

Report to: Corporate Parenting Panel
Date: 26 July 2019
By: Director of Children's Services
Title of Report: Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report
Purpose of Report: To update the Corporate Parenting Panel on the contribution of the Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Looked After Children

RECOMMENDATION:

The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to comment on and note the report.

1. Background

1.1 This Annual IRO report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Services in East Sussex as required by statutory guidance.

2. Supporting information

2.1 The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report April 2018 – March 2019 is attached as Appendix 1.

3. Recommendations

3.1 The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to comment on and note the contents of the report.

STUART GALLIMORE
Director of Children's Services

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Local Members

All

Appendices

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report April 2019 – March 2019 is attached as Appendix 1

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report April 2018 – March 2019

This Annual IRO report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO Services in East Sussex as required by statutory guidance. The IRO Annual Report must be presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel.

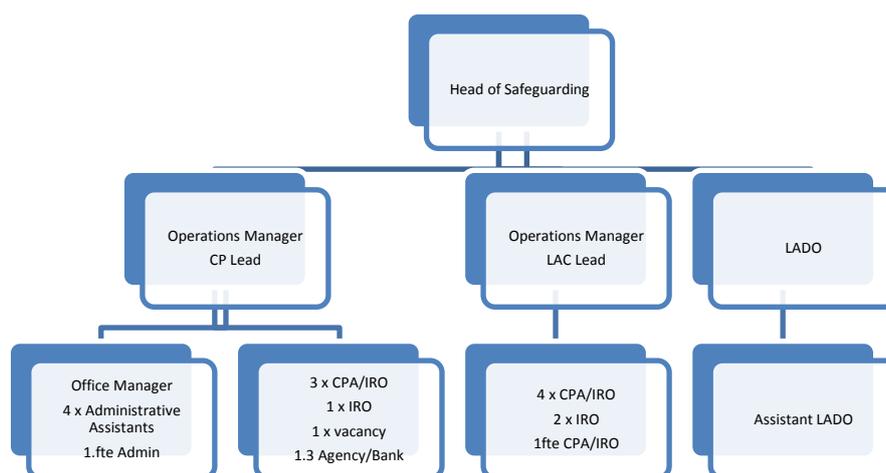
- 1.1 The Independent Reviewing Officers' service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for children who are looked after and for challenging drift and delay. The responsibility of the IRO has expanded from the management of the review process to include regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews.
- 1.2 The appointment of an IRO for each Looked After Child is a legal requirement under S118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. IROs quality assure the care planning process for all Looked After Children (LAC) and ensure that their wishes and feelings are understood.
- 1.3 **The statutory duties of the IRO are to:**
 - Monitor the Local Authority's performance of its functions in relation to the child's case.
 - Participate in any review of the child's case.
 - Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child are given due consideration by the appropriate authority.
 - Perform any other function as prescribed in the regulations.
- 1.4 In addition IROs have the power to
 - Adjourn reviews (Regulation 36(2)) if they are satisfied that the Local Authority has not complied adequately with all the requirements relating to the review.
 - Suspend decisions pending a LAC Review that would involve any unplanned change to the child's accommodation that would impact on their education (especially at key stage 4), changes of placement where the child has been settled and established for some time or changes to their legal status.
 - Escalate concerns through the Local Authority's formal dispute resolution process, which should have a timescale of no more than 20 days.
 - Refer cases to the Children and Families Court Advisory Service (CAFCASS) under Regulation 45.
- 1.5 The LAC Reviewing Service contributes to East Sussex's Core Offer for Children's Social Care: ***Provide care and support for children and young people where there is evidence that they have suffered significant harm or are at immediate***

risk of significant harm and provide an alternative home for children who are unable to live with their parents or in their extended family.

- 1.6 784 children have been accommodated by ESCC throughout or for some part of 2018/19 with 610 LAC at year end¹. Each of these were required to have a review within the first 28 days of becoming accommodated; a second review within three months and thereafter a review no less than every six months. Supplementary reviews should take place if there have been, or if there are proposed significant changes to the placement, education, legal status etc.

2. Professional Profile of the Child Protection Advisor and Independent Reviewing Officer Service in East Sussex²

- 2.1 The IRO/CPA Service sits within the Performance and Planning Directorate of Children’s Services. The Head of Children’s Safeguarding is Douglas Sinclair; there are two Operations Managers; Sue McGlynn and Fiona Lewis who have the leads for Child Protection Advisors (CPA) / Safeguarding and for IROs / LAC respectively. The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO), who deals with the allegations management of people who work or volunteer with children, also sits within the Safeguarding Unit; management cover for the LADO when on leave or not available this role is provided by the two Operations Managers.



- 2.2 The IROs chair the Looked After Children statutory review meetings and the CPAs chair the child protection conferences. When the unit was created the CPA and IRO were separate specialisms; today the majority of staff exercise a dual role and; this is common practice across much of England and Wales. There is a long standing debate regarding the benefits and disadvantages of combining the two functions;; specifically there is a concern that it dilutes the independence of the IRO. The two roles are separated by different legislation and regulatory protocols;; they each require a depth and breadth of expertise. Whilst this debate is kept under review;; operating the combined role allows the Unit greater elasticity and ensures that staff retain a sense of the child’s holistic experience. The separate management streams

¹ Data in this report is accurate at the time of writing. Figures are subject to change due to variations in the way that data is captured and some delays within SCIS.

² Throughout this document the term IRO is used as a protected title; CPA/IRO is used to refer to staff within the Safeguarding Unit where the dual role / staffing complement is more relevant.

ensure a focus on legislative / practice developments and quality assurance of each function.

- 2.3 The Unit has a relatively diverse staff group who bring a wealth of personal and professional skills and experiences to their role. The IRO/CPAs are all registered social workers with extensive experience. They have the confidence and knowledge to bring a critical perspective to the care plans for the most vulnerable children in our county.
- 2.4 At the end of March 2019 the Safeguarding Unit comprised 12.3 fte IROs /CPAs. This was an increase of 2.7 on the previous year which had been agreed in response to increasing demand / high caseloads throughout 2018/2019.
- 2.5 In response to the issues raised in the 2017/2018 Annual Report regarding capacity within Business Support additional funding was agreed to recruit a one year fixed term Administrative Support Officer. This additional post will enable monitoring and tracking to ensure compliance / best practice.
- 2.6 IRO/CPAs have continued to undertake a number of different activities, whilst this has been constrained due to high caseloads it is an area of development.
 - 1 IRO has a specialist lead for children with disabilities
 - 1 IRO has a specialist lead to support the Travelling Community
 - IRO/CPAs have lead on specific training for the LSCB, Universities and newly qualified social workers.
 - 1 IRO/CPA chairs PREVENT meetings
 - 2 IROs lead on asylum seeking children and young people
 - 2 IRO/CPAs sit on the MACE Panel
 - 1 IRO is a member of the Resilience Leads Group
 - Team Links have been revisited / reallocated
- 2.7 The Safeguarding Operations Manager leading on Child protection continues to Chair the Local Safeguarding Children Liaison Groups (LSCB Subgroup) in the East and West of the County. The Safeguarding Operations Manager leading on LAC now Chairs a number of Secure Accommodation Reviews. The Operations Managers have completed three Internal Management Reviews for Serious Case Review (child) and one IMR for a Safeguarding Adults Review.

Fostering Better Outcomes

Government response to the Education Select Committee into fostering & Foster Care in England

“We will work with organisations representing Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and LAs to consider how the role of IROs can be put to best effect in the current system and under existing legislation. There is potential for IROs to bring about significant practice improvements, alongside their role in ensuring that young people experience the best care from their fostering service. Where IROs are valued and listened to, they provide a legitimate and respected challenge function for individual children’s care plans and the wider service delivery.”

3. Risk

- 3.1 The Safeguarding Unit is in a significantly stronger position going into 2019 than at the time of writing the previous Annual Report. Key concerns last year were identified as being capacity, legal challenges and uncertainty regarding the future of the IRO role. Capacity across the year has been tight but agreement to recruit two further IROs alongside falling CP numbers will bring caseloads closer to statutory guidance. There have been further cases involving legal scrutiny of IRO performance but this has not accelerated as feared. Finally, the Government did not accept and have not acted on Sir Martin Narey's Fostering Stocktake recommendations regarding the role of the IRO.
- 3.2 Moving into 2019/20 risks are focussed on the increasingly complex cohort of LAC in a landscape where austerity has impacted on many of the previously available statutory and community resources.
- 3.3 The National shortage of foster placements and the reduced offer from agencies can impact on children's Care Plans. IROs have a duty to hold the Local Authority to account for its exercise of its corporate parenting responsibilities and to raise formal disputes in the event of concern. This can be a fine balancing act with IROs needing to evidence effective challenge and ensure compliance with statutory frameworks whilst also acting proportionately and recognising the reality of local budget challenges.
- 3.4 The legislative environment within which the majority of Children's Social Care work is undertaken is also facing significant change. Uncertainty regarding the European Withdrawal Bill has implications for jurisdiction and procedure. High levels of Care Proceedings and Private Family Proceedings have placed increasing pressure on the Courts, with Sir Andrew McFarlane, President of the Family Division committed to bringing about '*radical reform to working practices and processes*'³. A series of Practice Guidance is expected in September with change being implemented in both Private and Public cases by the late Autumn. Whilst these developments are expected to be beneficial to all those involved in the Family Courts, the changes will involve a period of learning.

OFSTED Inspection ESCC July 2018

Children are at the centre of care plans and they routinely take an active role in their reviews. Challenge from Independent Reviewing Officers is evident when there is a query about the nature or pace of care plans for children. However, senior managers recognise that this needs to be more consistent.

³ RESOLUTION CONFERENCE 2019 KEY NOTE ADDRESS Sir Andrew McFarlane President of the Family Division LIVING IN INTERESTING TIMES

4. Practicing Effectively

Caseloads

- 4.1 The majority of LMG2's in the Safeguarding Unit hold a dual role; reviewing both Child Protection and Looked After Child plans. CPA caseloads are not legislated; however the government has set statutory guidance for IROs: *a caseload of 50 to 70 looked after children for a full time equivalent IRO, would represent good practice. (The IRO Handbook DfE)*. At the end of March 2019 CPA/IRO combined caseloads averaged 101; recent local comparisons indicate that similar local authorities have an average caseload of 77.
- 4.2 The Unit also manages caseloads through expectations of the number of meetings that a Chair can review effectively across the week. Over the year the Unit chaired 1211 conferences (2366 individual Child's Plans) and 1629 LAC Reviews (this does not include data where reviews are held in multiple parts or separated for safety reasons). Taking account of a staff complement of 11.3 until February 2019 this equates to 251 meetings per chair.
- 4.3 It is recognised that whilst IROs have additional responsibilities for LAC; Child Protection caseloads can be more dynamic, meetings can involve multiple children and may involve a higher level of risk. Covering both roles necessitates an advanced depth and breadth of professional knowledge.
- 4.4 In East Sussex IROs have long held caseloads in excess of National Guidelines. Whilst measures have been put in place to ensure a safe and effective service, the capacity issues in the Unit have been recognised and agreement given to recruit two further IRO/CPAs.

Impact

- 4.5 All children who become Looked After by ESCC are allocated an IRO within statutory timescales and the majority of these maintain a stable relationship with that same IRO throughout their time in our care. The Unit has a relatively established staff complement which further ensures these long-term relationships. IROs demonstrate a strong commitment to children, resisting reallocation and working creatively to manage challenges caused by caseloads or location.
- 4.6 Whilst IROs have less frequent contact with children than their social workers or carers, they often have a longer term sense of the child's journey as they move between placements and teams. IROs also maintain responsibility for siblings wherever possible; they have contact with birth family and will likely have been into the homes of the child's various carers over time. The value of this is evident in reviews when children draw on IROs' memories to make sense of their childhood and attachment figures



**Thank you for all
your kindness and
understanding; for
being the one who
has been there
from the
beginning.** C aged 18

- 4.7 Children also use their IRO as an additional point of contact with the Local Authority; to challenge decisions about their care or to comment on the service they are receiving. Whilst the IRO should not divert from the social work relationship, it can be helpful for children, their families and carers to have the reassurance of an independent second opinion.

Escalation / Issues Resolution

- 4.8 There has been a drive across CP and LAC to improve compliance with procedures and ensure that statutory documentation is brought to all reviews. CPAs and IROs have emailed Social Workers and Practice Managers when reports have not been available or not shared in advance as well as logging this as an Issues Resolution on the child's electronic file. A report has been set up to track themes and share concerns with managers where there is a continued pattern of non-compliance. These first stage issues would not usually have been logged at this level and as such the numbers cannot be compared directly with Issues Resolution data from previous years.

- 4.9 A smaller number of Issues Resolutions have been raised in respect of children's Care Plans. Whilst these are generally resolved at Stage 2 others have been escalated and resolved at Head of Service / Assistant Director level. The current Dispute / Issues Resolution process does not track disputes within the statutory timeframe, nor does it adequately reflect the complex discussions and creative Care Planning that takes place between IROs and the LAC/Locality Managers. This remains an area for development with a need for improved digital solutions to ensure the integrity of the data.

The resolution of disputes is a time consuming activity and can create tensions between the IRO and the local authority. The managers of IRO services and senior managers in the local authority responsible for corporate parenting, will need to ensure that IROs have sufficient time and support in order to carry out this function of their work effectively. The IRO should ensure that all actions s/he takes in an attempt to resolve a dispute are recorded on the child's case record. IRO Handbook DfE

Opportunities

- 4.10 It is clear that children and young people benefit from a meaningful relationship with a consistent IRO; this connected practice throughout the child's journey requires time and energy. The majority of our regional and statistical neighbours comply with expectations for midway meetings between IROs and Social Workers as well as contact with the child between reviews. Reduced caseloads in 2019/20 will enable IROs to carry out these wider responsibilities, to work with teams to avoid drift and to achieve better outcomes for the children and young people in our care.
- 4.11 Additional capacity in the Administrative Support team has allowed the redevelopment of a LAC tracking system. The build and data entry phase of this

process has now been completed and we will be monitoring how this contributes to timely reviews / compliance over the coming months.

- 4.12 The LAC Review Administrative Support role will now provide checks and balances to drive compliance with the Review process and support effective meetings.

5. The Review Process

Participation

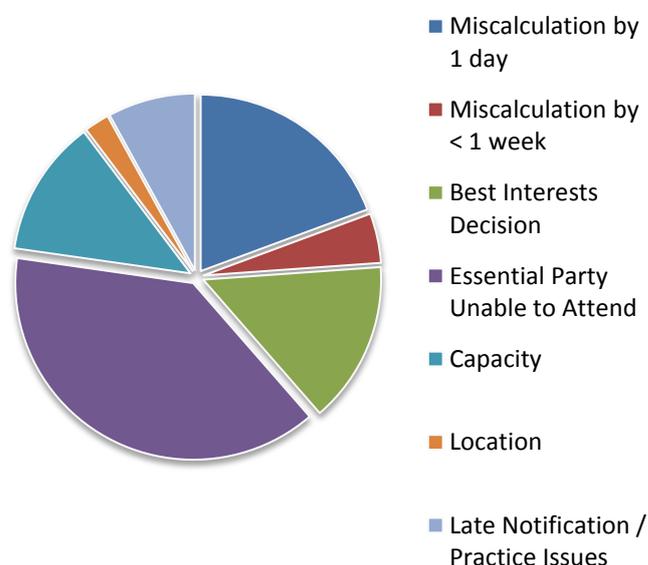
- 5.1 86% of children aged 4+ attended or actively contributed to their LAC review.
- 5.2 Children are encouraged to Chair their own Reviews and there is an enhanced focus on ensuring that they are consulted about who attends their meeting, where it takes place and what is discussed. The revised LAC Review documentation will place the child's participation at the centre of the process and ensure that all decisions are recorded in an accessible, child focussed manner.



Timeliness

- 5.3 94.6% of all LAC Reviews were held early or on time in 2018/19. 88 reviews (5.4%) were late. 21 cases were a scheduling miscalculation of which 17 were miscalculated by just 1 day; 13 reviews were delayed in the best interests of the child, 34 were delayed due to an essential party being unable to attend and 2 were late due to travel requirements. 11 reviews were delayed due to capacity or reallocation within the Unit with 7 reviews late due to practice issues. Meetings are generally scheduled well in advance which contributes to a high level of compliance; the dynamic nature of placements and other calls on social work time can mean that meetings have to be moved at short notice and it is not always possible to reschedule these within timescales.

Late Reviews

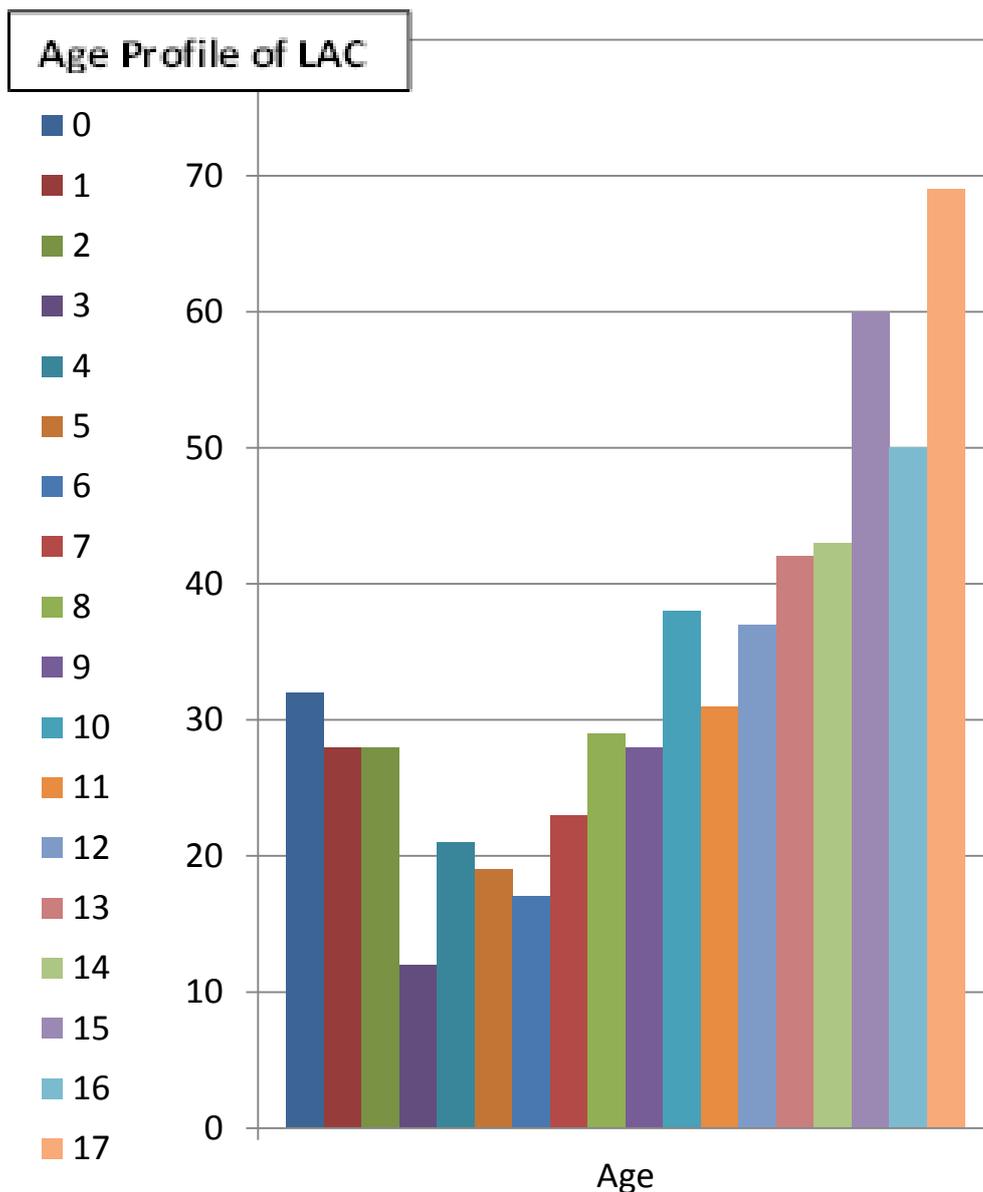


6. Knowing our Looked After Children - Demographics

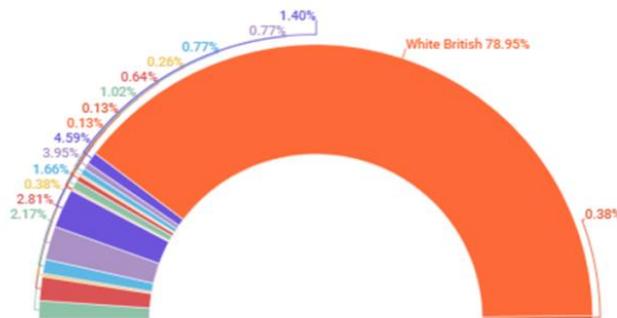


6.1 At the end of March 2019 ESCC was looking after 610 children and young people (57 per 10000) including 27 UASC. This was a net increase of only 4 children and sits below IDACI; however the end of year figure masks a higher number of LAC across the twelve month period with numbers climbing to 627 in November 2018 compared to 582 in November 2017.

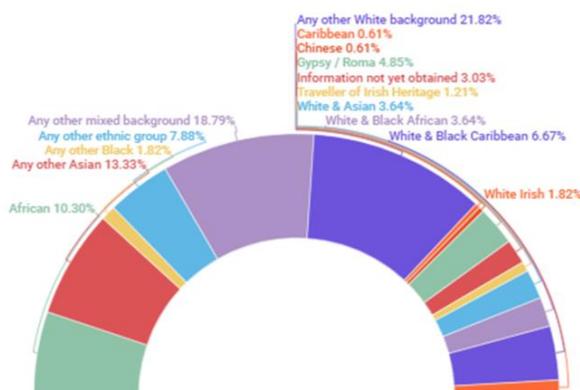
6.2 ESCC continues to accommodate more boys than girls, this is in line with National trends. The majority of children in our care are aged 11 or older.



6.3 Social Workers have demonstrated an enhanced commitment to ensuring that children’s identity and any additional needs / characteristics are clearly recorded and understood. There has been a particular improvement in detailed recording of children’s ethnicity and associated considerations such as language, dialect, diet and faith.



6.4 21% of the LAC population are BME; the majority of BME Looked After Children are drawn from other White backgrounds or are mixed heritage.



6.5 3% of the LAC population are children with a disability; whilst a relatively small cohort they require a high level of expert knowledge and skilled intervention to ensure that their Care Plans are effective and their voices heard.

3% of children had a disability

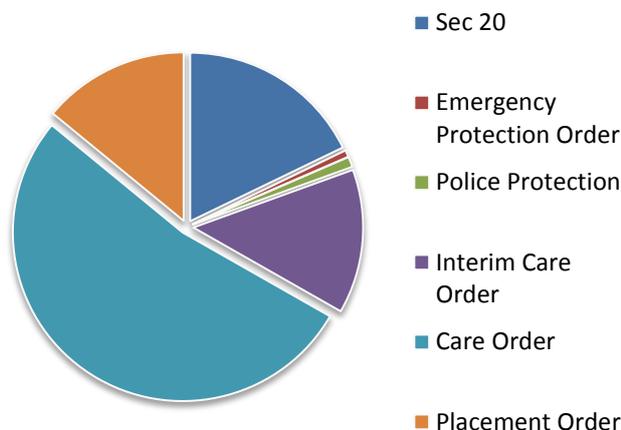


6.6 43% of children had an Initial Health Assessment within 20 days of being accommodated, 61% had their Health Assessment completed within 25 days. This was a deterioration on the previous year and below target. The LAC/Locality teams have a clear Action Plan in place to monitor and address delay; however the LAC Reviewing Service should also be contributing to this key area. Historically the Safeguarding Unit would prompt social workers to arrange the IHA when speaking to them in connection with the ILAC review. This practice will be resumed by the newly appointed IRO Administrative Support Officer.

7. Legal Status & Care Applications

Legal Status of LAC as at 31/03/2019

7.1 ESCC Issued 93 sets of Care Proceedings during 2018/19, a slight increase on 2017/18 where 91 sets of proceedings had been Issued but with rates per 10 000 significantly lower than the National or South East average. There has been a slight increase in the average length of Care Proceedings: still at 30-31 weeks but with only 20% completed within 26 weeks compared to 48% in 2017/18. This is broadly in line with National trends where Courts are recognising the importance of framing timescales to ensure proper assessment.



7.2 IROs continue to contribute views to Final Care Plans as well as being consulted throughout the proceedings and liaising with CAFCASS. A Professional Development session in January considered the statutory duties of the IRO in relation to Care Proceedings and ensured a re-focussing on the importance of viewing all relevant assessments / evidence.

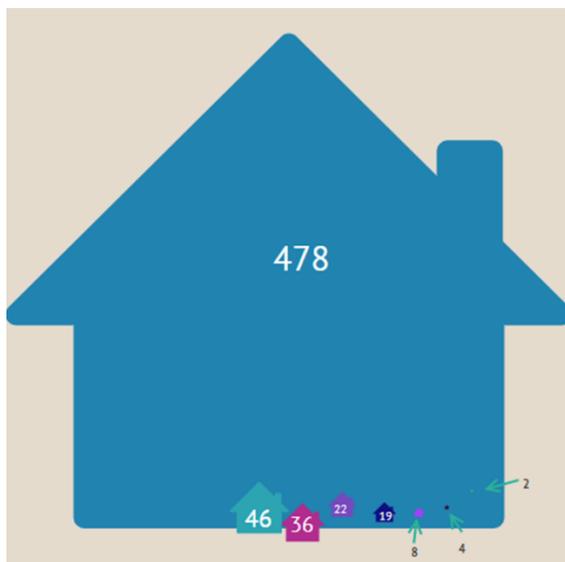
7.3 The majority of children in our care are subject to a Care Order. Children who are accommodated under Sec 20 (accommodated with consent of the parent and not under a legal order) are the most frequent subject of debate / challenge between the IROs and LAC/Locality teams. Where children are also subject to a Placement Order, this should be revoked once it becomes clear that adoption is no longer the Care Plan. For other children, their needs, birth family circumstances or the risks that previously existed will change over time; in those cases where it is safe and appropriate for children to return home, this should be an active consideration.

7.4 A key target for 2019/20 will be for IROs to actively discuss each child's legal status with the social work team in advance of the review and to ensure that where this status is no longer the most appropriate there is a plan in place to address that.

8. Where Do Our Children Live Whilst We Are Caring For Them?

8.1 The vast majority of LAC in ESCC live with foster carers (78%). Placements are generally stable although a few children experience multiple moves due to a combination of their presenting needs and the available placements. A piece of work

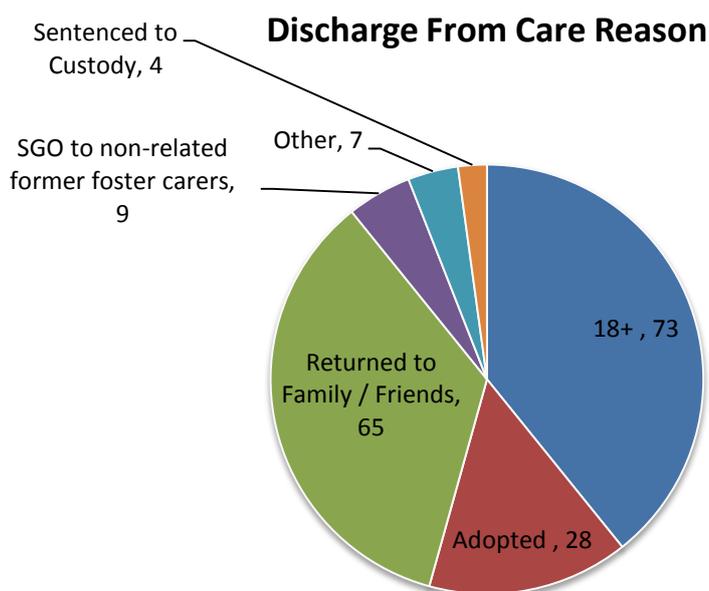
is being undertaken by the Operations Managers for the LAC Reviewing Service, the LAC and Fostering Services to better understand what works for these children and how to reduce disruptions in the future.



Foster Placement	478
Homes and Hostels	46
Residential Accommodation	36
Placed with Parents	22
Placed for Adoption	19
Temporary Move (respite)	8
Residential School	4
NHS / Health	2

Where Do Children Go When They Leave Our Care?

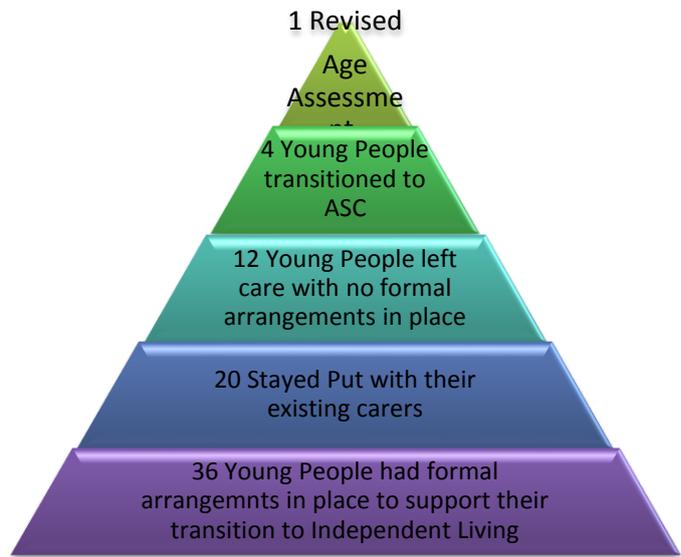
8.2 IROs have a responsibility to ensure that children who leave the care of ESCC have plans in place to ensure that their needs will be met moving forwards. Children leave care for a variety of reasons, sometimes moving into independence or returning to birth family, others cease to be LAC due to being adopted or becoming subject to another legal order within a permanent placement.



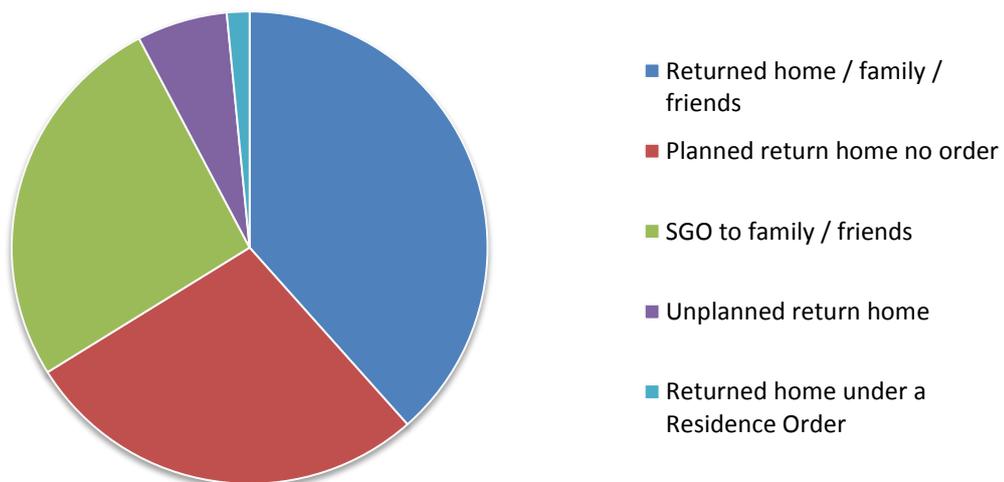
8.3 82% of young people who ceased to be LAC during 2018/19 due to turning 18, have formal arrangements in place to support them in their move to becoming adults.

8.4 More than a quarter of young people 'Stayed Put' with their existing Foster Carers; this is a highly positive reflection on the work of the ThroughCare and Fostering Services.

18+



Returned to live with Family / Friends



8.5 The majority of children who left the care of ESCC to return to live with their parents, relatives or friends did so in a planned and supported manner.

9. Looking Back - Progress on Priorities set for 2017-2018

Development of a standalone form for IRO contribution to Care Proceedings

- 9.1 A National response to this action is expected; ESCC will take a view on whether to adopt a template or to continue with the current process. Draft forms along with statutory guidance were considered at a Unit Development Session in January which enabled discussion of IRO duties and accountability within Care Proceedings.

Embed and develop the CPD programme

- 9.2 IROs receive regular supervision on a four weekly basis; there are monthly Unit Meetings which consider Council Business as well as the performance of the Safeguarding Unit against the PIP and key themes / professional issues. A number of Brief Bite sessions have been recorded following visits by other professionals to the monthly Unit Meeting. Planned training regarding IRO challenge is being commissioned by the SWET and is expected to run in the late Autumn.
- 9.3 The majority of IROs attended the Community Care Live Conference in September where they benefited from seminars covering Section 20 Accommodation, Integrated social care, Disabled children and the law, Use of Boarding Schools to improve the lives of vulnerable children, Modern Slavery and County Lines. This was a positive opportunity for team building and Continuing Professional Development with group discussions continuing throughout the day.
- 9.4 IROs are able to benefit from the Connected Practice Leadership Programme as well as other courses from the Training Offer. Two IROs completed the David Shemmings Leadership in Public Services Programme. IROs have attended Equality/Diversity training, Digital Practice, The Family Court Circle, The Family Justice Board training and Schools Safeguarding Conferences amongst others.
- 9.5 The National IRO Managers Partnership (NIROMP) are developing a training framework which we will reflect on and engage with as appropriate.

Enhance the profile of IROs through lead areas and facilitating training

- 9.6 This year has brought a renewed focus on IROs developing Lead Areas (set out above) and Professional Expertise as well as recognising the importance of Team Links and ensuring that these are prioritised. IROs already contribute to staff development through training at the Universities, the ASYE programme and LSCB. The Unit is offering each CSC ASYE a day's shadowing of an IRO/CPA to embed their understanding of the role and functions of statutory reviews.
- 9.7 The Principle Social Worker is developing Departmental training around LAC which the Unit will partner on in relation to new LAC documentation, expectations and culture.

Ensure robust, consistent scrutiny of care plans with use of the issues resolution process where necessary

9.8 IROs continue to scrutinise Care Plans and to offer informal, respectful challenge in the first instance. The Issues Resolutions process has been used more robustly over the year to drive compliance with Review documentation as well as a smaller number of challenges to practice. This has had a meaningful impact on our understanding of our LAC population and improving the quality of information available for the Review. Moving forward, the Issues Resolutions process will be relaunched to ensure consistent practice across IROs, clearer scrutiny of Care Plans and better tracking of these discussions.

The whole point and purpose of the system and machinery of Independent Reviewing Officers is precisely to keep the local authority (who are no doubt extraordinarily busy and overworked) on their toes and to be asking awkward questions.

[2014] EWHC 1341 (Fam)

Roll out of a more child friendly LAC Review process/document in line with statutory duties and the requests of the CICC.

9.9 There has been substantial consultation and development of the LAC Review Pathway which is now at piloting / sign off stage. There is agreement regarding a move to Review Outcomes being written in the form of a letter to the child, with QA data held on the same form but not exported for circulation. Consultation documents will now be incorporated into the Pre-Meeting Report so will be visible on the child's file and have enhanced significance within the Review process. Unnecessary duplication has been stripped out of the pathway wherever possible in an attempt to refocus social work time away from administrative functions and towards building relationships with children. Care Plans will concentrate on what is important for *this* child, what is happening in their lives now and what needs to be in place to enable them to move confidently into their future. The IRO letters are intended to provide children with a tangible record of their childhood and a real explanation of what decisions were made and why. Pilot letters have been very encouraging and have brought an added realisation of how much more accessible this communication will be for some of our families.

Driving up of standards within the unit to ensure that review decisions are circulated within timescales.

9.10 Completion of LAC Review documentation has improved following a change of practice and a more robust focus on raising Issues Resolution for cases where the Care Plan and Pre-Meeting Report were not available. High caseloads and an agreement to prioritise Child Protection Reviews has meant that some IROs continue to operate with a backlog; this is a focus of the Safeguarding Unit PIP and should be addressed in line with the streamlined LCS pathway set out above.

Increased expectation that IROs will visit or at least communicate with all LAC aged 5 and over between reviews.

- 9.11 Capacity issues across the year have impacted on this target; IROs prioritise contact with the most vulnerable children and ensure that they try to see each child prior to their review. Reduced caseloads in 2019/20 should affect progress in this area.

IROs to routinely record the quality of Health Assessments and PEPs.

- 9.12 This is a standard monitoring question within the IRO Outcome Document; issues with the SCIS have been addressed to improve consistency. Questions have been amended within the revised Review Documentation to ensure a focus on the application and relevance of information in the Health Assessment and PEP.

Dental Health amongst LAC in ESCC has been identified as being a particular cause for concern. This will be a focus for improvement across the LAC Service in 2018/2019. IROs will contribute to this target through pre and post review monitoring / discussions with carers, social workers and young people.

- 9.13 Using time within the LAC review to ask questions about dental and other health appointments was a key complaint of children and young people in our care. The new LAC documentation will seek to manage this data away from the meeting with the child whilst still ensuring robust monitoring. It is hoped that the skills and relationships that Supervising Social Workers have can be used more effectively to enhance child health records.

10. Looking Forwards - Improvement activities for 2019/2020

Participation:

- 10.1 Whilst the numbers of children participating in their review are high there is scope to improve the influence this has and the meaning of the review for the child. IROs will drive this through enhanced midway contact with children and young people.
- 10.2 It is clear that children, their families, carers and professional network do not always understand the process or mandate of the LAC Review. Development of Information packs and an enhanced media profile will enhance understanding and engagement.
- 10.3 Service User feedback will be investigated in 2019/20 with consideration of digital solutions to engagement.

Children with Disabilities – status and Care Plans:

- 10.4 The Operations Managers for CWD and the LAC Reviewing Service are undertaking a number of pieces of work to ensure that plans for children with disabilities take proper account of their circumstances and that they are compliant with statutory guidance. This will include an audit of children subject to Short Breaks.

Improving the quality and depth of Care Plans:

- 10.5 The majority of Care Plans are detailed and tailored to the individual child; however there is scope to improve analysis of how placements are meeting children's needs

and to reflect the rich texture of children's lives. Joint training across social work teams and the IROs will refocus plans to ensure that they are meaningful, dynamic documents. Formal monitoring of midway meetings between the IRO and social worker will drive progress.

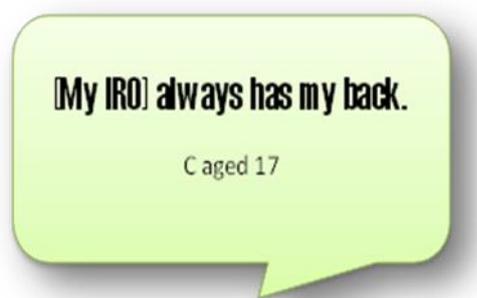
- 10.6 The revised LAC documentation should also enable better use of communication tools and translation services.

Improved Data Monitoring:

- 10.7 The Unit has recognised that much of the data reporting in previous years has been a duplication of the LAC Service Report and did not represent information management specific to the IRO role / Quality Assurance of ESCC as a Corporate Parent. The Safeguarding Unit Dashboard has been developed to provide a single Dashboard across both CP and LAC alongside revised LAC/IRO fields and an improved offer from Business Support.
- 10.8 A new Report has been requested and will be put to EHCSCMT for agreement / prioritisation. This is essential to ensure that the QA role provided by IROs at every LAC Review is purposeful.
- 10.9 Work to develop LAC Review documentation is addressed elsewhere in this report; planned changes to the IRO Outcome document will significantly reduce the time spent by IROs on unnecessary / duplicate processes whilst improving the focus of the document.

Improved compliance with documentation / data to ensure effective meetings

- 10.10 The LAC Review Service Administrative Support Officer will proactively track and prompt social workers to ensure that the monitoring undertaken by the IRO is focussed on the quality of the Care Plan rather than paperwork.



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NAIRO IRO Effectiveness Improvement Plan November 2018

NAIRO (National Association of IROs) have produced an improvement plan following the Fostering Stocktake and Government response. Whilst these recommendations will drive a National agenda it is prudent to identify where ESCC is positioned on these priorities. The table below sets out NAIROs key recommendations and the Safeguarding Unit Response.

NAIRO Recommendation	ESCC LAC Reviewing Service ice / Safeguarding Unit Response
Reviewing the IRO Handbook (the main statutory guidance for IROs) to strengthen the independence of IROs, their status and influence within local authorities and their capacity to challenge.	<p>The IRO Handbook is in need of a refresh to take account of current legislation and practice issues. Moves to strengthen IRO independence could include recommendations to take the role out of the LA which would undoubtedly result in less partnership work and more formal challenge. IROs currently seek to resolve issues informally wherever possible and have the advantage of existing relationships and access to the child's file. The LA should be alert to this possibility and to identify ways to enhance IRO independence / evidence of challenge whilst not losing the current strengths of an in-house service.</p> <p>IROs must feel empowered to raise challenges and the LA must evidence a meaningful response.</p>
Facilitating closer relationships between IRO services and elected members.	<p>The Lead Member with responsibility for Children and Families has evidenced a strong interest in the work of the Safeguarding Unit and support for voices of Children in Care. Engagement with the Lead Member and other elected members is facilitated through the Corporate Parenting Panel.</p>
Requiring local management arrangements to support and facilitate effective challenge.	<p>This has been a topic of discussion and development over the past year. IROs have ensured enhanced visibility of their informal discussions and formal Issues Resolution on the electronic record. ESCC is aware of the need to evidence the constructive discussions that already take place at all levels of the challenge process and to ensure that Managers take proper account of IRO challenge.</p> <p>Discussions have taken place with the Heads of LAC and Locality to drive forward the formal Issues Resolutions process.</p>
Enabling closer links with Children in Care Councils.	<p>One IRO already maintains links with the CICC. The OM with a lead for LAC has attended the CICC on three occasions throughout 2018/19 and has developed new LAC paperwork / processes in line with feedback / discussions with the CICC. Young people from the CICC routinely assist with interviews / recruitment.</p> <p>Moving forward, in 2019/20 the CICC will be invited to attend a Unit meeting and to support with Departmental training in relation to the new documentation / processes.</p>
Making it a duty of IRO services to assess local authorities' looked-after children services as a whole.	<p>ESCC LAC and Locality Services already invite close links with the Safeguarding Unit; each of the LAC and Disability teams have a named link IRO who attends team meetings throughout the year; this has been reinstated across Locality. The OM with lead for LAC also attends meetings with the OMs, PMs and Heads of Service for LAC and conducts audits/development work with the LAC and Children's Disability OMs. The LAC, Locality and Disability Service's data and management systems are open to the IRO Service, supervision records are transparent and IROs are able to see the whole child's file. The OM for Fostering has specifically invited comment on the capacity and quality of placement options. Work has started with Children's Disability to review Short Breaks guidance.</p> <p>The IRO Outcome document considers the broader service implications raised by each review.</p>