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The London Borough of Tower Hamlets Council

**Independent Reviewing Officer Manager**

**Annual Report**

April 2021 – March 2022



Better Together: Building Relationships, Strengthening Families



# Contents

# Introduction and a note about this report

# Executive Summary

# Meaning of words and initials used in this report

# What are we going to talk about in this report?

# The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer

# Who we are and what we do

# What else do we do?

# What individual links or roles do Independent Reviewing Officers have?

# Update on the things we said we were going to prioritise in 2021

# What about diversity?

# What was the impact of Covid and Black Lives Matter?

# How we’re working with CLICC and the CLICC wish list

# How are we contributing to national improvements?

# What about OFSTED?

# How are we promoting advocacy and human rights for children?

1. **What have we done about what children and young people told us?**

# What do we offer our care experienced young people?

# Checking how well we’re doing

# What’s the link with Cafcass?

# What about training for Independent Reviewing Officers?

# What’s next for 2022/2023?

**Hello**

**1. Introduction and a note about this report**

The IRO Manager’s reports are normally formal reports that are written to adults, senior managers, and councillors and made available for government inspectors when they visit to see how well the Local Authority is carrying out its duties and its work in responding to children in need of support, felt to be at risk or vulnerable to harm in or outside of their home, on child protection plans, or who are in care. This particular report is restricted to children in care although we know that they can also be vulnerable and at risk from harm.

The report has to be written once a year by the manager of the team of Independent Reviewing Officers in every local authority to let the senior managers, councillors, Corporate Parenting Board, and government inspectors know what work the team have been involved in during the year. It’s also a chance to look at how well Tower Hamlets has done in making sure that the planning that is done for children in its care achieves the best outcomes for them, and the role of the team in checking and contributing to this. In the book that sets out what is expected of Independent Reviewing Officers, called the Independent Reviewing Officer Handbook, this is called monitoring the performance of the local authority. That’s a big responsibility, so that’s why we have to report back, or account, for ourselves every year.

As well as presenting this report to the senior managers who make up Tower Hamlets Senior Leadership Team, it is also presented to the Corporate Parenting Board. The Corporate Parenting Board includes all these senior managers in the Supporting Families Division, Early Help, Virtual School, as well as senior managers from Education, Health, Youth Justice, Children Living in Care Council workers and representatives of our care experienced young people. Together, all these people and managers have a joint responsibility for children living in council care to make sure that they have the same life opportunities as children who live in their own families. This is where the phrase Corporate Parenting comes from, which in straightforward language means the responsibility that all workers, departments, services in the Local Authority and other agencies that work with children in care, have for them.

Because this report is normally written to adults, we know that the words and structure of the report isn’t always easy or interesting enough for the children and young people whose lives it is about to read or make sense of. Last year we tried to use more child friendly language and to write it to young people as well as the adults and senior managers, but that was only partially successful and on reflection perhaps straddled the two. We realise that we didn’t do a very good job of getting it out to our care experienced young people to read and give us their views. We also know that some of the information that senior managers and others want to know isn’t always what children are interested in. So, this year we are taking a different approach and we’ve decided to do two reports. One just for young people secondary school age and above that is written directly to them called **‘It’s All About Me’**, and **this one** for care experienced young people and the senior managers and other adults mentioned above who need to read it.

We hope that this approach will work better and we will be talking to our young people and care experienced young people’s groups to find out what they think and hopefully get their involvement and contribution for the next report. A couple of care experienced young people gave us some feedback on the young people’s version of this report, so if you’re reading this one as well, thank you. This is what they told us about it.

***I thought that the reports were thorough and descriptive, being in the care system for 10 years and reading both reports gave me a sense of relief as I believe that this will help younger kids in care clearly understand the system as a whole as well as give them comfort in what they are entitled to. There aren't any issues with the report and I think this will help kids on a great scale.***

***Care experienced young person’s comment on the IRO Manager’s report to young people – ‘It’s All About Me’ and the ‘You Said We Did’ document***

We will be asking our care experienced young people to let us know what they think of this report too so hopefully we can do an even better report next year. While this report isn’t written directly to young people, it is written with them in mind and with the intention of making it available to our care experienced young people, avoiding any use of social work jargon and hopefully in a style that they will be able to relate to.

There are times we will write ‘children and young people’ and others when we will just say ‘children’ in this report depending on what we’re writing about, but just so it’s clear, when we say children, it will **always** mean **all** children we care for up to the age of 18.

We hope you enjoy reading this report.

**2. Executive Summary**

Being a good Corporate Parent takes hard work, and means being open to challenges, listening, hearing, and responding – even to the difficult things, being willing to change, having curiosity, determination, and working together with children, families, workers, and other professionals to be ambitious for the children in our care, and providing them with the best care experience possible. The Corporate Parenting Board therefore meets regularly throughout the year, and together with other meetings involving various senior managers, provide scrutiny and tracking of how well we are meeting our obligation to provide a high level of care to children, achieving permanency for them as early as possible. The Independent Reviewing Officer service also has a role in making sure that everyone involved in working with children in care, or have a corporate responsibility for them, hear their voices, and bring to the attention of managers anything that might be causing delay in progressing their care plan, if their needs aren’t being met, or might be affecting their human rights.

The last year, April 2021 to March 2022, has been a year full of changes and challenges for the Independent Reviewing Officer service which has affected the team’s stability and ability to carry out some of the planned developmental work. The team has remained focussed however on working with social workers towards all children and young people we care for having high quality care plans that meets all their needs and that is co-developed with them in an age appropriate way. This is so that they have some ownership of it and view it as a living document that changes as their lives changes. Paying attention to diversity and equality in the service we provide to all children is always important and the team have drawn attention to decision making, procedures, and practice where children, in particular unaccompanied minor young people, have been disadvantaged. The ethnic make-up of children in care does not fully reflect the community in Tower Hamlets, and the team will be contributing to a greater focus being made this year to understand this and make sure that the service they and their families receive is appropriate to their needs and equal to that given to all children and families, regardless of ethnic or cultural differences.

Work is continuing to achieve greater consistency in Independent Reviewing Officers being more robust in their decision making and challenge where care plans have not been completed or are not of a good enough standard. The focus is also on children being much more involved in what their meetings look like, challenging Independent Reviewing Officers to be more creative, so reviews are more child-driven and not just child-focussed. With what will hopefully be a more stable team this year, the Independent Reviewing Officers service will be working with social work teams and the Learning Academy to develop further a culture where care plans are routinely scrutinised and quality assessed by team managers before the child’s review as a demonstration of their importance in the planning process for children.

Moving from child-centred to child-focussed and directed language has been a central plank in the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer service for the last 18 months resulting in the decisions and chair’s summaries from the review being written directly to the child in age appropriate language instead of writing about them, and during the course of the last year this has extended to include other documents that they write. The drive and focus going forward is to work with the Learning Academy and other services so that all documents are written to children in a language that they understand. Work is already taking place in and out of Supporting Families Division around listening to what children say about language which is impacting on the spoken and written word. The IRO service is continuing to work closely with the Children Living in Council Care forum in relation to promoting this and the voice of the children we care for.

The importance of all children being routinely offered the opportunity to explore re-establishing significant connections with family members and others through the Lifelong Links project is also high on the IRO service agenda and the push is to make sure that this is considered for each child from their first review. Developmental work is also under way to explore providing advocacy for parents who have become estranged from the social worker or social work team so that the child’s review does not remain the only way in which they feel they get to hear what has been happening in their child’s life over a six month period. Liaison with Barnardo’s and the Family Group Conference service have therefore become an important part of the IRO service focus this year, to ensure that children and parents are routinely offered advocates to get their voices heard or to offer them support in meetings.

Getting a system that produces consistent feedback from both children and parents is something the Independent Reviewing Officer service wants to achieve this year so that we can learn as a service about the areas that need improvement and that can deliver better outcomes for both children and their families, involving them in the process.

**3. Meaning of words or initials used in this report**

We know that reading documents professionals write can be difficult because we use words or abbreviations that make no sense to young people. They’ve told us that loudly and we’re learning and listening. This is the list of the meaning of some abbreviations or initials that might be used in this report. Mostly we will write the names out in full and give a brief explanation but if they are quite long and used a lot in the report, to avoid too much repetition we might start to use the initials after that. I hope the explanations below will help any young people reading this to make sense of them and understand what they stand for and mean.

**CAFCASS = Children and Family Court Appointed Support Service**

Cafcass stands for Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service. They work with children and young people in family court cases and they have a responsibility to make sure that children’s voices are heard in the court process and decisions are taken in their best interests.

**Children’s Guardian**

A Children’s Guardian, usually just called a Guardian, is someone who works for Cafcass and is appointed by them at the request of the court to help them with the decision about what is the best decision to make for children involved in care or family law proceedings. They do this by talking to social workers and looking at the plans they are making, children, Independent Reviewing Officers, parents, and others involved in the care of the child.

**CLICC = Children Living in Care Council**

CLICC is the abbreviation that children and young people who are or have been in care to Tower Hamlets chose to be known and referred as. At the moment the main group is for young people 16+ who are or were in care and choose to be known as care experienced young people. We are also trying to recruit children to start a junior CLICC group and recruit more young people for the teen CLICC group. The Corporate Parenting Board always likes to hear the views and feedback from these groups at their meetings and about their concerns or changes they would like to be made to improve their experience of being in care.

**CPB = Corporate Parenting Board**

This is the name given to a group of people that includes the Corporate Director, Divisional Director, various Heads of Service from all the social work and fostering teams, Early Help, Education, Health, Youth Service, other senior managers, the manager of the Independent Reviewing Officers team, representatives from the Foster Carers Association, Children Living in Care Council workers and representatives of care experienced young people are also invited to attend. The Corporate Parenting Board gets reports from the different managers in the Council about the work they have been doing (usually every three months) that relates to planning and the experience of children in care. The Corporate Parenting Board is responsible for acting in the place of the parents of children in its care and their role is to make sure that collectively we are listening to children and young people and doing the best job we can in caring for them. **The Children and Social Work Act 2017** set out in law for the first time what their joint responsibilities are, and the guidance given in the **Children Act 2004.**

**IRO = Independent Reviewing Officer**

This is the person who chairs the child in care review meeting that is normally held every 3 – 6 months depending on how long they have been in care or if they have had a lot of things going on where they’ve been living that means more frequent meetings might have been held.

**NIROMP = National Independent Reviewing Officer Managers Partnership**

This is the national group of managers of Independent Reviewing Officers who share information about what is happening in each of their areas as well as discuss any proposed changes in legislation that involves children, the work of Independent Reviewing Officers, and develop practice guidance.

**Personal Advisors**

Personal advisors can be but are not always social workers and are part of the Throughcare Service. They are people who have knowledge and information around benefits and lots of other things it’s helpful for young people to have support around when they move from being a young person to an adult. They get involved with young people leading up to their 18th birthday and continue to offer support to age 21 or 25 for those still in education.

**Supporting Families Division**

This is the name given to all the social work and other teams in the council that work with or offer services to children in Tower Hamlets. The names people often use is Children’s Services or Children’s Social Care but we wanted a name that showed what we wanted to do – support families.

**Virtual School**

The Virtual School is the name given to the service made up of teachers who don’t work in schools but are based in the Council and are responsible for keeping an eye on and promoting the academic achievements of children in care. They arrange a meeting every term with the social worker, school, and carer to develop plans and targeted support aimed at helping children and young people reach their full educational potential. This meeting is called the **Personal Education Plan** meeting and people often call them PEP meetings. The Virtual School can agree some financial support called Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) for the school to help with this, for example a tutor for Maths or English.

**4. What are we going to talk about in this report?**

We’ve already explained **why** we have to write this report and we hope that what we write will help everyone who reads it get a good idea and understanding about some of the highlights of the things the Independent Reviewing Officers team have been involved in and doing over the last year. We also want this report to give a good indication of how well Tower Hamlets met its responsibilities as a Corporate Parent over the last year with some examples of good practice and areas where we need to do better.

**What** the report has to cover is set out in the Children & Young Person’s Act 2004, the statutory guidance given by the Department for Children Schools and Families in 2010, and the Independent Reviewing Officer Handbook, so that readers can get a picture of the overall quality of corporate parenting provided for children living in care in Tower Hamlets. This report will be covering the period of April 2021 to March 2022.

In this report we are going to:

* reflect on the progress we have made on the priorities we set for 2021 – 2022 in the previous annual report
* look back at the continuing impact of the Covid-19 restrictions, illness, and staff changes on our work
* explore the care experience of children we care for during the last year (April 2021 – March 2022)
* highlight areas of good practice as well as areas for improvement
* report on work the Independent Reviewing Officer team have been involved in during the last year
* set out the new or continuing priorities for the Independent Reviewing Officer service during 2022 – 2023

**5. The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer**

The role and responsibility of Independent Reviewing Officers has changed over the years. Although the role of reviewing officers already existed, the Adoption & Children Act 2002 made it a legal requirement for every local authority to appoint an Independent Reviewing Officer for every child. This was because it had been recognised that the care experience of many children in or leaving care was unsatisfactory and they didn’t have an independent adult to check that the local authority was doing everything it should for them or to make a challenge on their behalf. This Act and the Children & Young Persons Act 2008 said that every child in care should have a named Independent Reviewing Officer who chaired all their review meetings, kept an eye on how the plans for them were progressing, and took up or challenged on their behalf anything that was of concern.

Although this was an improvement, there was still a view that Independent Reviewing Officers weren’t as effective or challenging as they could be when practice, planning, or decision making wasn’t good enough or in children’s best interest. As a result, further legislation was passed; the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010, and the IRO Handbook that was also published in 2010. These extended and strengthened the Independent Reviewing Officer role from just monitoring how the local authority met its responsibilities for children in the reviewing process to all areas of their care experience and the care planning process. Independent Reviewing Officers are therefore expected to make sure that all children being cared for by the local authority, in this case Tower Hamlets, has a care plan that reflects all their needs, promotes and makes sure their wishes and feelings are heard and considered, takes up with managers any part of its corporate parenting responsibilities that aren’t being met, as well as letting senior managers know about any poor practice involved in the care or planning being made for individual or groups of children, and highlight examples of good practice. Here’s what Roger Morgan, who was the Children’s Rights Director for England at the time said about what the job of the IRO should be:

*“* ***to make sure that everybody does what they are meant to, make sure the child gets their say and makes sure things get done****”.*

Here’s a link to the children’s version of the IRO Handbook if any young people or care experienced young people are reading this and want to know more about the role of the IRO.

[YOUNG PEOPLE’S GUIDE TO THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS’ HANDBOOK (publishing.service.gov.uk)](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/221761/young_20peoples_20guide_20to_20the_20independent_20reviewing_20officers_20handbook.pdf)

**6. Who we are and what we do**

Although Independent Reviewing Officers are employed by the Local Authority, to make sure that they can be completely objective when they chair reviews and scrutinise the care planning for the children who are allocated to them, they work in a different service to the social work teams to give them that extra degree of independence. In Tower Hamlets the Independent Reviewing Officers team is one of the teams in the Safeguarding & Quality Assurance Service. The other teams are the Child Protection Conference Chairs, Family Group Conference & Lifelong Links Service, Local Authority Designated Officer, African Families Service, and the Muslim Safeguarding Coordinator.

# The Independent Reviewing Officer team has six full-time posts which is one less than last year. This is because the number of children in care fell during 2020 while the number of children on child protection plans increased. One of the Independent Reviewing Officer posts therefore moved to the Child Protection Chairs team In March 2021 to balance out the work between the two teams. This was managed by two of the Independent Reviewing Officers deciding to share the dual roles of part-time Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and part-time Child Protection Chair until January 2022 when they were able to return to their full-time IRO roles when a member of the team took early retirement. A second IRO also took early retirement and left at the end of March 2022. We are currently recruiting to that vacancy.

# The IRO team had been very stable for many years which has given stability in a continuing relationship to those children who may have had changes of social workers or foster carers if they had to move from one foster or residential home to another. We know that these moves can be difficult, getting to know new people all over again, especially at an emotional time when children are trying to cope and understand the feelings that come from being separated from their family, and having one constant person through all those changes and difficult times is important.

# Unfortunately, the team has been less settled since January 2021 for a variety of reasons. One IRO was away from work between January and March 2021 for a covid related illness, in March the current Group Manager who was then an IRO in the team successfully applied for the temporary manager’s post, while at the same time, as mentioned before, two IRO’s started their part-time IRO roles. In June, another IRO went on long-term sick leave, returning in December 2021 but is currently supporting the Lifelong Links service in a part-time capacity. In January 2022 the two part-time IRO’s returned to their full-time posts, and then two IRO’s who had worked for Tower Hamlets for a total of 38 years took early retirement in February and March 2022. To help manage these changes two part-time temporary IRO’s joined the team in December 2021 and March 2022 respectively so that no child went without an IRO to be responsible for chairing their meeting and overseeing their care plan.

# We are sorry that this has meant that there has been lots of changes for some children in care too who have had to meet and get to know new IRO’s for each of these changes in the team even though we tried to keep this to a minimum. We were proud that being a stable team with long-serving IRO’s meant that we had been able to provide continuity to children and in some cases the IRO has had a longer lasting relationship with children and knowledge of their families than their social workers. In the last year however, for some children that has not been the case and a small number have had two changes of IRO during the year. We regret this and know that it isn’t ideal. We hope that once we recruit to the vacant IRO post, that we will return to being a more stable team so that we can form strong, reliable, and enduring relationships with all the children we care for and review.

***Making a Difference – Enduring Relationships***

***Hi Sylvie,***

***Thank you so much. It’s so nice for you to have remembered my birthday :), it was really nice having you as my IRO for the last 5 years- thank you for all you have done for me. You had my back. Continue your wonderful work with my sisters.***

***I’m sure we will bump into each other one day.***

***Many thanks***

***F***

***Care experienced young person to her IRO of 5 years after receiving a birthday card from her***

All the IRO’s in the team are experienced social work managers with a minimum of well over five years management experience before becoming IRO’s. With two black Caribbean members of staff retiring, one male and one female, the make-up of the IRO team has changed since last year. The team is now wholly female with two White British, one Asian Bangladeshi, one White French, one Greek Cypriot, and a Black Caribbean manager. The vacant IRO post is being covered by two temporary part-time IRO’s, White Irish and Black Caribbean respectively. We understand that although this makes the team itself reasonably diverse as far as racial and cultural backgrounds goes, we don’t reflect the local community the children and families we are involved with belong to. We are very conscious though of how important it is for us individually and collectively as a team to be aware of the impact our different life experiences have had on all of us and the need to be respectful and mindful of those differences in how we relate, talk to, and work with the children in our care and their families. The team are also very mindful in their reviews, conversations with children, discussions in team meetings, of picking up and bringing to the attention of managers any practices that may be having an adverse impact on children as a result of their ethnic or cultural heritage. For example, two IRO’s picking up the need for a young person to be tested for thalassemia and another for sickle cell anaemia and provided with full information about the respective conditions. On another occasion, the IRO through her consultation with the young person, identifying that ‘difficult’ behaviour described by the social worker and residential key worker, was actually the result of links to experiences he had during his journey to the UK.

The number of children allocated to each IRO has risen over the last year, partly as a result of the Afghanistan crisis which saw increasing numbers of unaccompanied young people coming into care during summer and autumn 2021. The average number of children each IRO was responsible for during 2020 was in the mid-fifties but this continued to fall as the number of children leaving care exceeded the number of children coming into care. As well as children achieving permanency or returning home, we had a large number of young people turning 18. As already stated, this led to one of the IRO posts moving across to the Child Protection Chairs team in March 2021. From September 2021, the number of children in care increased consistently so that by November 2021 the number of children IRO’s were responsible for had risen to mid-to-high sixties and has remained around this level to date. The IRO Group Manager has also continued to have a small number of children allocated to her. Although the number of children IRO’s are responsible for is still in line with the recommended number of children suggested in the IRO Handbook of 50 – 70 children for each IRO, the impact on IRO’s being able to carry out all the functions expected of them to a high standard has been noticeable. This is particularly so now that we are back to holding our reviews in person and the difference travelling to see children before and in-between their meetings have made, especially for those children who are living out of Tower Hamlets or need more than two meetings a year because they have had to move from where they are living or other change to their care plan.

The IRO Group Manager is mindful of the pressure on IRO’s of managing time and balancing work expectations to deliver a high quality service to the children we care for and it is a regular feature of discussion in team meetings, one-to-one supervision, and in her own supervision with the Head of Service. In discussions with other IRO Group or Service Managers in the East London region, it is apparent that allocation levels for IRO’s have risen across the region with an apparent shortage of IRO’s in London, and this is having an impact on their ability to carry out all their duties to a standard we would expect or want to work to. In Tower Hamlets, this means that although meetings and decision sheets are being completed in timescale, there has been some slippage in completing the record or letter from the review and the midway monitoring form being completed, although discussions may have taken place. This is discussed in every one-to-one supervision session and has also been discussed in team meetings with an expectation and acknowledgement that this needs to improve, and IRO’s are personally committed to achieving this, seeing it as a responsibility they owe to the child and not just to satisfy performance indicators.

IRO’s remain committed to seeing children before and in-between their meetings wherever possible and holding review meetings in person. There are occasions however when a hybrid or remote meeting still takes place and the reasons for this are expected to always be given in the record of the meeting and on the child’s electronic record. In those circumstances the IRO still attempts to meet with the child on their own before or after the meeting. Efforts are also made to see or speak to parents as part of each review which can mean two to three separate meetings are held in the course of completing one review. Wherever possible brothers and sisters are placed with the same foster carers and we also make sure they have the same IRO too unless they have such different care plans that might make it better to involve another IRO to make sure that the best interests of one child isn’t being compromised by the needs or plans for his or her brother or sister. We have managed for a large percentage of children in care to give them an IRO who remains with them throughout their care experience. Sadly, for the reasons already given earlier in this report, there were a number of children last year who didn’t have that consistency and continuity. We hope that with the recruitment of a new IRO that the team will regain its stability and that we will be able to achieve that again over the coming year.

**7. What else do we do?**

# As well as chairing reviews and overseeing the progress and outcomes of planning for permanency for children in care, IRO’s also have other responsibilities as part of the team of managers in Tower Hamlets. This is important to make sure that we don’t work in isolation from other teams and services, understand and contribute to work, initiatives, learning, and practice development that is taking place across all social work teams in the Supporting Families Division as well as with other services and agencies in or outside of the council.

# These include:

# Completing decision sheets and records of the review (in a form of a letter to the child) within timescales

# Holding a meeting or discussion with the social worker six weeks after the review to check on the progress made on the decisions made in the meeting. This aims to, and often involves, a conversation with the child, parent, or foster carer depending on individual situations

# Attendance at performance surgeries with the Divisional Director, Head of Service, and IRO Group Manager when they are arranged. The aim is for these to be held once a month.

# Links and involvement with CLICC and the Youth Engagement & Participation team so that we can work together to hear and learn more about what children in care and care experienced young people’s care experience has been, views and opinions on this, what they think we do well as well as the things or areas we need to improve on

# Complete file audits every other month, together with other managers, to see whether the records we keep shows how well we record our involvement and engagement with children and families, and whether this has been appropriate, effective, at the right time and within a reasonable timescale.

# Attending and contributing to the meeting for managers that takes place every month and is led by the Divisional Direction for the Supporting Families Division (all the social work teams involved in working or providing services for children and families)

# Participating in the Supporting Families Division Practice Week by observing meetings or activities from a different service as well as getting agreement from children and young people for their review meeting to be observed by another manager

# Attending and/or contributing to the Permanency Summit meeting that takes place every month to track the progress on the planning to achieve permanency for children. This gives IRO’s an opportunity to raise and discuss any concerns or worries they have about any part of the plan or possible delays with the Head of Service for Children Looked After and the Permanence Improvement Group Manager

# Promote the Lifelong Links project through their involvement in information gathering meetings and conversations with children in and outside of their reviews

# Together with the Group Manager, IRO’s will be carrying out file reviews when needed to review practice and identify any learning where there has been a concerning incident involving a child in need, on a child protection plan, or in care to Tower Hamlets

* Attending the monthly Safeguarding & Quality Assurance whole Service meetings
* Attending the monthly IRO team meeting, chairing it on a rota basis, and contributing to meetings around practice and team development
* Take the lead in specific service or performance links which are listed below and feeding back practice development, challenges, or other information to the team
* Keep up to date with practice development and research, complete the Tower Hamlets compulsory managers training modules, and attend training or workshops organised by the East London IRO Managers group

**8. What individual links or lead roles do Independent Reviewing Officers have?**

* London IRO practitioners group – one IRO currently attends the quarterly meeting with other London-based IRO’s to share and discuss good practice initiatives or concerns, new or proposed legislation, or guidance. We are aiming to eventually have two IRO’s linked to this group to cover annual leave or ill-health once the team is more settled
* Health of children we care for & care leavers steering group – The group meets six weekly and focusses on tracking and improving the physical and emotional health of children in care, including the timeliness of initial and subsequent health assessments and dental appointments
* African families service – This is a well-established Tower Hamlets based service that works with communities, professionals, and other organisations in and outside of Tower Hamlets and Europe to strengthen and consolidate theoretical understanding and links to improve practice in working with families of African and Caribbean heritage. The IRO linked to the African Families Service has now retired but we have maintained links through the Head of Service, invitations to their Link Workers meetings and conferences, and the Head of Service and Group Manager’s membership of the African Families Steering Group.
* Lifelong links steering group - We currently have two IRO’s involved with this group. One IRO is the original link who has been involved in promoting this service within the IRO team and has been a member of the steering group from the beginning. The second IRO is also a member of the steering group but is now working with the Family Group Conference service part-time supporting and promoting lifelong links with social workers and participating in the referral and planning process for children and young people in care who have lost contact with members of their family or other significant people in their lives, to explore and plan how those links can be restored, thereby enriching their lives
* Advocacy – One IRO has taken the lead in working with Barnardo’s Independent Visitor and Advocacy project to increase the number of children and young people benefitting from these services and exploring with the Family Group Conference service how parents of children in care can also be supported by their independent advocates in meetings with social workers in those situations where the relationship is difficult or broken down
* Tower Hamlets Virtual School – Through the involvement of the link IRO, the team have taken part in two joint moderation exercises of Personal Education Plans with teachers from the virtual school and arrangements are in place for the members of the team who couldn’t participate because they were in dual roles or not at work to get involved during the next school term
* Unaccompanied and asylum seeking children working group – An IRO is linked with this group working with other teams and services to improve delivery of services to these children and young people who are often isolated within the communities they are living in
* Domestic violence and abuse – The IRO lead is linked to various Tower Hamlets based teams and organisations involved in domestic violence and abuse, sharing information on developments, training, and practice relevant to our work with children and young people in care. The Lead IRO, together with one of the Child Protection Chairs, has led a second Learning Wednesday session on working with Bengali families where domestic violence and abuse is a concern as well as speaking at a joint adults and children’s safeguarding conference and a national Messages from Research seminar
* Emotional well-being – The IRO link to the CAMHs team working with children in care has now retired and this link will go to the new IRO once they are in post. The team has maintained its link and connections however to explore and share information and practice concerns for the emotional well-being of children and young people in care
* Restorative practice steering group – The IRO link has participated in this group which has been focussed on embedding the restorative practice model of working with children and families in Tower Hamlets
* Links to social work teams – IRO’s are being linked to individual social work teams and will be attending team meetings to forge better working relationships and understanding of roles and responsibilities

The IRO Group Manager has remained a member of the internal Lifelong Links steering group, Restorative Practice steering group, African Families Steering group, Children We Care For & Care Leavers steering group, Corporate Parenting Board, Unaccompanied & Asylum Seeking Children working group, Permanency Summit, NSPCC Reunification Practice Framework steering group, and Managers Forum. She also attends operational performance meetings focussing on initial and review health assessments and immunisations, children on care orders who are living at home or in unregulated/unlawful homes, and quarterly monitoring meetings with CAFCASS and the Barnardo’s Advocacy Service. She has also begun attending the main CLICC group meeting on a monthly basis and is about to start attending the Teen CLICC group monthly also.

Externally the IRO Group Manager is a member of the North East London IRO Managers Group, attends the London region of the National IRO Manager’s Partnership meetings, and the North East London IRO Manager and Cafcass Service Manager meetings.

**9. Update on the things we said in the 2020/2021 report that we wanted to prioritise in our work this year**

# Child Driven Reviews

# What we meant by child driven reviews when we set this as one of our priorities in 2021 for the coming year, was that as well as making sure reviews captured children’s voices and views, we wanted them to really feel like the review was their meeting that they had some control over and not just another meeting where they were asked for their views, where they felt confident enough to say where and how they wanted the meeting to be held, make their own agenda and not just be dictated by what IRO’s or other adults wanted to talk about, and decide what, if any, activity they wanted to incorporate as part of their meeting.

# Despite the restrictions of holding reviews remotely in 2020 and most of 2021, IRO’s were able to engage children and young people in having some kind of activity chosen by them at the beginning of their meeting. An example was one young person wanting to know what led the IRO, foster carer, and social worker to choose that as their occupation. It proved very enlightening for everyone and a comfortable way to start the conversation that formed the review. Another child decided that she wanted to demonstrate some gymnastics which was impressive and led to a conversation about exploring classes for her, while a younger child wanted to have a colouring competition. We are continuing to promote this, particularly encouraging more children and young people to chair part or all of their meetings. This means spending time preparing them before their reviews so that they feel confident enough to do so. Going back to meeting in person is making this easier and will allow children and IRO’s to be more creative in how their meeting takes place. The team now has access to direct work materials which will also help with ideas for activities, especially for younger children and/or those who find it harder to express themselves. One thing we have found as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions that meant meetings were taking place remotely during 2020 and most of 2021, is that some young people prefer to continue joining their meeting online, particularly if they just want to be present for part of it or want to talk to their IRO alone rather than being in a meeting with others. We’re trying to get a good balance around this by keeping meetings small and perhaps having a separate meeting or conversations with other adults or professionals while continuing to work with children to see the meeting as theirs and not ours.

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# Develop Our Work With CLICC

# We have continued our involvement with the workers involved with CLICC in trying to develop the teen and junior CLICC groups and the main CLICC for care experienced young people, with one of the IRO’s having a lead role in the team with them. CLICC workers have been to the IRO team meeting as well as the bigger Safeguarding & Quality Assurance whole service meeting that the IRO team are part of. Members of the team have attended a fun day put on by CLICC and have invited them to be part of an event called Just4U that the team is coordinating that will be held on 26th July 2022. We are hoping that this will help with getting children and young people involved with the junior and teen CLICC. The IRO Group manager has made a commitment to attend both CLICC meetings on a monthly basis to get to know some of the care experienced and young people in care and hear first-hand what they think we could be doing better.

# Quality Care Plans

# Improving the quality of care plans, making sure that young people are involved in contributing to it, as well as being given a copy before their review, has been and remains a priority for the team. IRO’s have been more proactive in asking social workers to make changes to their plans if it doesn’t have the child’s views or there isn’t a good sense of who the child is and how it’s going to meet their needs. IRO’s have also begun to be more consistent in not going ahead with reviews if the care plan isn’t completed before the review, early enough for young people to contribute to it or for it to have been shared with them before the meeting, or they’re just not happy with the standard. In those situations, the team manager is informed and a time set for things to be corrected. This is called the IRO resolution process – a way of sorting out things we are unhappy or disagree with. We have just finished carrying out an audit of some care plans completed for review meetings held in March as the first stage of the work we plan to do with social workers to improve the quality of care plans and this showed that although care plans had been completed on the whole in time for the review, not all of them gave a good enough sense of the child’s identity, views on their plan, or paid enough attention to family connections. We are in the process of planning the second stage of this area of work which will include some team managers and social workers.

# Strengthen Parental Participation

We already routinely record whether parents attend or participate in other ways in their child’s review and IRO’s also make efforts to speak to them and involve them as much as possible. If they can’t be in the same meeting as their child for any reason, then IRO’s meet or speak with them separately. We have asked for a report on parent’s attendance and whether their views have been received from information recorded on our management information system to be made available on a regular basis so that we can measure what progress has been or needs to be made overall, and also so the IRO Group Manager can examine and explore any particular themes with individual IRO’s and the team as a whole. We have developed a feedback form for parents that will be sent out with the review invitation letter. There is also an electronic version for those parents who might prefer to complete it that way and we will be promoting that more this year.

Through verbal feedback at reviews, the IRO team have identified that some parents feel that they only hear about what’s happening in their child’s life at the review because the relationship between them and their child’s social worker is difficult. Particularly during or after protracted court proceedings, the relationship between social workers and parents can suffer and at worst deteriorate to the extent that parents feel neglected and forgotten at the end of proceedings. The team have developed an advocacy project with the Family Group Conference service to train some of their existing advocates to facilitate meetings and conversations between parents and social workers on a short-term basis to try and improve what is an important relationship between them and we have already had one referral from a social worker for this service. It is still early days and the project is still in its infancy but we are hopeful that it will prove to be as impactful as the advocacy provided to parents in relation to Child Protection Conferences.

# 10. What about diversity?

Tower Hamlets is a diverse borough that has a population that is approximately just under a third White British (31%) and just over a third from the Bangladeshi community (32%). The White Other group was the third largest at around 12% of the population. The children in our care doesn’t reflect the community in Tower Hamlets as the figures gathered at the end of March 2022 shows based on 333 children in care on 29th March 2022.

Children from the Bangladeshi community were just under represented at 27% but the biggest differences were for White British and White Other children who combined accounted for just over 16% of children in care and Black African, Caribbean, other Black, and Somalian children were over represented at 15% as compared to approximately 7% in the community. The other significant group of children are those from dual heritage households recorded under the four different ‘Mixed’ categories who are 21% or just over one in five of children in care.

Audits have not picked up any inappropriate decision making that resulted in disproportionate numbers of children from these groups coming into care, but considered and targeted work is planned to develop a more strategic approach to explore Tower Hamlets intervention with families from different ethnicities and to specifically explore the care experience and outcomes for children from dual heritage and Black families. Recently a working group has been created to explore what we know, don’t know, and need to pay attention to as although the ethnic information of children in care is routinely gathered, it has not previously consistently been examined to see what areas of practice or service provision could be improved. There is some research (Webb 2021) that indicates that ethnicity and socio-economic factors makes a difference in whether and how local authorities intervene in the lives of families which is not always driven by need, but the basis by which judgements are made. This is worth exploring in our own local context and the IRO’s role is to be attuned to this, notice, and intervene where bias is impacting on a child’s care plan and care experience.

WEBB, C, 2021. Cuts both ways. Ethnicity and deprivation in child welfare interventions (presentation) [on line]. Available at https://www.calumwebb.uk/pres/cuts-both-ways/#1

# *Making a Difference – Asking the questions*

# *Sickle cell and thalassaemia are inherited red blood cell disorders that can affect people from African, Asian, and Mediterranean countries and can be serious health conditions. It is important for anyone suffering from either of these conditions, regardless of whether it is the less serious ‘trait’ or the full illness to know they have it and what it means for them and any future partner, particularly if they want to have children. IRO’s have had to intervene in two occasions this year and insist for two young people to be tested and given information about them and now are more aware to routinely ask the questions of children and care givers if they are not picked up during health assessments or by GP’s and ask for them to be tested and given information about the condition.*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ethnic breakdown of 333 children in care as recorded on 29th March 2022 | Total number of children and young people | Number of Females | Number of Males | Total percentage of children in care |
| Asian (any other Asian background) | 32 | 7 | 25 | 9.6 |
| Bangladeshi | 90 | 49 | 41 | 27 |
| Pakistani | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0.9 |
| **Total** | **125** | **57** | **68** | **37.5%** |
| Black African | 28 | 4 | 24 | 8.4 |
| Any other Black background | 6 | 2 | 4 | 1.8 |
| Caribbean | 11 | 3 | 8 | 3.3 |
| Somali | 5 | 2 | 3 | 1.5 |
| **Total** | **50** | **11** | **39** | **15%** |
| Mixed - any other background | 24 | 4 | 20 | 7.2 |
| Mixed – White & Asian | 12 | 4 | 8 | 3.6 |
| Mixed – White & Black African | 11 | 4 | 7 | 3.3 |
| Mixed – White & Black Caribbean | 24 | 13 | 11 | 7.2 |
| **Total** | **71** | **25** | **46** | **21.3%** |
| Any other ethnic group | 13 | 2 | 11 | 3.9 |
| Other - Arab | 11 | 0 | 11 | 3.3 |
| Other - Chinese | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0.6 |
| Other (information not yet obtained) | 3 | 0 | 3 | 0.9 |
| Other - Vietnamese | 4 | 0 | 4 | 1.2 |
| **Total** | **33** | **3** | **30** | **9.91** |
| Any other White background | 12 | 4 | 8 | 3.6 |
| Gypsy Roma | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0.9 |
| White British | 39 | 17 | 22 | 11.7 |
| **Total** | **54** | **23** | **31** | **16.2%** |

# 11. What was the impact of Covid and Black Lives Matters?

# March 2022 marked the second year of the restrictions and work from home directive that was introduced as a result of the Covid-19 virus, and 25th May 2022 was the first anniversary of George Floyd’s death. Both events have had a big impact on the communities and children we care for as well as on the team and the way we work. Because IRO’s only see the children they review a handful of times during the year, building up and sustaining the relationship with them is so important and IRO’s often use text messages, email, phone, or video calls to supplement this. As different strains of the virus were quite high in Tower Hamlets during 2021 the majority of reviews were held remotely with some hybrid reviews also taking place towards the end of the year and beginning of 2022 before we returned to all reviews happening in person. Some children were seen in person by their IRO in a variety of settings during 2021 but mostly they were seen on line or video calls, spoken to over the phone, or kept in contact with through WhatsApp, text messages, or emails. From early 2022 however with restrictions lifting, IRO’s have made greater efforts to see children in person wherever possible and to also begin having reviews where they live. They have made it a priority for those children who came into care during 2020 and 2021 who they had never met in person, or whose IRO had retired and they had taken on responsibility for, and therefore felt they didn’t know. It hasn’t always been as easy or straightforward as we imagined or wanted because of health conditions foster carers and some IRO’s have had or restrictions still in place in some of the residential homes young people were living in. All IRO’s are now working with social workers and carers to start conversations early enough for suitable arrangements to be made so that all reviews can take place where the child is living, perhaps with just the IRO, carer/s, and social worker present and everyone else joining on line where there are any health or other worries.

# As the year has progressed most of our reviews are now taking place in person where children live and reasons why not are expected to be recorded for any that are held as hybrid or remotely. As mentioned earlier in this report, some young people who are very settled and happy where they are living don’t always like to have review meetings as a reminder that they are in care. Sometimes a compromise is reached with the IRO where they meet with the child separately and hold a meeting with everyone afterwards. In other situations, the consent of the Head of Service for Children Looked After and Throughcare has been sought for in-person reviews to take place yearly with the care plan continuing to be reviewed six months later by the social worker and IRO and anyone else that has a part to play in the child’s care plan where children have been settled where they are living for at least two years and this is their wish. This could be by a physical or remote meeting, or individual phone calls and consultations by the IRO with parents, carers, and other professional, as well as a telephone or video conversation between the IRO and child.

# Unfortunately, the screen time involved while working from home during 2020 and 2021 has resulted in skeletomuscular conditions with some members of the team which has affected their ability to travel or sit in front of a screen for any great length of time. The result of this and the increase in the number of children allocated to each IRO is that timescales for completion of the chair’s records (or letters) from reviews has slipped. IRO’s are very conscious of the importance of keeping to timescales and it is addressed and discussed in one-to-one supervision and team meetings. IRO’s have been referred to Occupational Health and risk assessments completed where appropriate.

# The IRO team have been very focussed in team meetings and one-to-one supervision on reflecting on conscious and unconscious bias in society on the children and families that we work with and in particular their lived life experience. The article on white privilege and the questions posed in it by Peggy McIntosh has been a standing item on IRO team meeting agendas with discussion and reflection on individual experiences and awareness as a conversation starter on the lived experiences of the children we care for and the impact of this on them and their families, as well as a consideration on how we approach our interactions with them. They have not always been comfortable conversations to have but have been helpful in encouraging us to have those brave conversations with each other and to be more thoughtful about some of the lived experiences of the children we work with and become more familiar with the concept of intersectionality. The team have particularly thought about and explored any inequalities for those young people who have travelled from another country, don’t speak English, and may have experienced traumatic and discriminatory practices, and how this may have impacted them. More recently we have started to expand this to think about all aspects of diversity, equality, and identity, and how they impact the children and families we are working with.

***Making a Difference – Sometimes having an impact can be very subtle and can’t always be measured through the resolution process***

***“R is an Asian young person who was described as being Westernised and had several changes of places she was living in because of fears around her vulnerability and being at risk of sexual exploitation. She was also in an abusive controlling relationship with her older boyfriend who was sentenced for assaulting her.  R had been involved in drugs, alcohol and going missing regularly under his influence. His sentence meant R was able to be supported in her new placement.  However, initially she did not engage with services well although she had moments of good relationships with some key workers, but because of frequent moves, these relationships didn’t last.***

***Aysha became R’s IRO in 2021 and slowly formed a good relationship where R said she felt respected and not judged. It took a lot of coordination, challenge, and work with other professionals in R’s review meetings by the IRO before R said that she started feeling a sense of acceptance and belonging. During those early days of their relationship R probed with her IRO her decision to ‘cover’ as another Asian female.***

***Over time she developed a better understanding of the importance of who she was and had a positive outlook, engaging in her education, and doing very well in her exams. R eventually became more familiar with her own religious practice and decided that she wanted to start wearing the hajib and jilbab. R re-established her relationship with her family and made significant changes before moving in to her semi-independent placement. This has been such a positive change for R and having support from her IRO who she identified with, as well as others, helped her in making significant changes in her life”.***

# 12. How we’re working with CLICC and the CLICC wish list

# The IRO link worker and Group Manager have kept a good connection with workers from the Tower Hamlets Young People’s Service involved in trying to set up the junior and teen CLICC’s over the last year. They have attended IRO team and the full Safeguarding & Quality Assurance service meeting over the last year and the team have circulated information about both CLICCs to children in care and the fostering team so that foster carers could also encourage the children in their care to think about joining. The response hasn’t been particularly good so far with only about five young people in the teen CLICC and none yet for the junior CLICC.

# The IRO team are organising a children’s fun and creative expression event in July 2022 which CLICC have been invited to participate and be involved in, with a dual aim of hearing children’s views as well as promoting the junior and teen CLICC. This has been based on previous events organised by the previous Children’s Rights Officer that was well received and attended. Senior managers will be invited to join at the end of the afternoon to see what the children have been working on during the day and messages they have about their care experience they want managers to hear. IRO’s, social workers, and foster carers have been invited to drop in during the day and at the end of the afternoon to show support to the children they are responsible for in one way or another.

# Paying attention to the CLICC wish list has been a priority throughout the year for the IRO team as well as other services and the Corporate Parenting Board. The Children Looked After & Throughcare services have responded to the challenges presented by the Wish List and produced their own document on this to the Corporate Parenting Board. The IRO team have made their own response to the Wish List in the report to young people, All About Me, and the ‘You said, We did’ document which have not been repeated in this report for brevity, but they will be circulated with this for those who want to read them. An example of some of the things we have done in relation to the Wish List though has been the conversations we have been having and challenges through the IRO resolution process with the Throughcare service about young people being transferred sooner as well as personal advisers being allocated earlier so that they can have a smoother transition from the Children Looked After teams and preparation for living independently as an adult. We have also used the resolution process to bring to the attention of managers the delay that some young people experienced in having their age assessments carried out. The commitment from the Head of Service for Children Looked After & Throughcare to improve these experiences mean that this has improved in recent months, but IRO’s continue to be vigilant and bring any concerns to the attention of managers.

# 13. How are we contributing to national improvements?

The IRO team has maintained its connection with the London IRO Practitioners Group which is open to representatives from all the London boroughs to share and discuss practice issues and experiences, any common themes emerging from the work with children in care, as well as space to explore and reflect on the impact of proposed national changes, legislation, and most recently the Children’ Social Care Review that has been led by Josh McAllister. The meetings normally take place quarterly and has been attended by the linked IRO. During the covid restrictions the meetings were scheduled to take place on line but didn’t work as well and links to join the meetings either weren’t received by some members or didn’t work. With more local authorities returning to working in the office, it is hoped that these meetings will also resume to take place in person. The chair of the London IRO Practitioners group has continued to attend the London IRO Managers group which has regularly met on line during the restrictions and feeds back to the practitioners group what has been discussed in those meetings.

The IRO Group Manager similarly attends the equivalent managers group, the London IRO Managers Forum, on a regular basis and feeds back information to the IRO team. She is also a member of the North East London IRO Managers group that includes the IRO managers from Barking & Dagenham, Havering, Newham, Redbridge, and Waltham Forest, that meets quarterly to benchmark and share practice developments. Together with the North East region CAFCASS Service Manager the six IRO managers have organised joint IRO and Guardian workshops that have taken place twice a year for the last two years. The workshops have taken place on line and been repeated over three dates on each occasion to allow all IRO’s and Guardians to be able to participate. The workshops held during 2021 were Adoption – when it is chosen in June and on Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards and Secure Accommodation Orders in November and December 2021. The title of the first workshop reflected a more respectful language in relation to the use of the word ‘relinquished’ for children whose parent/s had chosen adoption for them because they were not able to care for them themselves.

These workshops have been very effective and well received by Guardians and IRO’s and in September 2021 the North East London managers group were successful in bidding for a small DFE grant which was used to provide some administrative support to help them organise and run the workshops and to organise an in-person conference for the IRO’s and Guardians from the North East London region that went ahead in April 2022. The conference included a parent in the morning and care experienced young person in the afternoon, both from Tower Hamlets, who spoke movingly about their experience and the impact the Lifelong Links project had made in theirs’ and their families lives. The IRO/Cafcass model of joint training has proved popular within the London IRO Managers group and other regions are now following in the footsteps of their North East London colleagues and aiming to set up similar regional meetings and workshops.

***Making a difference – recognising the importance of family connections***

***“Although there were times I never thought I had a family, I realised that they always had me, remembered me, and had a hope for me and my life. My IRO referring me for Lifelong Links changed my life completely. Having people who believe (in you and) never give up on you is important.”***

***Young person on the difference her IRO made by referring her to Lifelong Links and being able to meet her mother and extended maternal and paternal family members after years in care***

One of the IRO’s has been working condensed hours to facilitate her self-funded PHD. She has used her findings and knowledge from her research on domestic violence and abuse and implications for working within the Bengali community to speak at a Tower Hamlets joint Adults and Children’s Safeguarding Conference as well as at a Messages from Research Seminar and an internal training session for all social workers at a Safeguarding & Quality Assurance service meeting.

# 14. What about OFSTED?

We know that we are due for a focussed visit from the Ofsted Inspectors any time now and hopefully this report will be ready in time for that to complement the report written to children. We don’t know what they will be focussing on yet but are aware that children in our care could potentially be of interest to them. The last inspection in 2019 saw an improvement across children’s services from the previous one in April 2017 which saw Tower Hamlets graded as needing improvement. This was not unexpected but was unwelcome and a low point for everyone all the same. The comments in relation to IRO’s highlighted that although children’s care plans were being regularly reviewed, practice needed to improve, and in particular challenges by IRO’s to improve social work practice.

***“Almost all children have their care plans regularly reviewed by IROs, who know them well. Caseloads for IROs are manageable. Managers are aware that current practice needs to improve further. Evidence of informal and formal escalations are appropriate, but escalations require more incisive challenge by IROs to improve social work practice further”. (Ofsted April 2017)***

A lot of work took place across all of children’s services, including within the IRO team, with the introduction of midway monitoring meetings six weeks after reviews being held as a means of checking whether the decisions made in the meeting had been carried out instead of picking up on this at the next review. This meant that IRO’s were able to pick up on any delays for children earlier and start the resolution process, bringing any issues to the attention of managers to take action on. It also allowed an opportunity for the IRO to be updated on anything else significant that had happened since the review. The difference this made was recognised in the comments made in the 2019 inspection which also saw an improvement across all of children’s service with a grading of Good.

***“The work of the independent reviewing officers (IROs) has improved significantly. Midway monitoring and visits to see children with their carers brings additional rigour and oversight. Evidence of effective challenge is ensuring progress and care plans and reduces delay, including alerts to keep planning on track. IROs are creative in their approach to get to know children and their reviews are child- centred” (Ofsted 2019)***

# The team have continued to work hard to make sure that they offer support to social workers but also keep the challenge for children high where care plans or care planning are not meeting the child’s needs appropriately. The IRO challenge is an area that has been high on our agenda as well as for senior managers this year and two reports on the effectiveness and level of this has been written by the Group Manager for the Children’s Services Improvement Board in November 2021 and March 2022. Another report is scheduled to be completed for June 2022 adding an extra layer of oversight by senior managers. Since December 2021 it has been possible to record informal resolutions on the management information system which has helped to give a truer account of the IRO challenge but the reports completed shows that there is still more work to be done to help IRO’s to be more consistent in recording this on the system instead of just sending emails or having conversations with social workers or team managers so that we can better evidence the impact we have on planning.

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# 15. What’s happening around advocacy?

# Having access to an advocate is an important right for children in care and IRO’s are mindful of advising them of this and offering to refer them to the service provided by Barnardo’s, particularly when they feel they would benefit from their support, not just to make complaints but also to support them in meetings, including reviews, and help them get their voices heard. There is now a good connection between the Barnardo’s Advocacy Service and the IRO team and the Barnardo’s Service Manager, Team Manager, and Lead Advocate have all been to the Safeguarding & Quality Assurance service meeting and the IRO team meeting to promote the service and strengthen the links. The difference advocates can make in the lives of children made a big impact in those meetings leading to one of the Child Protection Clerks training as an advocate himself and will now be doing voluntary work in another borough.

# Referral forms and information leaflets have been circulated to all IRO’s to share with the children they review and the IRO Group Manager will now also be attending the quarterly monitoring meetings as well as receiving the quarterly reports. At the moment the way information is collected by Barnardo’s mean that it is not possible for them to say how many referrals come from IRO’s and is something that has been suggested should be looked at going forward. The advocacy and Independent Visitor projects are well used in Tower Hamlets but a group of young people who aren’t able to make full use of the Independent Visitor service as easily are unaccompanied young people who don’t speak English. A potential befriending service for this group of young people has been explored but unfortunately has not progressed at this stage and the possibility of recruiting volunteers who speak some of the more popular languages can be explored.

# As mentioned elsewhere in this report, the IRO team are working with the Family Group Conference service to train their advocates to also support and work with identified parents and social workers where relationships are strained or difficult to help open up and improve the communication between them.

# *Making a Difference – An enduring relationship*

***“I love Tracy and want her to remain in my life even though I’m over 18 now.  She actually listens to what I have to say – I didn’t always feel that others did.  She goes above and beyond.   If I email or message her about what’s going on for me, she always gets back to me and talks to me or checks how I am and how things are going.  She always remembers my birthday and I know she cares about me.***

***She has done so many things for me.    I remember two years ago when I was in my foster placement and it was like they had sat me down and telling me all these things that made me feel terrible about myself and things Tracy was supposed to have said. Tracy heard about it and rang me and told me the truth and tackled them about it. She made me feel good about myself and now I am more confident.  She takes time with me and really listens.”***

***IRO advocating for a young person who lacked confidence and felt judged by professionals and carers***

# 16. What we did about what children and young people told us

# Through our involvement with CLICC we wrote a document called ‘You Said – We Did’ last year that wasn’t widely circulated as planned. We have updated it this year as a standalone document that will be circulated with both the children’s and this version of the IRO Manager’s report. Please read it separately.

# *Making a Difference –Sometimes it’s the little things that can be most important, like saying goodbye*

# *A is ten and had been brought into the UK from Malta by her mother a year previously during contact without the consent of Maltese officials who held a Care Order on her. Court proceedings here ruled that she should be returned to Malta and the Maltese social workers travelled to the UK to pick her up within a couple of days of the ruling. A had told her IRO when she rang to speak to her about returning to Malta that she wanted to be able to say goodbye to her school friends who she hadn’t seen since she had been accommodated two months previously. There was very little time to arrange a proper goodbye as the Maltese social workers had booked flights to return the same day. The IRO therefore rang A’s school and arranged with her teacher for her friends to make a short video to send to her which she was very happy and excited about. It wasn’t the best ending but her foster carers made a special tea for her before she left and she had a final video call with her IRO to say goodbye and thanked her for arranging for the video to be made so she could keep it with her when she returned to Malta.*

# 17. What do we offer our care experienced young people?

# Young people leaving care at 18 are normally referred to as care leavers but children, quite rightly, have been challenging our language over recent years and have told us that they prefer to be called care experienced young people so that’s how they are referred to in this report.

# One of the key things IRO’s have identified this year that have been affecting some of our young people preparing to ‘leave care’ and make the big change to being an adult, is that they have not always been as well supported or prepared as they should be. This was because the transfer from the children looked after teams to the throughcare teams happened too close to their 18th birthday and/or they had not been allocated a personal adviser until their transfer to the throughcare team. This was also one of the areas raised by the main CLICC who also told us that there wasn’t always a smooth transition between services and they didn’t always work well together leaving young people feeling stressed and anxious. IRO’s also identified that unaccompanied young people who needed age assessments completed were being particularly impacted by a delay in transferring them to the throughcare team from frontline teams as well as disputes about which team should be carrying out the assessment. IRO’s have used the resolution process to bring both those issues to the attention of managers, and the Head of Service for children looked after and throughcare, with the involvement of CLICC, has worked hard to resolve this. There is now a new protocol in place which means that the transfer from the frontline teams takes place quickly for the assessment to be completed by the throughcare teams. There is still some work to be done however to make the transfer to the throughcare teams and allocation of personal advisers happen sooner than they currently are for other young people, and IRO’s will continue to start the resolution process where this has not started at an appropriate time. We recognise that there is a capacity issue that will need to be addressed for this to improve. IRO’s have also been reminded to make the recommendation for young people to be presented to the Housing Panel around their 17th birthday so that the plans for them can be agreed well in advance to give them a sense of security about where they are going to be living after their 18th birthday and to trigger the process of them being transferred to the throughcare teams, as well as starting the resolution process where this hasn’t happened.

# *Making a Difference - Listening to what you want*

***R is a very happy young man presently. R has additional learning needs and will be 18 in June 2022. He has told us for about 8 months that he wants to go home to his mum and dad when he reaches 18 years old. Despite some reservations we have just agreed at his last review held in May that as all the transition plans are in place that he can return to live with his family even though he won’t have his own room and the family home will be cramped. R is delighted and doesn’t care about any of this. He hasn’t written anything directly but his ‘grin’ said everything when he was finally told that this was going to happen. Because of his learning needs a Capacity Assessment was undertaken and the final decision about his returning home was reached at his review. The review recognised that it may not be so easy for R to be as independent as other 18 year old males and so a parallel plan is in place, which is for staying put because of his additional needs.***

***“We have set up the A plan, the B plan, and the C plan to ensure that there is a plan for all the ‘just in case’ scenarios.”***

***Tracey C, IRO***

# For those young people living with foster carers, conversations about the choices and options open to them about where they want to live when they are 18, start after their 16th birthday so that the plan can be clear about which option is going to be pursued for them by their 17th birthday. This will always include the option of remaining with their foster carer under the Staying Put arrangements if this is something they both want. There were 38 young people still living with their foster carers under the Staying Put arrangements during the financial year 2021-2022 and so far, for the coming year, April 2022 to March 2023, there are arrangements for 24 young people. The importance of stable and trusted relationships, and hopefully what has been an enduring one, is recognised for our children in care who through moving from their family, changing schools or homes they’ve lived in since coming into care have often lost connection with important people in their lives. Making sure they have support and a relationship network is therefore being thought about by the consideration of the role of the Lifelong Links project, and IRO’s are being encouraged to raise and consider it from the beginning of a child’s care experience and not just towards the end. The involvement of one of the IRO’s in the project will help to keep it high on the IRO team agenda where it is currently a standing item.

# Here’s what the manager of the Family Group Conference and Lifelong Links service had to say about the role of IRO’s in relation to Lifelong Links. Out of 26 referrals for the service, 16 came from IRO’s.

***Role of the IRO in Lifelong Links – Jane Towey FGC & Lifelong Links Manager***

|  |
| --- |
| I ***see the IRO role as central to Lifelong Links. Our IROs know the children really well , and fully understand the need for reconnection with family and other important adults in their lives that they may have lost touch with .  The IRO  confidence in Lifelong Links can be reassuring for others in the professional network who may feel anxious about the child developing relationships with family and other important connections.***  ***IROs are well placed to Identify children and young people who will benefit from Lifelong Links and will recommend referrals to be made through the social worker. IRO’s sometimes also make referrals directly and this prevents delay in the child and young person getting a service, especially where the social worker is newly allocated and isn’t yet familiar with the child’s situation.***  ***Although not directly involved in Lifelong Links planning, the IRO is an essential member of the Lifelong Links review and development group for each  child that  they work with who has been referred. The IRO can provide an overview of the child’s situation and the best way to support and  communicate  with each child. They also have a good knowledge of the parent and can advise on how to approach parents and secure their consent for Lifelong Links.***  ***The IRO can ensure that Lifelong Links work is  reviewed at the child’s review and this is a really important part of ensuring that the Lifelong Links work and plan is included in the  child’s care plan, and that the support network for the child and young person continues to develop and does not get overlooked.*** |

# *Making a Difference - The importance of maintaining family connections*

***L (11yrs) experienced harm and trauma in the care of both his mother & his father. He does not want to see either of them but has family time with his maternal grandmother and a couple of maternal aunts.***

***At his review L asked whether he would be able to see a paternal uncle and his cousins. His IRO, Alison, made the Lifelong Links referral and the LL Co-ordinator contacted the uncle who responded positively. A provisional date was made for them to meet up in a park on 22nd May. L’s uncle and cousins are looking forward to seeing him and he is also excited that he will soon get to meet his uncle and cousins.***

# 18. Checking how well we’re doing

# 18.1 Reviews

# One of the main responsibilities for IRO’s is reviewing the care plans for children and making sure these review meetings happen in time. For any young people reading this who don’t know or might have forgotten, the first review has to happen within 20 working days of a child coming into care, the second one should be no more than three months after the first, and then every six months. Sometimes they happen more often, for example if the care plan changes, the child moves to live somewhere else and it wasn’t planned, and if the child wants one or the IRO feels it would be helpful to have it earlier. This is called keeping the review in timescale.

# Making sure reviews happen at the right times (what professionals mean when they say in timescale), is one of the things that IRO’s are measured on and we have exceeded the target of 95% that was set for us. It has improved from 95.4% in 2018/2019, to 97% in 2019/2020, and for the last two years, 2020/2021 and 2021/2022, we have achieved 100% of our reviews happening in timescale. It takes hard work to make sure we achieve that target because there are times when IRO’s have had to have a series of meetings for the review because it wasn’t possible to complete the review on the first attempt for lots of different reasons. For example, the young person or other significant person not being present, an interpreter not turning up on the day, or the care plan not being completed or shared with the young person. In those situations, the IRO would need to arrange another meeting for them to be present or to meet with them separately and/or for the care plan to be completed and shared with the young person so that they could be properly prepared for their meeting. A quick snapshot of 65 reviews carried out in March showed that 75 meetings were held to complete the review, not including any pre-review consultation meetings. Now that we are back to holding reviews in person and with higher numbers of children allocated to them, the extra travelling time, particularly for children who don’t live in Tower Hamlets, puts added pressure on IRO’s to keep everything in timescale but it remains one of our priorities.

***Making a Difference – Deciding to adjourn a review***

***A is 16 and an unaccompanied young person who is very traumatised, living away from his family and everything he knows; and has issues communicating with his mother which has a significant impact on his emotional well-being. The IRO decided to adjourn his review , reconvening it four days later as there were issues with the interpreter and she was very worried about A’s emotional well-being when he told her in their one-to-one consultation that he felt invisible, a reflection of how sad and alone he felt at times. His IRO, Pamela, felt that he was very scared and confused in regard to the support in place for him and that the language barrier further impacted on his ability to express his feelings and to feel heard. In adjourning the review, the IRO gave clear direction to the social worker and key worker about what she expected to be done for A by the date of the adjourned review four days later. By the time the second meeting took place everything had improved. The plan for key work sessions was more targeted, regular, and needs and relationship building focussed. A said through his interpreter that he liked his keyworker and felt he was now there for him. He was more upbeat in his meeting and through observing all the professionals involved working together to identify and meet his needs, and also exploring options to support him, expressed himself and appeared more confident.***

***“I am really pleased that together, we have been very proactive in ensuring he will now be attending college this week and he appeared more re-assured that ‘he is not alone’, we are here to help him make sense of his journey to the UK and will be there whilst he settles/achieves his life goals.”***

***Extract from Pamela, IRO, message to social worker and key worker following the reconvened review.***

# A total of 915 reviews were held during the year April 2021 to March 2022 which is an increase from the previous year’s total of 842 reviews.

# Number of Review Meetings held during April 2021 – March 2022

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Month | First Reviews | Second & Subsequent | First Eligible (16+) | Subsequent Eligible Pathway | Totals |
| April 2021 | 10 | 55 (51 +4 adoption) | 6 | 16 | 87 |
| May 2021 | 6 | 42 | 4 | 15 | 67 |
| June 2021 | 16 (14+ 2 adoption) | 27 (26 + 1 adoption) | 4 | 15 | 62 |
| July 2021 | 6 | 36 | 7 | 11 | 60 |
| Aug 2021 | 13 (12 + 1 adoption) | 34 (30 + 4 adoption) | 9 | 16 | 72 |
| Sept 2021 | 16 (12 + 4 adoption) | 49 (46 + 3 adoption) | 3 | 20 | 88 |
| Oct 2021 | 19 (17 + 2 adoption) | 35 | 4 | 12 | 70 |
| Nov 2021 | 38 (36 + 2 adoption) | 29 | 7 | 19 | 93 |
| Dec 2021 | 17 (16 + 1 adoption) | 34 | 11 | 13 | 75 |
| Jan 2022 | 10 | 29 (27 + 2 adoption) | 17 | 15 | 71 |
| Feb 2022 | 9 (8 + 1 adoption) | 36 (34 + 2 adoption) | 22 | 14 | 81 |
| Mar 2022 | 21 | 38 (35 + 3 adoption) | 12 | 18 | 89 |
| Totals | 181 (168 + 13 adoption reviews) | 444 (425 + 6 adoption reviews) | 106 | 184 | 915 |

# 18.2 What happens in-between meetings?

# Tower Hamlets IRO’s now hold monitoring meetings with social workers six weeks after each review to check whether the decisions that were made in the meeting have been carried out and if there are any difficulties that need to be addressed as part of their oversight on care planning for children. Having these meetings means that the IRO can identify earlier whether there is any delay for children and to start the resolution process at an earlier time. They also use this meeting to check whether there have been any changes or significant events since the meeting they need to be aware of. As part of the monitoring meeting IRO’s also regularly attempt to talk to children and sometime parents or carers if it is pertinent to one of the decisions. IRO’s regularly report that children very often don’t feel inclined to talk to them so soon after their review, feeling it as an extension of their meeting, and so use their judgement about the timing of their next contact with the child which might be at the midpoint between reviews as well as a variety of ways of contacting them, phone calls, text, video call, or seeing them in person depending on what the child prefers.

# There has been a slight reduction in the number of midway monitoring episodes recorded over the last year, a total of 598 opposed to 601 in 2020/2021. Part of this is due to uncompleted monitoring meetings by the two IRO’s who retired, although some were carried out on their behalf by the new IRO’s. It is also clear that the number of monitoring meetings held, or at least being recorded, dipped during the months when the number of children and young people coming into care rose towards the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, with the exception of December 2021 and January 2022. This might be accounted for by fewer reviews taking place those months allowing for more time to hold and record the monitoring meetings. Discussions are held with IRO’s in one-to-one supervision around performance and while there is some acknowledgement that some monitoring meetings haven’t taken place within six weeks, it appears that there is some under reporting as conversations are taking place in some cases but not being recorded, or monitoring forms opened but not closed down. These will continue to be followed up by the Group Manager and a more regular data management report requested to help with oversight on this.

# 18.3 How do we involve children and parents?

# Making sure that children are consulted and feel involved in their meetings is always a priority for IRO’s and the team are committed to making sure that children and young people don’t just feel obligated to be at their meeting but are encouraged and supported to take charge of it, making decisions about who they want to be in their meeting, where they want it, and what they want to talk about. This doesn’t always coincide with what the IRO or others might want to talk about so a separate meeting or discussion might be necessary or to meet with people the child may not want in their meeting, like a parent or teacher for example. This is an on-going process as quite naturally children wouldn’t choose to sit in a room with adults they’re not related to and talk about themselves. The team therefore try to be as flexible as possible in how children’s meetings take place – being mindful of confidentiality. Giving children the choice of where their meeting takes place and who they want to be there can throw up challenges and IRO’s have to be creative and mindful about meeting a child’s request where practical difficulties or issues of confidentiality might need to be given consideration. Separate meetings might become necessary, for example, so that confidential matters can be discussed in a private space or if the child doesn’t want to be present for certain conversations the adults need to have.

# *Making a Difference – Sometimes it’s the little things involved in being a corporate parent that children value most*

***At M’s review I heard how well he was doing. M moved to live out of London due to criminal exploitation concerns. With the help of the staff and other professionals involved he is doing well, attending college and training to become a barber. His life is now totally different and by way of rewarding his hard work I approached our HoS who in turn approached the Resources HoS who agreed to pay for 10 driving lessons for him. He was delighted.***

***Xenia, IRO, reminding senior managers about what a parent would do to reward a child’s achievement***

# Particularly since reviews started taking place remotely when meeting in private places were unlawful or restricted, some young people have begun telling their IRO’s that they prefer to have their meeting this way as it allows them to just be present for part of the meeting if that’s what they choose or to be more flexible when meeting friends etc. The importance of keeping a connection to the children they review and the importance of seeing them in order to build their relationship is not lost on IRO’s and they persevere in trying to see young people separately if they choose not to attend their meeting and also to see or talk to them in-between their meetings. Getting children’s views for their meetings happens in different ways, mostly by them attending or speaking to their IRO directly, as well as through other means – written, through an advocate, or interpreter etc. Only 14 children are recorded as not attending their meeting or giving their view in any form. IRO’s ensure that the missing procedures are followed for children who have been absent from where they are living and check that return home interviews are offered. Also high on our agenda are concerns around children in care who are vulnerable to or at risk from harm outside the home. The IRO Group Manager has registered an interest for a member of the team to be part of a working group around contextual safeguarding for children in care that is being created by the National IRO Managers Partnership and the team have been involved in a briefing on the initiatives around this in Tower Hamlets to help inform practice.

# The IRO team have maintained their connection and involvement with CLICC to support them in recruiting to the junior and teen CLICCs as well as working with them to explore more creative and effective ways of hearing the voices of the children we care for. CLICC have been invited to participate in a planned children’s event in July 2022 and the IRO Group Manager has made a commitment to attend the two CLICC meetings on a monthly basis. A feedback form for children has also been created but it has proved difficult to get responses. It’s an area that we are still working on and will be exploring with those children who attend the event in July how they would like to communicate with us. In the mean time they are being encouraged to be as creative as they like in letting us know their views or what they want to talk about or tell us for their reviews. Two young people were involved in contributing to re-writing the letter telling children about their reviews and the various ways in which they can choose to share their views and have been rewarded for this. We are hoping the Just4U event in July will give us a bigger pool of children we can involve in co-production.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **CLA Review Participation** |  |
| **Participation Code** | **Total** |
| PN0-Child aged under 4 at the time of the review | 126 |
| PN1-Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself | 507 |
| PN2-Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf | 12 |
| PN3 – Child attends and conveys his or her views symbolically (Non verbally) (attendance symbols) | 2 |
| PN4-Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself | 0 |
| PN5-Child does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her | 135 |
| PN6-Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium (text, written format, phone, audio/video, viewpoint) | 38 |
| PN7-Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review | 14 |
| **Grand Total** | **835** |

# Keeping parents involved in their child’s lives and reviews is also an important part of IRO’s responsibilities. Efforts are routinely made to contact parents before reviews and to involve them as much as possible. There are some situations that make it difficult to have one or both parent in the review and where that is the case it is explained to them and the child if they are old enough and attempts made to see or speak to them instead, sometimes as a formal meeting and at others more informally as consultation. A feedback form has also been created for parents and is in the early stages of being trialled. Informal feedback from some parents however has led to the creation of the advocacy project being developed with the Family Group Conference service already mentioned in this report. A request has been made for a management information report to be provided to have an accurate rather than anecdotal understanding of the level of parental participation in reviews.

# 18.4 What about permanency for children?

# Permanence can mean different things for different children – returning to live in their own family, being adopted, or remaining in care matched to foster carers, or depending on age, residential care and being prepared for independence - but for IRO’s, it always means the same thing. Making sure that there is a plan in place for every child in care that allows them to know and experience a nurturing, stable, secure, supportive family or home life throughout their childhood that allows them to have ambitions, plans, and dreams for when they become adults. IRO’s scrutiny of the care plans that are made for children and how they change or progress is therefore vitally important, as is their ability to challenge effectively when they see any delay to the planning being made for them or when the plans aren’t meeting the child’s needs.

# In line with regulations and guidance, IRO’s are expected to make sure that the permanency plan for each child is clear within the care plan and discussed and recorded by the second review. A recent examination of care plans showed that how permanency is recorded is not always as clear or defined as it should be with some social workers referring to the outcome of court proceedings rather than being able to explain parallel or triple planning. Team managers will be reminded of their responsibility to check or quality assure care plans before reviews while IRO’s will be reminded of their responsibility to ask social workers to amend care plans where appropriate. This is all part of the second stage of work being planned with social work teams and IRO’s following the small audit that an IRO and the Group Manager recently completed.

# The IRO Group Manager is a member of the Permanency Summit and attends the meetings that take place every month to track the planning for permanency for children. IRO’s have been put on a rota to attend and also give any relevant comments to the Group Manager to contribute to the discussion when they can’t attend. They also attend on an ad hoc basis for specific children who are being discussed if they have particular concerns to share their view. Regular Permanency Planning meetings are taking place and the Permanency Improvement manager and the manager from Adopt London East also attend the Permanency Summit where checks are made that meetings have taken place/booked and that the correct paperwork and processes are being followed by social workers to prevent unnecessary delay. The IRO Group Manager is now also attending regular tracking meetings with the Divisional Director and other managers as an additional level of scrutiny to look at children at home on care orders and in unregulated or unlawful home accommodation. Arrangements are also being made for additional scrutiny around unstable placements by the Heads of Service for Children Looked After, Regulated Services, and Safeguarding & Quality Assurance together with the IRO Group Manager.

# 18.5 What about care plans?

# The importance of children being involved in writing their care plans and being given a copy remains a priority for the IRO team. The planned work around care plans by the team was delayed by the absence of the member of staff tasked to do this work but a short audit has recently been undertaken as the first stage of further planned work which will involve social workers and team managers in a drive to improve the quality of care plans. There are examples of good care plans for children but too many care plans haven’t involved the child where they are old enough to get their views, give a sense of how they see their identity, or how the plan will meet their individual needs. IRO’s often have conversations with social workers to help them think about what and how they could write differently to improve the plans, and not least impress on them the need to speak to and involve the child and share it with them before their meeting so that they fully understand what is in their plan. As a result, there has been some improvement and there is evidence that some social workers are now writing their care plans to the child and are more thoughtful about how they express themselves, but further work is needed and this will be the next stage of the work.

# IRO’s are also clear about their own responsibility, and as well as having respectful conversations with social workers or team managers, are now also rearranging or adjourning reviews where the care plan has not been completed, is not clear, show how the child’s needs are going to be met, or has not been shared with the child. Not all IRO’s are starting the resolution process at this stage and the need for greater consistency has been raised in IRO team meetings as well as with individual IRO’s in supervision.

# 18.6 What about IRO resolutions?

# The IRO challenge is an important part of their role to prevent delay for children in care or neglect of their human rights. In accordance with the IRO Handbook, IRO’s routinely attempt to resolve differences by communicating directly with social workers and team managers before starting the formal resolution process on the management information system. The form is still called the IRO management alert because of delays in amending forms on the system but the language has changed and they are now referred to as resolutions. There are occasions though when as well as having conversations with social workers and managers that IRO’s have been directed to start the resolution process. An example is when a care or pathway plan hasn’t been completed for a review.

# Since December 2021 we have been able to record informal resolutions which allows us to track the outcome of those informal conversations/discussions and escalate them to formal resolutions if the actions or outcomes requested have not been achieved in a way that wasn’t possible previously. The IRO’s use their judgement depending on the circumstances whether to start an informal or formal resolution. IRO’s have been asked to escalate informal resolutions after ten days without a response in the same way that applies to formal resolutions. This resulted in a noticeable increase in resolutions in December (9) and January (12) from a rough monthly average of 4. The figures for February (6) and March (2) shows a fall in numbers. Although March is particularly low, it is similar to previous years during a month when a lot of annual leave is taken. Conversations with IRO’s and emails that the Group Manager has been copied into indicate that some IRO’s are still not using the informal resolution and have had to be directed to do so. A request has been made for monthly reports from the data team to help with tighter oversight by the Group Manager.

# Between April 2021 and March 2022, 59 resolutions were raised, 9 of which were informal resolutions recorded between December 2021 and February 2022, three informal resolutions in each month. An earlier report on IRO resolutions covering a 12 month period from October 2020 to September 2021 showed there had been 48 resolutions, averaging 4 a month. With the exclusion of the informal resolutions, the 12 month period covered by this report shows 50 formal resolutions, only just slightly more than 4 a month and seems to confirm the outcome of the report completed in March 2022 that the rise in resolutions is as a result of the informal resolutions now being able to be recorded on the management information system. This is felt to be an under-representation however of the IRO challenge as indicated above. The emails IRO send and decisions made in reviews are not able to be counted but can often have the same effect and impact on outcomes as them using the resolution process.

# IRO RESOLUTIONS BETWEEN APRIL 2021 AND MARCH 2022

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| FORMAL RESOLUTIONS | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| APR 21 | MAY21 | JUN 21 | JUL21 | AUG 21 | SEPT 21 | OCT 21 | NOV 21 | DEC 21 | JAN22 | FEB 22 | MAR 22 | TOT |
| 6 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 6 | 9 | 3 | 2 | 50 |
| INFORMAL RESOLUTIONS | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| APR 21 | MAY21 | JUN 21 | JUL21 | AUG 21 | SEPT 21 | OCT 21 | NOV 21 | DEC 21 | JAN22 | FEB 22 | MAR 22 | TOT |
| N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 3 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 9 |
| TOTALS | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| APR 21 | MAY21 | JUN 21 | JUL21 | AUG 21 | SEPT 21 | OCT 21 | NOV 21 | DEC 21 | JAN22 | FEB 22 | MAR 22 | TOT |
| 6 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 9 | 9 | 6 | 2 | 59 |

# N/A = Figures not available

# Over the 12 month period of this report, 89 reasons are given for the resolutions raised. Just over a third, 37, of those concerns related to the care plan, 24 where the care plan was not completed and 13 where the plan was felt to be in drift. Taken together with those unknown instances where IRO’s have sent emails but not started the resolution process, care plans have to remain high on the IRO agenda and emphasises the work that has to take place with some IRO’s to shift the focus onto outcomes for the child and for tighter scrutiny by team managers to ensure that they give the same attention to care plans being completed for child in care reviews as they do for child protection conferences. The next two largest categories were ‘other’, 22, and the recommendations of the review not being followed, 15. Not having the information in relation to the ‘other’ category makes it difficult to know what the issues were, but it would be reasonable to speculate that some of those might relate to the difficulties there has been in relation to age assessments not being completed within a reasonable timescale and the delay in the transfer of young people to the Throughcare Service, although some of those young people would have fallen into both those categories. No report or social worker present for the review accounted for 7 of the resolutions, and this is often as a result of a change of social worker/team and the receiving social worker not being aware of the review. Statutory requirements not being met accounts for 8 reasons for resolutions, which would include health assessments, single assessments, PEP meetings, or statutory visits being out of timescale.

# BREAKDOWN OF REASONS FOR RESOLUTIONS APRIL 2021 TO MARCH 2022

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Reasons | Total |
| Care plan not completed | 24 |
| Drift in care plan | 13 |
| No report/attendance by social worker | 7 |
| Other | 22 |
| Recommendations from previous review not followed | 15 |
| Statutory requirement not completed – e.g., health assessment, PEP, other | 8 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Monthly Breakdown of IRO Management Resolutions by Outcome** | **Apr 2021** | **May 2021** | **Jun 2021** | **Jul 2021** | **Aug 2021** | **Sept 2021** | **Oct 2021** | **Nov 2021** | **Dec 2021** | **Jan 2022** | **Feb 2022** | **Mar 2022** |
| **Escalation to Next Stage** |  | 1 |  |  |  |  | 1 |  |  |  | 1 |  |
| **NFA - Issue Resolved** | 6 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 9 | 15 | 4 | **1** |
| **Totals** | 6 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 9 | 15 | 5 | **1** |

# Three of the resolutions were escalated to the second stage with the remaining 56 being resolved at the first level. Some of the resolutions raised were about more than one issue so the reasons given for resolutions are frequently larger than the actual number of resolutions started.

# 19. What’s the link with CAFCASS?

# The link and relationship between the Tower Hamlets IRO service and the regional CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service) has remained strong and effective over the last year. For any young people reading this report who are unsure, as well as having IROs to oversee the care planning for them while they are in care, where court proceedings are going on, the court will ask Cafcass to allocate a Children’s Guardian (usually just called the Guardian) to do a similar job and let the court know what they think would be in the best interests of the child. Here is a link if you want to know more.

# [A young person's guide to care proceedings - Cafcass - Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service](https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/young-people/young-persons-guide-care-proceedings/#:~:text=The%20court%20will%20ask%20a,special%20legal%20adviser%2C%20called%20a)

# The arrangements for letting the IRO Group Manager know when Cafcass has appointed a Guardian to act for a child in care proceedings is working well. The letter from Cafcass is added to the child’s electronic record, the IRO Group Manager informed and she in turn lets the IRO know and writes to the Guardian to tell them the name of the IRO and their contact details. One of the positive outcomes from the joint IRO and Guardian workshops that have been put on over the last two years has been a better relationship between the two professionals as a result of not just talking on the phone or through emails but getting to know and working together during the workshops and the recent in-person conference. Once the connection is made Guardians are invited to children’s reviews and are sent copies of the decisions and letter from the meeting regardless of whether they have been able to attend. The end of proceedings letter from Guardians to IRO’s is also added to the child’s record and is usually accompanied or preceded by a telephone conversation for a smooth handover. IRO’s are also mindful of the need to add a record of their conversations or email exchanges held with Guardians during proceedings to the child’s electronic record.

# 20. What about training for IRO’s?

# Regular monthly one-to-one supervision with the Group Manager takes place where performance and practice issues form a standing item on the agenda. Discussions around well-being and individual development also takes place and IRO’s use the opportunity to either raise or update the Group Manager about concerns in relation to any of the children they are responsible for. Discussions on any resolutions that have been started since the last meeting or that are still open and unresolved also form part of the monthly agenda. IRO’s are conscious of the need to escalate – or take to the next level – if managers haven’t responded within the ten days as the Resolution Protocol says it should, and the Group Manager is now monitoring this so that they are either closed down or escalated at the right time so that IRO’s don’t add to any delays for children.

# Outside of supervision, IRO’s also regularly contact the Group Manager to talk through something that may has arisen, keep her informed about something raised in their one-to-one or in relation to one of the children they review, or for advice and consultation while respecting the IRO’s independence in making decisions in relation to care planning for children in care. The IRO team use team meetings for ‘business’ as well as to focus on practice development and learning and have scheduled meetings to the end of the year to either invite guests or to devote to an area of practice development. IRO’s share chairing the meetings on a rota basis with the Group Manager and are responsible for the agenda and making any arrangements needed for the meeting they are chairing.

# Alongside other managers, IRO’s are expected to complete the internal compulsory managers training modules, attend the monthly managers meeting, as well as the Safeguarding & Quality Assurance (SQA) monthly service meeting. IRO team meetings take place monthly (alternate fortnight to the SQA Service meeting) and it is compulsory for them to attend both. They also have the opportunity to attend in-house training courses, Learning Wednesday sessions and other learning events organised or promoted by the Learning Academy, such as seminars put on by Research in Practice and Messages from Research.

# Specific training for IRO’s is practically non-existent and the joint workshops for the IRO’s and Children’s Guardians in North East London has been very well received by all involved. Two workshops took place in 2020 and 2021 and the first in-person conference was held in April 2022 which the IRO’s attended and found them all very valuable. Through the London region of the National IRO’s Managers Partnership, a specially commissioned training course by a senior lecturer at Edgehill University on supporting effective IRO practice spread over four half-day modules will be taking place during June 2022 which all the IRO’s will be attending.

# Two IRO’s applied for and were successful in being selected for participating in a voluntary teaching programme at Goldsmith University for BA and MA students. Unfortunately, only one of the IRO’s was able to go ahead with the teaching as the second IRO had health issues which resulted in her having to take time out of work. She has since returned to work and has reapplied for this teaching programme.

# 21. What’s next for 2022/2023

# The IRO service is committed to playing it’s part in working to improve practice and the care experience of children in care as well as that of our care experienced young people in Tower Hamlets journey from good to outstanding. We are hopeful of having a more stable team for the coming year which will allow for more developmental work to take place within the team. In line with the Supporting Families Division vision for the coming year, all the IRO teams priorities will be underpinned with the aim of co-production.

# These are our priorities for the coming year:-

**Care Plans**

Completing the work on developing better quality care plans for children in partnership with others, ensuring that they are written with and to children, and that they routinely are given a copy before their review.

**Participation**

Strengthening the participation of children and parents in the reviewing process and establishing a system for regular feedback that can be evaluated to improve and inform our practice.

**Language and Child Directed Recording**

IRO’s are now routinely writing their records from reviews to children and have started doing the same with their midway monitoring, recording in case notes, and audits. Our priority for the coming year is for all IRO’s to consistently adopt this model of writing in children’s files and to work with social work teams and the Learning Academy for this to be a standard that all teams work to.

**Advocacy for Parents**

Work will continue to establish this project to improve the communication and relationship between those social workers and parents where it has become difficult so that their presence in their child’s life can be maintained and recognised.

**Co-Production, You Said - We Did, CLICC**

We have made great efforts this year to try and get children’s voices heard, in their meetings, the letters we write afterwards, and through our involvement with CLICC. We have made a start in getting a few young people’s feedback on the children’s version of the IRO Manager’s annual report and want to strengthen our involvement and reach with them during the coming year so that they can be involved with us in writing the next report as well as developing the way in which we work and communicate with them.

**2. Executive Summary**

**Better Together Framework and the six C’s**

**Pillar -** Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care

Mission 2: By 2027, we will see an increase in high-quality, stable and loving homes available for every child in care local to where they are from.

Mission 3: By 2027, we will strengthen and extend corporate parenting responsibilities towards children in care and care leavers across the public sector.

[Independent Review of Children’s Social Care headed by Josh McCallister](https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/news/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care/) published in May 2022 had a final report recommendation that:

*“Government should make care experience a protected characteristic” and “New legislation should be passed which broadens corporate parenting responsibilities across a wider set of public bodies and organisations*

**Protected Characteristic**

**Mark Riddell Peer Review**

**Good Practice points**

**What we are going to aspire to do better**

Transitions panel

Health

Permanency tracking for children over 14