

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 their care. It states that the IRO Manager should be responsible for producing 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 Annual IRO report provides quantitative and qualitative data relating to the IRO Service within Walsall during the period 1st April 22 to 31st March 2023, as required by statutory guidance. The report captures performance between these dates and next steps for the IRO service across 2023/24. The report provides an evidence base in terms of describing an established and quality service which continues to support Walsall Children's Services and is key in providing good outcomes for children and young people who are looked after in Walsall. The report sets out where we need to develop and 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 children in care and care leavers.
 - 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.

In doing this, the IRO must:

- promote the voice of the child.
- ensure there is an up-to-date, effective plan for the child(ren), based on a detailed, informed assessment.
- identify any gaps in the assessment process or provision of service.
- make sure the child understands that they are entitled to an advocate and how they could be helped by one.
- prevent any 'drift' in care planning and the delivery of services.

- monitor the activity of the Local Authority as a corporate parent, ensuring care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings.

2.4 IRO's make an important contribution to the goal of improving outcomes for children in care. Their primary focus is to quality assure the care planning process for each child or young person, to identify any poor practice and any drift and/or delay that impacts directly on the child and which should be escalated appropriately. 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.

3.0 Workforce & Management

3.1 The IRO service in Walsall Council is situated in the Safeguarding and Review Service. Those employed by Walsall Council hold a dual role both undertaking the duties of IRO and having the responsibility of Child Protection Chair.

3.2 Management capacity in the IRO Service includes Head of Service, Group Manager for Quality of Practice and Principal IRO. The Principal Independent Reviewing Officer Michael Morris retired from the service in August 23. The role has been successfully appointed to by an external candidate who will join the service in November 23. The Group Manager for the service Jenny Cockcroft was appointed as Interim Head of Service in April 23, and Donna Green has been appointed as Interim Group Manager for Quality of Practice in May 23. The expectations and remit of the role of Group Manager will continue to focus on the development of the safeguarding and review service. However, they are also the professional lead for the quality of practice framework in Children's Social Care and responsible for identified key areas of audit and learning. 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 of the Interim Head of Service Safeguarding and Review, Jenny Cockcroft.

3.3 The IRO Service is fully staffed. (12 FTE and 1 PT 0.8). Of the 13 IRO's we have in the service 12 are permanent, with the 1 agency IRO (covering maternity) now also taking a permanent position, giving us a fully permanent team for 2024. Overall, the workforce is stable with recruitment being successful and staff retention is excellent. 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 have previously undertaken

roles within Walsall in different service areas, and some have been IROs for several years, with the longest standing member of our team being in the service for over 20 years.

- 3.4 Each IRO receives monthly supervision with their line manager, with either the Group Manager for Quality of Practice or the Principal Social Worker. In addition to supervision there are several other opportunities for sharing information and practice development within the service:

Fortnightly 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 these meetings will alternate between virtual and face to face to ensure that we continue to connect as a team. The Group Manager and/or Principal IRO also attend these meetings.

Monthly seminar: Each seminar has a different focus, led by a member of the service, and creates a space for reflection and learning, over the last few months these have focused on family time arrangements, assessments, family goals leading to SMART plans.

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.

- 3.5 We recognise the experience and skills that our IRO's bring, and some have had the opportunity to share their knowledge and assist or deliver training to Social Workers around Motivational Interviewing, Child Sexual Abuse, language that cares and writing to the child, LADO procedures and introduction to child protection as part of induction.

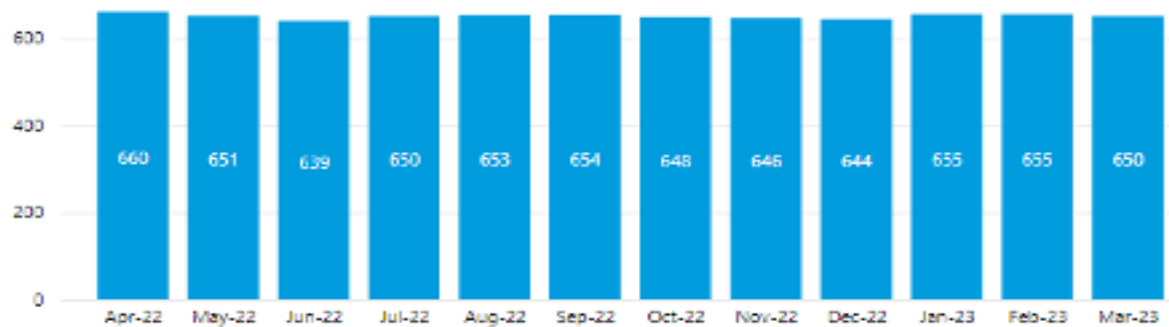
4.0 Workload

- 4.1 In Walsall the IRO's hold joint responsibility for chairing Child Protection Conferences alongside their responsibilities as 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.
- 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 17 children open on child protection plans. Therefore, currently the average total number of children allocated at the time of writing this report is 68 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 Overview of our children in care population

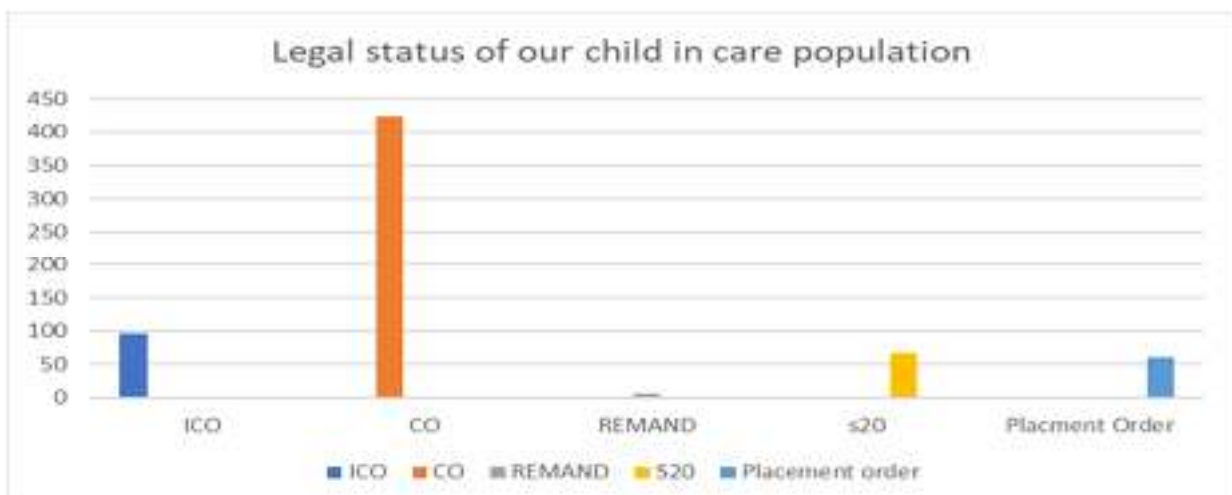
5.1 As of March 2023 there were 650 children who were in the care of the local authority, this is a slight decrease from years 2022 and 2021.

Children Looked After, by Month/Year (#)



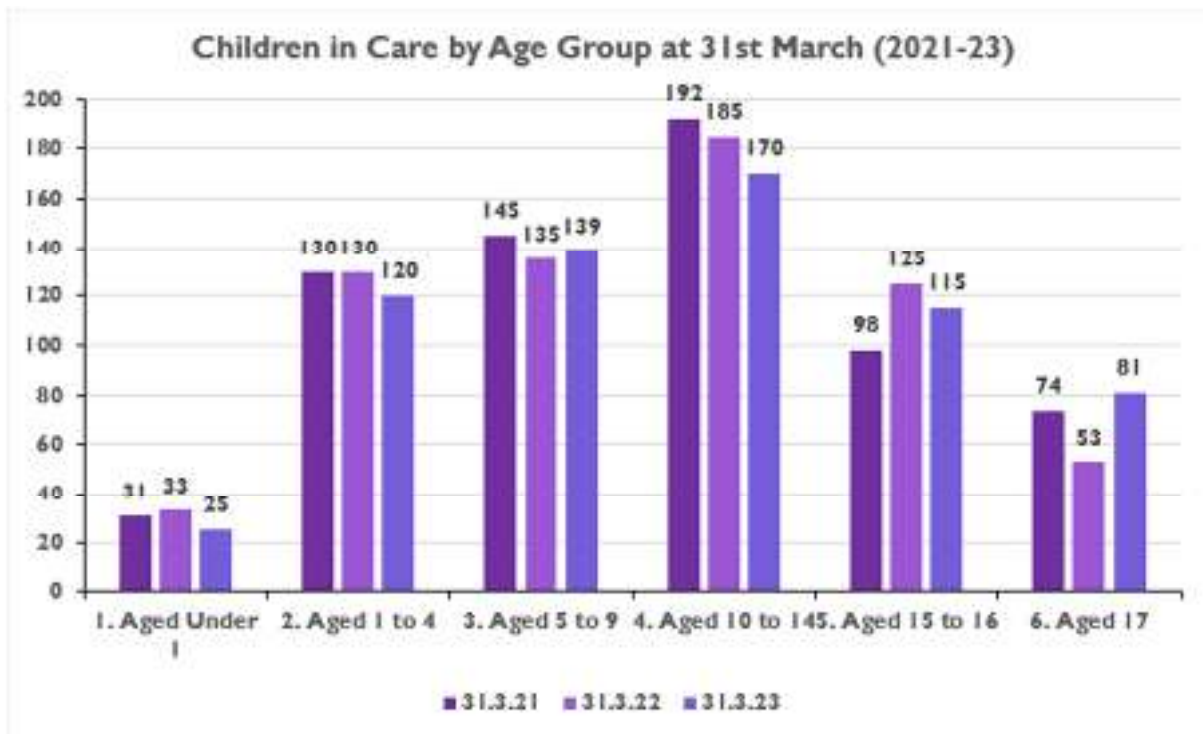
5.2 As of 31st March 2023, the rate of Children in Care in Walsall was 95 per 10,000 children, this figure has seen a decrease from 96.8 per 10,000 children in 2022 and 97.1 per 10,000 children in 2021.

5.3 In the table below you can see the legal status of the population of the children in our care as of 31st March 23. Those subject to full care order (426), ICO (94) S20 (72), Placement Order (65) Remand (12) with 19 ceasing care in the month of March 23.

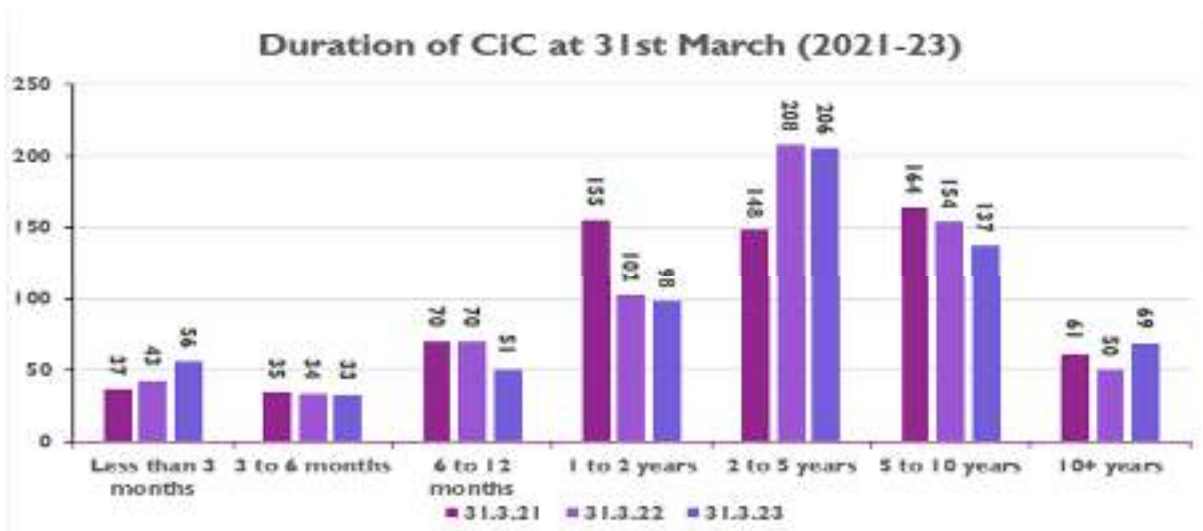


5.4 There continues to be more boys than girls in the children in care population with 52.7% boys compared to 47.8 % girls.

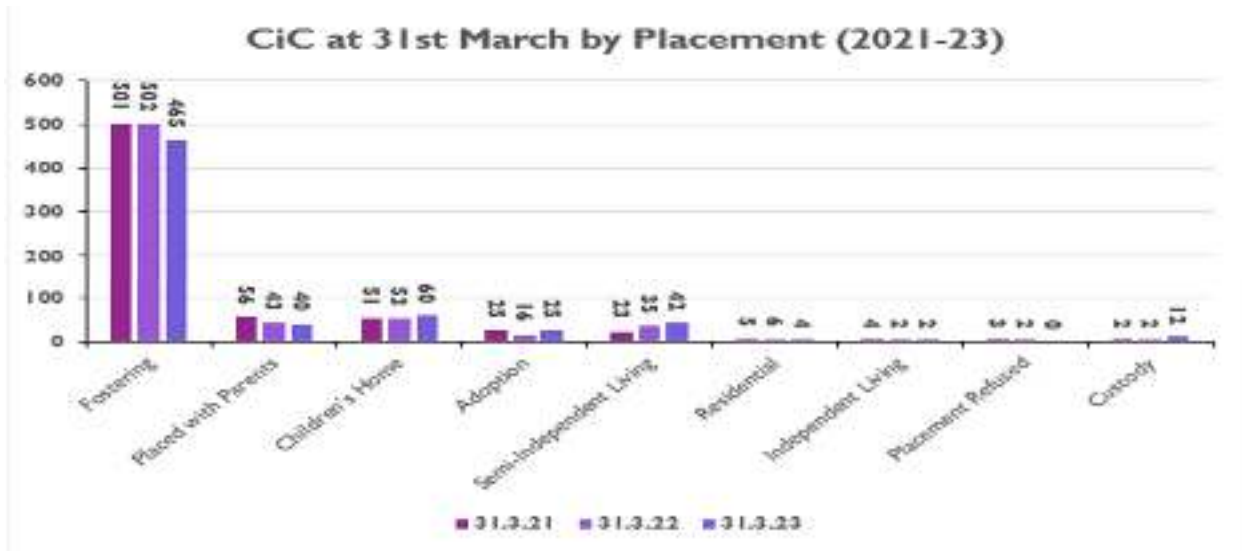
5.5 In the table below are the age groups of children in our care as at 31st March for 2021, 2022 & 2023. These figures are variable over the last 3 years and quite consistent.



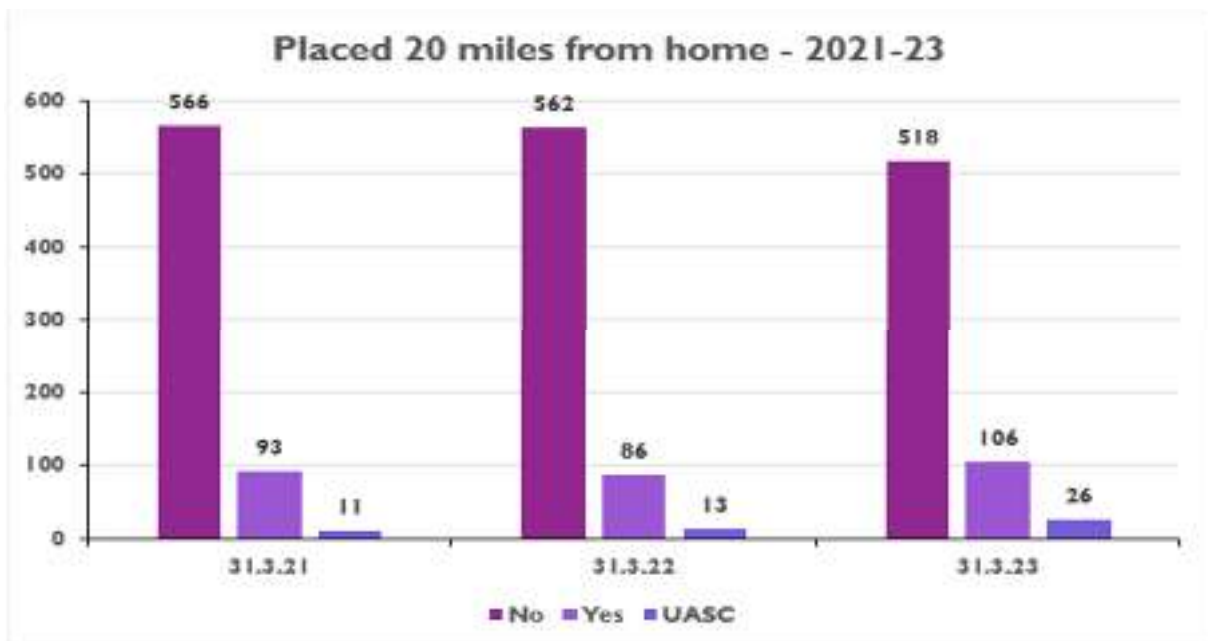
5.6 In the table below is the period that children remain in our care against the previous 2 years-2020-2021. There is an increase in terms of those leaving care in under 3 months which may indicate that support is utilised at an earlier stage in terms of reunification work.



5.7 The table below give details of the types of homes in which our children in care live and gives a comparison over the previous 2 years. We see a reduction in those living in a foster placement and those placed with parents under a care order. But we see increases in those living in a children’s home, semi-independent living, those to be adopted and young people who are remanded.



5.8 The table below details children in our care placed 20+ miles away from home as at 31st March for 2021, 2022 & 2023. We have seen a slight decrease in those living within 20 miles of home, but this may be in line with the lower numbers of children in our care.



5.9 The number of children in our care reviews held at the end of March 2023 was 1782 which is on average 137 reviews per IRO this year, this figure is almost identical to those in 2022, but a reduction from those figures in 2020/21.

6.0 Key Performance indicators

Timeliness of child in our care reviews

6.1 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

6.2 The timeliness of our child in care reviews are a key performance indicator, we know this enables effective and timely care planning for our children and young people. In the period 2022-23 considered in this report 94.7% (1687) of our child in care reviews were held in timescale. This is an increase from last year which stood at 91%. The 5.3% of those out of timescale were due to sickness of the Social Worker or IRO which created a slight delay. We have also needed to address some late notifications of new admissions to care which has influenced the timeliness.

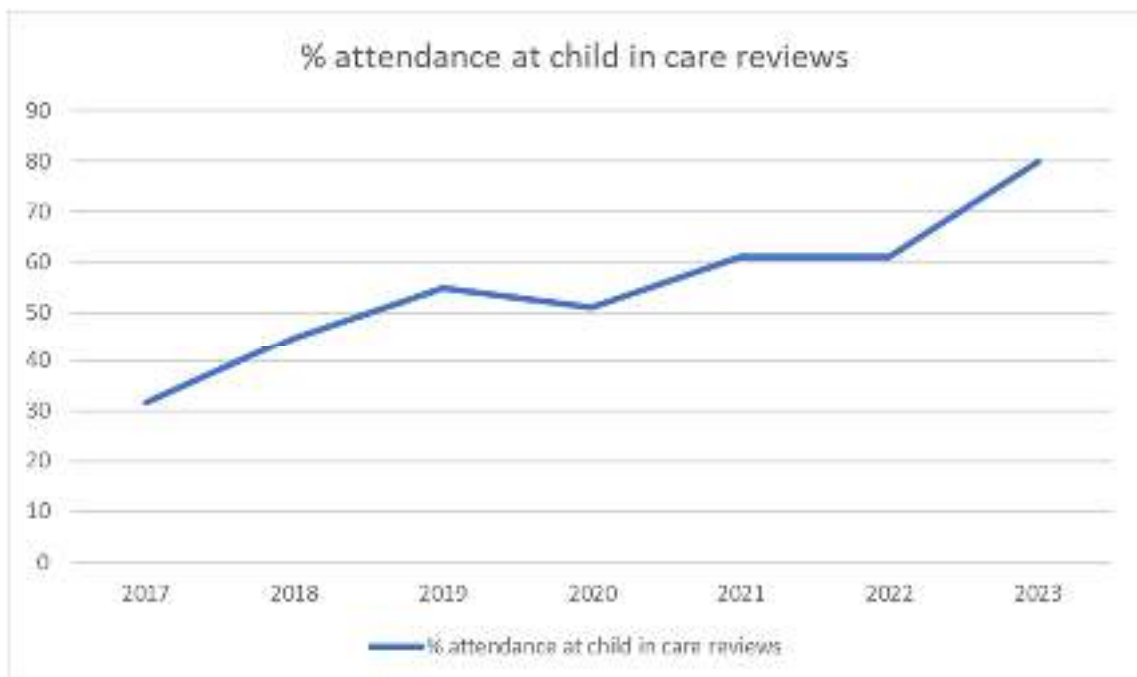
6.3 It is an expectation that the IROs speak with the social worker 15 days before the meeting to plan the review and ensure there are not any barriers to the completion of the required reports to inform the decision making. Where necessary this is escalated with the management team and dispute resolution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

6.4 Participation in reviews

6.5 The involvement of children in their own reviews is regarded as an essential part of the process. A primary objective of the IRO is to ensure children can make a meaningful contribution to their review and are central to decisions made about them, ensuring their voice is evident and heard within their care plans. Participation may be either attendance in person, by having someone convey their views or by making a written contribution to their meeting. A key element in delivering this objective is by the measure of the young person's participation in the Statutory Review of their care plan and care arrangements. In 2022/23 almost 100% of all our children contributed to their child in care review in some way, this has

remained consistently high, following 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. 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. The focus of service development was to increase children's physical attendance at their meeting to 75%. In 2022/23 there were 80% that attended in person to share their views, of these 81.9% were over the age of 5 years. This is a positive increase from 61% in both 2021/22 and exceeds our expectation of the target set the previous year of 75% following development of the workforce.

Attendance at CIC reviews (children aged 5 and over) 2017-2023.

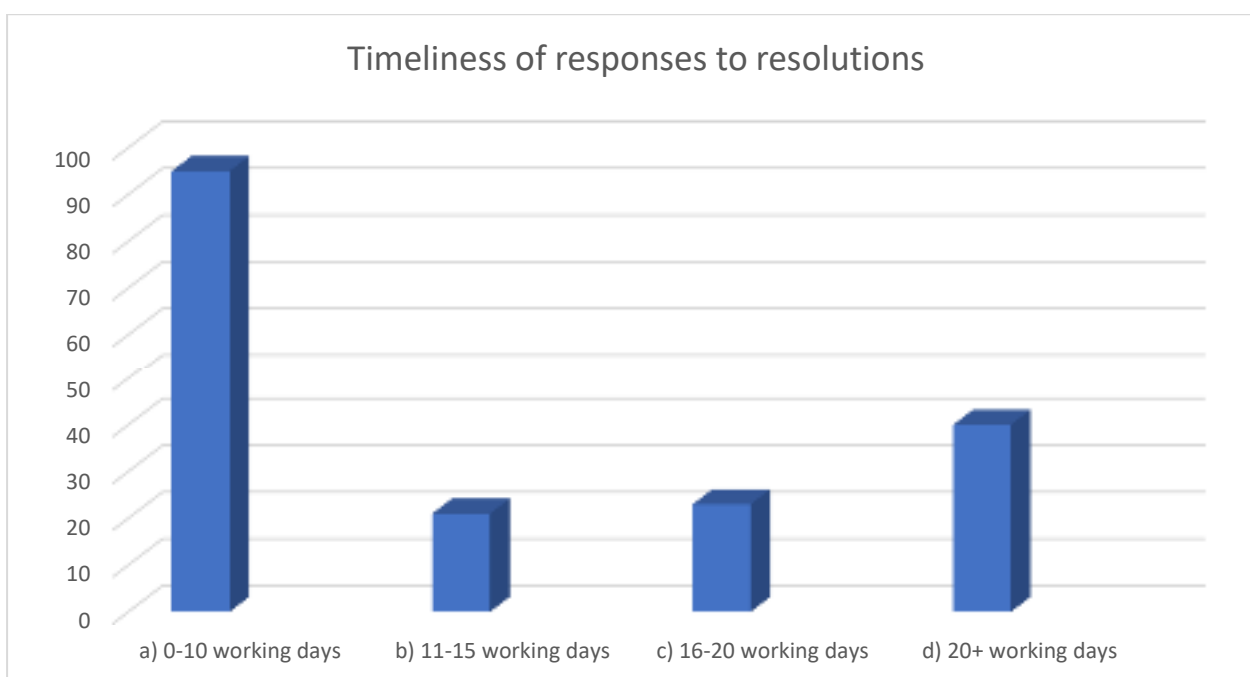
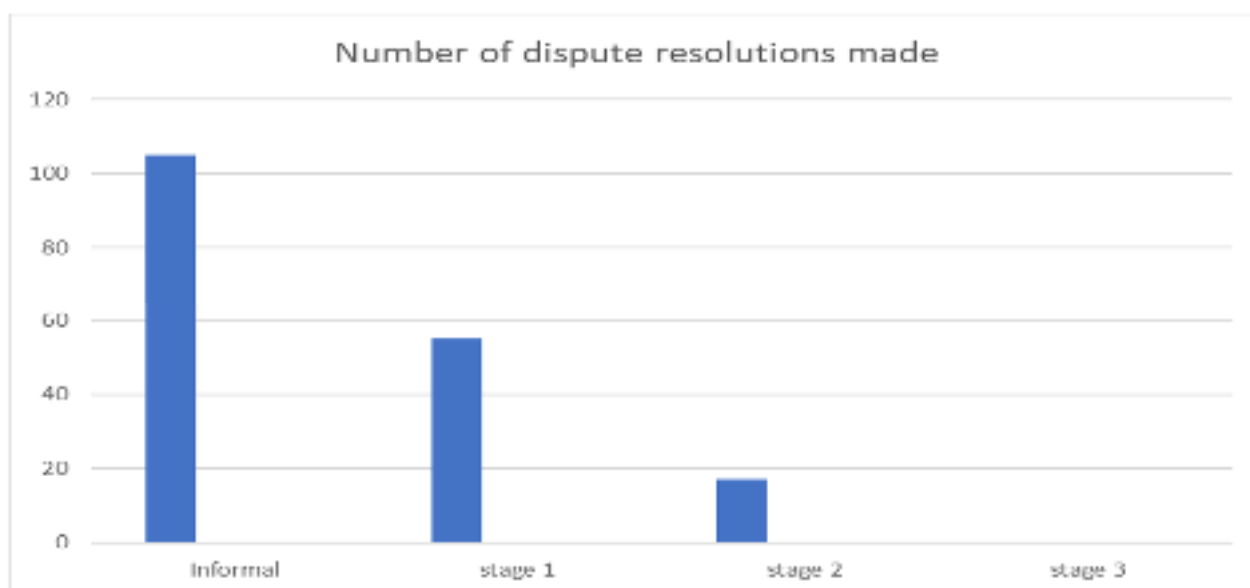


7.0 Scrutiny and Good Practice recognition

7.1 One of the pivotal roles of the IRO is to raise issues affecting a child's care with the Social Work service where, for example, performance issues, care planning and resources are affecting the child or young person's plans progressing and their needs being met. There is an established Resolution and Escalation policy in Walsall. IROs continue to seek resolutions informally to issues through collaborative dialogue with the Social Worker and Team Manager before and at each stage of the procedure, but if no resolution is achieved there are 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.

7.2 Between April 2022 to March 2023, there were 179 dispute resolutions regarding children in our care. This is not too dissimilar to year, 2022/21. The chart below demonstrates the numbers of resolutions opened at the different stages, it is positively noted that most issues are resolved at an earlier point, with no children requiring escalation to stage 3. It is further noted that the vast number of responses to resolutions are generally with 0-10 working days.



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

- Drift and delay (39)
- No care or pathway plan (28)
- Risks not addressed effectively (17)
- Child not seen/not seen at home (14)
- No health assessment (10)
- Care plan presented on the day (10)
- Lack of appropriate family contact (5)
- Assessments not completed to progress permanency plans (5)
- No PEP (3)
- Child not seen at home and bedroom not seen (2)
- Everyday life experience of child not reported (2)
- There is lack of engagement with those important to the child (2)
- No placement plan (1)
- No SDQ (1)
- Other (40)

7.4 We can see from the findings that there are various resolutions being raised. From audit activity and monitoring from the Group Manager and Head of Service it is clear resolutions are not being raised consistently where they should be. Discussions with IROs around this matter have heard that reasons resolutions are not raised is because of confidence in executing the challenge and the need to work on ways to help us do this more effectively. In considering this area, work has been undertaken with IROs in terms of writing the resolution to the child, this helps us remain focused on the child and allows us to understand the impact on the child rather than the challenge being felt to be directed at the practitioner. This will continue to be an area of focus within our priorities for 2023/24.

7.5 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 2022/23 was 79% of children in care with 19% of children's care plans being rated as amber following the review and 2% rated as red. There is work being undertaken in terms of revising the QA forms to ensure that they are being used effectively, these are currently being built and tested in the system.

7.6 The Principal IRO or Group Manager completes reports reviewing the RAG ratings. These are to be completed quarterly. The RAG reports considers 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 there is drift and delay.

7.7 A key issue that has continued to emerge over the period has been the robustness of RAG ratings. With nearly 80% being rated as Green it is likely that IROs are not effectively reflecting issues that would usually be raised via the dispute resolution process, as we believe these numbers are incorrect. To address this, there are continued discussions during

supervision and during team meetings in terms of applying a robust approach to the completion of the RAG rating reports. Again, work has been completed to rationalise this form and ensure it supports effective reporting and this is currently being finalised in mosaic. It will be important that moving forward continued 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.

- 7.8 Improving the scrutiny of Social Work practice by the IRO service will continue to be a key area of focus and development for the service in 2023/24. Work is already underway with the Group Manager and Principal IRO in undertaking a range of activity to understand the services strengths and areas for development, a development plan has been identified to drive this forward and this will be reported on in the next annual report.
- 7.8 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, they help to drive meaningful planning for the child, however, we know that staff are not consistently undertaking the midway reviews. Within this year work has been completed during supervision and through team meetings to help drive improvements. The Group Manager and Principal IRO continue to undertake activity in trying to understand the current effectiveness around the use of midway reviews and how this can be improved upon to support more effective quality assurance; there has been a revision of the QA forms, midway review and resolution forms to facilitate more effective quality assurance of practice, including development of QP practice resolutions to replace informal resolution, this currently remains in process. This will remain an area of focus for the service in 2023/24.
- 7.9 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 meetings and service development days and themes and trends identified are shared across the system. This is an area we have developed with the Group Manager attending interface meetings and offering quarterly quality of practice feedback sessions with other managers routinely across the system. The IRO's are very alert to seeking out best practice and will routinely share recognition of this which is then shared across the wider services within the Weekly Brief.

8 Feedback

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

"I've had my IRO for years and that has been good, and I have her number now because I didn't have it before." L says she will contact her IRO directly now if she needs any help or if there are any problems with her care plan or social worker. (child)

The IRO spent a long time at our home getting to know the children and our family life, she was very thorough, understanding and child centred. (foster carer)

The positive thing about my IRO was how she got me to share my views and moved things on, my IRO worked behind the scenes. My IRO supported me to remain in my SEN school which helped me as it was small school and has small classes. (child)

L stated her children's IRO, has been lovely. L added that she has been supported by the IRO throughout her children's journey. L shared that she has no concerns with how she's been spoken to or treated by the IRO. L stated that she has been treated with respect, if there is anything she disagrees with she will talk to the IRO. (Mother)

My IRO is amazing, I like her she listens to me and does her best and gives me 100%. (child)

9.0 Priorities 2023/24

9.1 During this report we have considered some of the proposed areas for focus for the service in 2023/24. In summary the identified key priorities are;

- To improve scrutiny – IRO's need to provide robust oversight and scrutiny and act as role of critical friend to ensure children are safeguarded and to prevent drift and delay. There will be further practice development regarding scrutiny and how to utilise the new QA forms effectively, and further support for IRO's in how to interrogate performance data to inform scrutiny of practice. To also include thematic audit of practice following implementation of new QA forms.
- To improve the use of RAG rating through implementation of new form. The IRO service to ensure that the RAG ratings are accurately reflecting the practice being observed and they are being used consistently and robustly.
- To implement use of new forms to support the continued development of the the Dispute Resolution process to ensure these are being used effectively to identify and challenge poor practice and help avoid drift and delay for the child.
- To continue to improve the quality-of-care plans ensuring that that plans are purposeful- IRO's have key part to play in supporting the development and implementation of purposeful plans. All IRO's to continue to have reviews observed to inform practice improvement. We will also revise the IRO induction programme to include a presentation around purposeful planning and signposting to the safeguarding network training on purposeful planning.
- Continued implementation of the Participation Plan to ensure continued high levels of engagement with children and parents/carers. Clear focus on ensuring the active involvement in decision making by children and their parents in reviews.

10.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, this report has highlighted the work of the IROs in Walsall Council for the period of April 2022 to March 2023. 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. There are also several areas where we seek to continue to develop our practice and our priorities for 2023/24.

Donna Green Nov 23