

**Lincolnshire County Council – Children’s Services
Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report
1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023**

This is the annual report in relation to the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) to quality assuring and improving services for children in care in Lincolnshire.

The Independent Chairs have a dual role as Independent Reviewing Officers and Independent Chairs who chair child protection conferences. This report focuses on the work of the Independent Reviewing Officers in relation to children in care. Activity relating to their role as Independent Chairs is detailed in a separate report which is presented to the Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership. As such any previous and ongoing targets in relation to Child Protection will not be reported on within this report.

This IRO report provides evidence relating to the IRO Service in Lincolnshire which must be presented to the Corporate Parenting Board as required by statutory guidance.

Purpose of service and legal context

The IRO Service is set within the framework of the IRO Handbook 2010 which provides the statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers and Local Authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for children in care.

The guidance is issued as part of a suite of statutory guidance which sets out how local authorities should carry out the full range of responsibilities in relation to care planning, placement and review for looked after children. The aim is to provide looked after children with the most appropriate placement to meet their needs and improve their outcomes.

Throughout this report the term child/ children refers to all those under the age of 18. However, it must be acknowledged that some young people in the upper age bracket like to be referred to as Young People.

Update on priorities 2022-2023 – Taken from the Quality & Standards Team Action Plan 2021-2023

- **Recording of escalations on Mosaic is amended to enable the recording of the narrative where there is genuine resolution dialogue to avoid taking to the next level.**

This piece of work is now completed.

A new Escalation Step is now live in the MOSAIC workflow. Wherever possible a positive challenge is made in the first instance, and this is recorded within the IRO

Activity step. A positive challenge is where an IRO has identified a practice issue and seeks to resolve this in the first instance in a restorative way. It is unlikely to be a significant or urgent issue. Where an IRO feels a formal escalation is required the Escalation workflow step now allows for a discussion narrative to be progressively added which forms part of the full record. This process allows all those involved, at whatever stage of the formal escalation to view and understand any previous discussions and proposed outcomes. This helps to create a full picture and removes the need to record information in other areas of the child's file. The result is an end-to-end record that tracks an issue through to resolution and provides clarity in one place.

- **The service will be undertaking a review of Children in Care physical participation by families and professionals with a road map for attendance.**

This is now completed.

There is a clear expectation that whenever it is required an in-person meeting takes place. The IRO team places a value on children, their families and professionals being able to get together to review the child's plan. However, for those children and young people old enough and who are able to express their views independently, the platform for the meeting always takes into account their preferences, their need to feel safe and the way in which they wish to engage. The service strongly holds an 'it's my meeting, it's my choice' ethos, ensuring that children and young people are always listened to. There are times where children elect to hold their meeting virtually and choose who they would like to attend. The Team places a value on this and wherever possible aims to meet children wishes and needs.

- **Analysis and development of procedures and IT support required for post covid Child in Care hybrid meetings. Hybrid meetings being those attended by invitees in person and via electronic means.**

This is an ongoing action.

There is still some way to go before all conference facilities around the County have hybrid working equipment available, similar to those already installed and working such as County Offices. This is an ongoing project within the context of smarter working development across the wider Council. All chairs now have individual Logitech conference cam units. These are portable and allow hybrid meetings to take place more effectively, where there is enhanced quality of sound and vision to support more effective meetings. This was procured after a successful business case was presented and is having a positive impact after being tested out for some time. This model is particularly benefiting Children in Care as the equipment can be used in a range of locations such as schools and foster carers homes which again allows more of our children and young people to have choices in relation to their meetings, who attends in person and who attends remotely. The IRO's are finding that this model allows more freedom and flexibility to engage with children in line with their preferences.

- **Integration of current feedback from Child Protection and Children in Care utilising "Engagement HQ" (centralised feedback development and recording system) when this comes online.**

This action is completed.

After some in depth discussions, it has been decided that the IRO service feedback will sit outside of the 'Let's Talk Lincolnshire' platform. Whilst this platform is positive in its wider context, the feedback received from Children and their parents/ carers is often subjective and linked to their experiences. By virtue of the nature of the IRO role the team are often faced with very sensitive situations where children are often placed into care against their parents' wishes. To ask a simple scaling question 'how did we do' is likely to evoke a negative response and impact on the overall feedback and effectiveness of the 'Let's talk Lincolnshire' survey. As such the IRO team continue to use their bespoke feedback system which acknowledges these sensitivities and focusses feedback on an individual over all experience and the support they received. This has been amended and now sits within the Microsoft Forms platform which makes the experience of feedback more fluid and accessible. This also helps the service to bring together key themes when considering the impact of the service we deliver, lessons learnt and adapting the way services are delivered.

- **Based on Engagement HQ, review of feedback forms and analysis of lessons learnt to effect service delivery.**

This action is complete. Please see the point above.

- **Challenge and focus by the Independent Chair on ensuring active participation and engagement with any "absent" parent within the child protection framework. With particular emphasis on Fathers.**

This is an ongoing action.

For the purpose of this report the emphasis will be on IRO's engaging with absent parents as the Child Protection Chairs are reported separately to the LSCP under the Child Protection reporting framework. The updated action therefore is:

- **Challenge and focus by the Independent Reviewing Officer on ensuring active participation and engagement with any "absent" parent within Child in Care Reviews, with particular emphasis on Fathers.**

Managers frequently consider this in case supervision to ensure the issues remains live. IRO's are now fully back completing peer audits and there is an expectation that this area is fully considered and reflected upon. IRO's, where necessary are discussing absent parents with locality social work teams to ensure that where there is an absent parent, every attempt is made to include them.

There has been some delay in progressing the strategic work around engaging absent fathers. After some initial low take up the LSCP absent father's survey is

due to conclude by the end of April 2023. The findings will be used as a bedrock for the Local Authority to understand the impact on absent fathers before considering service / systems changes. A full internal Childrens services audit has taken place around engaging absent fathers / stepparents and the findings and recommendations were presented to the Operational Management Group (OMG) on 4th April 2023.

Once accepted, the recommendations will be adopted by the working group to drive changes forward by looking at working practices, policies and procedures and staff training. Running concurrently to this work (and incorporating the audit findings) the Practice Advisors are presenting the Practice Lead (PL) 3 sessions on working with absent fathers. This training will also be delivered directly to all front-line teams to support the messages and cultural changes. The IRO's will also attend a PL 3 session together in order to develop in this area and to 'sign up' to their commitments as a team which will be measured against our Team Action Plan and ongoing priorities.

- **The development of the Valuing Care Toolkit and how this impacts on the information that is provided to reviews and how care plans are constructed is an ongoing workstream and IRO service needs to be actively engaged in the implementation and review of Valuing Care Toolkit.**

This is an ongoing action:

The Valuing Care Toolkit continues to develop. This has recently had further developments in its use and the guidance provided for all staff. It has become a frequent addition to the care planning steps and is included in each child's care review. There is an expectation that IRO's use this information to consider an individual child's needs and use it to promote conversations within and outside of reviews to ensure that children's plans always reflect their needs as these change over time. A Team Manager from the Quality & Standards Service sits on the Valuing Care Governance Board to ensure that the service is always at the heart of any developments and how these impact on the children and young people that the service oversees. Most recently the IRO's were involved in an audit on the use, quality and outcomes of the Valuing Care tool over a 7-week period and fed back on over 200 Childrens Valuing Care assessments. IRO's are now making a recommendation at each 28-day Child in Care review for the VC tool to be completed by the second (3 month) review in order to further drive its use going forward. A complicated area identified was the VC for those children under 5 years of age where their verbal views are not always present due to development reasons, along with some of the areas of needs that may not apply to them. This is being considered as part of the audit findings. IRO's remain actively involved in this area and the quality assurance of its use.

Professional Profile of the IRO Service

The Independent Reviewing Service continues to be embedded within the Quality and Standards Service Area of Lincolnshire County Council.

The Independent Chairs Team is made up primarily of two distinct roles: Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) and Child Protection Chairs. In a number of Local Authorities these roles are separate roles, often located in separate teams, however this is not the case in Lincolnshire. The service continues to secure further funding for an additional IRO post in relation to the rising UASC numbers.

The team also has responsibility for reviewing Children with Disabilities Short Term Breaks. This additional role is also a statutory requirement.

In addition, there are 5 FTE Local Authority Designated Officers within the wider team who are line managed by a Team Manager. These roles are filled by qualified Social Workers at the same grade as the IRO's and Chairs and are able to assist with covering work on occasion. The restructure has resulted in all the Chairs and LADO's being on the same job description, which means there is more resilience across the service.

Sickness absence, secondment and recruitment continued to be challenging over the course of the year; this has necessitated the use of some agency staff to ensure that service capacity is not impacted upon, and standards are maintained.

Staffing

Management Team

There remain four Team Managers in the Service. The Chairs are predominantly managed by Debbie Johnson and Richard Stone. Debbie Johnson has the service lead for Child Protection and Richard Stone has the service lead for Children in Care. Paul Fisher has responsibility for the LADO's and Reg 44 Officers and Philippa Gallop has responsibility for Quality Assurance, Learning and Development, Participation and Liaise.

Independent Chairs

Within the past 12 months the team have lost 3 contracted members of staff. One left due to personal reasons, one has taken the decision to remain within a locality FAST team as a Practice Supervisor after a period of secondment and one has successfully applied for a Practice Supervisor role within the Child in Care team. Whilst the service was sad to see them move on, it is positive that Lincolnshire Childrens Services has retained 2 of these skilled professionals in other roles. 2 posts have already been filled and after a period of induction both new starters are actively embracing their roles. The team still has 4 vacancies, which after a successful recruitment campaign have all just been filled. Whilst these 4 new appointees are currently going through their pre-employment checks, the team are optimistic that they will join the team within the next 3-4 months. The team still has 4 agency workers. Whilst this is a position places further financial pressures on the Local Authority, the 4 workers are committed and have brought stability and value to the team over the past months.

Short Term Breaks (STB's)

Short breaks are part of a continuum of services which support children in need and their families. They include the provision of day, evening, overnight and weekend activities for the child or young person, and can take place in the child's own home, the home of an approved carer, or in a residential or community setting. In Lincolnshire the users of short breaks are disabled children and their families. The breaks usually have two aims: to enable the child to participate in fun, interesting and safe activities; and to provide a break from caring for the parents.

The role of the IRO for children looked after in a series of short breaks is more limited than for longer term Children in Care. It is important that IROs are sensitive to the close and active involvement of parents. Given this sensitivity, parents as well as children and young people can highly value their contribution and independent perspective, especially in helping to resolve any difficulties with the placement. IROs have a responsibility to alert the local authority if the placement is not meeting the child's needs. A large number of short breaks occur that do not require oversight by the IRO due to not meeting the statutory requirements. A referral form has been developed with CWD to ensure that information and rationale for IRO involvement is captured effectively.

Number of Short-Term Break meetings held.

Apr 18	8	Apr 19	5	Apr 20	4	Apr 21	4	Apr 22	4
May 18	12	May 19	3	May 20	4	May 21	6	May 22	10
Jun 18	8	Jun 19	11	Jun 20	6	Jun 21	7	Jun 22	4
Jul 18	8	Jul 19	5	Jul 20	7	Jul 21	6	Jul 22	7
Aug 18	1	Aug 19	0	Aug 20	2	Aug 21	1	Aug 22	0
Sep 18	7	Sep 19	8	Sep 20	4	Sep 21	7	Sep 22	3
Oct 18	4	Oct 19	6	Oct 20	4	Oct 21	4	Oct 22	8
Nov 18	9	Nov 19	6	Nov 20	9	Nov 21	9	Nov 22	6
Dec 18	8	Dec 19	4	Dec 20	2	Dec 21	6	Dec 22	4
Jan 19	6	Jan 20	6	Jan 21	4	Jan 22	3	Jan 23	7
Feb 19	4	Feb 20	4	Feb 21	3	Feb 22	5	Feb 23	0
Mar 19	5	Mar 20	4	Mar 21	5	Mar 22	4	Mar 23	7
Total	80	Total	62	Total	54	Total	62	Total	60

Children in Care population and the IRO service

Despite the inclining trend during the past 12 months the figures for young people in care, appears to be overall more stable, 735 (1st April 2022) as opposed to 727 (31st March 2023).

In the year 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023 the IROs have conducted 1786 reviews. In the same period 1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022 there were 1694 reviews. Workload has been increasing year on year.

Due to the ongoing drift and delay within the court and the impact of a number of foster care changes for some children, reviews are often rescheduled to accommodate this. As an example, between April 1st, 2022 – 31st March 2023, 889 reviews were re arranged which has had a further impact on workload. This is a significant increase on the previous year's figures which were 775.

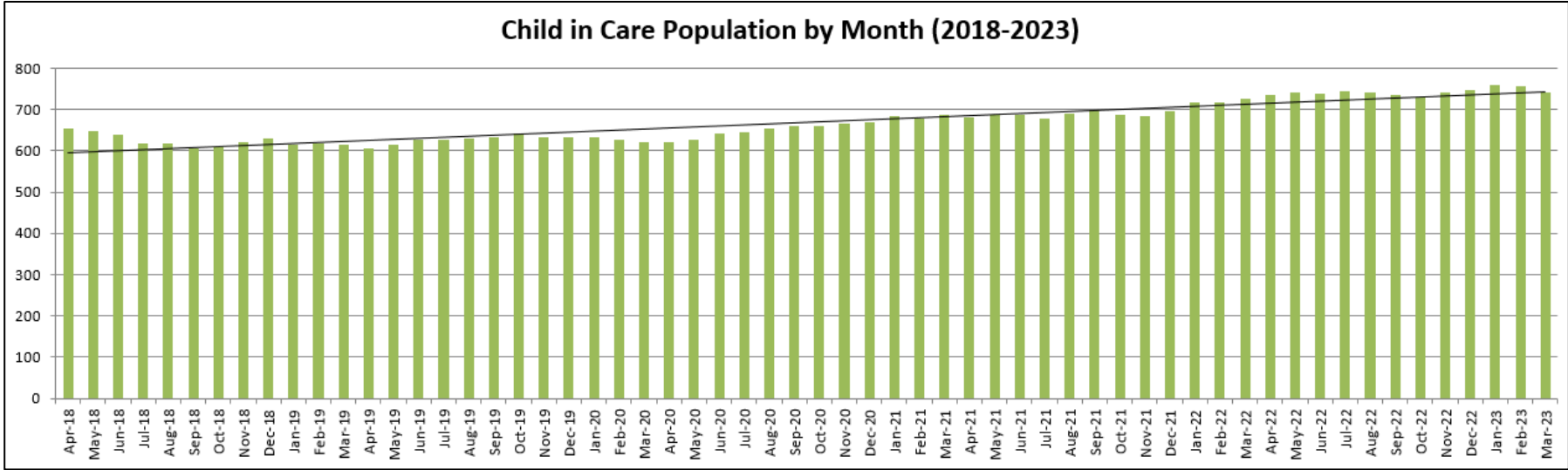
The service expects that the very recent relaunch of the Public Law Outline and a sharper focus on the 26 week track to avoid drift and delay for children will result in more child in care meetings being effective especially at the point of ratifying final care plans, which is a significant factor is having to rearrange meetings in short timescales to meet QAAG and filing dates, when considering final plans for children. It must also be noted that the Social Work pressures within the locality FAST and Children in Care Teams has also had an impact, with meetings having to be postponed last minute and rearranged due to some lack of readiness for meetings.

Overall, the Children in Care population has seen an upward trend resulting in the highest Children in Care population in the last 3 years.

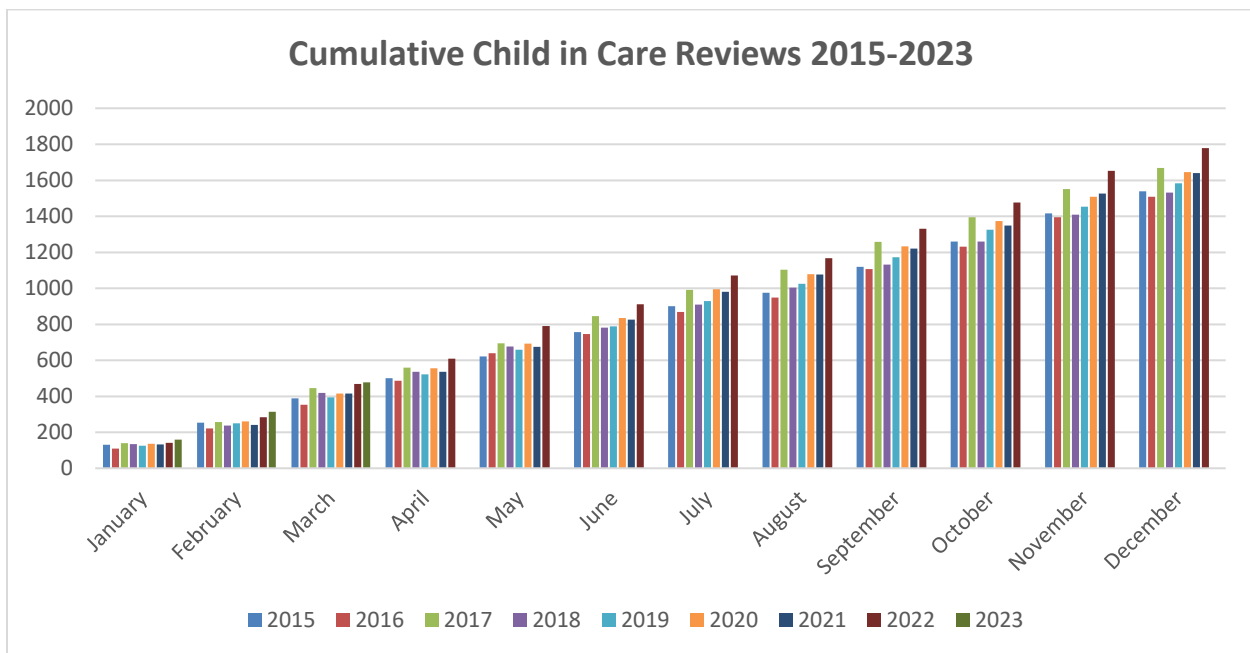
In the year 1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023 one young person has been subject to Secure Accommodation under Section 25 of the Children Act 1989. Any Secure Criteria Reviews are chaired by the Independent Chairs Team Managers.

In the year 1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023 there have been 55 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) placed in the care of Lincolnshire Childrens Services under the National Transfer Scheme. Whilst these children are the responsibility of Lincolnshire, their placements are mainly located in Peterborough, Derby and Nottingham areas with 5 children also being placed in London. Given the frequent referrals for UASC's there are predominantly 3 IRO's who oversee these. This allows them some constancy while the geographical locations of their placements mean that multiple reviews can often be held in one day by one IRO. It also allows the IRO's to focus mainly on these children and build their specialism in this area with this vulnerable group of children. The number of UASC's under 16 years old appears to be increasing and there are some concerns raised by the IRO's that given their age they are unable to agree and sign for their own Section 20 status. This is being discussed with senior managers reflecting the complexity of their situation.

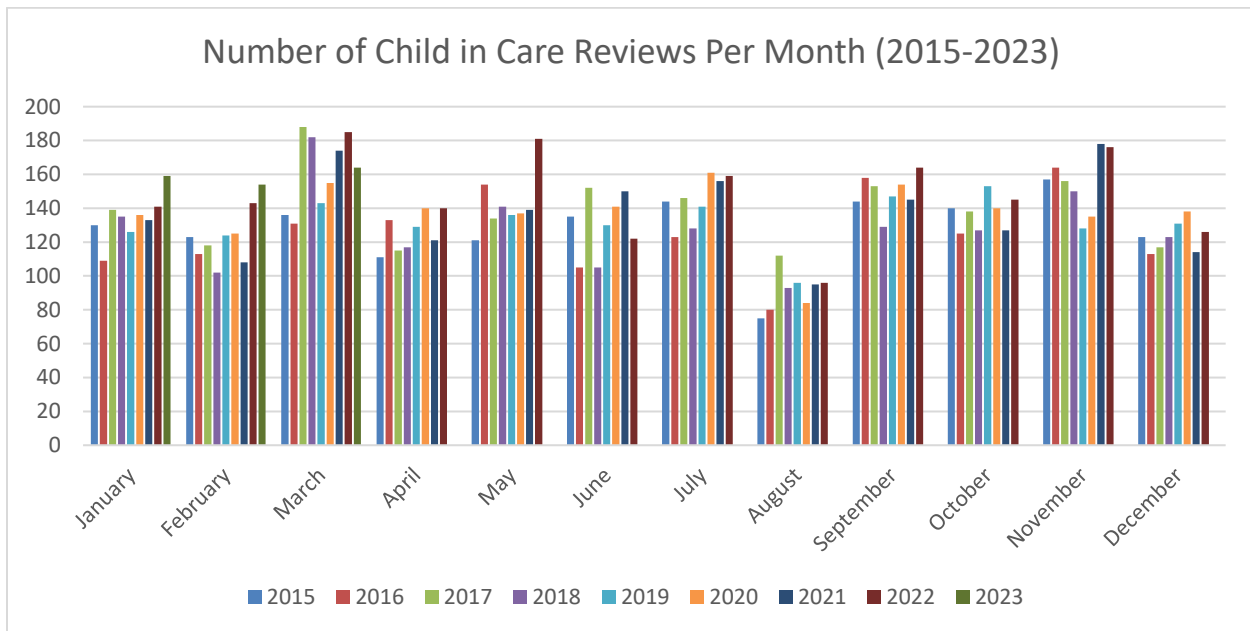
Child in Care Population



Cumulative Child in Care Reviews 2015- 2023									
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
January	130	109	139	135	126	136	133	141	159
February	253	222	257	237	250	261	241	284	313
March	389	353	445	419	393	416	415	469	477
April	500	486	560	536	522	556	536	609	
May	621	640	694	677	658	693	675	790	
June	756	745	846	782	788	834	825	912	
July	900	868	992	910	929	995	981	1071	
August	975	948	1104	1003	1025	1079	1076	1167	
September	1119	1106	1257	1132	1172	1233	1221	1331	
October	1259	1231	1395	1259	1325	1373	1348	1476	
November	1416	1395	1551	1409	1453	1508	1526	1652	
December	1539	1508	1668	1532	1584	1646	1640	1778	



Number of Child In Care Reviews Per Month (2015-2023)									
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
January	130	109	139	135	126	136	133	141	159
February	123	113	118	102	124	125	108	143	154
March	136	131	188	182	143	155	174	185	164
April	111	133	115	117	129	140	121	140	
May	121	154	134	141	136	137	139	181	
June	135	105	152	105	130	141	150	122	
July	144	123	146	128	141	161	156	159	
August	75	80	112	93	96	84	95	96	
September	144	158	153	129	147	154	145	164	
October	140	125	138	127	153	140	127	145	
November	157	164	156	150	128	135	178	176	
December	123	113	117	123	131	138	114	126	



Number of Child in Care Reviews Per Month (2015-2023)									
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
January	50	46	59	64	65	64	52	79	80
February	30	63	71	58	41	62	66	78	80
March	39	61	74	80	42	52	70	80	79
April	51	57	52	60	44	64	46	49	
May	53	43	68	55	54	51	58	73	
June	47	26	52	53	65	53	74	95	
July	40	47	62	48	64	46	58	69	
August	29	59	51	30	58	45	46	62	
September	40	52	50	39	77	74	63	85	
October	51	64	53	46	75	90	77	73	
November	37	64	58	58	60	64	65	90	
December	48	47	37	42	42	58	51	54	
Calendar Year Total	515	629	687	633	687	723	726	887	239 (so far)

Advocacy/Independent Visitor

Advocacy/Independent Visitor provision in Lincolnshire continues to be provided by Voiceability as part of a commissioned service.

IRO's routinely check that children and young people know about advocacy and how it can support them in having a real say in decisions affecting their lives. Children in Care are opted in to Voiceability who are invited to Children in Care Reviews for children aged 8 and over after the child's Social Worker has referred them. The Local Authority has a duty to appoint a person to be an Independent Visitor when it appears to be in the child's interests to do so. The appointment of an Independent Visitor should be considered as part of developing the Care Plan for the child and at the Child in Care Review. Any decision not to appoint an Independent Visitor should be kept under review. The child's wishes and feelings should be obtained, and they must agree to the appointment of the Independent Visitor.

There appears to be some challenges around provision, with some young people not being able to secure an advocate if required in a timely manner. The Quality and Standards Head of Service has taken over the contact management for Advocacy and is currently completing a piece of work to evaluate the actual provision against the service level agreements in order to identify any complicating factors that may be affecting the availability of provision. As outlined within the Quality & Standards Action Plan, The IRO Monitoring Form has been amended to capture the range of advocacy either offered, declined or not provided. This new data will provide the bedrock for understanding how effective the current contract is meeting the needs of children and will provide value within the contract monitoring meetings with Voiceability.

Timeliness of reviews

Between 1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023 a total of 1786 individual review meetings were held. It should be noted that sometimes children within the same family or same placement may have their reviews held together. This means that the number of children who had their care plans reviews is likely to be noticeably higher than 1786.

Within the same time period a total of 8 children had their review held out of timescales which means 98.9% were held in timescales. 4 children had their review held out of timescales due lack of preparation, documents by the Social Worker with the IRO making a decision that it was inappropriate to go ahead due to the lack of clarity. 1 child had her review held late due to a technical complication. She was placed in Local Authority Care under a Police Powers of Protection Order (PPO), with the FAST team gaining an Interim Care Order (ICO) 3 days later. Her siblings were also subject the same ICO and the date of their first review was taken 28 days from the ICO and not her PPO which meant her Initial review meeting was 1 day late. 3 children had their initial reviews held late due to human error.

Any recording errors are identified and resolved on a weekly basis to ensure that the performance reports are an accurate representation of "actual" performance.

Children and young people's preparation and involvement in reviews

When we consider how young people participate in their reviews, we look at their attendance at their meetings, how they contribute towards the agenda and how 'their review' is run. Our bottom line as a service is that however they choose to contribute, their voice should be at the forefront.

All children and young people are sent a consultation form with their invite. Some have phone calls, emails, and separate visits from their IROs in between reviews or in anticipation of a forthcoming review depending on their age and development. This is to enable the IRO to build a relationship with the child, ensure that they can discuss any issues / talk about the positives in their lives and to determine how they want the next review to be conducted. Attending a review is the child or young person's decision and not mandatory. Although IRO's always encourage them to engage and offer to adapt the meeting format to their needs.

IRO's are routinely visiting their children and young people in person prior to and in between their reviews. However, given that the landscape has changed, many young people are now requesting that they speak with their IRO over the phone, through video calls or text messages. Whilst an in-person experience would be the preferred model, IRO's are clearly listening to their children and young people and really taking their preferences into account when communicating with them.

IRO's are always mindful that not all children are old enough to verbally express their views, for some children English is not their first language and for other disabilities or additional needs means they communicate in a different way. Some children simply do not wish to talk or do not feel ready. IRO's are creative with how they approach

participation, trying to understand what a child's world looks and feels like, how they interact with those around them and what their behaviours may be telling us. IRO's also ensure those adults around the child are able help them share their views and feelings too. By taking this approach, as a service we try to ensure that any plans made are in the best interest of the child.

Participation performance was 98.4 % on 28th February 2023 which reflects this hard work. The data for 31st March 2023 has not yet been produced.

Plans for Children in Care

The Chairs continue to focus on ensuring the availability of high-quality plans for every child in care. The Chairs raise professional escalations if care plans are not completed or are not of sufficient quality.

The Valuing Care assessment and analysis tool is now fully embedded into the child's journey and IRO's oversee this at review meetings, ensuring that there is a clear understanding and analysis of the child's needs to support the development of the care plan.

IRO's do not write plans about a child. They write plans 'to the child', making sure that they use child friendly language.

There have been some fluctuations during the past year around the quality of initial care plans presented for IRO's to review. This is in part due to the pressures that the locality teams have experienced, particularly in relation to turn over of social workers. IRO's have been sympathetic to this where they can and restorative in their challenges to support the current pressures but always with any potential impact on a child and their family in their focus.

Progress-chasing Activities between Looked After Reviews

All IROs have a duty to monitor the progress of their allocated children between reviews. This is to ensure that the care plan is progressing and allows them to intervene and escalate issues where matters are drifting. All young people are provided with the IROs name and contact details at the initial meeting and routinely at reviews so that they know how to contact them.

Identifying good practice, problem resolution and escalation

IRO's identify and share good practice with colleagues but also raise concerns with locality teams via positive challenge and formal escalation.

The majority of concerns are still raised by the IROs through a positive challenge, focussing on a restorative approach with social work colleagues without the need for a formal escalation. These are recorded on MOSAIC.

The team continues to focus on improving consistency in terms of escalations made and to ensure better monitoring and reducing drift and delay. Systems are in place to support managerial oversight as well as helping the IRO's in their duty of tracking escalations. The IROs are sent weekly reminder emails of open formal escalations so that they can

follow these up with the respective teams. The drive is to make the escalations more robust and to increase the use of positive challenge, whenever this is warranted to approve care planning and outcomes for young people.

There continues to be a significant drop in number of formal escalations. As a result of this, the number for positive challenges has increased as IRO's seek to resolve challenges in care planning in a restorative way in the first instance.

The current IRO Activity form has been amended to include a radio button to indicate a positive challenge. Along with a range of changes to the MOSAIC forms used by IRO's, it is anticipated that the performance team will be able to map all of these into a report after April 2023. This will mean that the current practice and ways of working can be fully reported on for the purpose of how meaningful their role is and the impact they are having in driving forward good practice.

All Independent Reviewing Officers are required by the regulations to have access to legal advice. Clearly, given the independent nature of the Service, it would not be appropriate for any such advice to be provided by the Children's Services Legal Department. Legal advice has been sought once in the past 12 months. An ongoing area of development is clearer guidance and processes regarding access to independent legal advice.

Number of formal escalations per month

Apr 16	9	Apr 17	2	Apr 18	4	Apr 19	8	Apr 20	3	Apr 21	2	Apr 22	0
May 16	4	May 17	5	May 18	4	May 19	3	May 20	0	May 21	4	May 22	0
Jun 16	0	Jun 17	7	Jun 18	4	Jun 19	1	Jun 20	3	Jun 21	0	Jun 22	1
Jul 16	3	Jul 17	5	Jul 18	5	Jul 19	0	Jul 20	4	Jul 21	8	Jul 22	0
Aug 16	1	Aug 17	1	Aug 18	2	Aug 19	0	Aug 20	5	Aug 21	1	Aug 22	2
Sep 16	3	Sep 17	9	Sep 18	4	Sep 19	8	Sep 20	5	Sep 21	1	Sep 22	1
Oct 16	4	Oct 17	4	Oct 18	1	Oct 19	1	Oct 20	0	Oct 21	4	Oct 22	6
Nov 16	3	Nov 17	5	Nov 18	1	Nov 19	2	Nov 20	3	Nov 21	1	Nov 22	3
Dec 16	6	Dec 17	5	Dec 18	0	Dec 19	0	Dec 20	3	Dec 21	3	Dec 22	1
Jan 17	2	Jan 18	8	Jan 19	3	Jan 20	2	Jan 21	5	Jan 22	7	Jan 23	1
Feb 17	5	Feb 18	4	Feb 19	2	Feb 20	7	Feb 21	1	Feb 22	1	Feb 23	2
Mar 17	8	Mar 18	7	Mar 19	2	Mar 20	1	Mar 21	1	Mar 22	1	Mar 23	0

Total	48	Total	62	Total	32	Total	33	Total	33	Total	33	Total	17
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Themes of Child in Care Formal Escalations (for the period April 2022- March 2023)

Theme	Number of Escalations Raised
Missing or late documents	4
Practice Issues (Multiple issues)	3
Safeguarding concerns	5
Placement/ Accommodation concerns	3
Drift and Delay	1
Blank	1
Total Escalations Raised	17

Management oversight

The Guidance states that operational social work Team Managers must consider the decisions from the Review before they are finalised. This is due in part for the need to ensure that any resource implications have been addressed. Once the decisions and recommendations are completed by the IRO, the Locality Team Manager has 5 days to raise any queries or objections. Managers rarely ask for any amendments to be made and this process appears to work well.

Leaving Care – Director's Decision

Apr 18	1	Apr 19	0	Apr 20	0	Apr 21	0	Apr 22	0
May 18	3	May 19	1	May 20	0	May 21	1	May 22	1
Jun 18	2	Jun 19	0	Jun 20	0	Jun 21	0	Jun 22	1
Jul 18	1	Jul 19	1	Jul 20	0	Jul 21	0	Jul 22	0
Aug 18	2	Aug 19	2	Aug 20	0	Aug 21	0	Aug 22	0
Sep 18	0	Sep 19	0	Sep 20	0	Sep 21	0	Sep 22	1
Oct 18	1	Oct 19	0	Oct 20	0	Oct 21	1	Oct 22	0
Nov 18	1	Nov 19	0	Nov 20	0	Nov 21	0	Nov 22	1
Dec 18	0	Dec 19	2	Dec 20	1	Dec 21	0	Dec 22	0
Jan 19	0	Jan 20	0	Jan 21	0	Jan 22	0	Jan 23	0
Feb 19	0	Feb 20	0	Feb 21	0	Feb 22	0	Feb 23	0
Mar 19	0	Mar 20	0	Mar 21	0	Mar 22	0	Mar 23	0

The procedure with regards to Sec. 20 Accommodated young people leaving care before their 18th birthday is understood by Chairs and is discussed within reviews as part of the Care Planning process and Recommendations. Any young person who has been accommodated for more than 20 days and is aged 16 or 17 and wants to leave care must have this decision considered by the Assistant Director with a lead for safeguarding.

Quality Assurance of the IRO Service

Auditing and observations undertaken by the IRO Team Managers

The service has just revised the way in which Team Managers quality assure the work of the IRO's. Regular supervisions and appraisals take place to ensure that all Team Managers are fully familiar with their staff, have ample opportunities to engage in reflective discussions with them, problem solve around complex issues and support their learning and development. Spot sampling of work for quality often takes place.

From April 2023 a new Quality Audit schedule has been launched. In each 6-month period, a Team Manager will spend a whole day with each of their members of staff. The purpose of this day is learning and reflection. Team Managers will observe their IRO's chairing meetings in person, see them interacting with children and their families, carers and others in their support network. Following this a collaborative audit of the child's case file will take place where the Team Manager and IRO will together scrutinise the quality of the work, recording and impact. This will be inputted directly into a MOSAIC work step to ensure that there is a record of oversight and reflection. Any outcomes will be discussed with the IRO at the time and, should development needs be identified, will be added to the IRO's development plan for the year.

Team Managers meet every quarter to review any completed audits and the outcomes of discussions/ spot sampling to identify themes and patterns for learning and development for the whole service.

Supervision and training

IRO's have scheduled monthly supervision (pro rata) and informal supervision as and when required. All IRO's have a Personal Development Plan (PDP) and are encouraged to attend training through Lincolnshire Children's Learning and Development Team, Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) and the Regional IRO Workshops. Each IRO undertakes annual mandatory training and follows the 5-year Children's Services development training plan.

All IRO's are social workers and registered with Social Work England. As part of their continued registration, workers are required to evidence their continuing professional development.

Team Meetings are held monthly and include guest speakers and workshops. Team Meetings take place over one full day per month and these are always held in person to promote staff being together and to enhance practice discussions.

Any resource issues that are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service

The chairs continue at full capacity under the new ways of working. Due to a large amount of drift and delay in court proceedings and revised timetabling, Chairs are frequently having to rearrange meetings in order to ratify plans prior to QAAG and filing dates. This is having a further impact on time and capacity. As identified above in this report, in the past 12 months there have been 889 reviews rearranged. It must also be noted that the IRO's also chair Child Protection meetings where there are similar challenges and tensions around readiness for conferences. This also has an impact on their capacity and ability to work.

Chairs are under increasing pressure due to the additional admin tasks involved in new ways of working and also taking into account the increased travel time to in person meetings. Additional capacity has been created through the recruitment of 4 agency members of staff to cover vacancies in the team as outlined within this report. It should be noted that the Chairs are at the upper limit in terms of children allocated as set out in the IRO Handbook, which provides guidance around case capacity in order to carry out their duties effectively.

Supplementary to this some locality FAST and CIC teams continue to experience staffing challenges and a turnover of some agency social workers. This is making preparation for Child in Care meetings a challenge as on occasions reports are not completed in a timely manner nor plans updated. Despite this impacting on the chairs not having the correct information when they need it, they continue to work in a restorative way with locality teams in order to 'work around' these changes to minimise the impact of children, young people and their families. As this report outlines, despite the high number of meetings that are rearranged and challenges within the locality Social Work teams, the service feels it is an achievement to have only 8 Child in Care meetings out of timescales out of 1786 during the past 12 months.

Service Priorities 2022-2023

The ongoing service priorities are outlined within the initial section of this report and are taken from the Independent Chairs section of the Quality & Standards Service Action plan 2021-2023. New actions and priorities identified for the current year are outlined below.

- **Development of regular joint working with CAFCASS**

New Action:

The Team Managers are currently working with the Service Manager of CAFCASS to develop a joint working program. IRO's have strong links with Childrens Guardians on a day-to-day basis and it's crucial that they understand each other's roles. Joint development days will be planned to take place annually with the first being held in October 2023. The aim is to bring together IRO's and Childrens

Guardians in person to discuss relevant topics and hold reflective discussions around practice-based scenarios to further enhance and embed their thinking, how they apply their practice and the impact on children's care plans. In order to fully embrace working together, it is anticipated that some Social Workers from the locality teams will also be present to bring their perspectives on care planning and court work. The overall aim is to promote a joined-up way of thinking/ working that considers each individual's role in a child's care planning and an appreciation of their role. The overall focus will be the impact on children. A likely discussion topic for the first meeting will be the re launch of the Public Law Outline which aims to return to the 26-week track for all proceedings. The Initial planning session for this is due to take place in April 2023.

- **The Development and embedding of the IRO's MOSAIC Monitoring tools.
New Action:**

IRO's are responsible for not just the quality-of-care plans and their progression but a number of significant areas across Children Service performance such as meeting readiness, the quality of reports and care plans, the inclusion of children, their parents and carers, attendance at meetings, advocacy and the overall impact of Childrens Service performance to name but a few.

Since Covid, the Local Authority has embraced a number of new ways of working such as virtual and hybrid meetings, the electronic sharing of reports and plans with children, parents and professionals and the alternative ways of communicating such as messaging and video calls etc.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the impact of these changes the IRO monitoring forms in MOSAIC have been completely overhauled to reflect the new ways of working. IRO's complete a monitoring form after each Child in Care review they chair. These are currently in the process of going live and once completed will be streamlined to performance reports that will be readily available to help the service understand the Local Authorities performance in key areas.

Examples of some of these are reporting on the ways children are consulted and included such as in person, phone , messages and video calls (as is their preference), the timeliness of Social Workers sharing reports and plans and the impact of this of making a meeting effective, reporting on the inclusion of mothers, fathers and those who hold parental responsibility separately (rather than the old combined heading of 'parents') which seeks to strengthen our understanding of including absent parents, the level of advocacy offered to children and the rationale for this (which will strengthen the management of the Voicability contract), the format in which meetings are held to help us understand how effective our new ways of working impact on children and their families and a deeper analysis of the Valuing Care tool and its impact. The overall aim is to not only report on compliance but impact.

- **Embedding in a new framework for linking with locality teams**

New Action:

The service has redesigned the structure and process of linking with locality teams. Each locality team or service area has a dedicated link IRO. These include all FAST, Children in Care, Adoption, Fostering and CWD teams. We have also added specific links for Supported Living providers and UASC.

The link IRO will formally meet with their team/ service area 4 times per year. Individual meetings are scheduled with Team Managers and Practice Supervisors where link IRO's can share the outcome of the new performance reporting as outlined in the section above. This will help to identify key themes, areas of performance and highlight good practice within their specific team/ service area. Management level discussions can take place away from front line workers.

The link IRO will also attend whole team meetings in between meeting with managers to meet with social workers to give and receive feedback, enter into thematic practice development discussions and answer questions with the purpose of building relationships and strengthening practice between service areas.

The IRO Team meeting agenda now includes time each month for IRO's to feedback on any link visits they have completed and to gain feedback from colleagues in preparation for future link visits, ensuring that there is a fluid way of feedback and development.

IRO's are now committed to work from an office location one day per week in between their meetings to further strengthen their presence and build working relationships.

- **The Development of IRO Good Practice Guidance**

New Action:

The Managers within the Service have acknowledged the changes in the IRO team, the challenges in the locality teams staffing and the way in which this can impact on the general understanding of how the Local Authorities policies, procedures and guidance interprets itself into good solid practice.

As a result of this Good Practice Guides are being developed to support understanding and enhanced practice. The Practice guidance aims to be a maximum of 2 pages long and will highlight the context of a practice area, the likely impact on a child and their family and practice expectations (what good looks like when we do things right). The guidance is intended to be easily accessible and makes links to procedures, guidance and the IRO Handbook for further reading. It will be the IRO's 'go to' in key service delivery areas.

So far, guidance has been produced around chairing a Series of Short meetings, Short Term Breaks for Children with Disabilities and Locality team links. Guidance

around UASC, ratifying final Care Plans, Children Placed with their Parents under the Care Planning, Placement and Review regulations (2010) are currently being developed.

It is intended to produce further guidance in key areas with the focus on developing a cohesive understanding and approach within the team of 'how we do things around here when it works well for our children'.

- **Further develop practice around those Children Placed with their Parents under the Care Planning, Placement and Review Regulations (2010)**

New Action:

The Team Managers have recently coordinated a piece of audit activity in this area. All IRO's have engaged in reflective discussions and case file scrutiny during February and March for those children subjected to this over the past 2 years. An Audit report has been written to provide an overview of the local Authorities application of the process and way IRO's are involved in overseeing this practice.

Whilst the formal recommendations have not yet been signed off, it is envisaged that some further guidance and reflective discussions will be provided to IRO's to strengthen their practice and oversight in this area and some recommendations for the locality teams on how this is applied consistently.

It must be noted that overall, the audit found the quality of Placement with Parents assessments completed by Social Workers to be very good and where children were being considered to be placed with their parents under the Care Planning regulations, Social Workers were approaching IRO's for discussions and their views and feedback, ensuring their independent views and feedback helps to consider the trajectory and care planning.

It is anticipated that this will be a yearly audit report. It is hoped that a greater understanding in this area, together with guidance for IRO's will see practice strengthened.

- **Development of a bespoke IRO Induction package**

New / ongoing action:

The Service has recently created a bespoke induction package for IRO's joining the team. This links into the Corporate and Children's Services Induction package for those joining from outside of the Local Authority.

The induction process aims to settle new IRO's into the service gradually and positively. An initial induction meeting with their Team Manager ensures that new IRO's are provided with all of the hardware they need to undertake their role and that this is functional on day one. An induction check list ensures that all access is provided on day one together with the formulation of a bespoke 3-week induction plan that involves mandatory training, shadowing colleagues and enhanced

manager support. Each IRO is assigned an experienced mentor from within the team who will support their day-to-day development and answer any questions as they arise. There is no time limit for mentoring as each new IRO progresses at a different rate dependant on their previous experience.

The Service is in the process of building and developing an Independent Reviewing Officers SharePoint site where a dedicated Induction area will provide a key area of support and give access to further material and links in an easy to access way.

The feedback that the service has received so far is positive with new starters expressing their satisfaction at the organised approach and the level of support offered and available. This is constantly under review and will be developed in line with feedback and the measured experience of new starters.

- **Launch of Children in Care Consultation and engagement materials**

New Action:

All IRO's are expected to meet and introduce themselves to the children they are going to support and oversee their care plans. At the current time IRO's use varied way of doing this from existing leaflets and fact sheets to personal meetings. Prior to a child 's review they receive a consultation document which they are asked to complete to help their IRO understand their views and wishes to be considered at their review. The current paper-based consultation form has been in existence for over 13 years. Some of the feedback we have received from the children is that it needs to be updated.

The service has a vision to update and refresh these and along with an online / electronic interactive form utilising the Microsoft platform. Leaflets and booklets targeting younger and older children are being considered alongside the use of words and pictures, social stories and explanation, dependant on the age of the child.

Overall, the service wishes to provide children with something tangible and accessible that they can keep and refer to, perhaps reading with their carers, that helps them understand the role of their IRO and the care review process.

An initial consultation has taken place with the Quality & Standard Participation Officer who oversees the Young Inspectors with a view of arranging a consultation event to bring together children, IRO's and Managers to hold group discussions and activities in order to move this forward from the children's perspective.

Once some initial draft proposals for new materials are created the group will be re consulted. It is also hoped that the Regulation 44 Officers can seek feedback through their visits, links with the Children with Disabilities Team can support format versions for children with additional needs. A recent conversation with the Practice Supervisor from the Fostering service has also raised the possibility of

using the Foster Carers network to support refreshed carers consultation documents.

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