

# EAST SUSSEX INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2021/2022

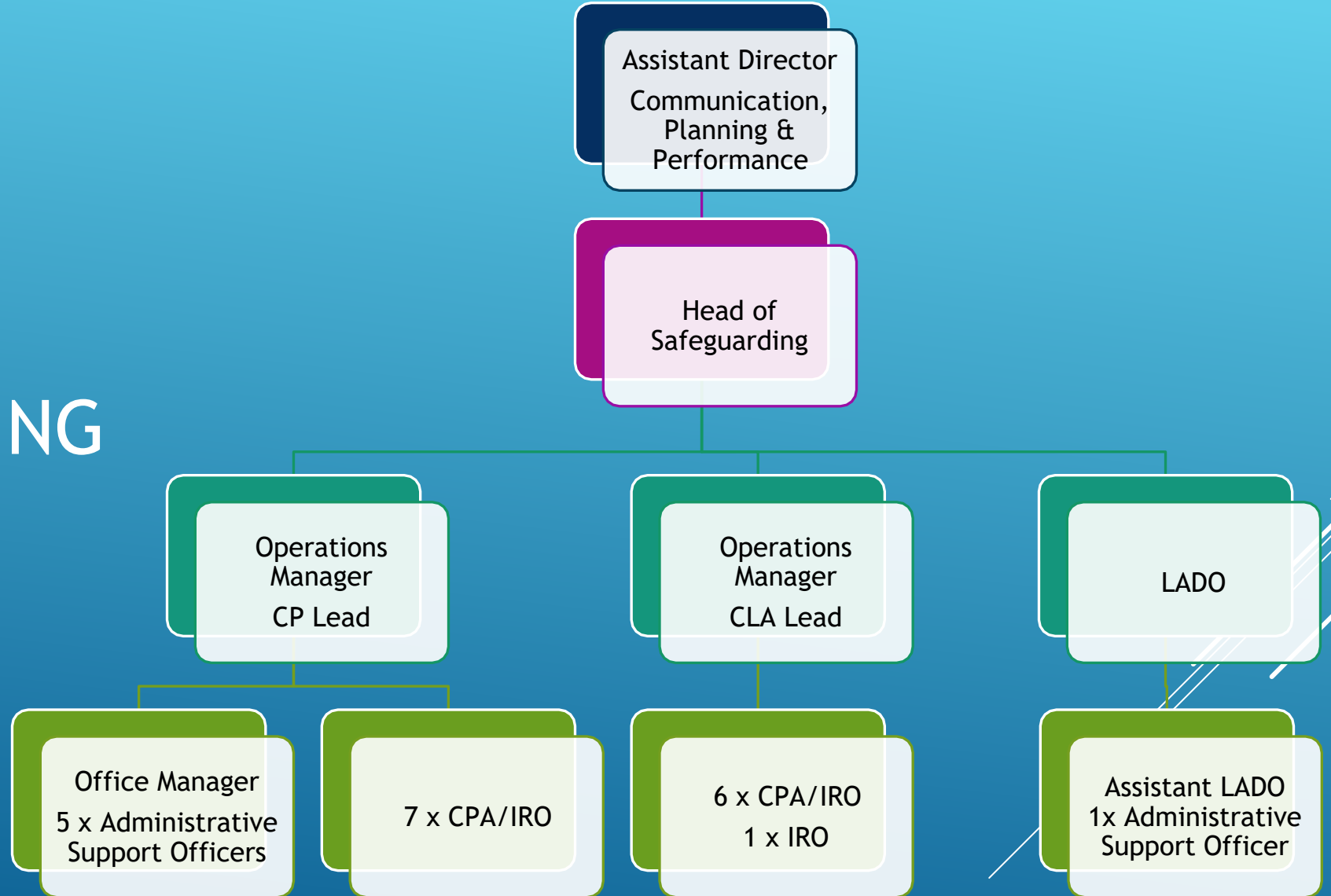
**Dawn Price Operations Manager**

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

The IRO Annual Report must be presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel.

Please see Glossary for definitions

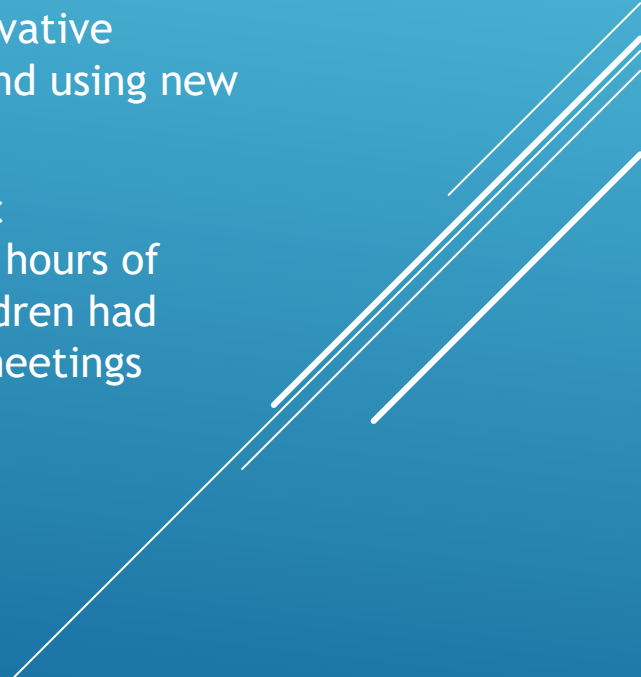
# CHILDREN'S SAFEGUARDING UNIT



Staffing compliment is equivalent to 13.3

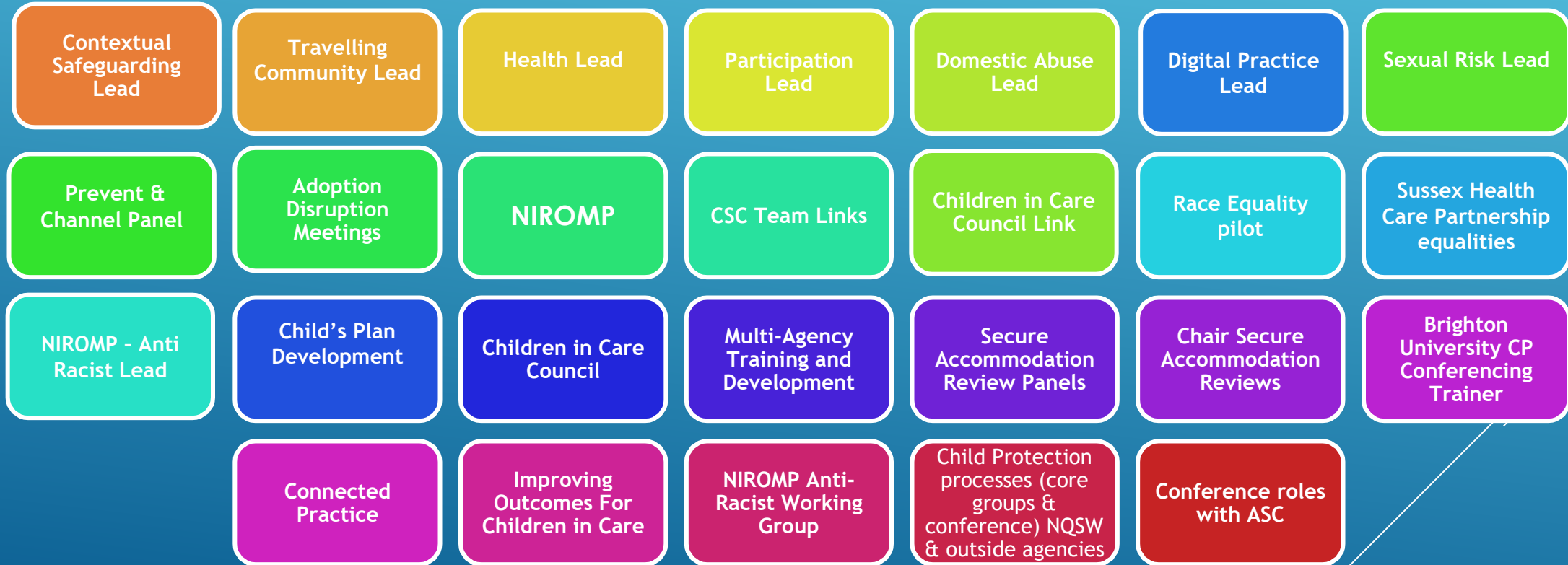
# PROFILE OF THE UNIT

- IRO/CPAs are registered social workers with extensive experience. They have the confidence and knowledge to bring a critical perspective to plans for the most vulnerable children in our county.
- IROs chair My Voice Matters Meetings; the statutory Looked After Children review meetings. Whilst CPAs chair Child Protection Conferences; the two roles are separated by different legislation and regulatory protocols which each require a depth and breadth of expertise.
- In ESCC and in common with some of England and Wales, most staff operate a dual role; this ensures that Chairs retain a sense of the child's holistic experience. The separate management streams ensure a focus on legislative / practice developments and quality assurance of each function.

- In May 2021, the Safeguarding Unit celebrated its 20-year anniversary. In 2001 it was launched under the title - Children's Safeguarding & Quality Assurance Unit. The Unit had dedicated roles 4xCPAs and 4xIROs.
  - The Unit has a diverse staff group who bring a wealth of personal and professional skills and experiences to their role. The combined experience of the Unit totals 431 years.
  - The Unit was recently recognised, in the departmental achievement awards, for its innovative approaches to continuing to hear the voice of the family, holding purposeful meetings and using new technology during the lockdown period.
  - In this review period we experienced high levels of unavoidable staff absence. Strategic management of case-loads combined with recruitment of temporary staff and increased hours of current staff, successfully resulted in minimal disruption to service delivery. Where children had established relationships with their IRO, we agreed to delay the MVM's to ensure their meetings remained purposeful.
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# CPA & IRO ADDITIONAL ROLES

CPAs/IROs undertake a range of additional responsibilities including:

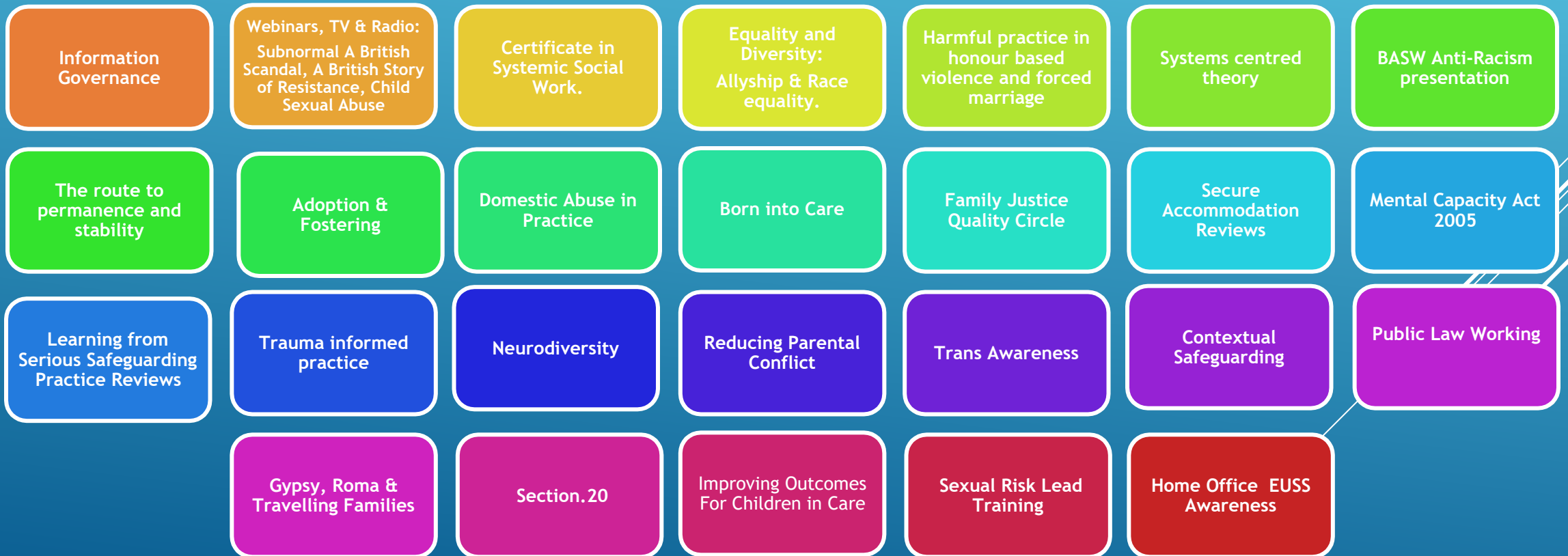


# OPERATIONS MANAGER ADDITIONAL ROLES



# CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CPAs/IROs have continued to access learning and development opportunities throughout the year including:





The majority of Chairs in the Safeguarding Unit hold a dual role; reviewing both Child Protection and Looked After Child / My Voice Matters plans.

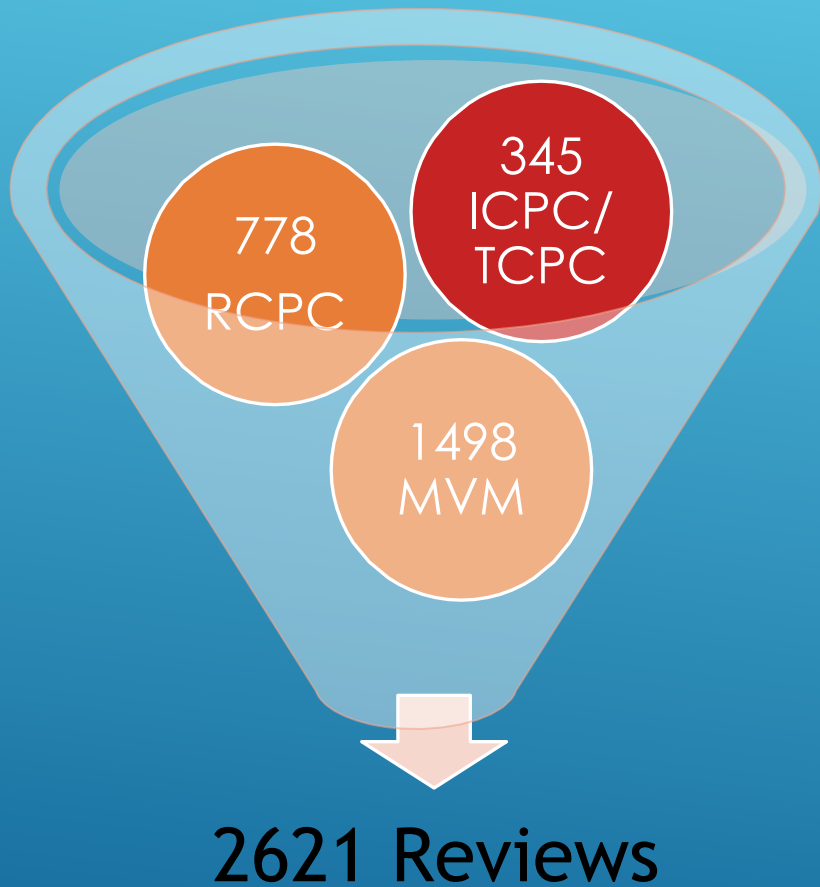
CPA caseloads are not set in legislation; however, the government has set statutory guidance for IROs: a caseload of 50 to 70 children who are looked after for a full-time equivalent IRO, would represent good practice. (The IRO Handbook DfE).

In common with other Authorities ESCC operates a weighting system recognising 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.

In respect of caseload numbers ESCC remains higher than the IRO Handbook recommendations. At the end of March 2022 CPA/IRO combined caseloads averaged 84 workload points, remaining consistent with the previous year.

## CASELOADS





Conferences and My Voice Matters Meetings\* are usually held as a single review involving all relevant family and professionals. However meetings may be held in two or more parts to ensure that they are effective, safe and facilitate the child's needs.

In addition to their professional focus, preparing parents, carers and children for the meeting and ensuring their wellbeing throughout the process; Chairs exercise a key role in the implementation of the Local Authority's Quality Assurance Framework.

2019/20: reviews held 2725 (MVM - 1612. CP - 1113)  
2020/21: reviews held 2698 (MVM - 1467. CP - 1231)  
2021/22: reviews held 2521 (MVM - 1498. CP - 1123)

Over the year the Unit chaired:

- 1123 Conferences involving 2169 Child's Plans
- 1498 individual My Voice Matters Meetings
- Equating to 198 meetings/conferences per Chair

*\*My Voice Matters Meetings are the ESCC approach to statutory LAC Reviews.*

# ISSUES RESOLUTION

- Quality Monitoring and evidence of independent challenge via a locally agreed dispute resolution process is a statutory requirement of both the CPA and IRO function
- A new electronic mechanism for collating reliable data on the number and nature of Issues Resolutions raised has been recently introduced, the system is still in it's infancy. The electronic reporting mechanism for Issues Resolutions remains with ESCC Business Services Department for development, this will then provide a full picture and identify themes to be focussed on.
- An initial indication is that IROs raised an Issues Resolution on 10% of CLA processes 2021/22.
- OFSTED expect to see evidence of effective challenge by CPAs/IROs when looking at a child's file; Senior Managers recognised the need for a more consistent footprint and have taken steps to achieve this
- The Safeguarding Unit operates a consistent process across the CPA/IRO service.
- The Unit focussed on ensuring that families had been provided with statutory review paperwork prior to their meetings to ensure that they were fully able to participate
- Issues have been raised throughout the year in relation to social work practice or Child/Care Plans when necessary
- All Issues have been resolved at Head of Service or below with the majority resolved at the informal stage

# Role of the IRO

It is a legal requirement for every Looked After Child to have a named IRO.

IROs quality assure the Care Planning process for children who are Looked After and ensure that their wishes and feelings are understood.

## **The statutory duties of the IRO are to:**

- *Monitor the Local Authority's performance ... 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.*

## **The Independent 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.*

## NATIONAL PICTURE / RISKS

- “These latest figures show the support that local authorities have provided in the midst of a pandemic to safeguard and protect children and young people in their local areas. The statistics, that relate to year ending 31 March 2021, further highlight the impact of Covid-19 on children, families and children’s services. Due to national lockdowns, the number of children entering care fell as did the number of children leaving care leading to an overall rise in the size of this cohort. Referrals to children’s social care reduced significantly during the periods of national lockdown which was a worry for us, however, local authorities up and down the country worked hard to make sure they were there providing support for those children and families who needed it the most. We are only now seeing some of the emerging signs of the impact of the pandemic with families presenting greater complexity of need, but the lasting impacts will remain with us for years to come. It is essential that we have both the capacity and resources to meet these needs as quickly as possible.”
- “ADCS research shows that the number of children looked after has increased by a third since 2008, while local authorities have faced a 50% reduction in budgets since 2010.”

(Commenting on the latest DfE Children Looked After statistics, ADCS President Charlotte Ramsden, 19 November 2021 )

- “We welcome the study’s focus on the mental health of children in care, and the factors associated with improved mental health outcomes in this cohort. These include positive relationships with friends, carers and social workers and being satisfied with the frequency of contact with social workers. Living with a relative or sibling, spending less time on screens and not being excluded from school were also seen to be positive factors. The forthcoming Schools White Paper must have inclusion at its heart, not only is this important for the mental health of children in care but for all children.
- “There are some important messages in this report, captured through the surveys of children and young people, I’m sure the findings will be of interest to all those working with and supporting children in care. While the impact of successive lockdowns and ensuing restrictions on children and young people will have varied, we cannot ignore that there is a rising tide of poor mental health amongst children and young people. Most mental health problems begin in childhood so ensuring children get the right help and support at the earliest opportunity is crucial. Over the years much focus has been placed on improving mental health support for children and young people but too many children continue to face long waits to access appropriate help and accessing mental health support for children has long been an issue for children in care - we must do better for them.
- “Local authorities are absolutely committed to finding stable, loving homes for the children in our care and recruiting and retaining enough social workers so that we can meet children’s needs, but we need government to support us with this via a nationally led and funded campaign to encourage more social workers into the profession and to want to stay.”

(Commenting on a survey on the mental health of children in care in England in 2020 and 2021 Charlotte Ramsden, ADCS President 23 March 2022)

# OUR COUNTY - MY VOICE MATTERS



- My Voice Matters went live in March 2020
- This is the ESCC approach to statutory LAC Reviews and has been designed in consultation with CYP, taking account of messages from people who are Care Experienced and relevant research
- My Voice Matters prioritises the child's voice at the centre of their Care Plan and emphasises the importance of human relationships
- Paperwork is written to be accessible to the individual child. The record of the meeting is written as a letter to the child and copied to adults as necessary
- **We believe that children should understand and have a voice in their history, their present and their future**

## LETTERS TELL CHILDREN THAT THEY ARE VALUED AND HELP THEM MAKE SENSE OF THEIR EXPERIENCES

- This is written for you to read now, or when you are older or when you are an adult as may wish to see your social work file. I hope these notes will help you understand what was happening for you at this time in your life, and the decisions that were made while you were in care. (4 years)
- Things are a bit uncertain for you at the moment, but everyone is working hard to have the best plan for your future, and to make this happen as soon as possible. We all want you to be able to stay with your mummy, but we have to make sure she can do what a mummy needs to do to look after you properly. (3 week baby)
- You like music and enjoy listening to your Alexa, we all agreed I was far too old to know any of the people that you like to listen to, which made us laugh. You have started boxing twice a week and you showed me your skipping, and it was just like watching a professional boxer train on TV, you were so fast and nimble. (13 years)
- The plan is a bit 'up in the air' at the moment. It would be good if you could go back to live with mum, but it might be hard to make this possible. SW is going to help work out whether you should go back to mum's, or whether you should stay in foster care. If you don't feel safe to go home, you won't be forced to go. SW thinks you can't go home until mum is not using drugs anymore, mum has used a couple of times in the last few weeks, so she's not ready to have you back yet. You need to be in care, we don't know how long for at the moment. (14 years)
- You know that when you first became looked after this was agreed for a short period of time for the social worker to try and do some work with you and your family. Since this time, adults can see the positive impact that living with F & C has had on your mental health and well being it has been agreed that living with them is the right place for you to live. (16 years)
- On a positive note, it was good to hear that you now have 'leave to remain' for 5 years. I am happy for you as this is one less thing that you need to worry about. So now you need to think about your living circumstances and whether you want to remain in College and if not, what do you want to do. We discussed that your next Looked After Review will be your final Looked After Review, and it would be good to know what's your plan regarding these issues. (17 years)

# CHILDREN'S VOICES ARE STRONGER

- It was lovely to hear about all your adventures, you are a busy girl! The biggest news was that you played Bell in the school play Beauty and the Beast - wowzers this sounded amazing! You wore a yellow dress which you said you loved. You said it was "great" and you want to do more drama. You said you felt healthy and well. (13yrs)
- You said that you feel settled at school and are now part of the school choir which recently went to Arundel. You said that you would like more time with mum and that things are fine when you stay over at Nan's. You have been to see Dad with P and told us that you don't want to go back but are happy to receive letters from him but that you are not fussed about writing back. You can decide whether you want to speak on the phone when calls happen. (16yrs)
- You did so very well in your meeting! Thank you so much for our lovely treats that you picked out for us and it was lovely to talk to you about what we need to think about for you over the next few months. We talked about how much you love the park (especially if you get to go for cake afterwards!) that the lego batman film is your favourite film and you told us that you would like to start playing football - we'll add that to our to do list shall we? You told us about the mad hatters tea party that you had at home and that you made some yummy jam tarts. We talked a bit about what makes you feel sad or gives you fizzy feelings in your tummy and you were really brave in telling us that school sometimes gives you those fizzy feelings and that you find it hard when Mummy's train is late as this makes you feel worried about the time you spend with her. (7yrs)
- The most important thing for you that we talked about was Christmas day as you want to be able to see Nan and Grandad. We agreed for you to go for two hours and F will arrange this with them. F said that your plan currently is to see them once a month and you wanted this to stay the same as you said that you know they have a lot of commitments and you feel this amount of time together is right. (15yrs)
- It was so lovely to meet you today, have a little sit on the beanbags and then for you to come into your meeting - you were marvellous. You told me you are a healthy boy, your favourite food is noodles and you love playing on your Ipad. The only thing you wanted us to talk about today was if everybody could save some money and buy you a Nintendo Switch so that's what we talked about when we got into the room. You talked to me about how you are happy at home, can do the things you want to do, play on your Ipad and you gave being at home 10 out of 10 - that's fantastic! (6yrs)



I want to know who is going to be there as it will help me speak up if I know whose going to be in the room

My points of view are listened to and I get to say what I want to say. It feels respectful how we do it

I chair my MVM now but it has taken a while to feel confident

Its my life and I want to hear the decisions being made about me

Thanks too for today your meetings really highlights the children's voices

I feel my voice gets listened too even if they don't agree with what I am saying.

R feels able to ask his carer to call his SW or IRO and set up a meeting, but most of all you do all the jobs he asks you to do for his MVM Meeting

I practised 7x tables when my IRO visited and I was better than she was, this made me laugh!

I can't think of anything you may need to add - it is a beautiful letter

**MEETINGS CAN BE MORE MEANINGFUL**

## TIMELINESS - MY VOICE MATTERS MEETINGS

- 97% of all My Voice Matters Meetings were held early or on time in 2021/22. MVMs held on time or early have continued to improve each year; 2019/20 - 92%, 2020/21 - 95%
- 11% of late reviews were due to a one day scheduling error.
- 21% of late reviews were held within 4 weeks of the scheduled date. The majority of late reviews were delayed in the child's best interests or because an essential party was unable to attend. As noted earlier in the report, some late MVMs held due to IRO sickness and to ensure meaningful meetings delayed until the IRO was able to chair.
- Further work to address the reasons for late MVMs and ensuring correct dates recorded on the system
- Meetings continue to be scheduled well in advance which contributes to a high level of compliance



# PARTICIPATION

## CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE THEIR VOICES HEARD IN LOTS OF DIFFERENT WAYS

- In 2021/22 97% of Children aged 4+ participated\* in some way in their review process; up from previous years. 2020/21 participation 95% up from previous year, 2019/20 participation 91%.
- Of children aged 4yrs+ 56% attended their meeting and 41% sent their views
- We now have a Participation Lead, who is working with social workers, partner agencies, carers and children to encourage diverse thinking in how to support meaningful participation
- My Voice Matters Letters mean that children receive the review outcome in their own/ age-appropriate language or in their preferred communication style
- There has been positive feedback about the IRO profiles that are now shared with Looked After Children; they noted that they like knowing a little bit about their IRO

\*actual date recovered from records rather than raw data



# CARE PLANS - IN COURT AND BEYOND

- Providing properly informed IRO views within Care Proceedings can be challenging, given the nature of Court directed timetables and the need for IROs have the opportunity to fully consider all evidence
- There have been a number of instances Nationally where Local Authorities have been criticised due to IROs failing to robustly monitor and comment on cases
- Working with the Legal Department we now have a system that enables the IRO to have full access to the Court Bundle throughout the case, ensuring that they are able to take proper account of all assessments when considering the Care Plan

*The IRO should feel confident that s/he is being kept fully informed of the progress of the child's case, during and at the conclusion of the proceedings...The legal department of the local authority should...provide copies of all relevant court documents to the IRO... (IRO Handbook)*

- At the end of March 2022 ESCC was looking after 628 children, equivalent to 58.9 per 10000. This was a slight increase on the previous year but remains below IDACI expected levels .

End of March 2021 - 611

End of March 2020 - 592

- The age and gender profile of CLA remains consistent with previous years and the national picture.
- Children with Disabilities represent a relatively small percentage of our CLA population, there is a good uptake of advocacy use at their MVM meetings
- At the end of March 2022 looking at the total population of CLA;
  - 33% living with foster carers (not long-term)
  - 26% children in long-term fostering
  - 12% living with connected carers
  - 12% lived in residential settings,
  - 4% children were placed with their parents
  - 1% living with connected carers (long-term)

With 12% living in other accommodation including prospective adopters, residential schools or secure accommodation.

## KNOWING OUR CHILDREN

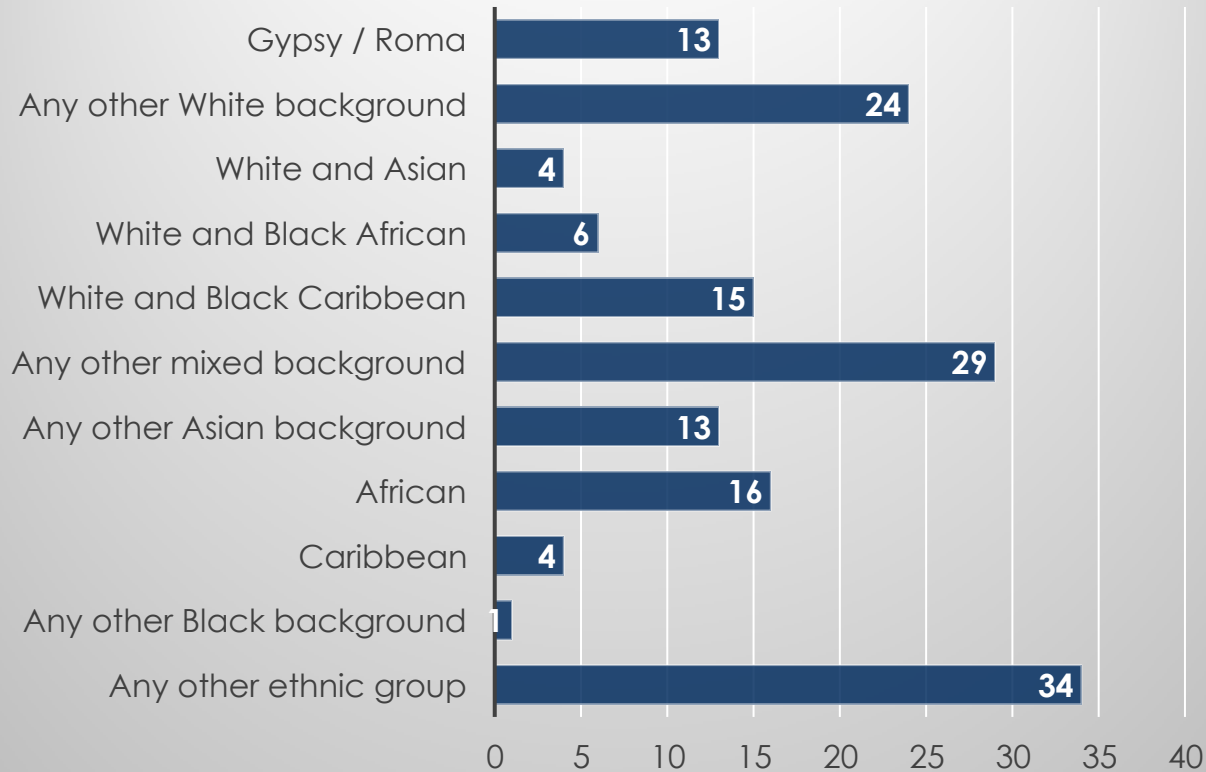


# REPRESENTATION

25% OF CLA IN ESCC IDENTIFY AS MINORITY ETHNIC OR MIXED HERITAGE – INCLUDING UASC MARCH 2022

27% OF IROS IN ESCC IDENTIFY AS MINORITY ETHNIC OR MIXED HERITAGE

## Minority Ethnic CLA Population at March 2022



In March 2022 ESCC were looking after 59 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. Over 2021/22 it was a total of 67 children an increase from 50 children in 2020/21 and 48 children in 2019/20.

The biggest population of our UASC came from Iran, Afghanistan, Sudan, Vietnam and Egypt. With lower numbers from Syria, Iraq, Eritrea and Ethiopia. With Albania, Libya & Somalia only have 1 child from each area.

- 20% of UASC are under 16 years old
- 93% of UASC looked after by ESCC are male
- The majority of UASC are allocated to IROs with additional training and specialist knowledge of this particularly vulnerable group

# UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN

# KEEPING CLOSE

- 19.1% of placements for children Looked After by ESCC were out of County in March 2022. This compares very positively against a National benchmark of 42% (March 2021 - ADCS)
- 73% of Looked After Children under 16yrs in ESCC had been accommodated in the same placement for at least 2 years. This is slightly higher than the National average\* (70%) and on par with our Statistical Neighbour group\* (73%)
- IROs particularly scrutinise those plans where children have had a series of moves or where their placement appears insecure
- ESCC continues to promote children having long term relationships with the same IRO and ensuring that brothers and sisters have the same IRO wherever possible
  
- March 2021: 64% same placement for at least 2yrs (under 16yrs)
- March 2020: 62% same placement for at least 2yrs (under 16yrs)

\*Statistical Neighbour and National comparisons are based on 2020/21 figures.



# SECURE ACCOMMODATION REVIEWS

## Criteria for Secure Accommodation Order

It is unlawful to restrict the liberty of a child in a secure children's home unless one of the criteria in Section 25(1) is met, no matter how short the period of restriction.

## Section 25 Children Act 1989

This is also known as the secure order. It is a court order which restricts the liberty of a child who:

has a history of absconding and is likely to abscond from any other description of accommodation; and if he/she absconds is likely to suffer significant harm

Or

if kept in any other description of accommodation, is likely to injure him/herself or other persons.

- During 2021/22 the Safeguarding Unit worked with Lansdowne to improve on the SAR process.
- We recruited senior social workers to sit on the SAR panel as the 3<sup>rd</sup> member and retained the Independent Person. We identified 7 IROs as SAR chairs, giving Lansdowne a healthy panel membership as SAR panels are required at short-notice.
- We agreed an agenda, to ensure all SARs are held in a consistent manner and only cover the areas required; they are not MVMs and the child's IRO does not attend.
- There is now a leaflet which explains the process for the child and can be shared with parents.
- The Exit Planning is in place to ensure planned transitions for children.

- In this review period we launched the IRO profile leaflets.
- The profiles are sent to all children on being allocated an IRO. They contain a photograph of the IRO, along with some information about the IRO for example hobbies, music or pets. There is information about the role of an IRO and contact details, including the advocacy service, CiCC and other organisations outside of the County.
- IROs have sent their profiles to their children too.
- CiCC have given positive feedback about the profiles along with ideas about tweaking the content for younger children. Overall, the feedback has commented on liking the photographs and learning something about their IRO.
- The team link for UASC has been working with the team to ensure the profiles are translated into the child's language.



## IRO PROFILE LEAFLETS

# PROGRESS ON 2021-2022 SERVICE PRIORITIES

- **Promote and learn from new feedback and consultation process for families and professionals**

There have been delays in being able to progress the forms, it is now in place to begin in July 2022. The delays have been around gaining appropriate GDPR.

- **Continue to promote children's voices through their My Voice Matters Meetings**

This has been successful with the thoughts and views of children being captured in both Care Plans and within the My Voice Matters Meetings. In this review period 97% of My Voice Matters meetings were held with the views of the child, either directly or indirectly, this was up 2% from the previous year. Some of these contained the observations of children with communication challenges. Supporting social workers to capture the views of children will be a priority in 2022/23, especially in respect of the 4-8yr olds and children with communication challenges.

- **Improve timeliness of meetings and sharing/completion of records**

During this review period 97% of My Voice Matters meetings were held in timescale, with the IRO noting within the records reasons for lateness, 2% increase on previous year. We continue to work on the data to gather the timeliness of children receiving their letters. Sending children their letter (outcome of the meeting) within time is essential to ensure the content remains meaningful.

- **Promote IRO monitoring by building on midway review process**

This continues to be an area of working progress, with the data collection not yet built in. IRO are more active in booking midway review dates with social workers and completing the form, this is essential to prevent drift of decisions between reviews. To strengthen the process it will now be included into the Looked After Children Operational Instructions.

- Continue to build on understanding identity issue for children who are Looked After:

The Safeguarding Unit attended BASW Anti-Racism together. The IROs feel more confident in the positive use of social GRRRAACCEEESSS when reviewing Care Plans, being more creative in how this tool is used. IROs are supporting social workers to think about the impacts of identity and to explore with the child what it means to them. As a unit we acknowledge there is still improvement to be made.

- Promote and encourage careful language as identified by the CiCC and Care Experienced People:

IROs continue to challenge language that is not child focused. The MVM outcomes are written in a letter to the child using this format ensures that the child is held in mind. We have held a group supervision focussed on language and we now have an IRO lead area with the CiCC, alongside the link in Through Care Team.

- Further develop IRO Lead Roles:

In this review period we have increased our lead roles to also include, Participation, Health, Neurodiversity and CiCC. The leads in sexually harmful behaviours have been attending additional training. The lead roles run alongside the links to teams, which we plan to expand in 2022/23.

- Development of hybrid meetings post covid-19

IROs returned to face-to-face MVM meetings, starting with meeting children for garden visits or walks. It is still the option for children to request virtual MVM meetings or for other parties to attend as hybrid meetings.

- Work across the Department to improve equality data monitoring specifically in relationship to children with disabilities:

The Safeguarding Unit contributed to the work completed in this area.

Increase the % of Midway Reviews. Evidence the impact in reducing drift & delay

Utilise the Issues Resolution reporting system to identify themes, establish a mechanism for feedback to CSC Managers.

Monthly QA audits of MVM letters & Midway Reviews - to include timeliness & content

Promote the Health Lead link: IROs to report on the quality of Health Assessments, ensure health appointments attending and notify delays in emotional health support.

Build robust referral pathways for UASC under National Transfer Scheme

Embed and support the refreshed QA framework and functions within the Unit and ESCC

Increase the numbers of children supported by the Advocacy Service in the MVM process

# IRO PRIORITIES 2022/2023

# Glossary

ASO - Administrative Support Officer

BASW - British Association of Social Workers

CiCC - Children in Care Council

CP - Child Protection

CPA - Child Protection Advisor

CSC - Children's Social Care

ESSCP - East Sussex Safeguarding Children Partnership

GPDR - General Data Protection Regulation

HR - Human Resources

ICPC / RCPC - Initial Child Protection Conference / Review Child Protection Conference

IMR - Independent Management Review

IRO - Independent Reviewing Officer

LAC/CLA - Looked After Child

LADO - Local Authority Designated Officer

LSCLG - Local Safeguarding Liaison Group

MACE - Multi Agency Child Exploitation

MVM - My Voice Matters

OM - Operations Manager

QA - Quality Assurance

SCR - Serious Case Review

SEIROMP/NIROMP - South East / National IRO Managers' Partnership

SESLIP - South East Sector Led Improvement Programme

Social GGRRAACCEESSS - Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Culture, Class, Education, Ethnicity, Spirituality, Sexuality, Sexual orientation

TCP - Transfer CP Conference

UASC - Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child