

Independent Reviewing Officer annual report 2021/22

Executive Summary:

Walsall Council have statutory responsibility for overseeing and ratifying the care plans for Children and Young People in Care via the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officers. As a result, the service is duty bound to provide the Corporate Parenting Board with an annual report that outlines the activity of the service, the impact for children and recommendations for service improvement that will enhance young people's experiences.

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 reinforced and strengthened the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO), enabling more effective independent oversight and scrutiny of the child's case. It has ensured that the child is able to meaningfully participate in planning for their own care and that the care plan that the local authority prepares for them is based on a thorough assessment of the individual child's needs.

Reason for bringing to the Corporate Parenting Board:

To provide the Corporate Parenting Board with an overview of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officers in 2021-22.

Recommendations:

That the board notes the Independent Reviewing Officer annual report.

Background papers:

None

Corporate Parenting Pledges

The Walsall Promise for all Children in Care and Care Leavers

Resource and legal considerations:

The relevant legislation is contained within the body of the report. There are no direct legal implications arising from the report.

Council Corporate Plan Priorities:

- Children have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.
- People have increased independence, improved health and can positively contribute to their communities.

Citizen impact:

The services and the improvements play a key role in the quality of life and outcomes for the children, young people and families of Walsall. The Council and its partners as Corporate Parents make critical contributions to improve outcomes.

Environmental impact:

There are no direct implications arising from this report

Performance management:

Corporate Parenting Board ensures everyone works together to fulfil the corporate parenting role and to hold each other to account for making this happen.

- It acts as the visible organisational champion for looked after children and young people and care leavers, promoting their rights, entitlements and aspirations;
- The mobilisation and optimum use of resources available to get the best chance of success for children in care and to support care leavers to positively move on to live independently

Reducing inequalities:

The Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022/2025 sets out the response to secure improvements in the equality of services, which, when achieved will have a positive impact on our most vulnerable children, young people and families. By being effective Corporate Parents for Children in Care and Care Leavers, we collectively seek to redress the disadvantage that looked after children and care leavers face.

Consultation:

The CICC is one of the key forums through which services for children in care and care leavers seek to consult on service delivery and where children and young people are able to shape and influence the parenting they receive at every level, the IRO service attend regularly and there is a direct line between the service and the Children's Champion.

Contact Officer:

Full Name – Jenny Cockcroft, Head of Service for Practice Quality and Improvement

Email: jenny.cockcroft@walsall.gov.uk

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The IRO Handbook (2010) is the statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review of children and young people in care. It states that the IRO Manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Board. It should also be available to the public on the Council website.
- 1.2 This report captures the performance for 2021/22 and the next steps of the IRO service for 2022/3. The report provides an evidence base for what is working well and where we need to develop and sets out our priorities for the coming year.

2.0 Context of the IRO Service

- 2.1 The responsibility of Local Authorities is to provide Children in our Care and Care Leavers the best possible experiences in life and support their hopes, wishes and aspirations as any good parent should.
- 2.2 The Children Act 1989 [amended 2004] and the Care Planning Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 specify the duties of the Local Authority to appoint an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) when a child first comes into the care of the Local Authority. The IRO should ensure that the Local Authority gives due consideration to any views expressed by the child and the IRO has a responsibility to monitor the Local Authority's performance of its functions in relation to the care planning for the child.
- 2.3 The regulations clearly specify circumstances when the Local Authority should consult with the IRO, for example, proposed change of placement, change of education plan, or serious incident. They also specify the actions that the IRO must take if it is felt that the Local Authority is failing to comply with the regulations or is in breach of its duties to the child. The statutory duties of the IRO are to (section 25b (1), 1989 Act)
 - Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's care journey.
 - Participate in any review of the child
 - Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child are given due consideration
 - Perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations
- 2.4 The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs, ensure those actions in the care plan are consistent with the LA legal responsibilities towards the child. There are two clear and separate aspects of the function of the IRO.
 - Chairing the child's review meeting and monitoring the child's care journey on an ongoing basis.

- The monitoring function should include identifying any areas of poor practice or drift and delay in care planning that impacts directly on the child and should be appropriately escalated. Equally the IRO should also recognise and celebrate good practice that has positively impacted on the child's care experience.

2.5 All children and young people in care, including children who are in an adoptive placement prior to an adoption order, are covered by the legislation. This applies to all children who are the subject of a Care Order (under section 31 of the Children Act 1989), or who are voluntarily accommodated for a period of more than 24 hours (section 20 of the Children Act 1989), including in Short Break Care, or who are placed for adoption under the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Also, those who are in care because they are remanded by the court to local authority accommodation. These young people require an allocated IRO and reviews in their place of custody.

2.6 To summarise, in the words of children consulted by the former Children's Rights Director for England, the role of the IRO is:

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

3.0 Workforce & Management

3.1 The IRO service in Walsall Council is situated in the Safeguarding and Review Service, alongside the Workforce Development team. In Walsall Council the IRO hold a dual role and also have the responsibility of Child Protection Chair.

3.2 The Group Manager for the service Debra Sylvester retired in February 2022. The role was been successfully appointed to by an internal candidate Jenny Cockcroft and commenced in this role in June 2022. The expectations and remit of the role have been reviewed and the post is now titled Group Manager for Quality and Practice. This role will continue to focus on the development of the safeguarding and review service. However, they will also now be the professional lead for the quality of practice framework in Children's Social Care and responsible for identified key areas of audit and learning. They will also be the lead for participation in children's social care. The line management of the IROs is shared between the Group Manager and the Principal Independent Reviewing Officer. The Service is under the overall direct management from the Principal Social Worker and Head of Service Safeguarding and Review Antony Schaffarczyk.

3.3 The IRO Service is fully staffed. (12 FTE and 1 PT 0.8). Our IRO's bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the service, some have been Team or Service Managers previously, all are experienced social work practitioners, some of our service have been IROs for a number of years, the longest standing member of our team has been with the service for over 19 years.

3.4 Each IRO receives monthly supervision with their line manager, either the Group Manager for Quality of Practice or the Principal Social Worker. In addition to

supervision there are a number of opportunities for sharing information and practice development in the service:

Weekly Team Meetings: Chaired by the IROs these are an opportunity to share information, discuss service developments, share learning from training and network with other services. It has been agreed that once a month these will not include the Group Manager and Principle IRO to create a peer reflection space.

Monthly seminar: Each seminar has a different focus led by a member of the service and create a space for reflection and learning, over the last few months these have included anti-racist practice and sexual abuse.

Service Development Days: These provide an opportunity to spend a day focused on a specific area of practice that we want to promote and develop.

Regional Meetings: All IROs are invited to the regional training meetings with other IROs to share practice. One of our IRO's is the co-chair of the West Midlands regional IRO forum. The Group Manager and Principal IRO attend the regional IRO managers meeting which enables us to be part of the sharing of best practice and learning from our regional colleagues.

4.0 Workload

- 4.1 In Walsall the IRO's hold a joint responsibility for chairing child protection conferences alongside their responsibilities as an Independent Reviewing Officer. We see this as a real strength as it offers consistency for families when children sadly are unable to remain living with their families and move from the child protection arena into the care of the Local Authority. Typically we ensure that brothers and sisters are allocated the same IRO regardless of whether they reside together to ensure a consistent approach which considers the holistic needs of the family.
- 4.2 The IRO Handbook recommends that workloads for IROs need to be between 50 and 70. Currently our IRO's have an average of 51 children in our care allocated to them in their role as IRO and an average of 15 children open on child protection plans. Therefore currently the average total number of children allocated at the time of writing this report is 66 children per chair which is well within expected workload and provides them with the capacity to provide a good quality service to our children in care.

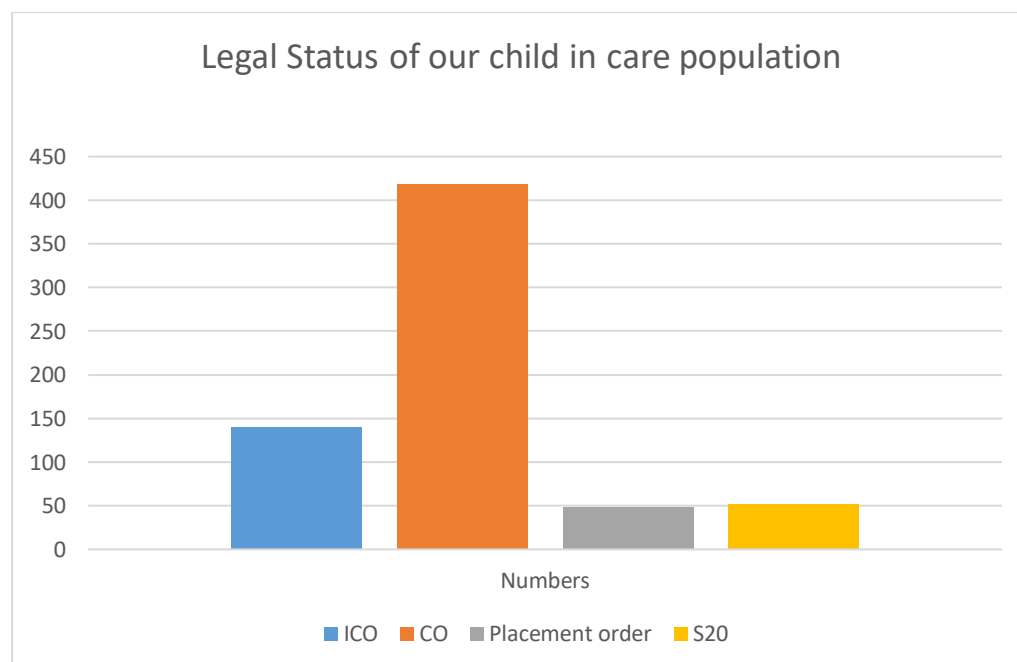
5.0 Considerations Post Covid

- 5.1 During the height of the pandemic in 2020 we moved to a much greater use of virtual approach to meetings and visits in order to safeguard the health of our children in care and workforce, however, throughout this period where there was a need to hold face to face meetings these were completed. In the earlier period of 2021 as we emerged from the restrictions there was a gradual shift back to face to face meetings, initially with appropriate safeguards such as social distancing in place and use of hybrid meetings with some professionals attending virtually.

- 5.2 As a service we are trying to capitalise on the benefits of the virtual way of working which came about as a result of Covid whilst recognising the importance and value of working with families in person. During the latter part of 2021 and in to 2022 we moved back to our primary offer being face to face meetings, whilst still offering the opportunity for virtual or hybrid child in care reviews. The expectation is that the meeting should be held in person unless there is a child/family led reason for this not to happen. The determination for the format for the review is done in consultation with the child or young person and there should be a clear child centred rationale if the decision is made to hold the review virtually. We know from some of our older young people in care for example, that they can prefer to have the meetings virtually as it can feel less intimidating or anxiety provoking for them, in circumstances such as this we will continue to support this way of working. However, the IRO will also typically visit the child in person prior to the review so that they are still maintaining the in person connection. Because of the way IRO visits are currently recorded we are unable to track this activity, we are working with MOSAIC to address this and building a process and hope to be able to report on this positive activity next year. This is current reviewed via supervision and dip sample audit activity.

6.0 Overview of our children in care population

- 6.1 As of March 2022 there were 661 children who were in the care of the local authority, this is a decrease from 2020 and 2021. In the table below you can see the legal status of the population of the children in our care.



- 6.2 The number of child in our care reviews held at end of March 2022 was 1789 which is on average 137 reviews per IRO this year, this figure is a reduction from 2020/21 but is reflects the number held in 2019/20 and previous years. It is possible that the impact of covid in 2020/21 meant there was an increase in the number of additional reviews required.

7.0 Key Performance indicators

7.1 Timeliness of child in our care reviews

7.2 The local authority is required to carry out review meetings in line with timings specified in the Regulations [regulation33]:

- the first review of a child's case within 20 working days of the date on which the child becomes looked after (or has a move to a new home);
- the second review no more than three months after the first;
- the third and subsequent reviews no more than six months after the previous one;
- a review whenever the IRO directs; and
- a review in all other circumstances as specified in the regulations

7.3 The timeliness of our child in care reviews is a key indicator, we know that this enables effective and timely care planning for our children and young people. In 2022 91% of our child in care reviews were held in timescale. In understanding this figure, we know some of this was due to recording, the majority of other delays were due to sickness of the social worker or IRO which created slight delay in meeting being held. We will expect to see an improvement in this in 2022/23 as work has been done with the IRO in terms of recording of their reviews to ensure they reflect timeliness.

7.5 It is an expectation that the IROs speak with the social worker 15 days before the meeting to plan the review and also ensure there are not any barriers to the completion of the required reports to inform the decision making. Where necessary this is escalated with the management team and dispute resolution utilised.

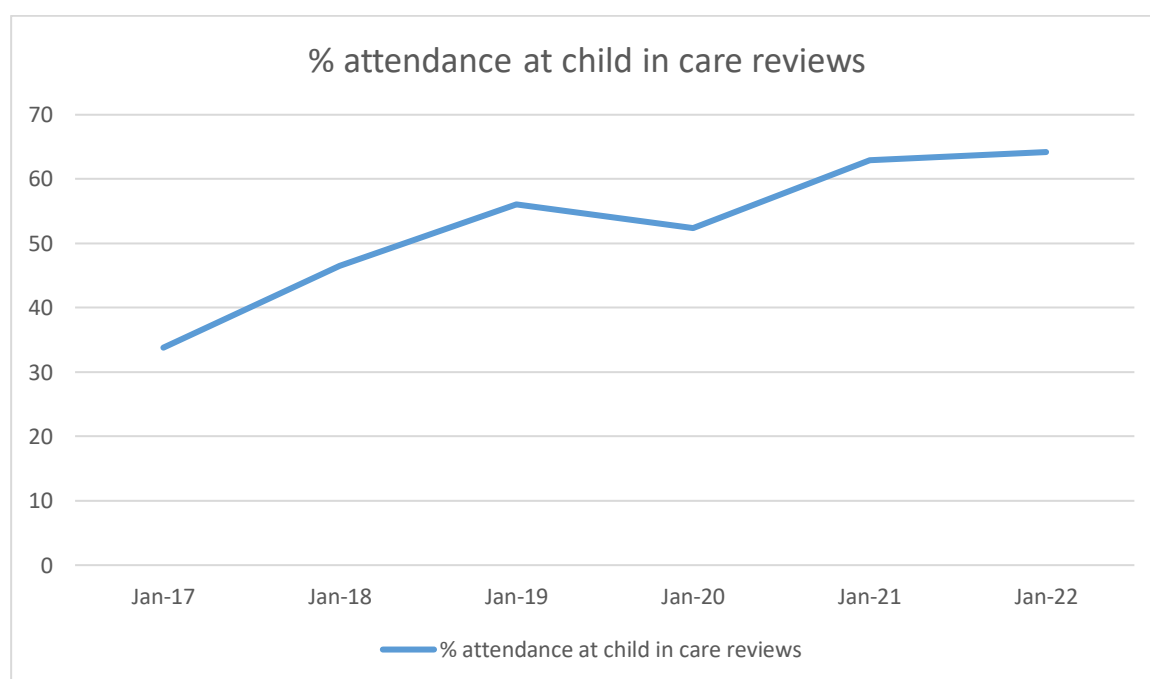
7.5 Participation in reviews

7.6 The involvement of children in their own reviews is regarded as an essential part of the process. *A key task for the IRO will be to ensure that the review processes, and particularly review meetings, remain child and family focused* (IRO Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002). The IRO plays a key role in ensuring the child can make a meaningful contribution to their review, either by attendance in person, by having someone else convey their views or making a written contribution to their meeting.

7.7 In 2021/2022 **98.5%** of all our children contributed to their children in care reviews, this has remained consistent since 2020, but this does include contributions via the social worker, and we are driving a move from this to more direct participation of children. Prior to 2020, this was an area for development for the service, with figures showing 45% of children aged five and over attending their reviews in 2018, rising to 55% in 2019. An improvement to over 60% in the year up to March 2021 and 64% in March 2022 was achieved through practice improvement work within the IRO service, with worker-level data discussed in supervision and a focus at service development days on developing more child-focused children in care reviews. The focus of service development now is to increase children's attendance at their meeting to 75%.

- 7.8 As a service we recognise the importance and value of children not just contributing but physically attending these meetings. Research tells us that children's active participation in decisions about their lives helps improve their self-esteem and confidence and it can help to counter feelings of powerlessness. Ultimately they are the experts in their own life and should be central to the decisions made for and about them.
- 7.9 In financial year 2021-22 64% of children in our care attended their review which is in line with attendance figures in 2020/21 and an increase from previous years. It is likely that this increase in attendance is due to the introduction of new virtual ways of working during Covid alongside a continued service drive to improve attendance for children in care at their reviews. We know that some young people have a strong preference for meeting virtually, it can feel less intimidating and more comfortable for them. For some young people this will be a gateway into us moving towards returning to face to face meetings and for others this may be their continued preference. We know that meeting in person can better help to build connections and relationships and that can be more difficult when held virtually. We need to continue to capitalize on this virtual way of working where it is beneficial for our children and families whilst not losing the benefits of working with children and young people face to face.

Attendance at CIC reviews (children aged 5 and over) 2017-2022.



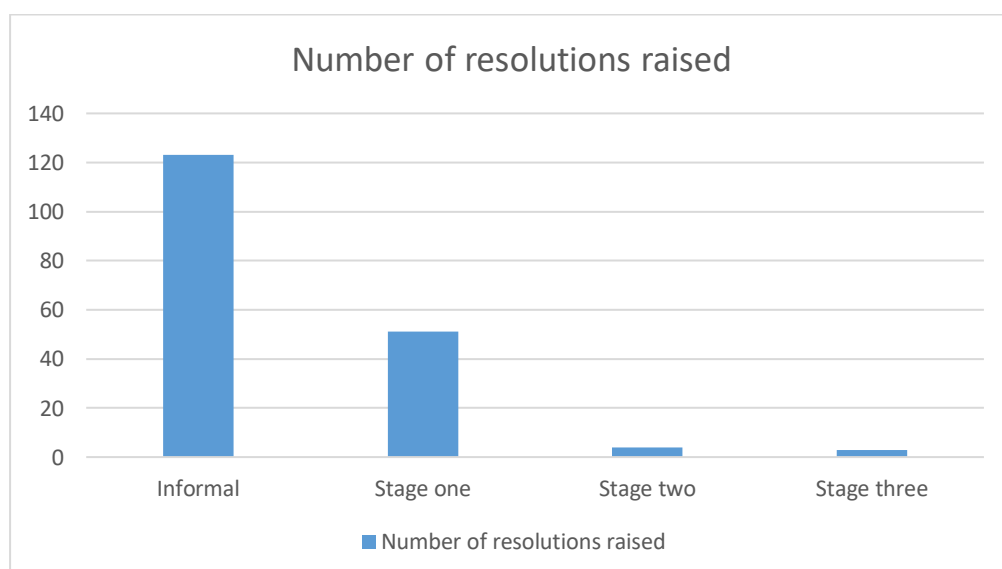
- 7.10 We recognise that this is an area of development for us as a service and will be one of the key priorities for the new group manager to address when they start in post. As previously stated the newly appointed Group manager will now have responsibility to lead on the participation and co-production of our children and young people with a social worker including those in our care. We recognise that the effective engagement

and participation of children in their reviews is not something owned solely by the Safeguarding and Review service and requires development across the services. One of the key priorities for this year will be the development and implementation of a participation and co-production plan for all children with a social worker. As part of this we will think with our children and young people in our care about their priorities and consider what is working well and what they want us to develop. We will also consider the learning drawn from our quality of practice activity to inform this planning.

- 7.13 A noted area of strength for the service is the quality of the written record of the reviews to the children in our care, these are written to the child in a way that are child focused and sensitive. Ofsted commented that the IRO's records *"are of high quality, child-focused and sensitive"*. As a service we are committed to embedding 'language that cares' in our practice. By this we mean avoidance of language that can stigmatise or obfuscate meaning (for example use of jargon) and using language that is easy to understand by children and families and this will continue to remain a priority for us a service area.

8.0 Scrutiny and Good Practice recognition

- 8.1 A key role of the Independent Reviewing Officer is to quality assure, scrutinise and the work of the Local Authority. We have a clear dispute resolution policy in Walsall, with the use of informal, Stage 1, 2 and 3 resolutions available to the IRO depending upon the significance of the concern. Stage one resolutions are addressed by team manager, stage two resolutions are addressed by group manager and stage three resolutions by head of service.
- 8.2 In 2021/22 the IRO service raised 181 dispute resolutions regarding children in our care. The chart below demonstrates the numbers of resolutions opened at the different stages, it is positively noted that the majority of issues are resolved at an earlier point, with only one child requiring escalation to stage 3 this year. This is in line with the number of escalations raised in 2020/21.



8.3 The themes for the resolutions have been grouped into key findings below:

- Drift and delay – 39
- No care or pathway plan – 12
- Child not seen/not seen at home – 22
- No SDQ/HA or PEP – 9
- Risks not effectively enough addressed – 8
- Care plan presented on the day – 13
- Assessments to progress permanency plan not completed - 18
- Lack of appropriate family contact – 3
- Experiences of child not recorded – 7
- No permanency plan – 5
- No placement plan – 3
- No life-story work - 4
- Other – 38

8.4 What we can see from the findings is that almost a third of our resolutions are related to issues that would affect the timely permanency planning and decision making for children. It is proposed that the use of resolutions will be reviewed by the new Group Manager when in post and they will complete dip sample activity to understand the effectiveness and how we can continue to progress in this area.

8.5 Following a child in care review all IROs will RAG rate the current care plan. The overall percentage of children with a RAG rating of green in 2021/22 was 81% of children in care with the 18% of children's care plans being rated as amber following the review and 1% rated as red.

8.6 The Principal IRO completes reports reviewing the RAG ratings. These were at monthly intervals during the period covered by this report, more recently they have been completed quarterly. The RAG reports consider aspects of Care Planning including progress with key recommendations, liaison with partner agencies and completion of plans and assessments, with a focus on whether the process is meeting the child's needs and whether this is drift and delay.

8.8 A key issue emerging over the period has been the robustness of RAG ratings. With over 80% rated as Green it is likely that IROs were not effectively reflecting issues of drift and delay. Audit activity indicated that there were issues with the driving of permanence plans, this did not align with the RAG ratings. To address this, there have been discussions in supervision and at a service development day on applying a robust approach to the completion of the RAG rating reports. The need for a clear focus on the wider care planning process, as well as the Child in Care Review, has been established. This will remain an area of focus and development for the service in 2022/23 and there is

8.10 The RAG reports showed consistent progress in terms of engaging parents in the child in care review process. 68% of parents were consulted/attended their child's Review during the period, a significant increase on previous years. This reflects a drive in the service to develop and maintain the connections between children and care and their families.

- 8.11 It will be important that moving forward work is completed with the IRO service to ensure that the RAG ratings are accurately reflecting the practice being observed and they are being used consistently and robustly.
- 8.12 Improving the scrutiny of social work practice by the IRO service will be a key area of focus and development for the service in 2022/23. The work completed in terms of the RAG reports has identified a need for a stronger focus on these quality assurance aspects of the role. Work is already underway with the Group Manager and Principal IRO undertaking a range of activity to understand the services strengths and areas for development in this area and deliver a development plan to drive this forward and this can be reported on in the next annual report.
- 8.13 Midway reviews are an important part of the IRO role, they allow the IRO to keep a clear overview of practice across the review period and pick up and address any potential issues of drift and delay in terms of the progression of the care plan at an early point. What we know is that when midway reviews are completed effectively these help to drive meaningful planning for the child, however, at present they are not always consistently being utilised. Within this year work has been completed during supervision and through team meetings to help drive improvements. Again the Group Manager and Principal IRO are currently undertaking activity to understand the current effectiveness around the use of Midway reviews and how this can be improved to support more effective quality assurance; this will remain an area of focus for the service in 2022/23.
- 8.14 The IROs contribute to quality of practice activity by regularly undertaking audit activity. There are regular discussions about areas of quality of practice within team meeting and service development days and themes and trends identified are shared across the system. This is an area we will seek to develop and make more systematic over 2022/23 with the Group Manager and Principal Independent Reviewing Officer attending interface meetings with other managers across the system routinely. The IRO's are very alert to seeking out best practice and will routinely share recognition of this which is then shared across the services within the Weekly Brief.

9.0 Feedback

- 9.1 During Covid the collection of feedback forms from children, family and professionals at child in care reviews stopped. There is an identified need for these to be developed in partnership with our children in council to help inform our understanding of our practice and areas for development.
- 10.2 It is pertinent to draw attention to the findings in relation to the IRO service in our recent OFSTED inspection of Children Services, October 2021. They found that:

Children's wishes are prioritised and taken into consideration when decisions are made about care planning. Children are supported to attend and participate in their review meetings. Independent reviewing officers' (IROs) recording of children's reviews are written directly to the child. These records are of high quality, child-focused and sensitive. IROs ensure that children have a clear understanding of why decisions are made. Due consideration is given to different care planning options and the rationale for the preferred plan for children is clearly recorded. IROs ensure that

the vast majority of children's permanence plans are appropriately in place by the second review.

10.3 During the year the IROs have received a number of compliments for their practice, some examples are detailed below:

- *I wanted to share good practice of X who has shown her dedication as an IRO. It is always a pleasure to work X as her passion for the children she supports is always evident.*
- *In a nutshell, to start with I was really impressed by her introduction and explanation about what the meeting was about and then throughout the meeting how calm, restorative and child focussed she was throughout.*
- *The IRO was kind, empathetic and patient and allowed mother the time she needed to be in a place to be able to be fully present in the meeting. I wanted to share my praise for her practice to hold a meeting that was truly centred on the family's needs – what a fabulous IRO.*

11.0 Priorities 2022/23

11.1 During this report we have considered some of the proposed areas for focus for the service in 2022/23. In summary the identified key priorities are

- To develop a participation action plan which will support the increased engagement of children in care (aged 5 and over) attending their reviews.
- To continue to improve the quality of care plans to ensure they are consistently SMART, clear and concrete.
- To review the current practice in terms of scrutiny by IROs on the care and permanency planning through midway reviews, robust care planning, RAG rating and use of resolutions. To implement development plan to help the continued improvement in this area.
- To develop the use of feedback forms for children, carers, families and professionals.
- To support the service to move to a more appropriate office space which is more child and family centred and also encourages better joint working with social work practitioners.
- To ensure all IROs have completed training in relation to motivational interviewing and to undertake service day specifically considering how a relational approach is embedded in meetings with our children and families.

12.0 Conclusion

12.1 In conclusion, this report has highlighted the work of the IROs in Walsall Council for the period of April 2021 to March 2022. The information in this report evidences the work of the service and how it is focussed on improving outcomes for the children and young people in our care that we support. It also identifies a number of areas where we seek to continue to develop our practice and our priorities regarding this for 2022/23.