

Safeguarding and Performance Independent Reviewing Officer Service Child in Care Annual Report 1st April 2025 – 31st March 2026



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1. Executive Summary

The Annual Report for the Independent Reviewing Officer Service provides an overview of service performance in 2025-2026 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 reflected in our last annual report, 2024/25 was a year of embedding our reset and regroup from 2023/24. This year, 2025/26, has been a year of continuing to build on positive changes and ensuring consistency in our practice, whilst keeping children at the centre of their care planning.

During this reporting year there has been an increase in the number of children in care, with 761 children in care on 31st March 2026 compared with 694 children on 31st March 2025. This increase has resulted in greater demand across the Independent Reviewing Officer Service, with 2,203 Review of Arrangements Meetings completed for individual children, equating to 1,783 meetings when sibling groups are counted together. Despite this increase in activity, timeliness has remained strong, with 98.4% of meetings completed within timescale.

Children's participation has continued to be a strength of the service. For children aged over four, 93% contributed to their review during 2025/26, which is a slight increase from the previous year. Independent Reviewing Officers have continued to use creative and flexible approaches to support children and young people to share their views, including face to face, hybrid and virtual meetings, advocacy, trusted adults, alternative communication methods and the use of the My Review booklet. The continued embedding of purposeful and trauma informed review meetings has supported children to remain central to their care planning.

Permanence planning has strengthened over this reporting period. Of the full cohort of children in care, 96% had an agreed permanence plan, and all children who had reached their second review and where assessments had concluded had an identified permanence plan. Independent Reviewing Officers have continued to maintain a strong focus on permanence from the earliest stage of a child's journey in care, using review meetings, midway reviews and challenge processes to reduce drift and delay wherever this is identified.

The service has also continued to strengthen its quality assurance role. During 2025/26, 431 Quality Assurance Alerts were completed for children in care, including 144 formal escalations, 199 challenges and 88 recognitions of outstanding practice. This reflects a more mature and consistent approach to identifying concerns, challenging delay and recognising good practice. Most escalations were resolved at Team Manager or Service Manager level, demonstrating that challenge is being used constructively to support improvement for children and achieving early resolution.

There have been positive developments in the wider service context, including continued engagement with CAF/CASS, the Family Justice Board, regional Independent Reviewing Officer forums, the Corporate Parenting Board and the Youth Voice Council. The Language that Cares Toolkit and Coming Into Care Pack have continued to support child-centred practice, and the service has contributed to wider work to strengthen responses to child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour.

There remain areas for continued focus into the future. These include sustaining timely and purposeful reviews in response to demand, improving the use of the My Review booklet, strengthening analysis of feedback and quality assurance data, providing greater oversight of health and dental needs, and continuing to challenge drift and delay in permanence planning.

Over the next 12 months the service will continue to focus on participation, permanence, family networks, reunification, health and wellbeing, quality assurance and challenge.

Overall, the Independent Reviewing Officer Service has continued to provide robust independent oversight, challenge and advocacy for children in care. The service has maintained strong performance during a period of increased demand and change, while continuing to promote children's voices, timely permanence, purposeful care planning and improved outcomes for children and young people in Leicestershire.



2. Introduction

The Annual Report for Safeguarding and Performance - Independent Reviewing Officer service offers an oversight of performance in 2025-2026, identifying our key achievements and setting out priorities for the forthcoming year.

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 sits within the Safeguarding and Performance Service and works closely with Child Protection Conference Chairs to promote consistency, quality assurance and high standards of practice for our most vulnerable children. The service operates through two dedicated specialist teams, Child Protection Conference Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers for children in care, who provide expertise, leadership and oversight within their respective areas of practice. Together, they drive continuous service improvement and contribute to the delivery of a robust and effective safeguarding system with a key focus on the quality of plans.

Although the service sits within Children and Family Services and forms part of the wider Children's Social Care structure, it remains operationally independent of the teams responsible for service delivery and resource allocation for children in care. This independence is fundamental to the IRO role, enabling objective oversight of care planning and ensuring that the voices, needs and rights of children remain central to decision-making.

The Independent Reviewing Officer Service plays a critical role in quality assurance and service improvement. Through independent scrutiny of care planning, safeguarding practice and permanence planning, IROs help to ensure that interventions are timely, effective and focused on achieving the best possible outcomes for children. Their statutory responsibilities include monitoring the progression and implementation of care plans, identifying and challenging drift or delay, and ensuring that children receive the services and support they need.

IROs are uniquely placed to identify themes, share good practice and highlight areas for development across the looked after children system. Through constructive challenge, effective advocacy and independent oversight, they provide assurance regarding the quality, safety and consistency of services, helping to drive continuous improvement and secure positive outcomes for children and young people.

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 2025 to March 2026.

It is an evaluative report considering how effectively the Safeguarding and Performance service has fulfilled the statutory 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 Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill (2026) 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 focused teams)

1x FTE Safeguarding Manager- Looked After Children

13.01 x FTE IRO

There are significant benefits to the Independent Reviewing Officer Service being located within Children's Social Care whilst maintaining operational independence. This position provides IROs with a strong understanding of local priorities, performance demands and service pressures, enabling informed and effective scrutiny.

The effectiveness of the IRO role depends on a culture of collaboration where value is placed on independent challenge and oversight. While IROs do not manage cases or direct interventions,

they ensure that care plans remain focused, timely and effective in achieving positive outcomes for children. Where progress is not being achieved, IROs provide constructive challenge and advocate for change.

Strong professional relationships with practitioners, managers and senior leaders enable IROs to fulfil their quality assurance responsibilities, champion good practice and contribute to continuous service improvement. The service continues to receive strong support from senior leaders, recognising the important contribution IROs make through their statutory responsibilities and wider quality assurance role.

IROs are central to driving Signs of Safety and Trauma-Informed Practice, promoting strengths-based planning, the effective use of support networks, and an understanding of the impact of trauma on children and families.

The service remains committed to continuous improvement through its Learning and Audit Framework, peer audit activity and monthly Improvement Cycle meetings. These provide robust oversight of performance, identify emerging themes and inform improvement activity, with progress regularly reported to the Senior Management Team each month.

Towards the end of this annual report year, in December 2025, there were some changes in leadership following Jane Moore's appointment as Chief Executive Officer and Sharon Cooke's appointment as interim Director of Children's Social Care. The Safeguarding and Performance Service Head of Service, Kay Fletcher, was appointed as interim Assistant Director, and Hollie Martin, our previous Service Manager, was appointed as interim Head of Service. The service has welcomed Emma Bulgin as interim Service Manager; she was previously the Local Authority's Agency Decision Maker. As we come to the end of this reporting year, our management structure remains interim though with strong insight into the needs of the service, and commitment to continuing the established relationships and support to the service.

In terms of IRO sufficiency, growth was agreed during 2024/2025 in response to increased demand and an additional IRO joined us in December 2025, taking our total to 13.1 FTE. The service has continued to be stable in terms of both staffing and development. This year's data consistently shows positive performance as a result of workforce stability, experience and capacity within the team.

Challenge Meetings

The Service Manager for the Safeguarding and Performance Service, Safeguarding Managers, and the Agency Decision Maker meet bi-monthly for a Pre-Challenge Meeting. This provides an opportunity to discuss cases and explore themes of emerging concern. Over 2024-25, this was monthly however has been reduced to bi-monthly over this year as a reflection that our escalation process is well established and emerging themes are addressed at an earlier stage.

Consideration is given to whether these cases or matters should be taken to the formal Challenge Meeting with the Assistant Director for Children's Social Care, or whether further actions can be taken in the first instance. A tracking spreadsheet is kept with a log of these discussions and the cases and themes are followed up with the allocated Independent Reviewing Officer during supervision or Team Meetings. Given the quality assurance role of the Agency Decision Maker, particularly in respect of permanence, this forum is key to jointly identifying themes and areas of practice which need further development at the earliest opportunity.

The formal challenge meeting is then held with the Assistant Director bi-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 which is set out in statutory guidance.

This formal challenge meeting also provides a chance to review and consider data linked to quality assurance alerts completed since the previous meeting 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 managers from CAFCASS to discuss identified themes and ensure that there is a strong partnership in place. Six-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 addressed.

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 benefited from quarterly tailored training and networking days over 2025/26. Each Regional Day has a key theme with a variety of speakers delivering presentations, as well as 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. Over 2026/27 there are plans for three online training sessions and one in-person training session.

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 in line with developments in that service.

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 in a timely way. We want children to be afforded opportunities that inspire high aspirations and support successful childhood experiences, which form the foundations for 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 diversity and ensure our children and young people are provided with inclusive services which value and respect their individual identity needs.

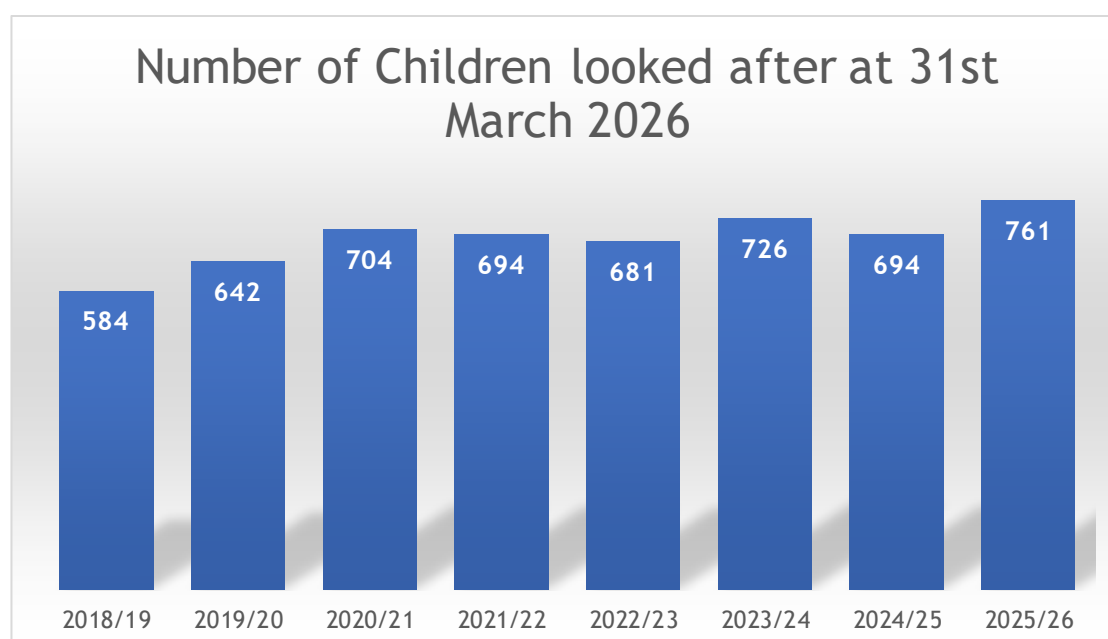
We are committed to the voice of our children and young people informing all areas of decision making, underpinned by a "You Said, We Did" approach. Participation is central to all services delivered to our children and young people and is championed in effective children and young people led forums 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 in achieving this, Leicestershire developed 'Our Promise' 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?

Numbers of Children in Care



There were 761 children in care on the 31st March 2026, this is an increase of 67 children (9.7%) from 694 children in care on 31st March 2025.

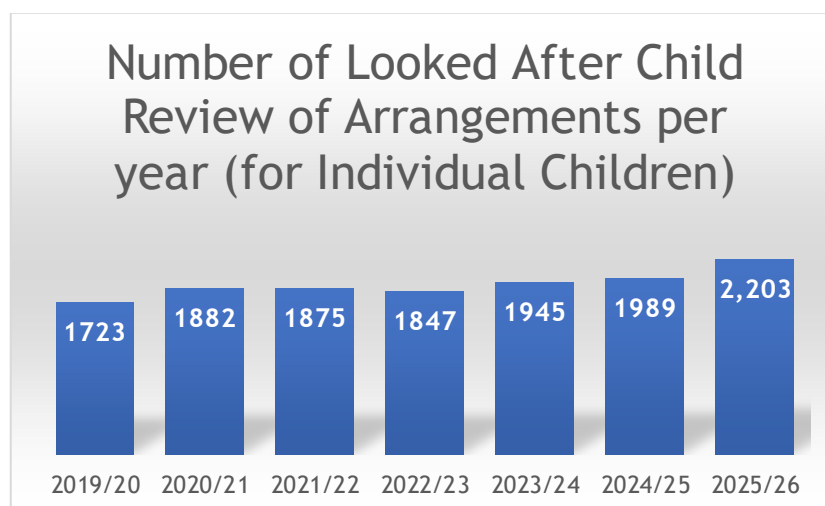
761 children is equivalent to 51.6 children per 10,000 population aged 0 to 17 in Leicestershire.

This compares to an average of 53.5 children in care per 10,000 children in Statistical Neighbour authorities, 62.0 for East Midlands and 67.0 for England as of 31st March 2025.

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.

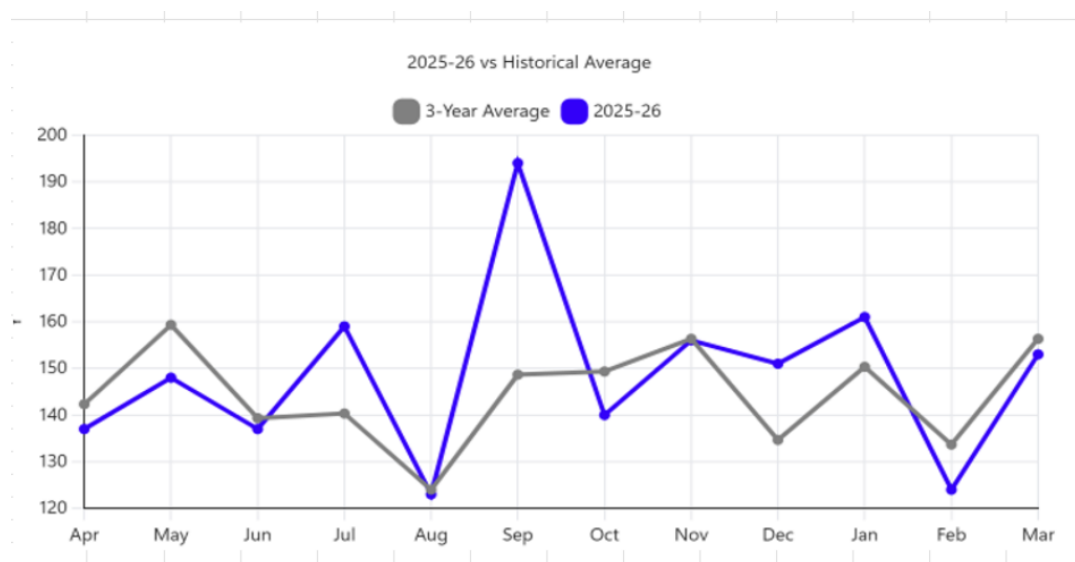
Of the 761 children in care on 31st March 2026, 464 (61.0%) were male and 297 (39.0%) were female. This represents an increase of 51 males compared to 31st March 2025, (413, 54.3%), and an increase of 16 females (281, 36.9%)

Numbers of Review of Arrangements Meetings



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.

On average there were 149 reviews chaired each month, with peaks of 194 in September 25, and lower numbers of 123 in August 25. This is an increase in comparison to an average of 141 reviews chaired monthly over 2024-2025. The variance in number of reviews is shown in the graph below.

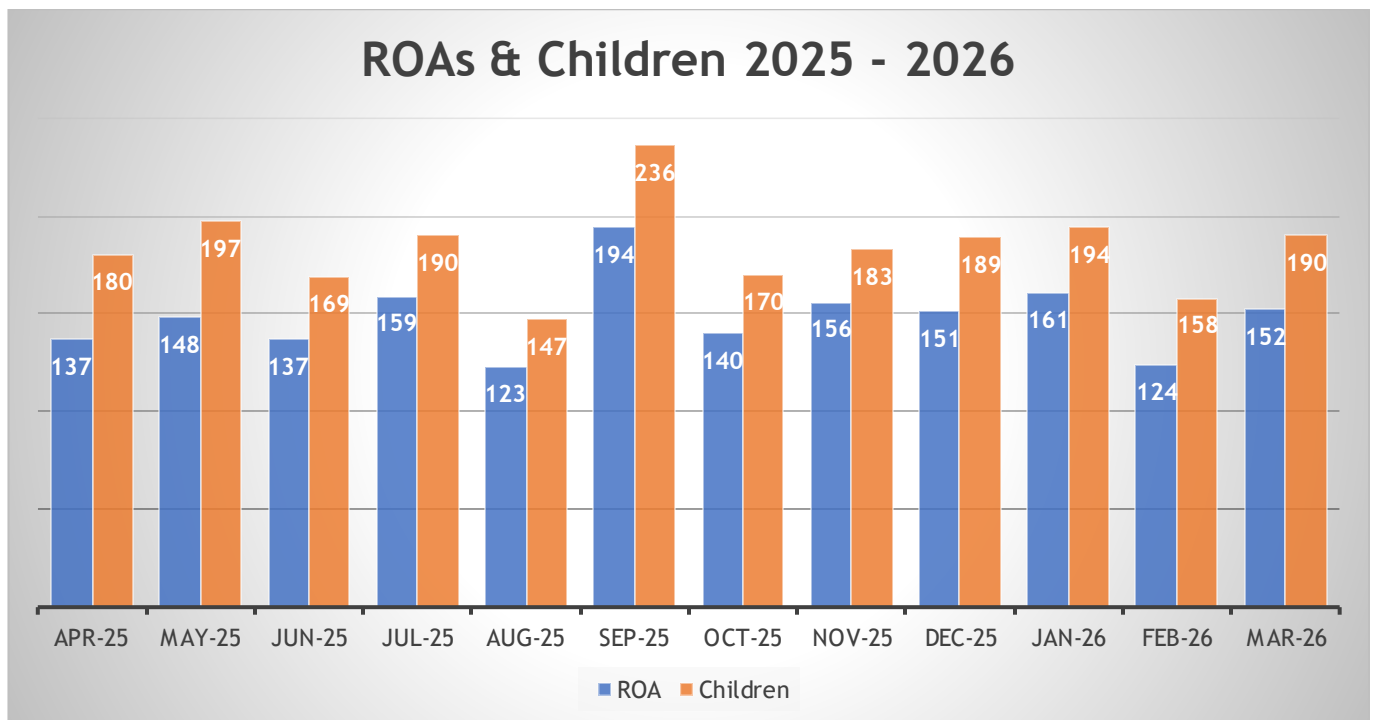


There has been an increase in the number of Review of Arrangements Meetings completed during the reporting period compared with the previous year. A total of 2,203 Review of Arrangements Meetings for individual children were undertaken, equating to 1,783 meetings once sibling groups were accounted for and counted as a single meeting where appropriate. This is an increase of 214 meetings for individual children (10.8%) and 97 meetings overall (5.8%), in comparison to the last reporting year.

While sibling groups continue to have an impact on overall meeting numbers, the increase in both individual child reviews and overall meetings indicates that the rise in activity cannot be attributed solely to larger sibling groups entering care.

Monthly performance broadly followed expected patterns, although a notable peak in activity was recorded during September. Analysis of available data has not identified any clear operational, demographic or practice-related factors to explain this increase, and activity levels returned to expected ranges in subsequent months. At this stage, the September peak appears to represent an isolated fluctuation rather than evidence of an emerging trend.

The data also demonstrates that increases in review activity are accompanied by increases in the number of children reviewed. In September 2025, the highest level of activity was recorded, with 194 ROAs relating to 236 children, reflecting both increased demand and the impact of sibling groups entering or progressing through review processes together. Similarly, in January 2026, 161 ROAs related to 194 children, further evidencing the continued prevalence of sibling group arrangements. Below is the graph that shows the difference between reviews and children per month over the year.



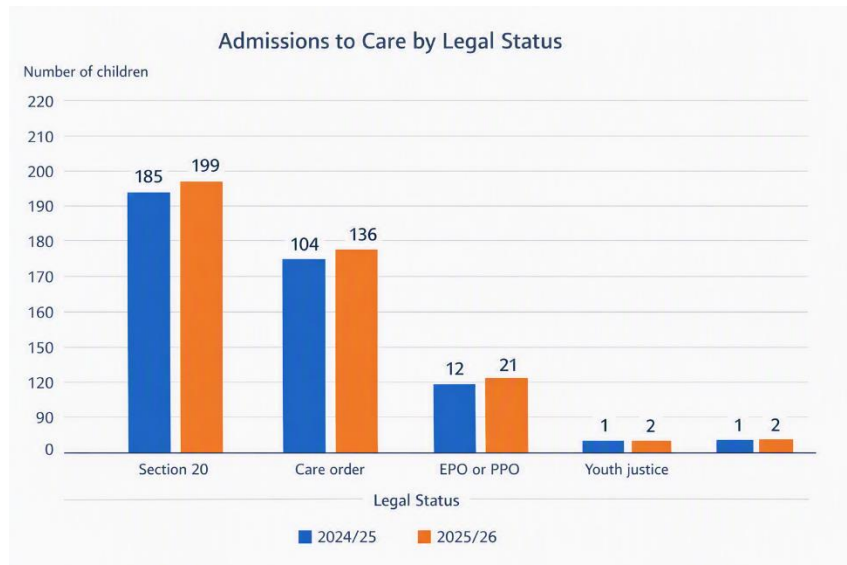
Over this year, we have continued to embed midway reviews, which take place between review meetings so that the Independent Reviewing Officer can carefully track a child's care plan. This can also take place at other points during the review period, if the Independent Reviewing Officer identifies a need 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

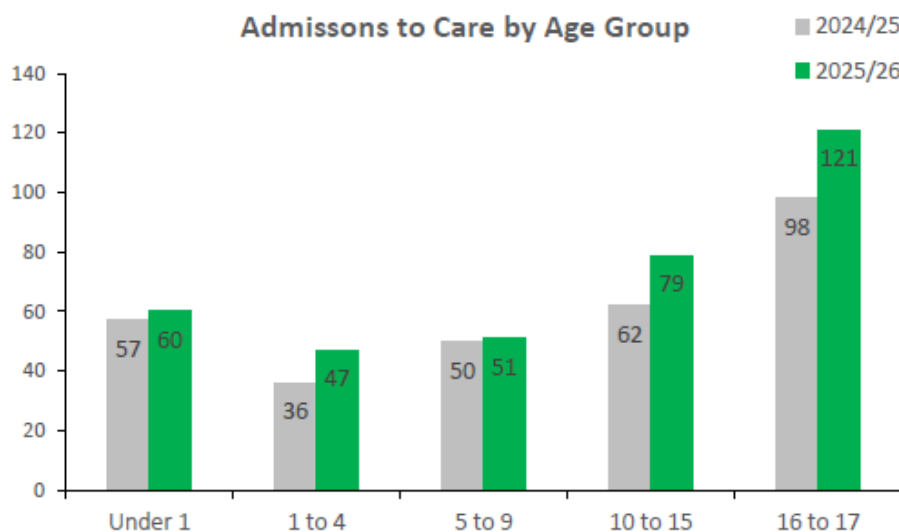
of arrangements meeting will this be arranged. Generally, all issues can be dealt with at the midway review. This aims to both improve quality and avoid drift and delay in planning permanency for children, which has remained a key focus for the service in this period. Early reviews can still be held for children in specific circumstances as outlined in the Independent Reviewing Officer Handbook.

Admission by Legal Status & Age

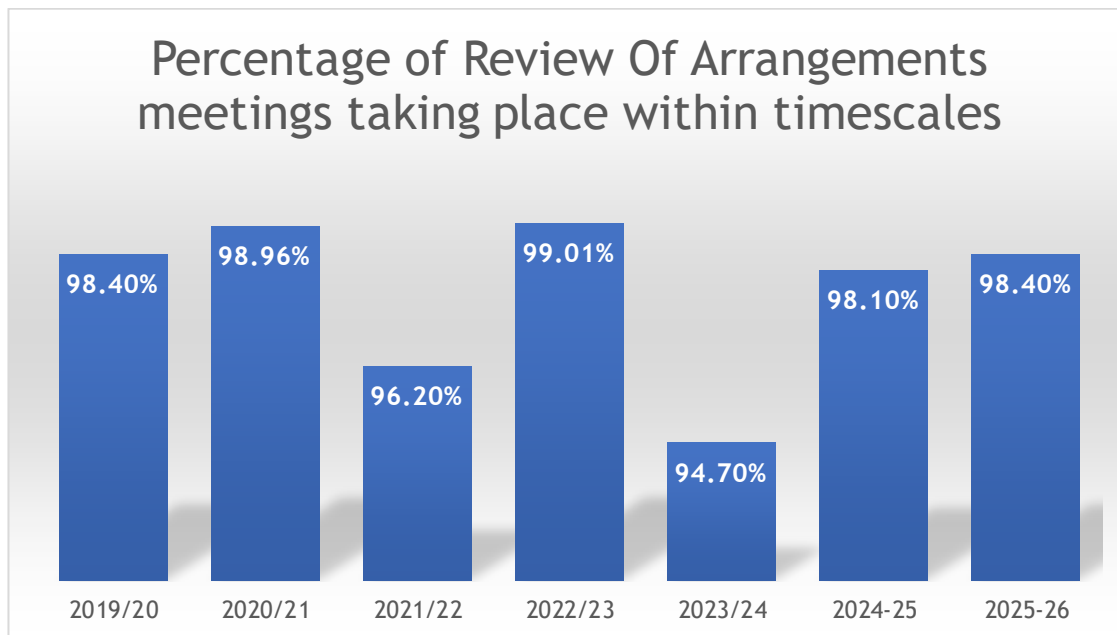
During 2025/26, 358 children were admitted into care, representing an increase of 55 admissions (18%) compared with the 303 admissions recorded in 2024/25. The visual below shows the breakdown by legal status.



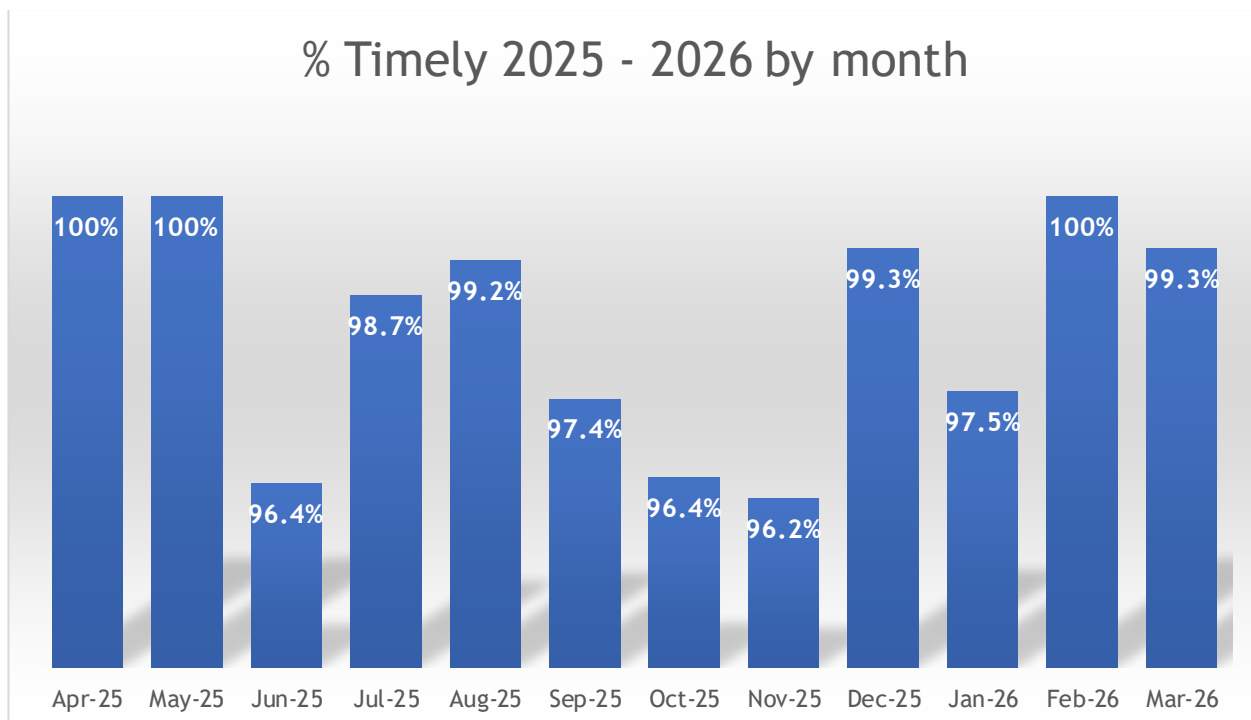
In 2025/26 there was an increase in children admitted to care for all age groups. Further examination of admissions to care by age group and legal status in 2025/26 are shown in the charts below.



Timeliness of Reviews



At the year ending 31st March 2026, 98.4% of meetings were completed within timescale and 1.6% (30 reviews) took place out of timescale. This is a positive small increase from 2024/25 as we have had an increase in meetings overall, and a further reduction of meetings held outside of the expected timescale.



We continue to hold our monthly Improvement Cycle Meetings which provides Head of Service oversight to all aspects of the Review process and therefore 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. Oversight from Senior Management team is then provided each month in a management meeting dedicated to performance.

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.

During the review year, 58.2% (1,037) of reviews were held face-to-face, 3.3% (59) were delivered using a hybrid approach, and 38.4% (684) were held virtually. This compares with 2024/25, when 64.2% (1,082) of reviews were held face-to-face, 0.9% (16) were hybrid, and 34.8% (587) were virtual.

While there has been some year-on-year variation in the proportion of reviews delivered through face-to-face, virtual and hybrid formats, the overall pattern remains broadly consistent. Importantly, the format of each review is planned in partnership with children, young people and their families, taking account of their individual circumstances, preferences and participation needs. The changes seen across the different meeting formats therefore reflect a flexible, child-centered approach to review planning, rather than any significant change in the level of review activity.

We can see that our participation numbers have remained high over this review period, and for children aged over four, we can report that 93% of children contributed to their review this year. This is a slight increase from 92% last year and shows consistent performance. This is very positive as part of our drive to have the child at the centre of their planning.

We acknowledge 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. For another young person and their final review, the IRO met with her prior to her final review to complete a timeline of her experiences/achievements since living with her carer who she is staying with into adulthood. This was completed to ensure her final review was a celebration of all of her achievements and celebrated the relationship between her and her carer. It was completed on a roll of paper, she did drawings and put photo's on marking her achievements and she added more details to this in the run up to her review. At her review, the young person spoke about the support she'd received, her achievements. This was a real celebration with cake shared to mark the occasion and lots of positive feedback about how meaningful the review was for this young person.

For another young person, the IRO met with the young person prior to his review, they played dominoes and chatted, he then opted to stay for his review for the first time, having just done a fun, regulating activity just before the meeting which calmed any nerves, built rapport and made this a positive experience.

For another young person, he was actively involved in planning his review being asked where they would like the review to take place and setting the time. This was centered around his needs and preferences rather than exclusively around the professional needs. The review was scheduled for 4.30pm after college day, so it would limit any disruption to the young person's schedule and attendance at college.

For a child in their adoptive home, the IRO spent time playing with him and his adopters, using building blocks. This helped to gather more insights into the things the child does with his parents, including playing together in the mud kitchen. He let the IRO have a cuddle with his toy monkey which his daddy had bought him to support with his transition to his permanent placement. They also read a story together which was part of helping the child to understand transition planning. This simply story telling helped to provide an important opportunity for the IRO to understand more about wider family relationships, and the child's relationship with his younger brother. He proudly showed off the shelf his daddy had made for his toys. This sort of creative and child focused approach demonstrates the IRO's drive to place the child's voice at the centre of their plan.

We have continued to drive purposeful practice within review meetings, making sure they provide a space where children and young people would want to attend, ensuring discussions are held in a trauma-informed way and that discussions are proactive and meaningful in producing 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 an emphasis on strengths first and a more solution-focused discussion about some of the worries. It may mean the young person's review is more like a discussion covering all the key areas, or that some discussions take place outside of the main meeting if it is not appropriate for the child to hear some of the more adult discussions needed.

We have found that being more purposeful in our review meetings is crucial to keeping children and young people at the center of the planning process.

For 2025/26, 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	2025/26
Children who are under the age of 4	363	370	404	405	367	329	332	386	416
Children who attend their reviews and speak for themselves	554	632	659	561	590	714	855	863	863
Children who attend but communicate via an advocate	4	10	7	18	23	48	66	31	38
Children who attend and	2	3	0	4	3	4	4	6	5

convey their views non-verbally									
Children who attend but don't contribute	11	10	11	7	4	14	22	23	24
Children who do not attend but brief someone to speak on their behalf	52	98	87	81	118	104	76	38	33
Children who do not attend but communicate their views by another method	415	296	450	636	623	495	478	515	658
Children who do not attend or convey their views in any other way	87	163	103	118	147	139	112	127	113

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 Youth Voice Council 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 electronically to the social worker, who will either complete the booklet with the young person or share it with the young person so they are able to complete it independently or with support.

Over this year, 216 booklets have been returned, which is a slight decrease compared to 227 booklets in 2024/25. However, both are positive increases from 128 booklets in 2023/24. There is more work required to improve the visibility of this document, and the Independent Reviewing Officers continue to promote its completion which forms an action for 26/27.

In addition to the link being sent directly before the review it can also be found on the LCC Corporate Parenting page using 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 the 2023/24 year, the Language that Cares Toolkit was developed from this as further support to practitioners who have important conversations with children and young people about being more aware of the language they use 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 by ensuring at each review meeting that practitioners are using the 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 and any other important language or words they would prefer 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.

We are now two years into using this toolkit and it has continued to be a positive addition to practice, with IROs and social workers reflecting on children's preferences when it comes to the language they use during their time 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

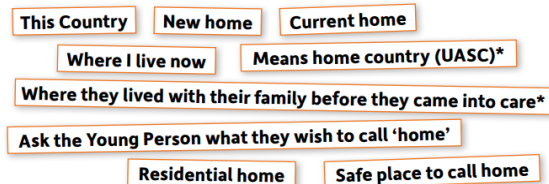
Alternatives:



Home

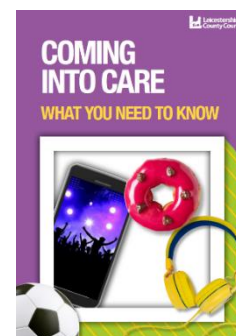
Where a child currently lives – this can be confusing as a child might call their home the place where their parents live

Alternatives:



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

We are two years from the launch of our Coming Into Care Pack, which is a document created by the Children's Rights and Participation team providing helpful information for children in care. Like with the toolkit, this has also been shared with those working with children in care including foster carers and providers and is supported by IROs.



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)	Total	%
Return to family	33	5.9%
Adoption	46	8.2%
SGO/CAO	26	4.7%
Supported living in the community	94	16.8%
Long-term residential placement	54	9.7%
Long-term fostering	263	47.1%
Twin Tracking	42	7.5%
Total without permanence plan agreed	0	0.0%

Total with permanence plan agreed	558	100.0%
Total	558	100.0%

Plan agreed before 2nd review	558	100.0%
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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. We have slightly altered our recording process on this to ensure all children's proposed permanence plan is recorded from their 28-day Review of Arrangements meeting. The IRO is endorsing the child's proposed permanence plan from the earliest stage and continues to place strong emphasis on permanence being confirmed at the earliest opportunity.

Permanence Plan (ALL LAC – from start of care period)	Grand Total	%
Return to family	49	6.4%
Adoption	66	8.6%
SGO/CAO	32	4.2%
Supported living in the community	145	18.9%
Long-term residential placement	61	7.9%
Long-term fostering	294	38.2%
Twin Tracking	91	11.8%
Total without permanence plan agreed	31	4.0%
Total with permanence plan agreed	738	96.0%
Total	769	100.0%

In 2025/26, data has been used from the full cohort of children in care and 96% (738 children) had a permanence plan agreed, with 4% (31 children) without permanence agreed. These children had not had their second review by 31 March 2026, and there are a further 11.8% (91 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.

Comparing this with the previous year 2024/25, permanence planning has strengthened during 2025/26. Despite a 10.5% increase in the looked after population, the proportion of children with an agreed permanence plan improved from 92.1% to 96.0%. Long-term fostering remains the predominant permanence route, while notable increases have been seen in supported living and Special Guardianship Order/ Child Arrangements Orders. Family-based permanence options have grown overall, and residential provision has remained proportionately stable. The continued reduction in children without permanence agreed demonstrates positive progress in ensuring children achieve timely permanence outcomes.

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.

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.

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.

Between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026, 431 Quality Assurance Alerts were completed for Children in Care, comprising 144 formal escalations, 199 challenges and 88 recognitions of outstanding practice. This represents a significant increase in overall QA activity compared with previous years. Formal escalations increased from 76 in 2024/25 to 144 in 2025/26. Challenges also increased to 199, compared with 168 in 2024/25.

Recognition of outstanding practice rose substantially from 16 in 2024/25 to 88 in 2025/26. The data shows a strengthening quality assurance framework and how our electronic recording system has developed over the past few years to ensure that escalations are always formally captured and recorded.

Category	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	Change 24/25 to 25/26
Formal Escalations	39	76	144	+89%
Challenges	103	168	199	+18%
Outstanding Practice	94	16	88	+450%
Total Alerts	236	260	431	+66%

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 118 resolved at Team Manager level, 49 resolved at Service Manager level and 3 resolved at Head of Service level.

An example of one formal escalation was where an IRO raised concern that therapy had not been fully explored for a young person since his last review. He had experienced significant trauma and a number of moves in where he was living; however, he had subsequently had a positive match and settled with his foster carers. This was raised with the manager, who responded with recommended actions that the team then followed up. At his subsequent review, it was noted that play therapy was now in place weekly with his foster carer. Positive feedback was shared about this, and the young person enjoyed the creative play, particularly the sand. This is a positive example of the support from the IRO contributing to new thinking for the young person, addressing any challenges, and development of the care plan.

The service has continued to regularly discuss and review the processes of QA's, working with 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. There has been a renewed focus within the IRO group to achieve greater consistency between them around our escalation process, with focus in team meetings and peer supervision groups keeping this under review which will continue into 2026/27.

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

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 2025/26.

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 2025/2026.

Personal Education Plans

The virtual school are currently reviewing and developing how they monitor and capture Personal Education Plans meaning that further detail will be available for future reports; at present data is captured per academic year.

Term	School Age PEPS completed	All age groups PEPS completed	Total
Autumn 25/26 (August 25 - Jan 26)	490	731	98%
Spring term 25/26 (Jan 26 - April 26)	433	743	98%

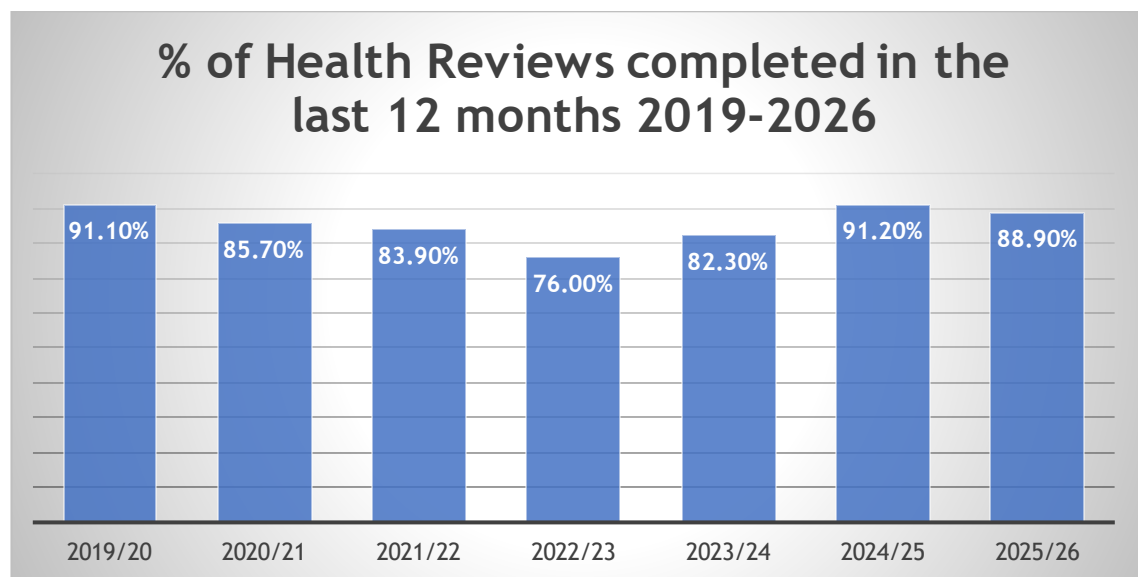
At Review of Arrangements meetings, Independent Reviewing Officers routinely confirm if PEP meetings have taken place, whether all recommendations are being progressed and whether this is sufficient or further action is necessary. Completion of PEPs is seen as a high priority, as they are fundamental to ensuring each child has access to the right educational support to enable them to achieve their potential. To this end, Independent Reviewing Officers continue to work closely with the Virtual School, and Education Improvement Officers regularly attend the child's review of arrangements.

Children and young people's education continues to be a high priority within the Independent Reviewing Officer service. In each Independent Reviewing Officer's supervision, all cases are reviewed where the child has been identified as not 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 School is proactive in working with schools and colleges to ensure that young people's needs are met.

Health checks completed within twelve months

In 2025/26, 88.9% of children had their annual health reviews completed within timescale, which is a slight decrease from 91.2% in 2024/25.

IROs continue to focus on children's health needs during review meetings, reviewing their annual health assessment and ensuring any recommended follow up is included as part of their care planning actions. There has been contact where necessary between the IRO and Looked After Children's Health team where specific information has been needed about a child's health, or advice has been sought. Health colleagues attend the Corporate Parenting Board and are held to account for service delivery for children in care. There are operational and strategic meetings that take place between children's social care and health to discuss provision and any challenges.



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, 86.2% of children had their teeth checked by a dentist.

We are aware that there can be several factors that may contribute to missed checks, such as a young person declining services. This data is reviewed on a monthly basis by the children in care service to determine any steps needed for young people who have outstanding checks.

Strengthening our response to child sexual abuse

Following the publication of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) findings in 2022, Baroness Casey's Audit of Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, and the report '*I Wanted Them to Notice: Protecting Children and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse Within the Family Environment*' (November 2024), Leicestershire strengthened its workforce development offer in relation to assessing and responding to adults who pose a risk of harm to children, including specialist training which was successfully completed by IROs.

Alongside this, the IRO service contributed to the development of the internal Care and Protect Assessment tool and associated Risk Assessment tools, which have been rolled out across the department for intervention with families, adults who caused or may have caused harm, and protective adults.

In December 2025, there was a Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) across LLR which focused on sexual abuse within the family network. Some of our children in care were identified as part of that inspection and joint interviews with IROs, CP Chairs and allocated social workers were

completed. The final report was published in February 2026, with the main findings detailing that *'The partnership is committed to recognising and responding to child sexual abuse in the family environment. The safeguarding partners work closely together to consider shared matters of governance, funding and intelligence, to seek to ensure consistency across the wider area.'* They also noted that senior leaders across the partnership know their services well and share their openness to learning and supporting staff's continuous improvement through some well-received training. The quality of assessments, including capacity to protect assessments, was positive. IROs continue to ensure that children who have experienced sexual harm are provided with the right support for their circumstances and needs via identified actions within their care plan.

The service is responsible for the harmful sexual behaviour consultation offer. Five specialist IROs provide this offer of support and oversight where a child is using harmful sexual behaviour. A referral is made by the allocated social worker to the service and a harmful sexual behaviour meeting is held. It may be that advice is offered, or that the young person is allocated an IRO to oversee their plan due to concerns of harmful sexual behaviour. This can be a child subject to a child in need plan, child protection plan or child in care plan. Feedback has been that this offer is considered helpful and supportive to those teams and workers who are providing intervention to families. IROs who provide this role are actively involved in further developments across the service, led by the Practice Excellence Team, in how we support young people using sexually harmful behaviour.

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

Well managed meetings

Over this review period we have had a mix of face-to-face, hybrid and virtual review meetings. Independent Reviewing Officers have been visiting the children they are working with and are thinking of creative 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 children's best interests, and we have seen participation levels increase in line with following a young person's wishes regarding the way their review is conducted. The individual profile 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. The service continues to monitor this robustly through review meetings, monitoring of children's records and seeking updates between meetings. Independent Reviewing Officers provide professional challenge to teams if there are concerns about drift and delay for children. All children who are in a position to have a permanence plan have this agreed by the second review, 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, and I have highlighted some below:

- A young person who has found education really tricky over this year, got a certificate from school for 'always setting a great example of behaviour in the classroom' which was celebrated by a certificate from our Director.
- A young person who is blind held a fundraiser for the RNIB. There were raffles, a meet and greet with animals, food and cupcakes, along with a bouncy castle and garden games, which raised £500. A voice note was sent to the young person by our Director to celebrate her success.
- A young person who ran a 6k muddy obstacle course run.
- A young person was playing out with his friends on their bikes and scooters when one of his friends fell off his bike and injured himself, causing cuts and bruises and bleeding. Out of the entire friendship group, it was our young person who helped his friend and supported him back home to his parents. The boy's parents rang his carers to express their thanks and appreciation for his caring nature and quick thinking in helping his friend to safety.
- A young person turning 18 had a birthday dinner out and the young person chose who she would like to attend who she felt were most significant to her, including her kinship carers, Social Worker, Independent Reviewing Officer.

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, they have done this again this year. The staff, young people and social workers for the young people got together and cooked their cultural dishes and shared these together.

After the success of our Celebration Achievement Awards in March 2025, celebrating our children in care and their achievements, organised by the Corporate Parenting Team, three different events were hosted to accommodate the different age groups. This style of event is again planned for June 2026, and next year's annual report will comment on this further.



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.

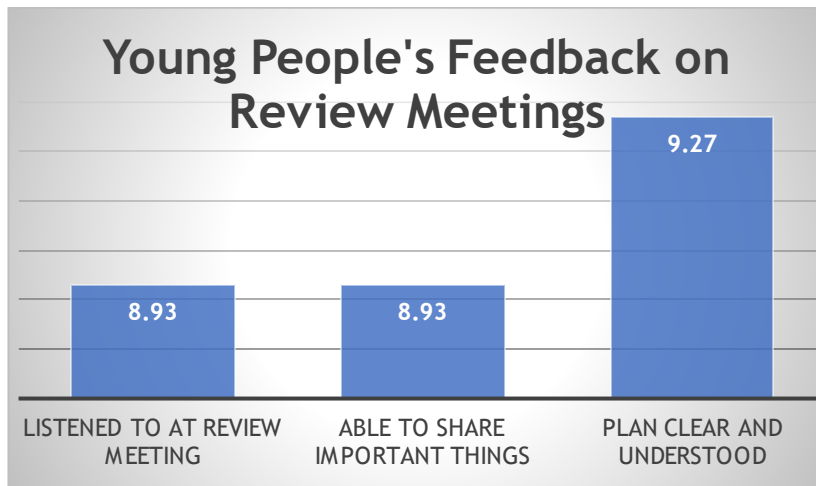
Feedback from children

One of the main ways the service has received feedback from children has been via the Youth Voice Council, formerly the Children in Care Council (CICC). Over this year, the key focus for them has varied over recent months. One of the key projects we have been working on has involved reflecting on court processes to better understand whether children and young people feel they have sufficient information and are adequately prepared to participate in court proceedings.

One particularly impactful discussion focused on the use of taxis for children in care and the effect that poor service provision can have on their wellbeing. This feedback has prompted challenge and discussion within the organisation, resulting in work to improve taxi provision and ensure services are more suitable, reliable, and responsive to the needs of children and young people.

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:



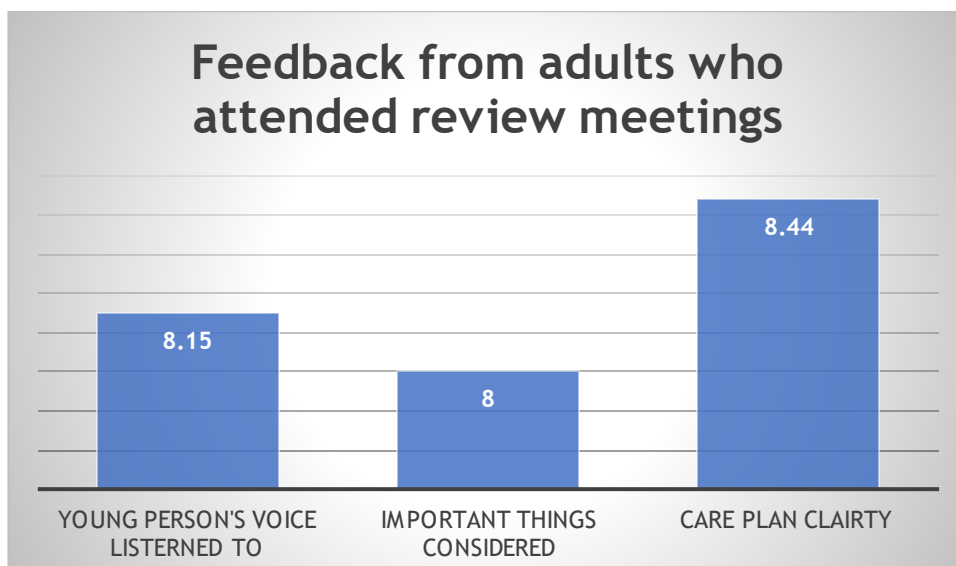
We continue to review our feedback forms within team meetings and use them to grow and learn as a team taking on board the advice provided through the feedback.

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 forms from children and young people detailed above, we have also developed feedback forms for adults who attended review meetings, including 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 we achieved against our aims over the past 12 months?

The 2024/2025 annual report set out our plans for 12 months going forward. Below is how we have addressed and achieved those aims:

Social Work Reforms

During 2025/26, Families First reforms have continued to develop, and the service has remained engaged with emerging changes and their potential implications. Whilst there have been no significant changes to the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer during this reporting period, the service has continued to monitor developments and ensure that children continue to receive robust independent oversight throughout periods of organisational and national change. Within our service, there are likely to be changes to the Child Protection Chair role with the development of the Lead Child Protection Practitioner role. The changes Leicestershire plans to make will be piloted over 2026/27, with implementation by 1 April 2027.

Embedding of the Language that Cares Toolkit

A key priority for 2024/25 was embedding the Language that Cares Toolkit into practice following its launch in June 2024. We have made good progress in this area and are now two years into the implementation of the toolkit. Independent Reviewing Officers routinely use the toolkit during review meetings to ensure children's individual preferences about language are captured and reflected in review records and wider care planning documentation. This has helped ensure that recording is more child-centred and sensitive to children's identities, relationships and lived experiences. The toolkit continues to be viewed positively and has become an established part of practice across the service.

Consistent Practice: Our Bottom Lines

During 2025/26, the service has continued to progress its revised bottom lines and purposeful practice standards. These expectations were reviewed and updated in October 2025, building upon the work undertaken following the service day in November 2024. The evidence suggests these standards have become well established, supporting a positive culture shift in how review meetings are prepared for and conducted. The reduction in reviews held in two parts has been sustained, review quality has improved, and 98.4% of Review of Arrangements meetings were completed within timescale despite increasing demand on the service.

Utilising Data to Improve Practice

The service has continued to strengthen its use of data throughout the year. Monthly Improvement Cycle Meetings have provided regular oversight of performance, reviewing review activity, timeliness, participation, and other key indicators. Data analysis has also been used to better understand trends relating to participation, permanence, review activity and quality assurance. In addition, the feedback mechanisms for children, families and professionals have provided valuable information to support service development and evidence impact.

The service has continued to provide robust scrutiny and challenge where concerns have been identified regarding drift, delay or care planning. Permanence remains a key focus, and the data demonstrates positive progress, with 96% of children having an agreed permanence plan and all children reaching their second review having permanence agreed. Quality assurance activity has also increased significantly, with 431 Quality Assurance Alerts completed during the year, including increases in both challenge and formal escalation activity. This demonstrates the continued commitment of Independent Reviewing Officers to advocating for children, challenging delay and supporting timely decision-making.

Improving Administrative Processes

Progress has continued in improving recording and administrative processes, including the use of Microsoft Copilot to support records of Review of Arrangements meetings. A pilot started in January 2026, with positive feedback received during the pilot centred on IROs being more focused on discussion during the meeting and improved timeliness of meeting records being completed. The young people who have been present for meetings which have been recorded have not raised any concerns about this change to the process. This has now been rolled out to the whole IRO service. It is accepted that not all children will want their review meeting to be recorded, and a key bottom line is that the use of Copilot does not affect the quality of the record being produced; the IRO still remains fully responsible for the record. Now this has been implemented, further review of records will take place during the 26/27 period.

The service has further embedded the use of Mosaic workflows, activity logs and quality assurance systems to support more effective oversight of children's plans. Amendments have also been made to challenge and escalation recording processes to improve monitoring and reporting. Whilst some system developments remain outstanding, there has been continued progress in improving the visibility and recording of Independent Reviewing Officer activity and quality assurance work.

Promoting Participation of Children and Young People

This has remained a significant strength for the service. Participation levels have increased slightly, with 93% of children aged over four contributing to their review, compared to 92% in the previous year. Independent Reviewing Officers have continued to demonstrate creativity and flexibility in supporting children to express their views, including through advocacy, trusted adults, alternative communication methods and individual engagement approaches. Children have also benefited from a choice of face-to-face, virtual and hybrid meetings to support their participation. Whilst use of the My Review booklet remains significantly higher than previous years, there has been a small reduction compared to 2024/25, and increasing its use remains a priority moving forward.

The Importance of Networks

The service has continued to recognise the importance of family, friendship and professional networks in children's lives. Review meetings have maintained a focus on relationships, identity, belonging and permanence planning, with sibling group reviews continuing to support family-centred approaches where appropriate. Independent Reviewing Officers have also continued to work purposefully with children's wider networks to ensure they remain involved in planning and decision-making, supporting positive outcomes and stronger permanence arrangements.

Supporting Effective Use of the Public Law Outline

Independent Reviewing Officers have continued to support effective practice for children subject to pre-proceedings and care proceedings by maintaining a strong focus on permanence planning and preventing drift and delay. Through review meetings, midway reviews and ongoing oversight between reviews, Independent Reviewing Officers have provided scrutiny of children's plans and challenged where progress towards permanence has not been achieved within expected timescales.

The service has continued to embed midway reviews, enabling concerns about care planning to be identified and addressed at an earlier stage rather than waiting for the next statutory review. This has supported timely decision-making and strengthened oversight of children's plans throughout proceedings.

9. What can we do better and our plans for the next 12 months?

Participation and Children's Voice

The voice of children and young people remains central to the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service participation within reviews remains a significant strength of the service, with 93% of young people contributing to their review during 2025/26. However, there remains a cohort of children who do not attend or contribute to their reviews, and we will continue to explore creative and individualised approaches to support their participation.

A particular focus for the coming year will be increasing the use of the My Review consultation document. Whilst completion rates remain significantly higher than in previous years, there has been a slight reduction from 2024/25, and we will work with social workers, foster carers, Children's Rights Officers and the Youth Voice Council to raise awareness and encourage greater use of this valuable tool.

Health and Wellbeing

Children's health remains an important area of focus. Whilst annual health assessments continue to be completed for the majority of children, performance has reduced slightly from 91.2% to 88.9% during 2025/26. Dental attendance also remains below the level we would aspire to see for all children in care.

The service will continue to work closely with health colleagues to ensure health needs are appropriately considered at every review, recommendations are progressed and children receive timely access to health services. We will also seek greater involvement in future health audit activity to strengthen joint quality assurance and shared learning.

Quality Assurance, Challenge and Escalation

The service has continued to strengthen its quality assurance function, with increased use of challenge and escalation processes supporting improved oversight of children's care planning. There has also been a welcome increase in the recognition of outstanding practice.

A priority for 2026/27 will be continuing to improve consistency in how challenge and escalation processes are applied across the service. We also want to further develop our recording and reporting systems so that challenge activity, themes and outcomes can be more effectively analysed and used to inform service improvement.

Family Networks and Relationships

As the number of children in care continues to increase, maintaining family relationships and strengthening support networks becomes increasingly important. The service will continue to promote family network approaches and ensure that children remain connected to the people who are important to them wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so.

We will continue to support early family network identification and encourage professionals to consider wider family and community connections as part of permanence planning and preparation for adulthood.

Families First Partnership Programme

National social work reforms, the Families First Partnership Programme, 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, will evolve. We expect greater clarity on these changes in the coming months and will continue to assess their impact on our service, but we are working with the project team to prepare for the likelihood of new standalone job descriptions and roles for IROs. We know that the future focus of this programme into 2027 is “Enduring Relationships”, as set out by the Department for Education, and the service will be keenly involved in any developments.

Reunification

IROs are involved in discussions and planning around reunification for our children where possible. Following on from the Families First Partnership focus, national guidance positions reunification as one of the key ways in which enduring relationships with family can be preserved or rebuilt. Over the next year, as a service, we will be engaged in development around our approach to supporting reunification.

Unregulated Placements

IROs play an important role in oversight and challenge for all children in care, but we recognise that when children are placed in unregulated placements, that a further increased level of oversight and consideration is needed. IROs will focus on how we support this small cohort of children to help support their needs being met and provide challenge to teams in securing the right placements that meet their needs.

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