

Safeguarding and Performance Independent Reviewing Officer Service Child in Care Annual Report 1st April 2024 – 31st March 2025



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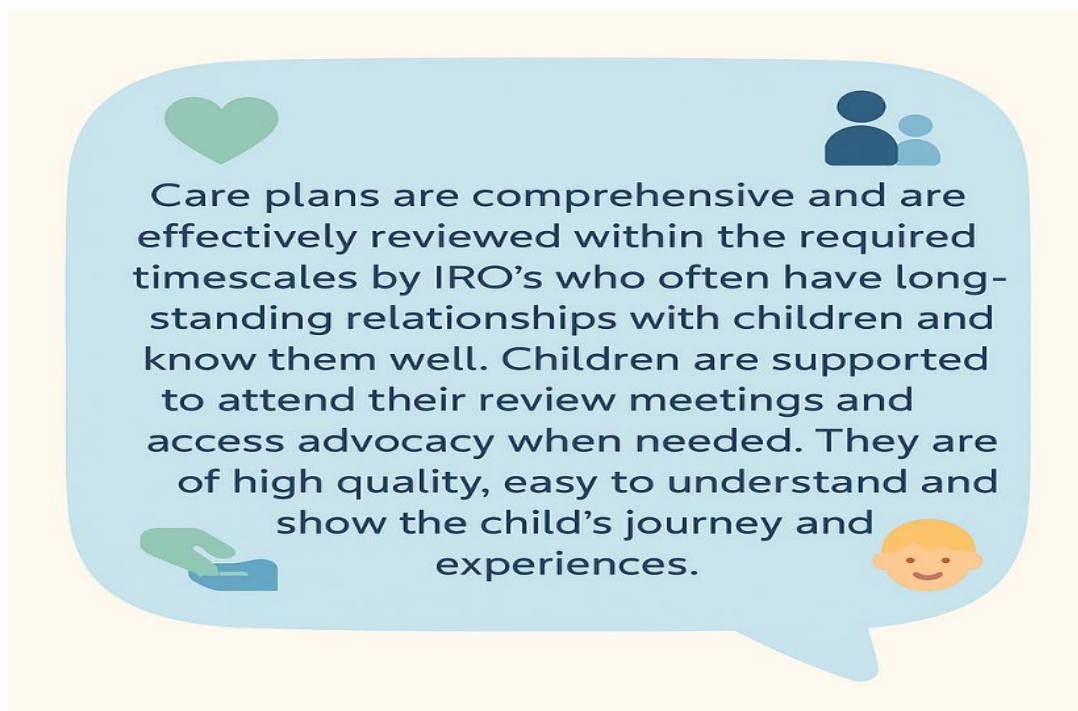
1. Executive Summary

The Annual Report for the Independent Reviewing Officer Service provides an overview of service performance in 2024-2025 and identifies our priorities for the forthcoming year. The Independent Reviewing Officer Handbook sets out the statutory requirement for an annual report on the delivery of services and the impact of the Independent Reviewing Officer service on the outcomes for children in care.

For the purpose of this report, the term Looked After Child will be used for statutory related references to children looked after by the Local Authority and all other references will refer to Children in Care.

As we reflected in our last annual report for 2023/24 that was a year to reset and regroup, and 2024/25 has been a year of embedding this into our practice, whilst ensuring we keep children at the centre of their care planning.

We welcomed Ofsted for our full inspection in April 2024 resulting in Children Services in Leicestershire being rated as Outstanding. This included an Outstanding judgment for our children in care services. Ofsted provided a strong objective measure of the IRO service as part of the inspection, and this judgement is particularly important given it is based on external scrutiny. OFSTED told us :-



During the year we continued to use our Independent Reviewing Officer 'bottom lines' which were updated in October 2024. These reflect key issues from discussions from our development day and include a focus on the timeliness of social work reports shared in preparation for the review meeting.

Whilst all review meetings went ahead with a social work report and updated care plan available to the meeting, the Independent Reviewing Officer's had identified that reports were not always available with sufficient time to provide for preparation and reflection. Our bottom lines have restated the required 3-day timescale for reports being shared as our expected standard. This has had a positive impact on the quality of preparation for review meetings. Meetings are more purposeful, based on everyone being and feeling prepared for the meeting.

This provides more focus on progressing care plan actions to deliver outcomes of our children in care.

Independent Reviewing Officers continue to embed the use of their 'one page profile', which is sent out in preparation for a first review meeting. This introduces the reviewing officer to the child and is designed to be kept by the child to establish and promote the relationship with their Independent Reviewing Officer going forwards.

During 2024 we had a positive team development day in September 2024. This provided an opportunity for the whole team to come together, including 2 new members of the team who joined the service in summer 2024. Filling our vacant posts fulfilled a key ambition for the service to fill all our established posts to offer stability and consistency in our work with children. This is particularly important given the importance of relationships in the IRO offer to children so that the role is meaningful and impactful.

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF

Name: Rebecca Peters

Job: Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

Tel:

e-mail:

What people like and admire about me:

- I am a kind and approachable person
- I like to support my colleagues and enjoy being part of a team
- I have a good sense of humour

What is important to me for you:

- That you feel listened to
- That you have yourself about your life and decisions made for you
 - That you have somebody in your life that you trust
- That you recognise your potential and feel supported to follow your dreams
- That you feel valued, important and cared about

My role in supporting you:

I check that everyone involved in your care is doing the best job they can to make sure that you are safe, happy and all your needs are met.

BE A PINEAPPLE
STAND TALL, WEAR A CROWN
AND BE SWEET ON THE INSIDE

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

Whilst we had changes in our senior management team towards the end of our last annual report year, this provided opportunities for a greater connection to the Practice Excellence Team and Quality Assurance and Improvement Team, who now form part of a unified service. The new service structure was successfully implemented and launched in June 2024, with Hollie Martin recruited to Service Manager position and providing leadership to the service.

The new service structure has allowed for closer working relationships across the service to support learning and development and has brought further focus to the quality assurance work the Independent Reviewing Officers complete. There is also a closer working relationship between the team and the Principal Social Worker in Leicestershire providing a link to practitioner's voice and supporting the impact of learning across the authority. This had made the role of the independent reviewing officers more visible in learning and improvement work during this year.

New recruits to the service have benefited from a strong induction plan, which means that the new Independent Reviewing Officers have settled into their role, with strong support from their peers. This has meant that use of agency workers has significantly decreased during 2024/25. This stability in the team has allowed our commitment to purposeful practice to progress. We can also see significant improvement in our key performance measures including timeliness of review meetings, stability of meetings held per month as well as children participating in their review meetings.

It has however also meant that some of our more variable data such as our quality assurance work has been less consistent as our 5 new Independent Reviewing Officers settle into their roles.

Over this year, we have been working with our Corporate Parenting Team to support their launch of the Language that Cares Toolkit which was developed in partnership with our Children in Care Council.

This launched in June 2024, and the Independent Reviewing Officers have worked to embed this into practice by ensuring it is referenced in each child's review and the child's views captured in the record.

We continue to write the children's review summaries to them, and this is now a key focus of delivering the language and terminology that the child has identified for what they call where they live, the adults around them and the time they spend with their family and friends.

After recent audit work in January 2025, we can see the positive impact this has had to date but we need to continue to embed this further into social work practice for children in care over 2025/26.

During the year we have continued to return to a more business-as-usual service delivery model, whilst retaining a level of flexibility using new ways of working developed through the pandemic. We have recognized that for some of our young people, they prefer their review meeting to be in person, whilst others prefer them to be virtual – their views are central to how we manage our meetings so that we can get the best participation possible. Importantly we have seen an increase in our meetings being held face-to-face this year.

We have continued to successfully embed changes to recording in the Mosaic system which started in May 2023. This significantly changed how reports and care plans are completed for our children, including providing timely 5-day recommendations and a clear Independent Reviewing Officer summary. We are now satisfied that we are using this approach effectively. These extensive changes affected how data is gathered for reporting and whilst most gaps in our reporting have now been resolved, we are still using some manual tracking for our informal quality assurances alerts. We have worked with our ICT and Business intelligence teams to add the necessary details into the forms, to pull the correct data forwards but are waiting for these enhancements to be built and launched. We aim for this to be delivered in 25/26.

The Independent Reviewing Officer Service has been committed to further strengthening practice around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in terms of developing our knowledge and understanding and becoming more culturally competent in our practice. This has included training for the team, undertaking individual learning, having guest speakers and reflecting in team meetings and supervision about how we can best ensure that the diverse needs of our children in care are being met in the care planning process.

Key areas of development this year remain focused on delivering our aspirations as set out in our Continuous Improvement Plan (2024-2027), Achieving Excellence through Purposeful Practice. This, alongside Our Promise to our Children in Care, provides the aspiration, vision, values and behaviours which embody the Independent Reviewing Officer service.

We are also mindful of the Social Work National Reforms taking place across England published in 2024 and informing a programme of work into 25/26. The aims of the reforms were set out in the children's social care national framework, published by the Department for Education (DfE) in December 2023 as statutory guidance for local authorities. The framework established four overarching outcomes for the children's social care system:

- children, young people and families stay together and get the help they need,
- children and young people are supported by their family network,
- children and young people are safe in and outside of their homes,
- children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes.

These four outcomes are underpinned by three "enablers", which are designed to support councils and their partners to achieve the outcomes. These are:

- **Multi-agency working is prioritised and effective.**
- **Leaders drive conditions for effective practice.**
- **The workforce is equipped and effective.**

Whilst there are no significant changes proposed to the Independent Reviewing Officer role, there is to the Child Protection Chair role which may have an indirect impact for our involvement and activity.

A framework of quality assurance and learning improvement activity continues to tell us how we are doing as a service and forms a key part of understanding the lived experience of children in care, the quality of social work services they have in place, arrangements for their day-to-day care, time with their families and achieving permanency.

The service has continued to conduct regular audit of its own service but also to provide a key role as a critical friend to operational colleagues by the implementation of the informal and formal quality assurance process. Key to this is having a strong Independent Reviewing Officer footprint in our records so that our role in achieving best outcomes for children including where appropriate to achieve permanency is visible.



2. Introduction

The Annual Report for the Independent Reviewing Officer sets out the performance for the service in 2024-2025, identifying our key achievement and setting out 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.

We recognise the role of the service as central to driving forward the Continuous Improvement Plan 2024-2027, and promoting the key goals and behaviours set out in Achieving Excellence through Purposeful Practice.



The Independent Reviewing Officer Service in Leicestershire sits within the Safeguarding and Performance Service and works closely with our Child Protection Chairs to bring a consistent approach to planning and implementing practice standards for our most vulnerable children.

Whilst the service sits within the Children and Family Services department and is part of the management structure of Children's Social Care, it remains independent of the line management of resources for children in care and the operational social work teams.

The independence of the Independent Reviewing Officer ensures that they can advocate and challenge on behalf of children and families to ensure that they receive the right service at the right time to both protect and support them.



The Safeguarding and Performance service continues to have two focused teams of Child Protection Conference Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officer's for children in care. The two teams have specialised expertise and drive forward the development plan for that area resulting in a robust, efficient Independent Reviewing Officer Service.

The quality assurance role of Independent Reviewing Officer'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. Independent Reviewing Officers have key duties that scrutinise and support the quality, safety and effectiveness of safeguarding practice and policy, care planning and achieving permanence. Independent Reviewing Officers are central to

identifying and sharing good practice and checking the quality and consistency of provision across the areas of Looked After Children.

Independent Reviewing Officers 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, are central to planning and given full consideration. The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 extended the Independent Reviewing Officer'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 Independent Reviewing Officer 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 Independent Reviewing Officer 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 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 2024 to March 2025.

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 – 'what is working well' and those in need of development and improvement – 'what needs to happen'. 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 Independent Reviewing Officer 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 Independent Reviewing Officer 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 service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or whether we are failing'.

The proposed Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill does not currently suggest changes to the statutory requirements for this role.

4. Profile of the Service

Safeguarding and Performance Service, IRO focus team

1x FTE Service Manager (covers both focus teams)

1x FTE Safeguarding Manager- Looked After Children

12.01 x FTE IRO

There are significant benefits of the service being located within Children's Social Care whilst maintaining their independence. The position allows Independent Reviewing Officer'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 Independent Reviewing Officer must be valued by senior managers and operate within a supportive service culture and environment. It is not the responsibility of the Independent Reviewing Officer to manage the intervention and support or 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. In circumstances where this is not being delivered it is their role to challenge to make a difference.

Independent Reviewing Officers 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 contributes to improvement activity which has 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 continued effort to recruit and retain our workforce. This is recognition of the pivotal role the Independent Reviewing Officers 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 Independent Reviewing Officer is central to strengthening the implementation of Signs of Safety and Trauma Informed practice approach. Independent Reviewing Officer's are Practice Leads, role modelling and applying the Signs of Safety approach in practice, delivering our identified values and behaviours and being experts in planning. This includes promoting the use of networks to strengthen support and protection to our vulnerable children and enhancing how we build the wellbeing of our Children in Care. This is alongside recognizing the impact of trauma on the lives of children, young people, and families.

Independent Reviewing Officers play a significant role in the development and delivery of high-quality interventions to children in care and in need of protection. The Independent Reviewing

Officer Service in Leicestershire remains committed to this responsibility. This commitment is supported by the implementation of a service specific Learning Audit Framework which highlights areas of need and provides a framework of observation, peer audit, and audit analysis to inform learning and drive forward best practice. In addition, the service has monthly Improvement Cycle meetings to challenge and evaluate service performance data to support rigorous responses to emerging performance trends and direct action for improvement. This is reported to the Senior Management Team, chaired by the Assistant Director in monthly performance meetings for challenge and oversight.

Challenge Meetings

The Service Manager for the Safeguarding and Performance Service, Safeguarding Managers, and the Agency Decision Maker meet each month for a Pre-Challenge Tracking Meeting. This provides an opportunity to discuss cases and explore themes of concern.

Consideration is given to these cases / matters being taken to the formal 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 Independent Reviewing Officer during supervision or during Team Meetings. Given the quality assurance role of the Agency Decision Maker, particularly in respect of permanence, this forum is key to jointly identify themes and areas of practice which need further development at the earliest opportunity. The terms of reference for this meeting were further developed and strengthened in March 2024 to support this process.

The formal challenge meeting is then held with the Assistant Director monthly as part of this process, to discuss identified areas of concern, identified in the pre-challenge meeting. Cases discussed in this forum are cases which have followed the full escalation process.

This formal challenge meeting also provides a chance to review and consider data linked to quality assurance alerts completed in that month and themes identified.

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) & Family Justice Board

The Independent Reviewing Officer service continues to maintain a good working relationship with CAFCASS Children's Guardians. Independent Reviewing Officers routinely liaise with Children's Guardians during Care Proceedings and ensure their views on the care plans are represented formally in the court process. Guardians routinely write to the Safeguarding and Performance Service 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 Independent Reviewing Officer also completes an Independent Reviewing Officer 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 Independent Reviewing Officers and Guardians. The Assistant Service Manager who oversees the line management of the Independent Reviewing Officers attends meetings with the managers from CAFCASS to discuss any identified themes and to ensure that there is a strong partnership in place. 6 monthly meetings are being arranged between Independent Reviewing Officers and Cafcass Guardians, including managers, to review and support working relationships, share information and updates and ensure any matters arising can be dealt with. During the last quarter of 23/24 a learning session was planned

between CAFCASS and Independent Reviewing Officer's for City and County, which then took place in June 2024.

Feedback and learning from the service is fed into the routine Family Justice Board meetings and in turn the service is kept up to date with any issues arising from the Public Law work that in turn influences Independent Reviewing Officer practice. This supports timely care planning and better outcomes for the children based on collaborative learning.

Regional Independent Reviewing Officer Forums

The Service has continued to engage in the East Midlands Regional Independent Reviewing Officer forums and has had the benefit of quarterly tailored training and networking days over 2024/25. Each Regional Day has a key theme 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. The engagement promotes the sharing of learning and development to strengthen our local service offer.

5. Independent Reviewing Officer Service: Looked After Children

Being a Corporate Parent

The Independent Reviewing Officer 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 the council does, and it is the council's responsibility to ensure that our children are given the care, support and stability that they deserve.

Independent Reviewing Officers are represented at the Corporate Parenting board by the Assistant Service Manager and Service Manager. Going forwards for 2025/2026 we plan to grow and strengthen our links to the Corporate Parenting team further.

Our Corporate Parenting Strategy states:

We strive for children and young people of Leicestershire to be afforded positive, stable and safe care within their families, where they are well connected to their communities and supported to access support services where needed.

In circumstances where children are unable to live with their family, our priority is to ensure they are provided with safe, stable and secure care and permanence is secured within a timely way. We want children to be afforded with opportunities to ensure they inspire to have high aspirations which are supported, thus having successful childhood experiences, which are the foundations to their adulthood.

In Leicestershire we are committed to our Children in Care and Care Leavers and are determined to ensure that we carry out our duty and responsibilities as a Corporate Parent with genuine passion, ambition, enthusiasm and care. This is underpinned by Our Promise which sets out our commitment to Children in Care and Care Leavers.

We understand that all of our children have individual needs and goals, and our care planning and planned support offered to all of our children reflects this. We advocate and champion for diversity and ensure our children and young people are provided with inclusive services which values and respects their individual identity needs.

We are committed to the voice of our children and young people informing all areas of decision making, underpinned by a "You Said, We Did" approach. Participation is central to all services delivered to our children and young people and is championed in effective children and young people led forums including 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 2024) with our children and partners and this underpins the expectations for all.



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

During 2024/2025, the service has continued to use data to review its own performance and to understand Children's Service's intervention and services to children. Over this 12-month period, we have had to change and develop a number of ways to collect data; and there is further improvement planned to continue to strengthen and develop how data is gathered to underpin service development. Data is collected from a number of Tableau dashboards which pull information directly from mosaic, alongside the meeting diary spreadsheet. We are continuing to develop further tableau dashboards to include informal quality assurance process of challenge which we aim to deliver in 25/26 subject to the mosaic and reporting prioritisation plan.

Children in Care

There were 694 children in care on the 31st March 2025, this is a decrease of 31 children from 726 children in care on 31st March 2024 (-4.4%).

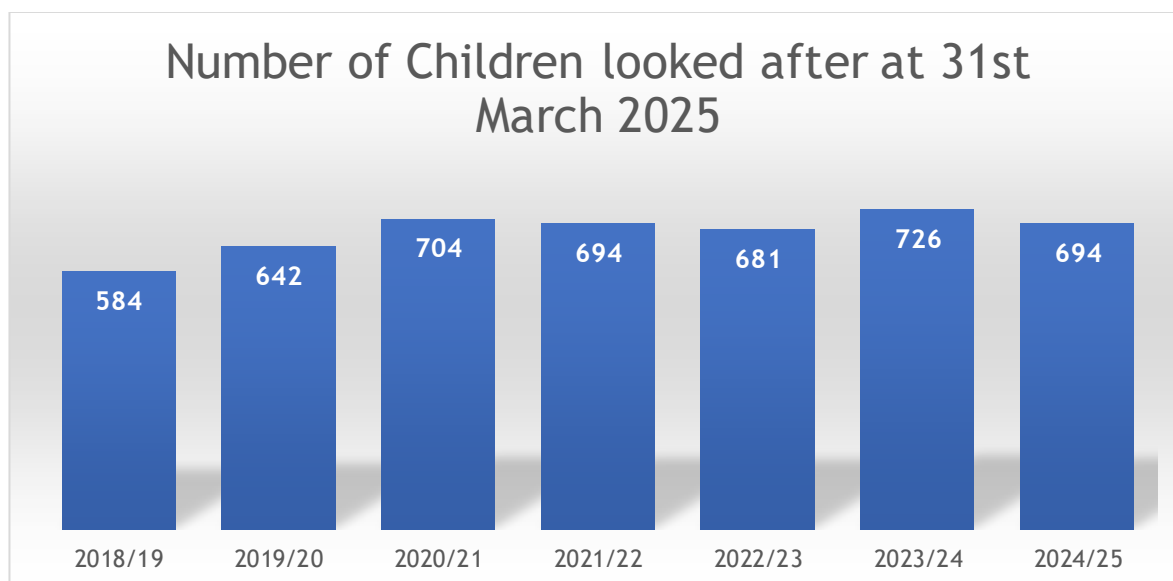
694 children is equivalent to 47.8 children per 10,000 population aged 0 to 17 in Leicestershire.

This compares positively to an average of 61 children in care per 10,000 children in Statistical Neighbour authorities, 65 for East Midlands and 70 for England based on the most recent national figures available from 31st March 2024.

We have a robust review of our threshold decisions for children becoming looked after and work hard to maintain and strengthen family networks including by seeking permanency to reduce the length of time a child may remain in care.

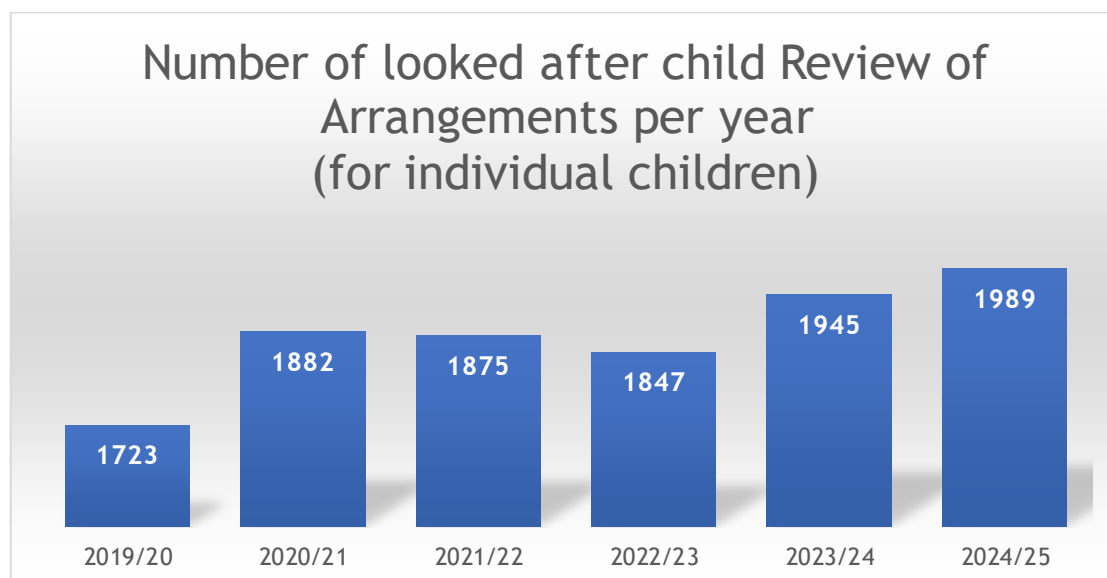
Of the 694 children in care on 31st March 2025, 413 (59.5%) were male and 281 (40.5%) were female. This represents a decrease of 41 males compared to 31st March 2024 (454, 62.5%) and an increase of 9 females (272, 37.5%). Most notably, the number of males in care aged 16 to 17 has decreased by 30 to 137. By comparison, the age profile of females in care on 31st March has seen an increase of 12 young people aged 16 to 17, and a decrease of 10 aged 10 to 15.

Number of Children looked after at 31st March 2025

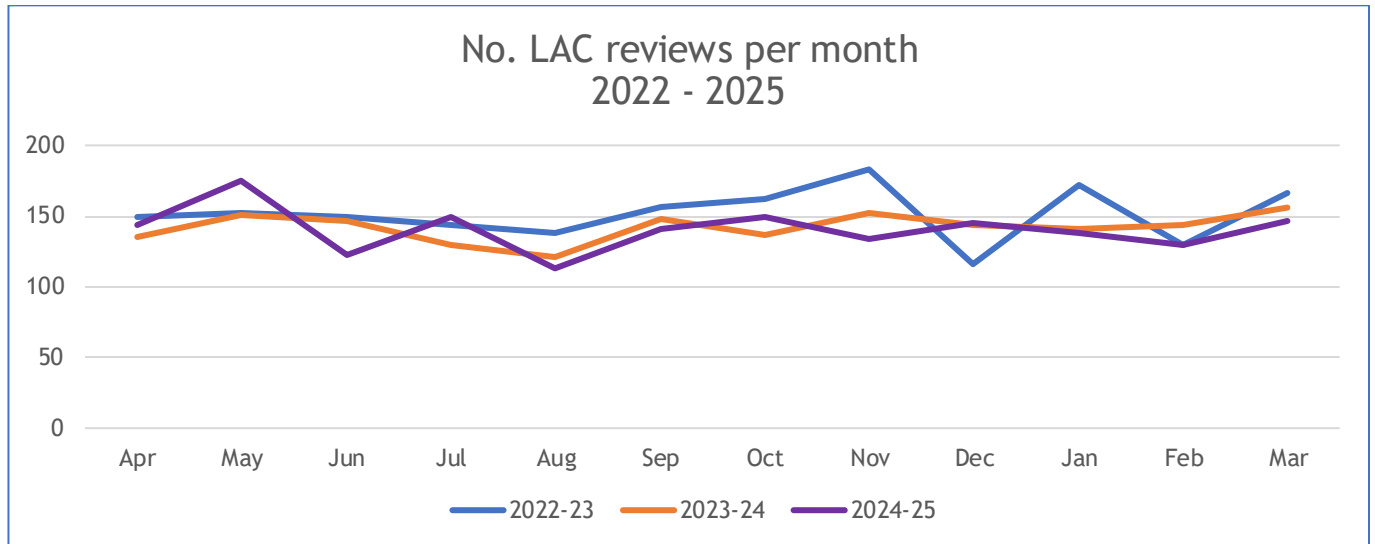


There were 1,989 Review of Arrangement Meetings for individual children completed over the last year which equates to 1,686 meetings, taking into consideration review meetings held for siblings where only one meeting would be counted. This compares to 1,945 review meetings for individual children over 2023/2024, which equates to 1,702 meetings taking into consideration meetings held for siblings where only one would be counted.

Number of looked after child Review of Arrangements per year (for individual children)



On average there were 141 reviews chaired each month, with peaks of 175 in May and 149 in July and October. August, with 113 meetings and February with 129 meetings, have been quieter months for review meetings. Over this review period there has again been a more consistent number of reviews per month compared to significant highs and lows towards the end of the 2022/23 annual reporting year- see below graph for the last 3 years of tracking the number of review meetings per month.



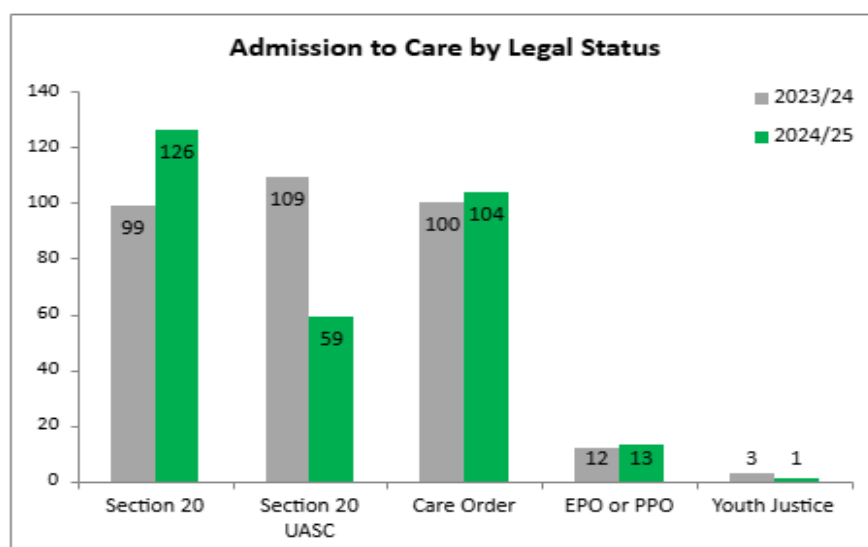
Whilst there has been another increase in review of arrangements meetings being held when looking at individual children, there has been a decrease in children coming into care over the year. It can be surmised that we are seeing an increase in the number of sibling groups coming into care, however we are currently unable to analyse data via group ID's on mosaic to test this. Over this next year this is something we would like to further analyse. The actual overall number of review meetings completed has again decreased by 16 (decrease of 113 meetings over 23/24) in this last year which is positive and again points to the increase in sibling groups whereby one meeting is held for all children within the sibling group.

In June 2023, we introduced our bottom lines for review of arrangements meetings taking place, which supported a significant reduction of meetings held in two parts. Our bottom lines were reviewed and updated in October 2024, and we have continued to see a positive change in culture to how review meetings are managed.

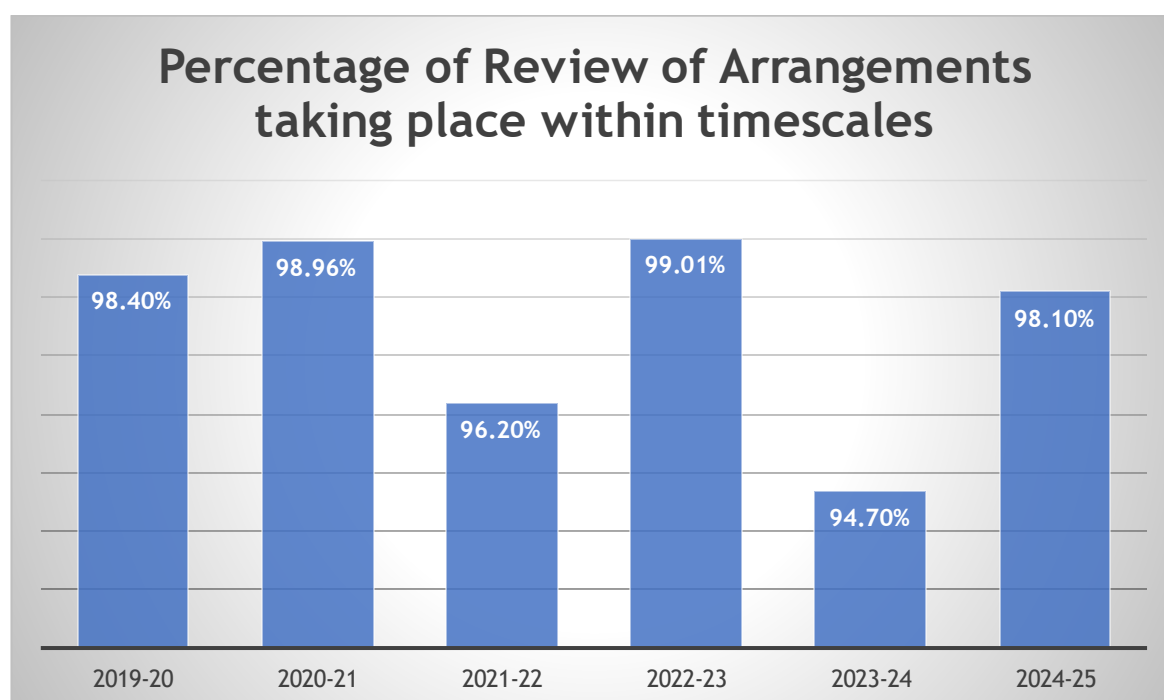
Over this year, we have continued to embed the midway review which takes place between review meetings for the Independent Reviewing Officer to have oversight of a child's care plan and this can also take place at other points over the review period if the Independent Reviewing Officer sees there is a need to formally track the child's care plan more often.

At the midway review, any concerns regarding a child's care plan are raised and resolved and only when the Independent Reviewing Officer considers there needs to be an additional review of arrangements meeting will this be arranged, but generally, all issues can be dealt with at the midway review. This aims to both improve quality and avoid drift and delay in planning permanency for children which remains a key focus for the service in this period. Early reviews may still be held for children in specific circumstances as outlined in the Independent Reviewing Officer Handbook.

The number of admissions of children into care during 2024/25 was 303, 20 (-6%) lower than the previous year of 2023/24, which was 323. This was 67 (26%) higher than the 257 recorded in 2022/23. Comparing admissions to care under each legal status within each year shows a notable decrease of young people UASC (-46%), with an increase in non UASC section 20 admissions by 27% to 126 in 2024/25.

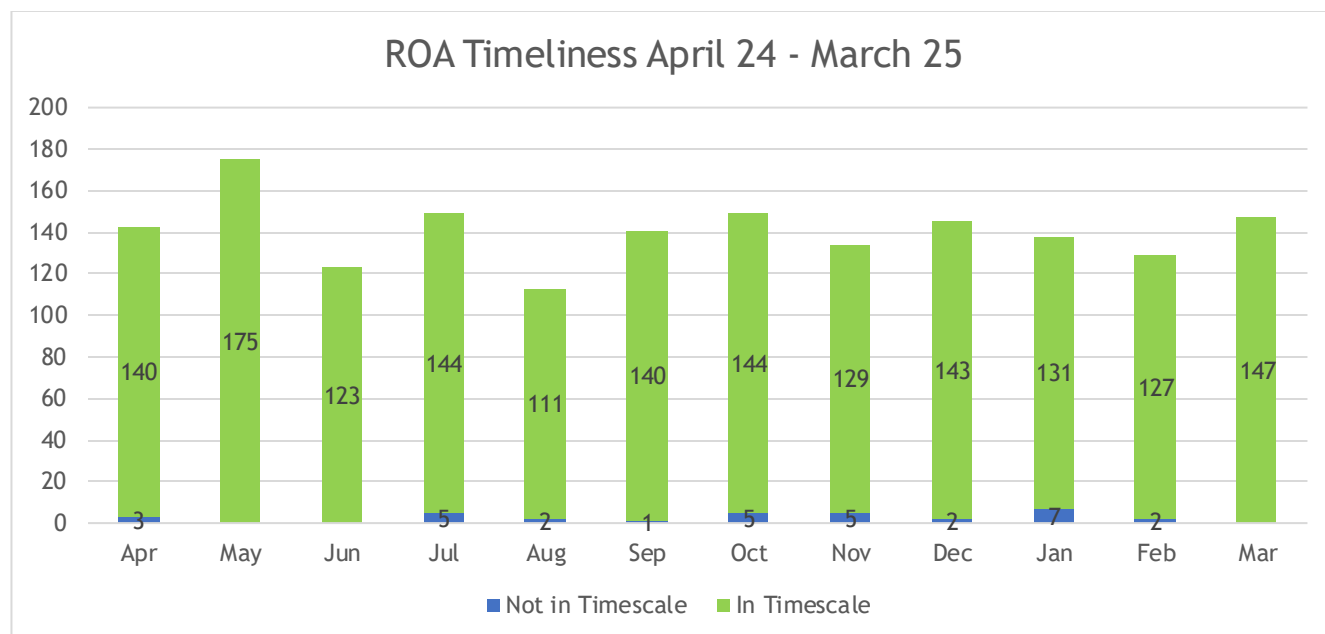


All children that enter care must have a Review of Arrangements Meeting within 28 days and a further review at three months, it is also important to have an additional review as a child leaves care, particularly prior to reaching 18 to ensure that all the necessary services are in place to support them as an adult.



At the year ending 31st March 2025, the service had completed 1,686 Review of Arrangement meetings (per sibling group/ not individual children) of these 98.1% were completed within timescale and 1.9% (32 reviews) took place out of timescale. This is a positive increase from 2023/24 where we worked hard to re-set our meeting expectations, progressed our bottom lines for review meetings. The positive impact of this work is reflected in our timeliness data over this year. The Service continues to ensure one good quality meeting is being held for the child which is in their best interests.

In our previous Annual Report, there was a concern noted regarding review meetings being held in two parts, and in January 2023 noted that 27% (41) of reviews were held in two parts between 12.12.22 and 20.01.23 and over that year 28% of review meetings were being held in two parts. Over 2023/24, we successfully reset the culture of review meetings held in two parts and reduced it to 7.4% which has continued into 2024/25 with 6.1% being held in two parts in line with our identified ambition



We have also successfully embedded our monthly Improvement Cycle Meetings to review our data for the previous month, this considers the number of meetings completed, timelines, whether face to face, stepped down or out of date. This is key to keeping performance on track.

Participation

The child and young person's voice, their views and wishes are essential to care planning. As always, Independent Reviewing Officers continue to strive towards obtaining this and ensuring children and young people actively participate in the review process. Over this year we have continued to hold reviews in line with the child's expressed views, recognizing that for some children they prefer their reviews face to face, and for others they prefer virtual reviews.

We have also recognized that hybrid meetings have been beneficial, allowing for those unable to attend face to face, to dial into the review meeting. This includes parents, family members, or other professionals, and improves participation more generally. Having this level of flexibility has allowed us to hold review meetings in the way children would like them to be held, and with those they would like to be present.

Over this review year, we have seen 64.2% (1082 meetings) of reviews held face to face, 0.9% (16 meetings) held as hybrid, and 34.8% (587 meetings) held virtually. This is a significant increase in face-to-face meetings compared to 2023/24 where 55.1% (938) of meetings were held face to face, 4.2% (71) as hybrid and 40.7% (693) virtually.

We can see our participation numbers have remained high over this review period, and for children aged over 4, we can report that 92% of children contributed to their review. This is a slight decrease from last year, when 93.056% of children contributed. However, compared to 90.84% in 2022/23, this high and consistent performance over the last 2 years, which shows children have

engaged in their review this year either directly or indirectly. This is very positive as part of our drive to have the child at the center of their planning.

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. Over this review year, the Independent Reviewing Officers have been creative in how they gain their children and young people's views. For one young person with disabilities, photographs are used to share his experiences, and his progress in independence skills. Another young person, who is a selective mute, is supported to share her views by her Children's Rights Officer and for other young people, their network of trusted adults has been used to share views, achievements and thoughts on how things could improve.

For another young person who enjoys being in nature, her Independent Reviewing Officer took her up on an offer of a walk around the local area for a catch up ahead of her review meeting.

We also had an Independent Reviewing Officer who had a sparring boxing session with his young person before his review, and he felt it positively supported his engagement and contribution to his review. We also encourage our children to chair their review meetings which supports them to feel empowered and in control of their care plan.

One professional gave the following feedback after a young person chaired their review meeting:



We have continued to progress our purposeful practice within review meetings, making sure they are a space whereby children and young people would want to attend, ensure discussions are held in a trauma informed way and that discussions are held in a proactive and meaningful way to produce clear outcomes. The Independent Reviewing Officers get to know their children, their families, networks, and professionals around them, and adapt their style of chairing review meetings to best suit the young person and their situation. This may mean emphasis on the strengths first, and a more solution based discussion to some of the worries, it may mean the young person's review is more like a discussion covering all the key areas or some discussions take place outside of the main meeting if it isn't appropriate for the child to hear some of the more adult discussions needed. We have found being more purposeful in our review meetings continues to place children and young people at the center of their planning.

For 2024/25, the table below shows types of participation of young people:

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Children who are under the age of 4	363	370	404	405	367	329	332	386
Children who attend their reviews and speak for themselves	554	632	659	561	590	714	855	863
Children who attend but communicate via an advocate	4	10	7	18	23	48	66	31
Children who attend and convey their views non-verbally	2	3	0	4	3	4	4	6
Children who attend but don't contribute	11	10	11	7	4	14	22	23
Children who do not attend but brief someone to speak on their behalf	52	98	87	81	118	104	76	38
Children who do not attend but communicate their views by another method	415	296	450	636	623	495	478	515
Children who do not attend/convey their views in any other way	87	163	103	118	147	139	112	127

Another important area within children and young people's participation is the use of the 'My Review' booklet. This is a document written and designed by the Children in Care Counsel to help children and young people prepare for their review or be submitted to the Independent Reviewing Officer as a written record of their views.

This continues to be sent out electronically to the social worker who will either complete the booklet with the young person or to share this with the young person so that they are able to complete their independently or with support. Over this year, 227 booklets have been returned which is a positive increase from 128 booklets over 2023/24. There is more work required to improve the visibility of this document, and the Independent Reviewing Officers continue to promote this being completed.

In addition to the link being sent directly before the review it can also be found on the LCC Corporate Parenting page as per the link here:

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/social-care-and-supporting-families/services-for-looked-after-children-and-young-people/corporate-parenting>

Participation Driving Service Improvements

At the start of 2023, the Children in Care Council developed a survey regarding the language of care to be completed by their peers in care, seeking to gain their views on professional language used.

Over 2023/24 year, the Language that Cares toolkit was developed from this as a further support to practitioners who have important conversations with children and young people about being more aware of the language they use in these conversations and the importance of this for our children and young people.

The toolkit was launched in June 2024, and the Independent Reviewing Officers have played a pivotal role in this ensuring at each review meeting that practitioners are using this toolkit. This ensures that we capture what the child calls the place they are living, what they call their carers, what they call the time they spend with their family alongside any other importance language or words they would prefer to us to use.

This will then be reflected in the child's record of the meeting, and it would be expected to be seen across all recording for the young person. For non-verbal children, we will ensure we consider how they communicate and which words they prefer to use and for babies/toddlers the use of sensitive language and ensuring we are having open discussions within reviews with parents/ carers about promoting language that cares.



This toolkit has been sent to our Local Authority foster carers as well as shared with our commissioning team, so providers are aware of it, as well as being promoted by our participation officers, children in care teams and safeguarding teams who work with children who have recently come into care.

Home

Where a child currently lives – this can be confusing as a child might call their home the place where their parents live

Alternatives:

This Country

New home

Current home

Where I live now

Means home country (UASC)*

Where they lived with their family before they came into care*

Ask the Young Person what they wish to call 'home'

Residential home

Safe place to call home

It is essential for a young person to decide what they want to call the place they live in Care

Care Plan

All children who are looked after in the care of the Local Authority have a Care Plan which sets out what the child needs to keep them safe and provide support with someone identified to carry out tasks and dates when they will be finished

Alternatives:

Young Person's Plan

My/Your Plan

Independence Plan

Future Plan

Over 2023/24 in preparation for this being introduced we updated our bottom lines regarding recording, including no abbreviations and to be considerate about children looking back at their records so that they will really understand their situation and why decisions were made for them. Using language that shows our care for them and achieving the right outcome for them is a key part of this commitment.

Over this year it has been introduced, and it has generated some interesting discussions around children's preferences, supporting children's sense of belonging and making reviews feel more personal using their chosen language. The following are two examples:



We have also launched our Coming Into Care Pack this year which is a document created by the Children's Rights and Participation team providing helpful information for children in care.

This includes a range of important information, from why children may come into care, health and education information for children in care, the review of arrangements meetings process and who key people are in the process, information about advocacy and Children's Rights Officers as well as information regarding their rights and many other areas.

This document has been designed so they can refer to the specific information at the time they need it. Like with the toolkit, this has also been shared with those working with children in care including foster carers and providers.



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.

Permanence Plan (at second review)	Grand Total	%
Return to family	49	7.6%
Adoption	60	9.4%
SGO/CAO	20	3.1%
Supported living in the community	111	17.3%
Long-term residential placement	57	8.9%
Long-term fostering	265	41.3%
Twin Tracking	79	12.3%
Total without permanence agreed	0	0.0%
Total with permanence agreed	641	100.0%
Total	641	100.0%

Plan agreed before 2nd review	51	8.0%
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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. Positively, we have again seen an increase for children having their care plan of permanence agreed before their second review, to 8%, compared to 5.08% in 2023/24 and 3.25% during 2022/23. The Independent Reviewing Officers continue to place strong emphasis on permanence being agreed at the earliest opportunity which reflects departmental ambitions.

The Independent Reviewing Officers are raising questions about permanence and longer-term planning at the first 28-day review meeting and there has been a greater increase in children having permanence by their second review meeting.

Permanence Plan (ALL LAC)	Grand Total	%
Return to family	49	7.0%
Adoption	60	8.6%
SGO/CAO	20	2.9%
Supported living in the community	111	15.9%
Long-term residential placement	57	8.2%
Long-term fostering	265	38.1%
Twin Tracking	79	11.4%
Total without permanence agreed	55	7.9%
Total with permanence agreed	641	92.1%
Total	696	100.0%

In 2024/25, the data has been used from the full cohort of children in care and 92.1% (641 children) of children had a permanence plan agreed, with 7.9% (55 children) without permanence agreed. These children had not had their second review by 31st March 2025 and there are a further 11.4% (79 children) who have twin tracking as their care plan as their assessments have not concluded to determine their recommended final care plan within care proceedings. Therefore, all children who have had their second review, and where assessments to determine their permanence plan have been finalised, have a permanence plan.

Independent Reviewing Officer Challenge & Escalation

Practice improvement and quality assurance is a significant role for the service. The service uses two quality assurance processes; challenge which is an informal quality assurance process, and escalation of professional concerns which is a formal quality assurance process.

As noted already, this was previously called positive challenge however after consultation with the teams that receive these, it was agreed they would be called challenge. We routinely review 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.

In last year's Annual Report, it was noted that over the previous review period, 2022/23 there was a change to how our Quality Assurance Alerts were completed and the new Mosaic system implemented in December 2022 had given the opportunity to review how our challenge and escalation is recorded. Over this review period, the management information system has continued to record our formal escalation alerts and responses, and progress has been made with amendments completed on the form used so challenge data can be tracked manually, we continue to wait the build of this within the system and the data base to allow our positive challenges to be reported and this has not yet been finalised, our Safeguarding Administration team continue to hold these on Excel.

Over this review period, the service has continued to use a preparation for review template which informs what constitutes a challenge in practice to the social work team and through the procedures how this escalates until it is resolved. Over this review period, the service has continued to focus on quality rather than compliance-based assurance, on the basis that improved reporting for Local Authority Children and Family Service teams means greater visibility of key performance issues such as supervision and visits. Senior Management oversight to these key measures has taken place monthly.

From 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025 there have been 244 Quality Assurance Alerts completed in respect of Children in Care, including 76 formal escalations, 168 challenges and 16 for outstanding practice. This is an increase in escalations compared to 2023/24 whereby it was noted that 39 formal escalations and 103 positive challenges were completed. However, for this year we have seen a decrease in good practice feedback with 94 being completed last reporting year, which we are reviewing further over 2025/26 to ensure we remain consistent in recognising and providing positive feedback.

All formal escalations are reviewed on a monthly basis and consideration given to patterns or themes emerging from service areas or specific teams, leading to discussions being held with relevant managers or services, and training and support identified as needed to help support the improvement of practice. For the formal escalations completed, we have seen 66 resolved at Team Manager level, 8 resolved at Service Manager level and 2 resolved at Head of Service level.

One example relates to the provision of service supporting a young person with therapy that was recommended at the conclusion of her care proceedings and due to her situation, she did not feel ready to access at that time. The Independent Reviewing Officer has kept this under review at each review meeting, and as time has passed questions were being asked about whether further assessment was needed for neurodiversity for the young person. This was reviewed by the local Child and Adolescence Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and concluded this did not need to progress first and that her therapy could progress which was explored in the review. The young person was feeling ready to start her therapy however there was a delay in the Local Authority

progressing this which was successfully challenged by the Independent Reviewing Officer and has now been resolved, and therapy is being provided. Through the challenge being completed, the Independent Reviewing Officer was able to advocate on behalf of the young person and resolve the delay in this being provided with a positive outcome for the young person.

The service has continued to regularly discuss and review the processes of QA's, working against an agreed set of bottom lines which has developed a far higher degree of consistency within the team, although there will inevitably remain some variance as the process has to involve a degree of professional discretion.

Operational managers continue to work from their own dashboards of data which is reviewed monthly on compliance matters. Whilst Independent Reviewing Officers have continued to send challenge for compliance matters; this has been more refined to where drift and delay has been identified. This has allowed the Independent Reviewing Officers to focus on more qualitative matters relating to children's care planning rather than quantitative.

For positive feedback, there is no requirement for a manager to provide a response however for escalation of concerns it is necessary for a manager to respond and the Independent Reviewing Officer to be satisfied with the response before the QA is formally resolved. Stage one resolution is with the Team Manager, Stage two with the Service Manager, Stage Three with the Head of Service and Stage four with the Assistant Director. A final stage would be with the Director of Children's social care, although no cases were required to be escalated to this level during the year 2024/25.

Additionally, as part of the escalation process, if an Independent Reviewing Officer has sufficient concern in relation to a child or young person's care planning, they can refer the case to either Cafcass or request independent legal advice, neither of which was required during 2024/2025.

Personal Education Plans

From April 2024 to 31st March 2025, on average 95% of all children in care have had a PEP meeting completed, with 98% of school aged children having had their PEP completed. Below is the breakdown per term:

	All children:	School aged children:
Summer term 2024	97%	99%
Autumn term 2024	94%	97%
Spring term 2025	95%	98%

At Review of Arrangements Independent Reviewing Officers routinely confirm if PEP meetings have taken place, that all recommendations are being progressed and if this is sufficient or whether further action is 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 Independent Reviewing Officer's continue to work closely with the Virtual School, and Education Improvement Officers regularly attending the child's review of arrangements.

Children and young people's education continues to take a high priority within the Independent Reviewing Officer service. In each Independent Reviewing Officer's supervision all cases are reviewed whereby the child has been identified as not in being in education, employment or training (NEET). This process was implemented some years ago due to concerns that as children

moved placement there may be delays in identifying suitable education provision. For those children in mainstream statutory education this has not been identified as an area of concern for some time, as the Virtual Schools are proactive in working with schools and colleges to ensure that young people's needs are met.

Health Check's completed within twelve months

In 2024/25, 91.2% of children had their annual health reviews completed within timescales, which positively is an increase of 8.9% compared to last year.

Audit work continues in this area with our Designated Nurse for Looked After Children in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (LLR). Our last audit started in December 2023, concluding in 2024 which then informed targeted work focusing on children and young people's health during 2024/25.

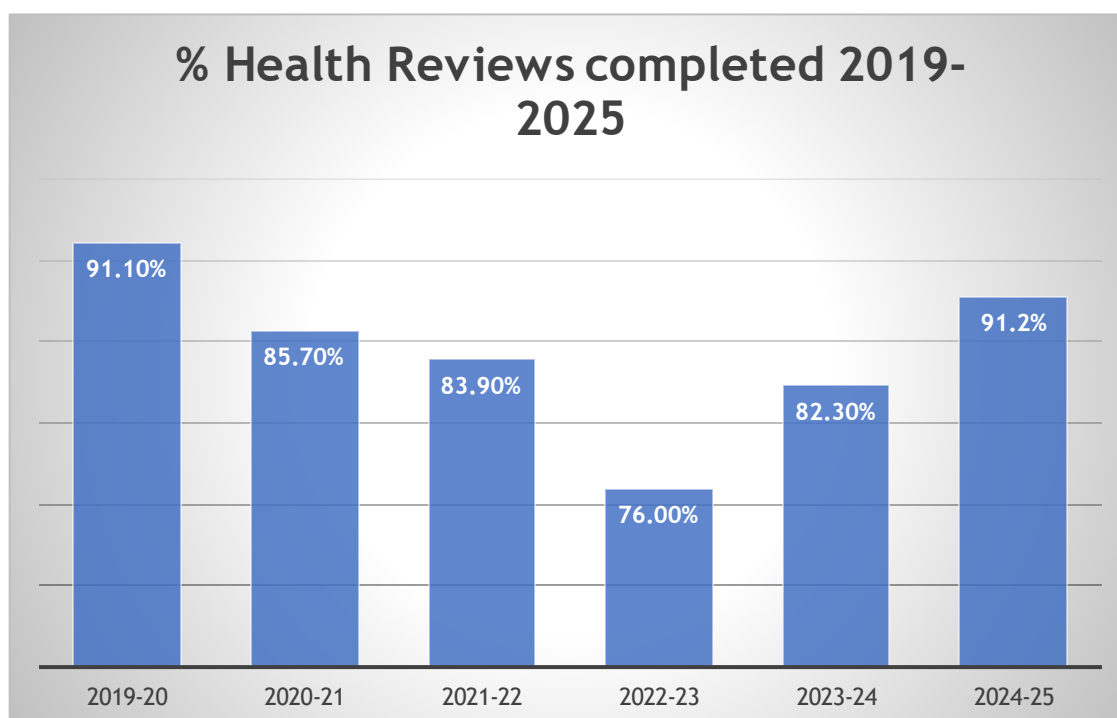
For Leicestershire, this audit looked at 60 children in total with 20 children from each age range (0-5, 6-15, 16-18) to examine children's files in detail to determine how well the health assessment and plan is integrated into the Review of Arrangements meetings, and that the timeliness of the health assessment fulfils the Statutory Guidance (2015) and strength and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) is available to inform the health assessment. The findings have been received and positively show that most young people had a current in-date health assessment and that nearly all young people were having their health needs met as the time of their Review Health Assessment. Rates of seeing a dentist and an optician within appropriate timescales have increased since the last audit and that all young people, where engaged with a health assessment were permanently registered with a local GP or (for an Initial Health assessment) in the process of registering. Review meetings had identified new health needs in the meeting for 11 young people within the audit sample showing an ongoing review of needs.

There are areas to continue working on, including ensuring Enduring Consent is in place for all children, and it was noted that there is inconsistent practice in ensuring a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is in place 3 months prior to the review health assessment date. It also noted that the review minutes do not consistently evidence whether all areas of the health care plan were reviewed or whether a health representative was present in the meeting. The audit also noted that the voice of the young person is not always evident in the Review Health Assessment and a lack of consistency in offering the young person the opportunity to be seen alone.

The audit has evidenced some areas of good practice with both the Leicestershire Partnership Team (LPT) Looked After Children's Health Team and Leicestershire Children's Social Care Teams, including the work of the Independent Reviewing Officers. The key areas of improvement identified have recommended actions to address these areas, and there is a review meeting held monthly to share progress updates.

The Looked After Children's Health Service have been continuing to provide health assessments for children in care.

Independent Reviewing Officers monitor this via review of arrangements meetings have been raising and concerns directly with the service and the allocated team if assessments have not



been completed. Health colleagues attend the Corporate Parenting Board and are held to account for service delivery for children in care.

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. Over this reporting year, 93.1% of children had their teeth checked by a dentist.

7. What is the impact for our children and families?

Well managed meetings

Over this review period the reduction of meetings held over two parts has been maintained and continued to improve the quality of meetings being held, alongside a greater focus on meetings being held in a timely manner with an updated quality report and care plan. This has been further supported by the implementation of the updated Independent Reviewing Officer bottom lines providing clear guidance to the social work teams for the standard expected for a review meeting to go ahead. It is positive that this has been received well improving the meeting quality for children and their families.

Over this review period we have had a mix of face to face, hybrid and virtual review meetings, although we can see our face-to-face reviews have increased over this year. Independent Reviewing Officers have been visiting the children that they are working with and are thinking of creatively and proactive ways of including children and young people in their reviews. The Service has continued to have clear guidelines that review meetings should take place in the children's best interest and we have seen participation levels increase in line with following a young person's wishes regarding the way their review is to be conducted. The individual profiles of each Independent Reviewing Officer is shared consistently to ensure that children know their reviewing officer as the basis for strong relationships to be established.

Permanence

The service has continued to focus on permanence and timely planning for children being essential. The service continues to robustly monitor this through review meetings and through monitoring of children's records and seeking updates between meetings. Independent Reviewing Officers give professional challenge to teams if there are concerns about drift and delay for children. The number of permanence plans at second review has continued to increase, showing the ongoing focus on achieving permanence for children.

Celebrating success

The Independent Reviewing Officers are committed to highlighting and sharing our children's successes and sharing these with senior managers including the Head of Service for Children in Care, Assistant Director and Director.

There are numerous positive examples to share, I have highlighted some people:

- A young person who completed his GCSEs after a difficult period of moving in an unplanned way from his kinship carer back to his mum's care and then moving to another family member in a more planned way. His social worker sent his professional network the pictures of him in his academy football kit where he will complete his further education after successfully completing all of his GCSE's.
- A young person became a wellbeing ambassador at her school
- Art work had been completed by a young person, and she won Artist of the Team at her school for her work. Pictures were sent to Head of Service for Children in Care and the Assistant Director.
- A young person turning 18 had a birthday dinner out and the young person choose who she would like to attend who she felt were most significant to her, including her Social Worker, Independent Reviewing Officer, her Children's Rights Officer, family time supervisors and lead children in care choir support worker.

Whilst our children's successes continue to be significant, we have also recently celebrated a 16+ provider who have gone above and beyond to support their young people with their identity and culture by arranging a cultural cooking day which was positively received. The staff, young people and social workers for the young people got together and cooked their cultural dishes and shared these together.

In March 2025, we held our Celebration of Achievement Awards celebrating our Children in Care and their successes, organised by the Corporate Parenting Team.

There were three events this year to better accommodate the different ages groups. For the 5–10-year-olds, they spent a day at Twycross Zoo with their carers. They had their award ceremony and then were able to tour the zoo. This was a family friendly event supporting the connection between the children and their carers. There was face painting, glitter tattoos and a great time was had by all.



For the secondary school children aged 11-16 and the children aged 16+ they had their events on separate nights, but enjoyed a silent disco, photobooth, glitter tattoos and buffet food as well as their awards celebration. There were performances from Beacon Choir, (our Children in Care choir), as well as a performance by Care to Dance. There were also two guest speakers, both care leavers from Leicestershire, who shared their journey and experiences, and what they have achieved to date to inspire other young people at the event.

Visible Footprint of the Independent Reviewing Officer

Over this year, the Independent Reviewing Officers have continued to show a high visibility of their work and involvement on children's records. They record their involvement on the IRO Activity Log which is a running record on activity over the child's review period, including their preparation for the review, contact with the child and/or their network prior to their review meeting, meeting with the child and any other case work that they complete. The recording of challenge is also included in the Activity Log, and positively the date of conclusion and level it was concluded at have been added in preparation for formal reporting being completed on this.

Feedback from children

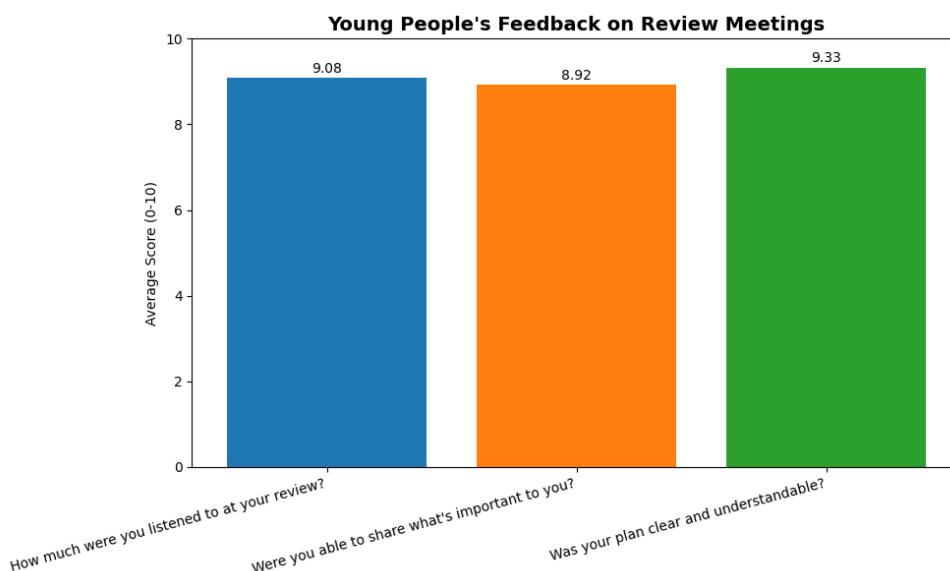
One of the main ways the Service has had feedback from children, has been via the Children in Care Council (CICC). Over this year, the key focus for them has been the launch of The Language of Care Toolkit, which recognises how important language is to our children and young people in care, it matters to them what language is used and that every child is different in their language preferences and they must be treated as individuals. The toolkit has been developed with Leicestershire's partner agencies and a feedback session held at the Corporate Parenting Board which supported our partner agencies to consider how they may implement something similar within their own areas and language that is used.

This launched in June 2024 and since launching, there has been positive feedback received as to the document and it has supported children and young people feel listened to using the words they prefer to describe their situation. Independent Reviewing Officers have been raising this in their review meetings and taking it into consideration in their preparation for review meetings.

In reviewing the implementation of this, an audit was completed in January 2025, and a deep dive of young people's records were reviewed by the Service Manager for Children in Care, Practice Excellence Team and IRO service. There were 20 children's files selected across the 4 children in care teams. The audit positively found that 65% of Care Plans/ Pathway Plans and Review of Arrangements meetings reflected the 'Language that Cares' and that abbreviations were generally avoided or fully referenced. In the early stages of this toolkit being implemented the audit found that there was further work to be completed with social workers using this with their children and ensuring that all IRO's are reflecting these discussions in their review summaries. Next steps and actions were implemented from this to ensure that this remains a focus within practice and utilised in the way it was intended. A further audit will be undertaken over the next review period.

Independent Reviewing Officers continue to endeavour to consult with children before their reviews take place to ensure they can decide where and when they want their review to be held, who attends and key issues to discuss. The Independent Reviewing Officers also encourage the children to chair their own reviews. The Independent Reviewing Officers do develop and have longstanding relationships with the children they are allocated to, so over time develop a relationship whereby they may message, call or visit them to gain their views. This is captured on the Activity Log as well as in the child's review of arrangements summary.

Children continue to be involved in their care planning and their review meetings as shown on the participation table and the Independent Reviewing Officers continuing to be positive and proactive about their children's involvement in review meetings. Over this review period we have implemented feedback forms, one for a young person if they have attended their review, one for a young person who hasn't attended and then another one for adults who have attended which is suitable for both family and friends and professionals. For the young people that attended the following has been provided:



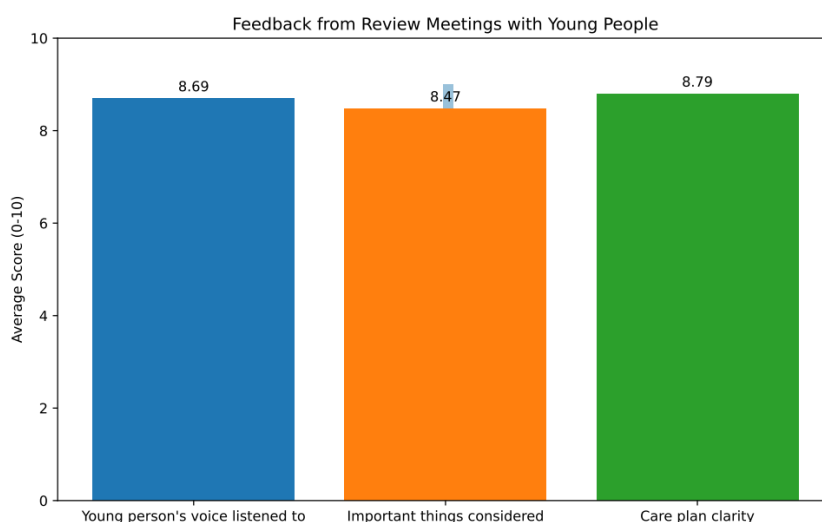
We continue to review our feedback forms within team meetings and use them to grow and learn as a team taking on board the advice provided through the feedback.

Feedback from professionals

The Service values feedback from professionals and acknowledges the importance of working in partnership with colleagues to get the best outcomes for children.

Alongside feedback form from children and young people detailed above, we have also developed feedback forms for the adults who attended review meetings which include parents and professionals, who shared the following.

We continue to review our feedback forms within team meetings and use them to grow and learn as a team taking on board the advice provided through the feedback.



8. What can we do better?

Participation

Leicestershire Independent Reviewing Officer Service has for a long time been proud of its participation work and we have worked closely with the Corporate Parenting Team, both the Participation Officers and the Children's Rights Officers to this end. Good communication with our children and young people is essential and the Independent Reviewing Officer Service will be striving to improve this even further in the coming year.

With our new service structure embedded, we have built strong connections with the corporate parenting team, practice excellence team and quality assurance and improvement team. This has helped to strengthen participation and how we use children's voices in our work and service and we have seen an increase in our consultation document being used, however we would like to see this use increased further over this next year.

We want to continue to increase the use of the consultation documents for children to give their views on their review meetings and how they wish to participate. We have seen a very minimal decrease in our participation number this year and our focus remains to ensure that children are able to give their views in a way that feels comfortable for them to inform their care planning. This will be reviewed during 2025/26 and we will be working with the Children in Care Council to assess their impact.

Timeliness of meetings

The timeliness of review of arrangement meetings being held will be a focus to ensure continued improvement remains over 2025/26. Whilst it is positive that this has returned to over 98%, this needs to be maintained going forwards.

Quality Assurance

Whilst our data for sending Quality Assurance alerts in respect of challenge has increased, we have not seen the same increase in sending good practice feedback in the same way. One of the areas to focus on over 2025/26 will be recognising positive practice, and ensuring good practice is recognised and commented on with the social workers as well as their managers.

Health

The meeting of health needs for our children in care is incredibly important. The Independent Reviewing Officer Service wants to support the continued improvements of ensuring all health needs are met in a timely manner. The findings from the health audit are being progressed and reviewed monthly at the meeting held between Health and Children's Services. The main areas identified are ensuring Enduring Consent is in place for all children as well as ensuring a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is in place 3 months prior to the review health assessment date. As a service we have been working on improvements to the co-ordination of SDQ's, and have seen a promising increase from 60.1% in 2024 to 88.4% in 2025 and work will continue in this area. It also noted that the review minutes do not consistently evidence whether all areas of the health care plan were reviewed or whether a health representative was present in the meeting which is an area for Health improvement.

Family networks

We know that a child and young person's network is important during their time in care and for their future. The Independent Reviewing Officers want to support the wider service focus on considering family networks at the earliest opportunity, involving networks in planning, and the use of tools such as cultural genograms to explore family and network with young people. Family, friends and professional networks are critical to supporting young people and we need to continue to promote this further.

Performance data

We need to continue to enhance our access to data and use the new forms and workflow within our improved recording system to further enhance our measure of impact of our service.

9. What we achieved against our aims over the past 12 months?

The 2023/2024 annual report set out our plans for 12 months going forward. Below is how we have address and achieved those aims:

- Implementation of the Language that Cares Toolkit - this has now been implemented across the service and Independent Reviewing Officers have been committed to ensuring a successful implementation. They see this as a natural next step in ensuring children's records continue to be personalised to them including their preferences in language and how they refer to where they live, who they see, the adults around them. The audit completed in January 2025 which is referenced above shows whilst we have made a positive start, we need to continue to focus on embedding this into the service further and ensuring the language children prefer to use is championed across the service.
- We have demonstrated that we are a service that focuses on the needs of children and young people being met, represented and addressed with their care planning. We can see this through the use of our quality assurance process when needed.

- We have progressed our purposeful practice approach within review meetings ensuring children's reviews are best suited to them, they are supported to contribute in the way that best suits them and their care plans are understood. Our team development day supported this approach across the team. Independent Reviewing Officers have continued to support children to take part in their review meetings and sharing their views for care planning.
- We have progressed in our focus on the child's network around them and who their trusted adult is by discussing this area in review meetings to support the child's sense of belonging and connection. This will continue within children's reviews meetings.
- We have seen particularly emphasis on understanding the trauma that children in care are likely to have suffered both in their experiences before becoming looked after but also in their experiences in care when they are separated from their family networks. Our Independent Reviewing Officers continue to access necessary training to underpin trauma informed approaches to supporting children and in particular to inform how they coordinate and manage meetings and support the participation of children and their families. Over this year, all of the Independent Reviewing Officers have attended the Foundation to Trauma Training which they found incredibly insightful, and we reflect on in our team meetings the significance of this. By attending this training, they are now able to attend more advanced training around trauma to support their development.
- We are continuing to progress work around the recording of review of arrangements meeting to consider the benefits of IT support and the use of AI to enhance admin productivity. We have recognised that we want meetings that follow the wishes and needs of young people, and these have been a mix of face to face, virtual and hybrid. This is something we will continue to consider in the upcoming year.

10. What are our plans for the next 12 months to maintain or improve practice?

Social Work Reforms

National social work reforms are underway across England, and Leicestershire is progressing its own plan in line with government recommendations. While the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer remains unchanged, the responsibilities of Child Protection Chairs—who are also part of our service—may evolve. We expect greater clarity on these changes in the coming months and will continue to assess their impact on our service.

Embedding of the Language of Care Toolkit

Our Independent Reviewing Officers are committed to using the *Language that Cares* toolkit, which was launched in June 2024. This toolkit plays a vital role in ensuring that the language used in review meetings reflects the preferences and voices of children and young people. IROs write records directly to the child with care and clarity, helping them understand their circumstances and the reasons behind decisions. The toolkit supports this approach and strengthens our commitment to respectful, child-centred communication across all aspects of care planning.

Consistent Practice: Our bottom lines

Following our service day on Purposeful Practice in November 2024, we updated our bottom lines for consistent practice. Over the next year, Independent Reviewing Officers will continue to apply these standards to ensure care planning remains consistent and effective. Supported by the Mosaic recording system and our quality assurance processes, these bottom lines help Independent Reviewing Officers ensure that interventions are appropriate and timely, and that any concerns are addressed promptly and robustly.

Utilising data to improve practice

In the coming year, we will enhance how we use data to better understand service performance, inform quality assurance, and identify key themes affecting children and young people in care. This will support more informed decision-making and continuous improvement.

Improving Administrative Processes

We will review and refine our administrative processes for creating records of review meetings. By making better use of technology, we aim to improve efficiency and ensure records are shared more consistently and in a timely manner—freeing up Independent Reviewing Officers to focus on leading purposeful review meetings that have a positive impact on children and young people.

Promoting Participation of Children and Young People

We remain focused on ensuring that children and young people are actively involved in their review meetings and that their views shape their care plans. Independent Reviewing Officers will continue to build strong relationships with children between meetings and encourage the use of the “My Review” consultation document to help young people prepare and share their thoughts.

The importance of networks

We will continue to prioritise the role of family, friends, and professional networks in review meetings and in Independent Reviewing Officer oversight between reviews. The use of cultural genograms will support a deeper understanding of each child’s identity and background, helping to inform future planning and transitions. Independent Reviewing Officers will also ensure that diversity, equality, and inclusion are central to care planning, and will challenge any gaps in support where needed.

Supporting effective use of the public law outline

Independent Reviewing Officers will continue to advocate for children’s needs within care planning, particularly for those in pre-proceedings or care proceedings under the Public Law Outline. They will challenge any delays and promote best practice to ensure timely and appropriate decisions are made for children, supported by our quality assurance processes.



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