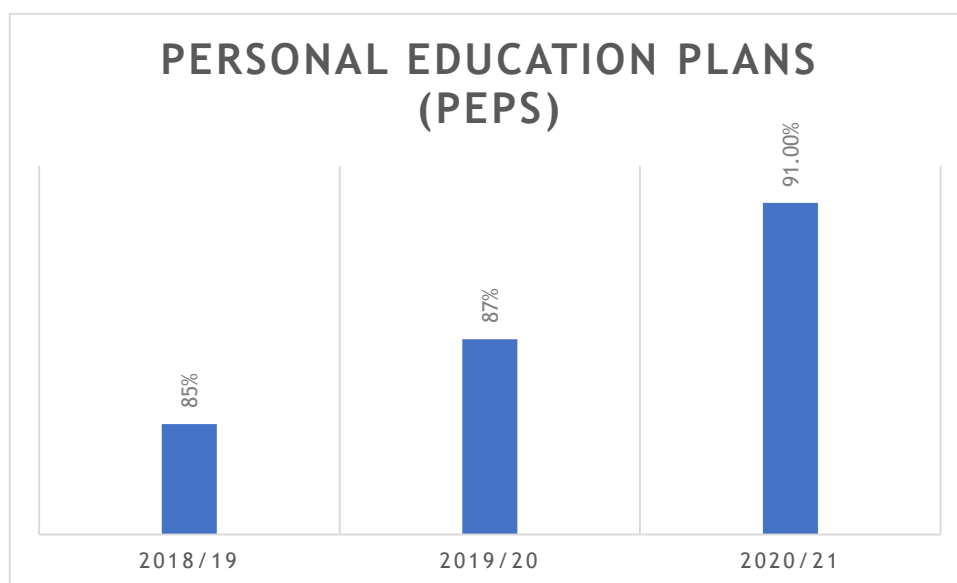
IRO Challenge & Escalation

Practice improvement and quality assurance is a central role for the IRO Service. Since September 2016, the Quality Assurance Alerts have been used by the IRO service effectively to identify areas of good practice as well as areas of concern, including quality and timeliness of reports, drift or delay in care planning, concerns regarding statutory duties not being met and areas of practice which need developing. As a service, we have routinely reviewed the Quality Assurance Alerts to help identify any key themes or areas which need to be addressed; this is then shared within the Senior Management Group.

From 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020 there were 130 Quality Assurance Alerts completed in respect of children in care. Of these there were 41 for good practice and 89 highlighting areas of concern. This was an increase in the overall number of alerts since the previous year by 37.7%. With the continued emphasis on quality assurance the Safeguarding and Performance Service worked with IT to build the QA process into mosaic, the purpose being to improve consistency and enable greater management oversight. Previously QA's were recorded by the Safeguarding Administration Team on Excel, this has now moved to Tableau, this provides a highly detailed range of data in relation to QA's including how many have been completed by each IRO, the reasons for each QA such as good quality social work report or concern about the suitability of child's placement, it can also breakdown the QA's by which team the alert is sent to. This provides important information in real time so management can see what the key issues are being raised within the local authority, where and specific difficulties may be and take the necessary remedial action. This enables themes to be identified and addressed more systematically to support improvement in practice generally and target training??

Although this has been a significant step forward there were some initial difficulties with the data validation and the overall statistics for the number of QA's in year 2020/21 are incomplete. The number of QA's recorded by the Safeguarding Administration Team for the year are 93 in total for all looked after cases, with 66 for concern and 27 for good practice. This is significantly lower than in the previous year which is undoubtedly linked to data being lost in the changeover to the new system. IRO's routinely use a check list know as Prep forms, to go through cases in advance of ROA meetings to ensure key practice standards are met, if there are any areas that are not met then they must either complete a QA or record on the child's file why they believe a QA is not necessary on this occasion.

Personal Education Plans



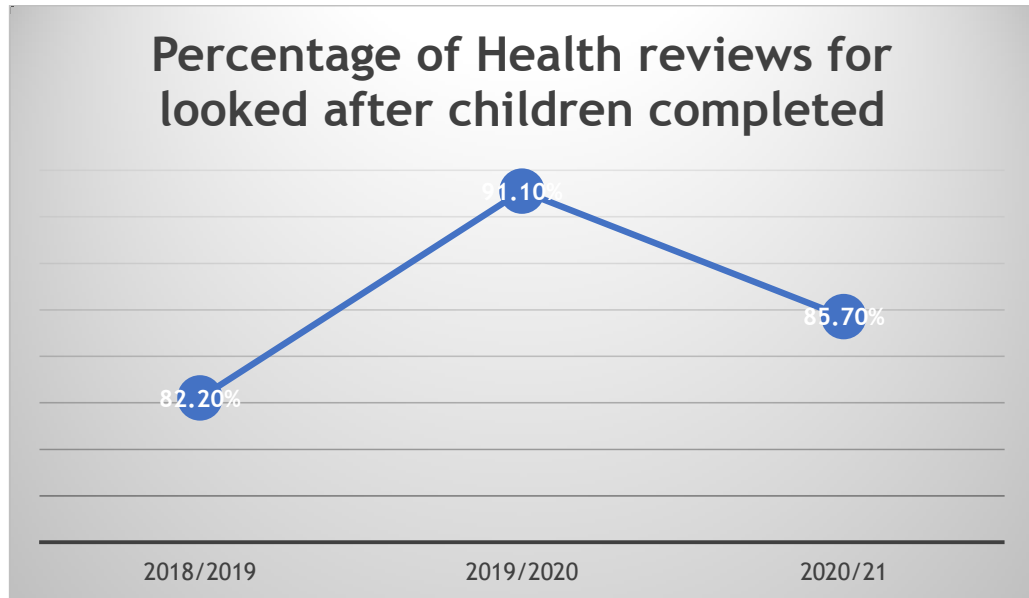
In 2020/21 of the all looked after children that were eligible for a Personal Education Plan (PEP) ninety one per cent were completed, this is an increase from the previous year during at which time eighty seven per cent of looked after children had a PEP recorded. This is a clear sign of continuous improvement and strong performance. Of the 139 children and young people that did not have a PEP 67 of these were recorded during a first review, this would be expected as the initial review must take place within 28 days of a child becoming looked after, although it could be held much sooner leaving little time for a PEP to be undertaken.

At ROA meetings IRO's routinely confirm if PEP meetings have taken place, that all recommendations are being progressed and if this is sufficient or whether further actions necessary. Completion of PEP's is seen as high priority as they are fundamental to ensuring each child has access to the right educational support to enable them to achieve their potential. To this end IRO's work closely with the Virtual School, with the Education Improvement Officers regularly attending the child's ROA.

There are several reasons why a child may not have a PEP on file, one of the most significant being that they are not in school due to an unplanned placement move. With any unplanned move the IRO will undertake a 28-day ROA to ensure the right steps have been taken to support the child in their new placement, including education provision. This has been an area of ongoing focus within the Safeguarding and Performance Service throughout 2020/21 to ensure there is no drift and Safeguarding Managers have been reviewing caseloads with IRO's

in supervision to identify any cases of ongoing concern where a young person is not accessing education and requires escalation within the Education Department through the Virtual School.

Health Check's completed within twelve months



In 2020/21 85.7% of children had their health reviews completed within timescales, this is a dip on the previous year's figure of 91.9% although still above the rate of 2018/19 when 82% had a health reviews within timescales. A key reason for the dip in performance this year appears to be outside of the control of the Safeguarding and Performance Service. LAC health reviews are monitored on via a performance dashboard on monthly basis and presented to the Leicestershire, Leicester, and Rutland Multi Agency Operational Meeting and then at the Multi Agency Strategic Meeting. The dashboard includes exception reporting that looks at the reasons behind any delays that month. In 2020/21 the dashboard indicates that the main reason for delay was the late submission of the referral from social care to health. This is an area that is being addressed by the nominated Leicestershire County Council strategic lead.

Safeguarding and Health undertake joint audits twice per year to assess the impact of the health assessment on children and young people's care plans. At the most recent audit it was found that health assessments were being referred to by IRO's in looked after reviews although this was not consistent in all cases. There were some good examples of how the LAC review covered all areas of health including discussing the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and that even though the score was low and the young person was exhibiting good mental health it was important to consider the history of trauma and the potential for this to become an issue in the future.

In another example a young person had highly complex physical and mental health needs and although the review looked in these issues in great detail it was felt that direct reference to the health review would have assisted and in such a complex case the presence of a LAC Nurse would have been beneficial to ensure that all aspects of the health needs were discussed in sufficient detail.

Dental checks within a twelve-month period

As with health reviews dental checks are viewed with high importance in contributing to children and young people's well-being. In 2019/20 there were 407 (87.6%) of children who had a dental check within the last twelve months. This is an area which is routinely scrutinised by IRO's within the ROA's however performance dipped considerably in this area during 2020/21 with only 28.4% of all looked after children having their dental checks completed within timescales, this is due to the COVID19 restrictions being in place with dentist only having capacity to see patients for emergency treatment for much of the year.

7. What is the impact for our children and families – IRO: Looked After Children's Service?

Looked after children

Information from IRO's has indicated that virtual meetings and contacting children via Skype has worked very well for some children and young people whilst for others it has been more difficult. Prior to COVID19 restrictions IRO's would regularly encourage young people to chair their own meetings, although this may require some initial preparation work once the child or young person has had a positive experience of chairing their meeting they would happily do this routinely, however chairing a virtual meeting has a different feel to it and IRO's have reported that young people have been far less keen to do this and in some cases said the virtual meeting has felt so different they have chosen not to attend. During the pandemic we have seen a reduction in children attending their ROA's however an increase in them participating in other methods, including one to one discussions with the IRO whom then advocates their views during the ROA on their behalf, thus continuing to ensure the voice of the child is heard. All workers have shown inventive ways of engaging children such as using what's app and video calls.

Alternatively, there have been many reports of young people, in particular teenagers who had not previously been attending their meetings face to face but felt far more comfortable participating in a virtual meeting rather than having to attend in person. Moving forward, with COVID19 restrictions being lifted, IRO's will begin completing the ROA to the preferred method of the child or young person, thus being face to face or via a hybrid model. It is expected IRO's will contact the child prior to the ROA meeting taking place to gain their views on how they wish for their meeting to be facilitated. IRO's are also resuming visits to children to gain their views face to face, whereas during the pandemic this process was completed virtually or via what's app and video calling.

Permanence

It is essential that children experience not only physical permanence in the form of a family they are a part of and a home they live in but also a sense of emotional permanence, of belonging and the opportunity to build a strong identity. The IRO plays a pivotal role in promoting permanence being secure for children in a timely way, having rigorous oversight of the permanence process and using the QA process to raise any concerns regarding drift and delay.

Feedback from social workers who attend Permanence Panel regularly highlights how pleased children are to be reassured the case has been approved by panel and it has formally been agreed that their long term plan will be to continue to live with cares that they have identified where they feel happy and safe. The chair of the panel writes to the child direct to share this

decision with them, which not only provides them with written confirmation but also gives the child and foster family an opportunity to celebrate permanence being secured.

IRO Challenge & Escalation

The Safeguarding Service has worked hard to embed Quality Assurance Alerts into practice and become part of Leicestershire's culture of continuous improvement. It is important that when an alert for concern is raised that these are written in a clear and objective manner that highlights any work that needs to be done whilst acknowledging positives and difficulties in achieving the right outcomes. IRO's are aware of the pressures colleagues in social care may be working in and aim to ensure that any QA is not written as a criticism of the worker but rather to highlight the importance of the local authority getting things right for the child or young person. This is in keeping with the core values in the Road to Excellence of being outcome focused and ensuring everyone is accountable for delivering high quality services.

An example of how a QA makes a difference for a child is in case A, whereby the QA was raised by the IRO as they were concerned that A had not had their life story work completed. This was raised as a significant concern as the IRO found when discussing their care plan with them that they did not really understand their journey into care or why they had become looked after. On this occasion the IRO requested life story be completed as a matter of urgency to help the young person make sense of their situation. This is an area that IRO's have to monitor closely, not only as it is a concern if life story work is not completed but also it may be necessary for this to be revisited from time to time as children get older and ask more searching questions as to why they became looked after.

The QA processes ensure the IRO maintains independent oversight of the case, challenging areas of concern as well as identifying areas of good practice. This helps to ensure that children and young people's care plans are appropriate, in line with their identified needs and that any actions raised are addressed in a timely way, in line with the QA process. Thus, prompting improved and timely outcomes for children.

Health Assessments

Health assessments are always seen as a vital aspect of the local authorities corporate parenting responsibility and health routinely report on this at the Corporate Parenting Board. These are seen as vital not only to ensure children and young people's physical health needs are met but also the health review is a key opportunity to ensure that their emotional well-being and mental health needs are being met.

Feedback from children

A key theme that has been regularly raised at the Children in Care Council has been the importance of consistency. The Review of Arrangement expectation statement will go some way to addressing this however IRO's have undertaken to look at addressing consistency through a range of measures including team meeting discussions, peer supervision and in a development day. It is planned that colleagues will review a random selection of ROA records produced by their peers to get greater understanding of their fellow IRO's working practices, additionally they will talk through their individual approaches to charring meetings with a view to collectively developing a clear standard of what good looks like and what children and young people can expect from their IRO.

Feedback from professionals

Feedback received by the safeguarding manager on the IRO service from professionals is often linked to their experience of receiving quality assurance alerts. There is a very clear message that social workers value the positive QA's and appreciate when IRO's take the time to highlight and document when a good piece of work has been completed. In relation the QA's for concern their has been increasing feedback to indicate that social workers and team managers appreciate being contacted by phone in advance of the QA being sent, on some occasions it might be found that the issue can be addressed immediately without the need for a formal QA to be completed. On other occasions it can help the person receiving the alert to understand why the concern has been raised and what needs to be done without feeling criticised or individually challenged. The IRO Service values feedback from professionals and acknowledges the importance of working in partnership with colleagues to get the best outcomes for children.

8. What can we do better - IRO: Looked After Children's Service?

Looked after children

Improving the participation and engagement of children and young people is central to the recovery plans for the Safeguarding and Performance Service. This includes, continuing to be creative with technology where children express their preference for the meeting is virtual, however IRO's resuming face to face ROA meetings where safe to do so and where this is the preference of the child. It is essential that the IRO obtains the views of the child regarding how they wish for their meeting to take place, but are also offered face to face visits with the IRO to obtain their views and wishes if they do not wish to participate in the ROA meeting itself.

As COVID restrictions have lifted IRO's have been going out to see children in a COVID safe way, going for walks, meeting in garden's or in schools which have been assessed as COVID secure.

However as some restrictions remain in place it is highly unlikely the IRO service will return to the previous way of working in the near future and there needs to be a greater investment in time to get to know children and young people through virtual means. All IRO's have been issued with iPhone's with the capacity to contact children and their carers by WhatsApp, as well as through Skype and Teams, thus ensuring the views of the child can be sought and advocated on their behalf.

Permanence

In between ROA meetings, IRO's have endeavoured to track cases and this is recorded on the child's file on Mosaic as IRO case tracking. The IRO 'footprint' has developed significantly during recent years. IRO's aim to ensuring they have oversight during review periods and addressing any concerns regarding drift and delay. Although good progress has been made in midway tracking there is room for improvement in relation to consistency, as there may be significant oversight on some of the more complex cases however as a service we now want to ensure this foot print is equally visible in all cases.

In addition to long term fostering some carers may wish to offer permanence by way of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO). This can be seen by many children and carers as a more

preferable option as this offers legal security without ongoing involvement of the local authority. In all appropriate cases this will routinely be discussed by the IRO at each review. IRO's will regularly discuss the potential for applying for and SGO and talk through any questions, worries or reservations that the carers may have, if appropriate the IRO will recommend that the family have a separate meeting with either the child's social worker or their supervising social worker to get more information about what financial, practical support and training they would be entitled to as part of an SGO support plan. Although this is clearly good practice, again the Safeguarding Service are challenging ourselves to look at what more we can do to progress appropriate cases to securing an SGO in a timelier manner.

IRO Challenge & Escalation

The Safeguarding Service is committed to improving consistency in how QA's are utilised. In addition to formal QA's there is also the option for informal QA's to be recorded. As part of the development of the new LAC focused team there will be an increased emphasis on all IRO's having a share understanding of when cases fall below the required standard.

Health Assessments

A key issue for Health and Safeguarding to address is the great use of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to help establish an understanding of children and young people's wellbeing. This is usually completed by carers and then sent to LAC Health in advance of the review. However following audit activity, it has been found that getting completed SDQ's returned from carers and sent to Health in a timely way has presented some challenges. To address this Safeguarding has been working with social care administration to ensure that the process is as efficient as possible as well as looking to develop training for social workers to ensure that they fully understand the SDQ process and what their role is in this.

9. Identified areas of development - IRO: Looked After Children's Service

- A key objective is to see children face to face where it is safe to do so. IRO's have identified those young people on their caseloads that have found virtual communication most difficult and are now prioritising arranging visits and where possible face to face ROA meetings - **August 2021**
- Throughout this year the majority of virtual meetings have been held on Skype, although video connectivity is possible the local authorities preferred method of video conferencing is Microsoft Teams and it is planned to move all ROA meetings to Teams in the coming months – **October 2021**
- The child consultation booklet to be prompted and used, with the development of an electronic version for children to use if this is their preference – **September 2021**
- The implementation of the midway case tracking template and secondly the revision of the Review of Arrangements monitoring form to include enhanced monitoring of permanence data – **June 2021**
- The midway case tracking template will now be completed by all IRO's for looked after children at the half way point between reviews this is to ensure that all actions agreed at the previous review have been completed within timescales and no other issues are causing drift or delay. This process will be supported by the Administration Team who will include the date for the midway reviews in the IRO diaries. It is anticipated that this will provide not only greater IRO oversight but will make a real difference for children in progressing their journey to achieving permanence – **June 2021**
- The Review of Arrangements monitoring form is being revised as currently it highlights when a permanence plan has been agreed but not when it has been achieved which is

now being added along with monitoring the ongoing success of a permanence placement. In doing this there has been a greater focus within the IRO group on the full range of permanence and what steps need to be have both legal and emotional permanence – **October 2021**

- A major step forward in the application of QA's will be the use of the Tableau report which is now fully operational. This will enable IRO's and managers to see when QA's are still open and require a response from social care before the case can be closed. This should support the QA process to address concerns in a timely manner – **June 2021**
- Safeguarding managers to be part of the social care performance management group, this is important as by having a greater oversight on the full range of children's social care data it will be possible to cross reference any areas of concern with QA activity. The expectation will be that if any data highlight's concerns in certain areas, for example if a particularly team are not producing reports within given timescales it will be possible to see if IRO's are addressing this with the team on a case by case basis – **June 2021**
- As part of our ongoing to commitment to promote equality and diversity we have now added this as its own category of concern which enables IRO's to raise any issues whereby any child or young person's diversity needs are not being met. This will now be monitored within Tableau to enable managers to identify if there are any patterns or specific areas of concern which can be address as a matter of urgency – **August 2021**
- A further development this year will be with IRO's taking part in the thematic audit activity carried out by managers on a quarterly basis. The plan is for each full time IRO to complete two audits per year. Again, this will help the IRO's have a greater understanding of colleague's work, improve consistency, and give a more in depth understanding of what good looks like for Leicestershire. This is in line with the service being part of a learning organisation, using data and audit to know ourselves well and inform our learning – **May 2021**

10. Corporate Parenting Team

The Corporate Parenting Team is also based within the Safeguarding and Performance Service. This is comprised of two Participation Officers who lead on all participation activities including the Children in Care Council (CICC) and Beacon Voices, looked after children's choir. Additionally, there are three Children's Rights Officers who provided advocacy for young people who are both looked after or subject to Child Protection procedures.

The ethos of corporate parenting runs throughout the work of the Safeguarding and Performance Service. The Participation Officers work directly with children and young people to get their voice collectively, to hear their views about the local authority and the services they have experienced. We have a very active Children in Care Council who meet monthly to not only socialise and meet other looked after children and young people but also examine specific aspects of Children's Services and hold the local authority to account with delegated members of the CICC attending the quarterly Corporate Parenting Board.

The team consists of 3 FTE Children's Rights Officers, 1.6 FTE Participation Officers, who are lined managed by the Safeguarding Manager for the Looked After Children's Service.

11. What do we know about the performance and quality of practice within our Corporate Parenting Team?

Participation

The Participation Team have a strong ethos of working with children and young people following the 'you said, we did' philosophy, this is routinely evidenced within the work of the Children in Care Council. Members of the Children in Care Council continue to take part in the interview panels to have their voice in who the local authority recruits into key roles in the Children and Family Services. We continue to have positive participation in this process, where the young people design questions they wish to ask and feedback to the recruitment panel.

Children in Care Council recently participated in the development of a Contact Expectations Statement and a Review of Arrangements Expectation Statement to improve the experiences of our children who have contact and participate in their Review of Arrangement Meetings. These documents clearly identify the views, wishes and perspective of children and young people and have been welcomed by the workers to ensure they are reflected in contact with family members and Review of Arrangement Meetings. Young people met with a group of IROs and talked about their experience of their meetings, what they thought went well, where things could be better and shared their views on why consistency was so important so that all children and young people have a positive experience when attending their meetings. It is important to note that it was the young people themselves that wanted to meet with the IROs to be reassured that any expectation statement they designed would be a meaningful document that was both aspirational and achievable. The next step will be to obtain feedback from children and young people on the impact these Statements have had on their experiences.

Members of the Children in Care Council have also participated in the production of a young people's version of the Corporate Parenting Strategy. A video has been designed by members of the Children in Care Council. Young people were consulted on what the children's version of the strategy should look like and they were clear that they did not want it presented in a written

form that looked like a leaflet or booklet so it was agreed to record it as an animated video. The young people were involved in every step of the design process. They were asked what they thought the most important elements of corporate parenting was and what did it mean to them. This generated a lot of ideas that were developed into statements and they were then asked via mentimeter to identify the most important ones which were then used for the basis of the script of the video which the young people recorded.

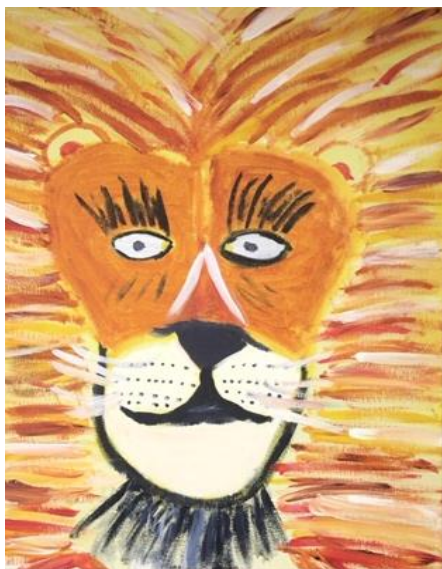
This has now been launched at the Corporate Parenting Board in April 2021 and subsequently shown in several forums including Child Care Managers Meeting. On every occasion the feedback has been positive and professionals have commented how powerful it is to hear the young people's comments. A link to the video can be found below:

<https://youtu.be/M-C7jdPB80s>

The Children in Care Council have also been working with Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, to develop a number of different projects with a view to all the CICC members being Green Champions. One of the issues they are looking at currently is issues they have been exploring so far are; stopping the use of single use plastic in their own environment, it is planned in the summer they will be part of a tree planting campaign, setting up bug hotels and a wild life garden at County Hall. They are also planning an environment cleaning campaign such as going to Bradgate Park and do a litter pick. The young people are also really keen to have the opportunity to do a beach clean, this is likely to be planned when further COVID restrictions are lifted.

Beacon Voice's looked after children's choir has continued to meet throughout lockdown, despite it not being possible to meet face to face and sing together the group have met Monday, initially this was just to keep the cohesion of the group together and engaging in fun activities such as games and quizzes, more recently they have been working with our new choir master to write a new song they are looking forward to performing as soon as the COVID restrictions are lifted.

As it has not been possible to arrange face to face activities in the usual way during this year the Participation Team have been very creative in looking at other ways to engage children and young people. One popular way has been with virtual art workshops. These have been arranged with two separate companies. In one session there was an online tutorial where all the participants learnt to paint a tiger. An example of a tiger painted by one of our young people:



Our main participation event for the summer 2020 was the virtual Leicestershire's Got Talent competition that took place in August 2020. All our looked after children and young people and care leavers were invited to send in a short video clip of themselves performing their chosen talent. These were divided into three age ranges of junior, senior and care leaver. There was an excellent diversity of entries with children and young people not only singing and dancing but also dog training, trampolining and crocheting to name but a few. The finals were held on a Teams meeting with a judging panel including the director and assistant director of children's services and a young person who was the then Chair of the Children in Care Council. The winner of the youngest category sang and danced to a song from the Greatest Showman, the senior winner impressed the judges with their singing and playing the ukulele with the final winner being a young man who submitted a video of himself in a race against the clock to complete multiple Rubik's cubes. However, the judges were so impressed with all the entrants that on the night it was agreed everyone should get a voucher for their brilliant performances.

Additionally, there were two other events ran by Cathy Matthews - artist which focused on water colouring and drawing and a 'Swirly Sky's' workshop. Due to the positive feedback we are now exploring the option of having a monthly art club.

The Participation Team have also been supporting a new group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ+) young people called Out in Care. This was devised by one of our care experienced young people who wanted to set up a forum for young people to meet in a safe environment, discuss issues and share information and experiences.

12. What is the impact for our children and families – Corporate Parenting Service?

CICC represents a group of YP that have been 'done to' and there have been lots of decisions made about them, the CICC given them the opportunity to work in a safe and secure environment, gives them a voice, influence and enables them to exercise their ability to show they are experts in their own lives. They can see their impact and influence in positive ways such as with their involvement with the recruitment of senior managers.

One of the Participation Officers commented 'on the journey of influence young people's confidence grows and helps them realise their potential...it's so rewarding to see young people develop their confidence, especially when you see them leading discussions at the Corporate Parenting Board, discussing important issues with the Director, Assistant Director and Heads of Service'. The discussions in Corporate Parenting Board can be very empowering for young people and helps the local authority and partnership agencies keep a clear focus on what the issues are for young people.

13. What can we do better – Corporate Parenting Service?

We are very mindful of the need to make the CICC and participation in general as representative as possible. As we start to return to more face to face participation activities it is important not to lose sight of how productive and engaging some of the virtual meetings and activities are. A key area of development for the coming year to look at different ways to engage our looked after children and young people who are placed out of county and help them feel more connected to Leicestershire and reassure them that their voice is just as important.

Furthermore, we would like to build stronger relationships between Participation and the IRO's as well as the locality teams, Children in Care Teams and the Disabled Childrens Service.

It is well established that the Corporate Parenting Team are a highly capable and committed group with a passion for supporting our children and young people. The vision of the team is to support all children and young people who require advocacy and ensure their voice is heard. The aspiration is to increase the range of participation events to enable a greater cross section of our children and young people to have a voice in shaping the services that are there to help them and more broadly to develop the ethos of Corporate Parenting across the Local Authority and with Partner Agencies including the introduction and co-ordination of Corporate Parenting Champions.

The roles within the Corporate Parenting Team have evolved since the job descriptions were first produced. As a result of the developments within the service, including the growth of the service and the roles and responsibilities, it was agreed an evaluation of the team was required and this will be completed in summer 2021, which will include service redesign and delivery focused on improving increased management drive and oversight to drive forward the development of the service further and thus enhancing service delivery to our children and young people.

Feedback from children

The Participation Officers work hard to support children and young people, development their confidence and reinforce to them how important it is that they have a voice and can express their view in a way that ensures they are being heard, probably nowhere more so than in the Children in Care Council. The monthly meetings are a mix of both fun activities and focussed work including looking at area's where the looked after services could change and improve to meet the needs of children and young people better.

A selection of quotes from young people can be seen below:

"Through the Children in Council we regularly attend Corporate Parenting Board meetings. This gives us a fantastic opportunity to meet senior managers and influence the important decisions that matter to Children in Care"

"CiC Council has really helped with my self-esteem and confidence. Before getting involved I was shy and very nervous, now I am far more confident to talk about how I am feeling and to challenge things in a positive way"

"Children in Care Council has not only been an amazing social experience to talk and get to know more people, but it's also been a rewarding experience to know the work that we do is helping improve the lives of other young people in care".

Unfortunately, the three major events whereby we are best able to capture the feedback of children and young people were all postponed in 2020/21 due to covid restrictions, these being the summer scheme, winter fun day and the Celebration of Achievement Awards. All of which are normally face to face activities whereby young people are given an opportunity to use a range of art resourced to express their views, hopes, thoughts and feelings, which can then be recorded on story boards. Although these did not take place in 2020/21 everyone is very much looking forward the August 2021 summer scheme, which will now be our first major face to face event since the start of the pandemic.

As a result of the success of the virtual art groups in lockdown, an exciting development is now planned, to introduce monthly art sessions in partnership with a local voluntary sector arts project, this will be a great opportunity to capture the views and insights of our younger children in care

It is also planned that a further means to capture children and young people's feedback in 2021/22 is by way of quarterly surveys to assess the impact of participation activities and inform the development of future work.

Feedback from professionals

Feedback from professionals in relation to the work of the corporate parenting team and the Children in Care Council has been highly positive this year.

The Corporate Parenting Team and the young people have had excellent feedback on the consultation work they have completed on the Defining the Future of Children's Service's. As referred to above, this was a group of young people that shaped the way the consultation was undertake and it challenged the consultants to rethink the way they interacted with young people to gain their views. Rather than ask young people to complete a questionnaire or talk to the consultants direct. A group of young people were supported by the Participation Officer to interview other young people peer to peer about the development of new services. This has been a high profile piece of work which is being used to inform the design and development of future services for children and families. The consultants developed a list of key areas they wanted the young people's views on and the young people developed and adapted the questions to ensure they would be meaningful to their peers. The consultants full of praise for all the young people that worked in this process, the strength of it being they were able to capture so much key information as there were no communication barriers in place as it was care experience young people talking to other care experienced young people seeking their ideas and views. This has been seen as a flagship piece of development work.

At the launch of the Children's Version of the Corporate Parenting Strategy at the Corporate Parenting Board, professionals commented how powerful it was hear children talk about what corporate parenting means to them and what they would ask of those with this responsibility.

Initially this was designed by young people for young people but the feedback has been so positive it is now being seen as a valuable tool in conveying the key messages of what corporate parenting means. It is being considered as a resource to be used in training for colleagues within children and families services and partnership agencies as well as it having the potential to be shown as part of an induction programme for newly elected members and part of ongoing training for existing counsellors.

The work the young people completed on the Review of Arrangements expectation document was very well received by the IRO's, firstly when it was shared with a number of them at a Children in Care Council meeting, then this was taken to the following IRO Team Meeting for the whole team to consider. The feedback on their work was very positive and the proposals the young people had made were fully embraced by the team who agreed this should be used to inform their day to day practice going forward.

14. Identified areas of development – Corporate Parenting Service

- The roles within the Corporate Parenting Team have evolved since the job descriptions were first produced. As a result of the developments within the service, including the growth of the service and the roles and responsibilities, it was agreed an evaluation of the team was required and this will be completed in summer 2021, which will include service redesign and delivery focused on improving increased management drive and oversight to drive forward the development of the service further and thus enhancing service delivery to our children and young people.
- The young people in the Children in Care Council have expressed an interest working with social workers to deliver a workshop on what makes a good social worker, sharing their views on what are the elements of their practice that are really important to young people and best practice in relationship building.
- The Children in Care Council have also been working with Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, to develop a number of different projects with a view to all the CICC members being Green Champions. One of the issues they are looking at currently is issues they have been exploring so far are; stopping the use of single use plastic in their own environment, it is planned in the summer they will be part of a tree planting campaign, setting up bug hotels and a wild life garden at County Hall. They are also planning an environment cleaning campaign such as going to Bradgate Park and do a litter pick. The young people are also really keen to have the opportunity to do a beach clean, this is likely to be planned when further COVID restrictions are lifted.
- The Participation Team have also been working with the UASC Team to undertake a scoping exercise looking at what would be the best ways to plan regular engagement meetings and activities for our unaccompanied asylum seekers. Although there have been a number of events held for them previously including a theatre trip it is hoped that by having a regular activities or meetings it will make the Participation Team more accessible to this group of young people.

15. Independent Reviewing Officer - Service Developments 2021-2022

Looked After Children - Independent Reviewing Officers			
Objective	Actions	Lead	Date for implementation
Children have timely targeted high quality intervention to maximise their outcomes using skills across agencies			
An effective and consistent IRO Service to be implemented, providing expertise, knowledge and experience which can be shared with other Children and Families Services.	Joint IRO/CIC council Task and finish Group to work on the development of more consistency of the application of Signs of Safety within Looked After Children reviews; to enhance the inclusion of the voice and participation of the child or young person.	IRO's to be identified to attend CIC each month, to complete this work and keep an open source of communication between the IRO's and CIC.	Jun-21
	Care plans / Pathway Plans to be based on the individual needs of the child / young person and be SMART.	IRO's to be identified to attend CIC each month, to complete this work and keep an open source of communication between the IRO's and CIC.	Jun-21
Children receive the right intervention without drift and delay to ensure decisions are timely and appropriate to their needs to improve their outcomes			
Clear evidence of the IRO's oversight of cases, ensuring any concerns regarding drift and delay are addressed in a timely way.	Mid-way reviews to be completed on all cases, with the IRO reviewing the progress of the care plan, ensuring the IRO footprint and oversight is evident on case files. Any concerns raised during the review should be raised using the QA process.	IRO's	Jun-21

	The QA process to be effectively used to address any areas of concern, as well as recognising good practice.	IRO's	Jun-21
	Ensure the supervision policy is being adhered to, with cases having regular supervision discussions on file, in line with the timescales set out in the policy, including clear management oversight and driving forward the care planning.	IRO's	Jun-21

Clear, accessible and easily understood records support our children understanding their journey and decisions now and in the future.			
A timely, high quality and inclusive service is provided to children and families.	Exploration for ROA meetings to be held using Microsoft Teams whilst being held virtually.	Stuart Jones - ASM Looked After Children Lead	Jun-21
	Service provision to be reviewed alongside the COVID recovery plans, with consideration of how virtual meetings can be incorporated into core service delivery. Putting in place learning from what has worked well during the virtual ways of working and what areas need to improve, whilst also having some meetings face to face.	Stuart Jones - ASM Looked After Children Lead	May-21
	Timescales to be met in	IRO's	Jun-21

	respect of 5 day decisions being inputted on Mosaic.		
	Timescales to be met in respect of ROA records being distributed.	Business Support	Jun-21
	ROA documents to be written to the child.	IRO's	Jun-21
	IRO oversight to be evident on case notes.	IRO's	Jun-21

Children experience stability in their long term care placements and certainty about their living arrangements and future plans

Achieving permanency at all pathways of the child's journey	IROs to ensure a consistent and robust approach to care and permanence planning for every child with strengthened management oversight processes – avoid drift and delay	Stuart Jones - ASM Looked After Children Lead	Jun-21
	Development of Mosaic steps to support with permanence performance data, including the updating of the ROA monitoring forms.	Stuart Jones - ASM Looked After Children Lead, Kelda Claire - HofS CIC Services	Jun-21

There will be evidence of performance from analysis of key data driving improvements and experience of service delivery by children and young people

Learning will be shared and valued by staff as means to drive improvement for children.	IRO's will undertake a minimum of two thematic audits per year, in line with the other managers within CFS.	IRO's	From Q2 - May 2021
--	---	-------	--------------------

	IRO's will complete audit activity throughout the year, identified by Stuart Jones - ASM and these reports will be shared with QAIT and the Learning Framework completed.	IRO's	Starting from May 2021
	Stuart to devise an audit timetable for the IRO's.	Stuart Jones - ASM Looked After Children Lead	Jun-21
	IRO's identified to lead in particular areas of interest, service delivery and training to champion the improvement areas. This would include an attendance to represent the IRO views at Residential Review Groups, leads in permanence and other identified areas of specialism within LAC. This will provide development opportunities for IRO's in attending meetings with SMT and representing the IRO service.	Stuart Jones - ASM Looked After Children Lead and IRO's	Jun-21

The safeguarding unit provides a work environment where all staff can access support, build positive career pathways and where reliance on temporary agency staff is reduced this stable staff group enables consistent, effective and meaningful engagement and progress for children and families - add in ADP

IRO's receive regular and quality supervision and support, as well as being supported with their own professional development.	Monthly peer supervision sessions will be held, with IRO's completed 3 monthly learning feedback and this being sent to QAIT.	IRO's	Jun-21
---	---	-------	--------

	IRO's will receive bi-monthly supervision which will cover personal supervision and case supervision, in addition to the PDR process.	Stuart Jones - ASM Looked After Children Lead	Jun-21
	Case supervision discussions held in supervision will be recorded on Mosaic.	Stuart Jones - ASM Looked After Children Lead	Jun-21
	IRO's will be supported to attend regular training and development opportunities.	Hayley Binley - Service Manager and Stuart Jones - ASM Looked After Children Lead	Jun-21

All staff are fully aware of the responsibilities they have, in their day to day roles in services and with colleagues at work, for advancing the council's equality and diversity objectives

<p>To ensure that all staff are enabled to feel safe and supported within the Safeguarding and Performance Service. The team are able to share worries or concerns openly and without judgement</p>	Work towards a stronger, evidence-based approach to tackling inequalities - including relevant research, data, QA activity and engagement with children, young people and families.	Safeguarding and Performance Service	Jun-21
	Staff will be supported to be confident and capable of raising their experience of personal discrimination/'how your making me feel?' and challenging discriminatory practice or language either within the authority or outside of the authority irrelevant of status.	Safeguarding and Performance Service	Jun-21

	Supervision to be a safe and supportive arena to raise concerns and explore the wider ADP issues within their role. ADP to be added as standing agenda item on Personal Supervision.	Stuart Jones - ASM Looked After Children Lead	Jun-21
	ADP Action plan to be reviewed quarterly as a whole Service.	Safeguarding and Performance Service	Jun-21
	All staff to ensure mandatory training as well as bespoke equality, diversity and human rights training is completed and for bespoke training to be discussed in APR and Supervision.	Safeguarding and Performance Service	Jun-21

Authors:

Hayley Binley

Interim Service Manager, Safeguarding and Performance Service

Stuart Jones

Assistant Service Manager: Performance and Corporate Parenting Lead

Date: 04/08/2021