



# INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS ANNUAL REPORT 2024/2025

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This year’s report marks the first time the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Report for Children Looked After has been combined with the Child Protection Conferencing Report, offering a more integrated view of our service delivery.

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

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

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# Executive Summary

## Stable and Skilled Team

The Safeguarding Unit maintained a stable workforce, enhancing relationships with children, families, and professionals. All permanent posts were successfully filled, eliminating the need for agency staff.

Key developments included:

Two internal staff joined in new roles, bringing valuable experience.

One external candidate was recruited later in the year.

During this period there was one extended sickness absence and a brief period of being 0.8 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) down, however the commitment of the staffing team was present with sharing out the additional workload.

Child Protection Advisors/Independent Reviewing Officers (CPAs/IROs) undertook and delivered on a range of training events (incl. post-qualifying 'Risk and Decision Making' course with focus on midway reviews) and provided consultation as developmental leads in key areas of risk and practice.

## Child-Centred Decisions

In some cases, My Voice Matters Meetings (MVMs) were delayed to avoid introducing a new IRO for a single review. Children supported this approach.

## Audit and Improvement Work

CPA/IROs are involved in the monthly audit programme completed by all Children's Social Care Practice Managers.

Operation Managers (OMs) and Head of Service (HoS) meet quarterly with the Children's Safeguarding Unit (CSU) Quality Assurance OM to complete a thematic audit, at times these are completed collaboratively with other services.

Audits conducted during the review period included a thematic audit on the Effectiveness of the Missing Children Process showed most children were offered return home interviews. Safeguarding Managers audited the impact of Midway Reviews, finding positive outcomes and prompting improvements in alerting Practice Managers to outstanding actions.

## Recognition and Awards

The Business Support Team and an IRO/CPA were nominated for the Outstanding Achievement Awards under the category 'Delivering a great service and focusing on outcomes that matter most', highlighting the difference they make to children and families through their work.

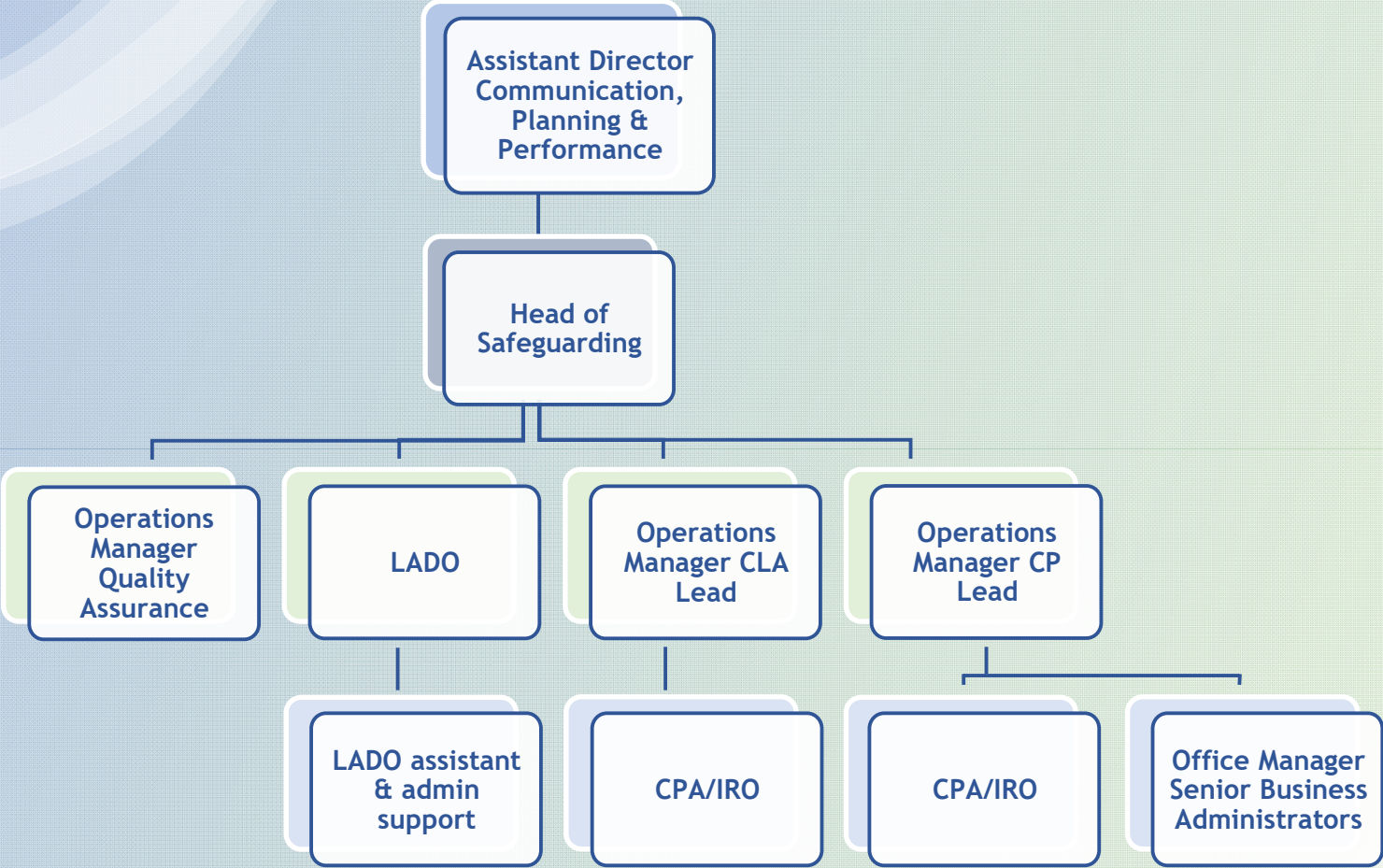
Nominations came from a team manager and a children's social worker.

## Partnership with Bede's Independent School

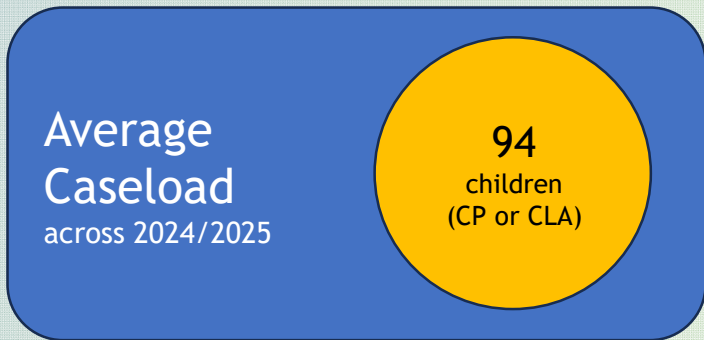
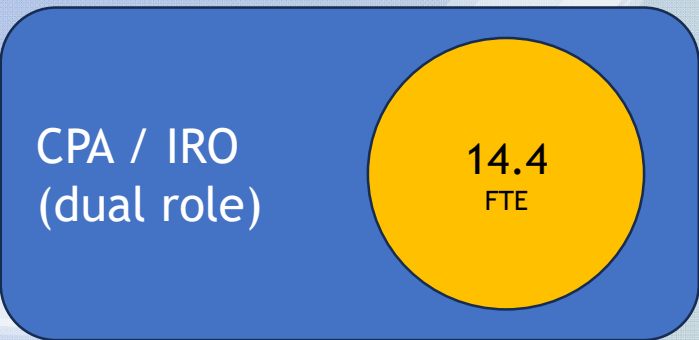
The Safeguarding Unit strengthened ties with Bede's, where several children are boarders. The team visited the school to better understand the Boarding School Project, toured facilities, and discussed how the school meets children's needs.



# Service Structure





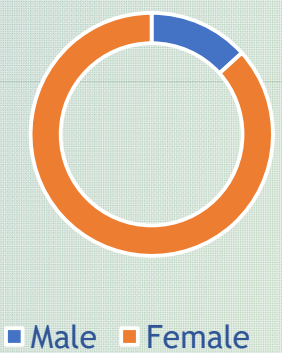


Our CPA / IROs have the confidence and knowledge to bring a critical perspective to plans for the most vulnerable children in our County. We are a diverse staff group who bring a wealth of personal and professional skills along with experience to the role of chairing.

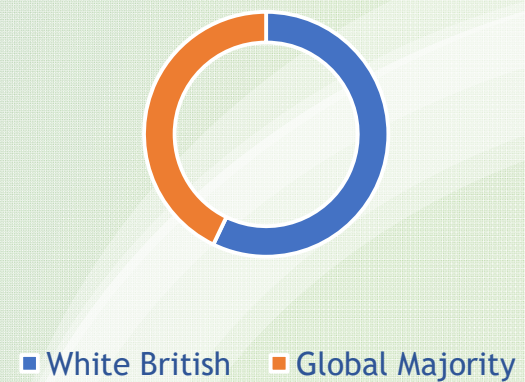
IROs chair My Voice Matters Meetings; the statutory Looked After Children review meetings. CPAs chair Child Protection Conferences; the two roles are separated by different legislation and regulatory protocols which each require a depth and breadth of expertise and knowledge.

All the Chairs fulfil a dual role thereby ensuring they retain a better sense of the child’s journey and holistic experience. Separate management streams ensure a focus on legislative and practice developments and quality assurance of each function.

### Gender



### Ethnicity





# Review of Safeguarding Unit Priorities 2024/2025

Embed the use of the new Family Plan ensuring SMART actions within the plans

Monthly case file audits have highlighted that most cases had SMART Child's Plans, with clear roles, tasks and responsibilities outlined, but there is continued need for improvement in this area of practice.

Contribute to the Valuing Care work and develop the LCS forms accordingly

All children up to the age of 16yrs now have a Valuing Care Profile within their Care Plans.

Review the effectiveness of the SAFER Plus process for children at risk of exploitation and harm outside the home

SAFER Plus has been found to provide a robust and effective multi-agency safeguarding mechanism, for some children who are subject to or are at risk of contextual harm, as an alternative to the CP Conferencing process.

Update existing Child and Family CP Conference information documents

The Family CP Conference information leaflet has been updated. The Child's CP Conference information leaflet is due to be finalised following consultation with young people.

Evidence that the quality assurance activity is having an impact, monitor the progress and arrangements and continue the Safeguarding Unit audit activity

Increased scrutiny and reporting of the timeliness of RCPCs has resulted in an improvement of our performance in this area. An audit of ICPCs has highlighted potential opportunities to increase collaboration and innovation. Midway Reviews are completed consistently, which contributes to evidencing CPA/IRO footprint in monitoring pace and progress. OMs report on the outcome of Midway Reviews for CP Plans 18 months+ to Senior Management. An audit of Midway Reviews highlighted that the majority of Midway Reviews have a positive impact on case progression.

Ensure ICON Cope is promoted within CP Conferences where there is a new baby in the family

Prompts and guidance on utilising ICON Cope have been implemented across the children's electronic recording systems, incl. in the Child's Plan and the CPA QA section of the Conference outcome form.

Continue to implement the developments for life story work and recommended actions from the Steering Group

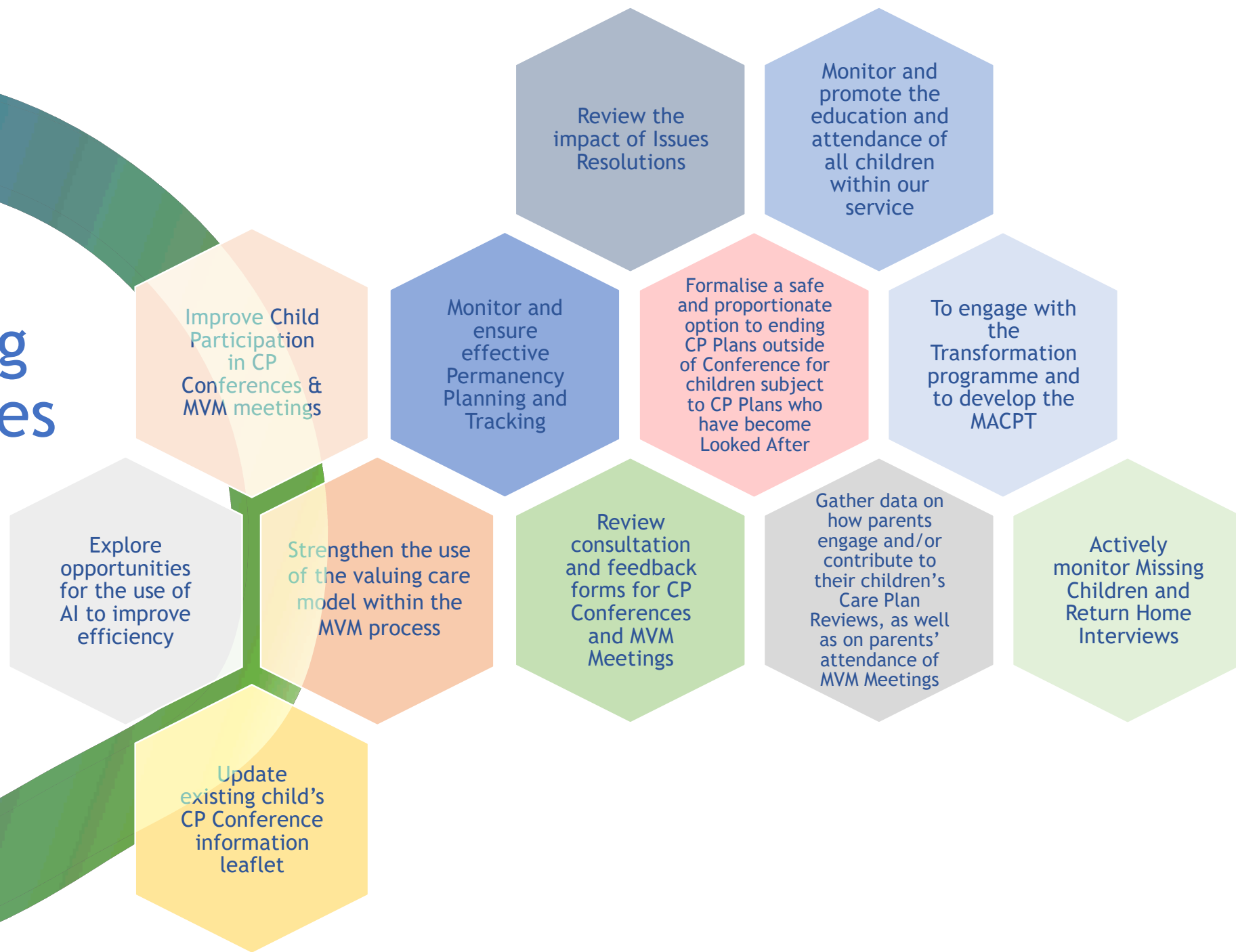
Additional Life Story and Later Life Letter monitoring and timescales have been added the IRO outcomes form.

Ensure effective permanence tracking is captured within the MVM outcome form

Permanency planning and permanent placements are both now tracked with the IRO outcome forms. This data can be accessed to support on going monitoring.



# Children's Safeguarding Unit Priorities 2025/2026





# CPA/IRO Activity

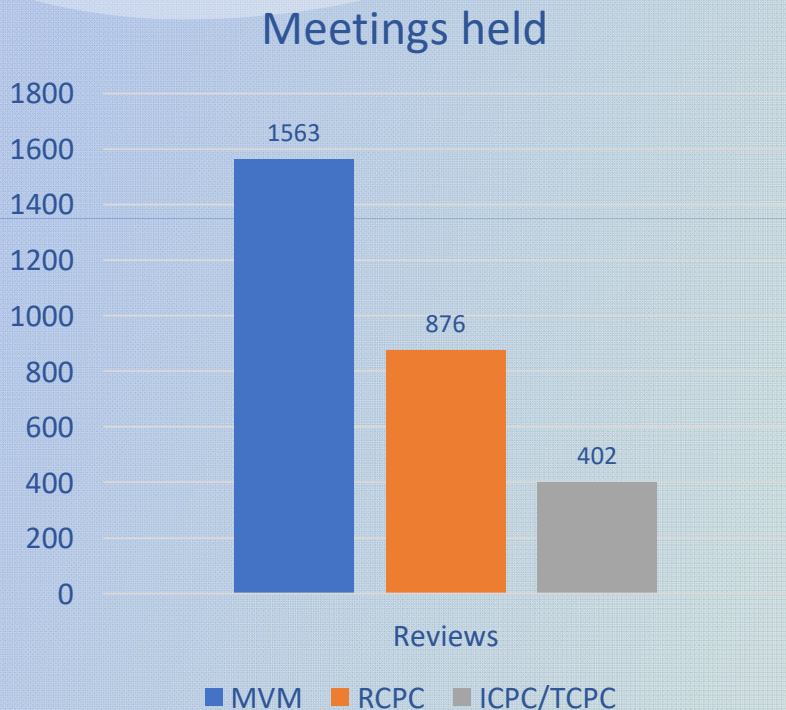
## Child Protection Conference and My Voice Matters Meetings

Child Protection Conferences (CPC) and My Voice Matters Meetings (MVM) are usually held as a single review involving all relevant family and professionals. However, MVMs may be held as a series of meetings 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 their meetings and ensuring their wellbeing throughout the process. Chairs exercise a key role in the implementation of the Local Authority’s Quality Assurance Framework.

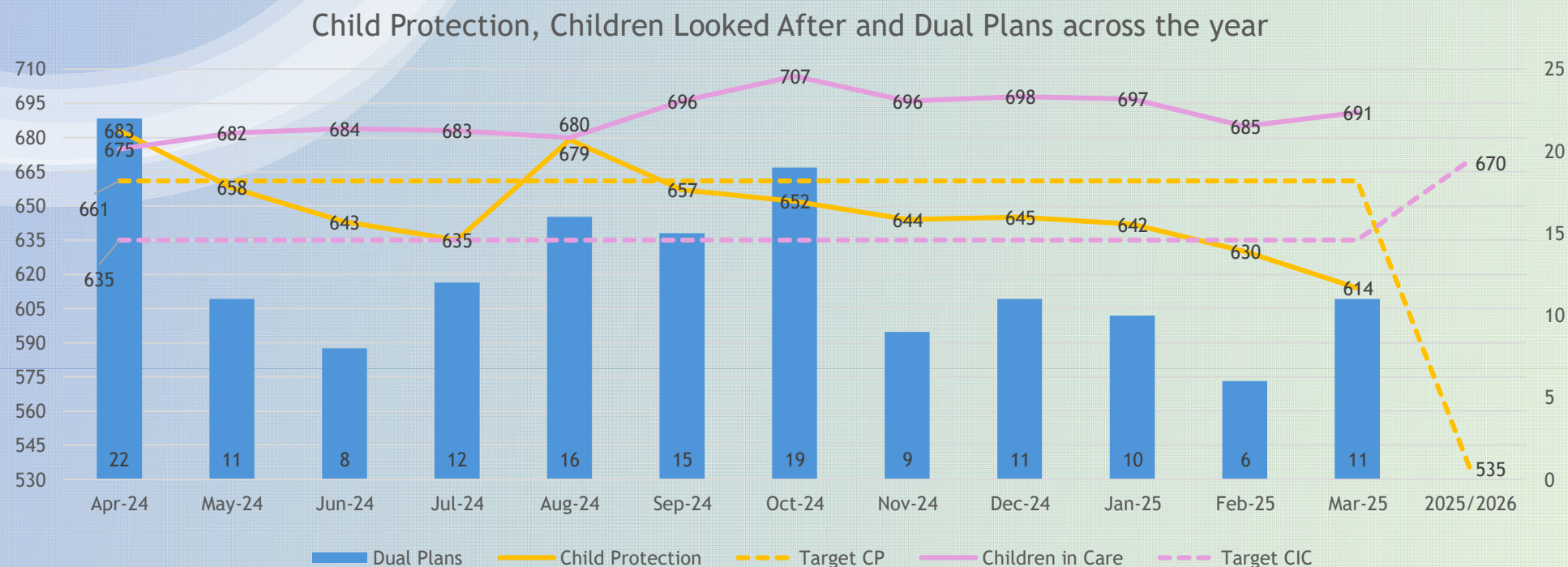
- 2022/23: meetings held 2719 (MVM: 1541. CPC: 1178)
- 2023/24: meetings held 2856 (MVM: 1569. CPC: 1287)
- 2024/25: meetings held 2841 (MVM: 1563. CPC: 1278)

The service has chaired:  
1278 CPC involving 2504 Child’s Plans  
1563 individual MVM meetings (for 807 children over the year)  
Equating to on average 197 meetings per Chair, (when fully staffed at 14.4)





## Total Number of CP Plans, CLA Caseload and Dual Plans



The number of children subject to CP Plans in East Sussex has seen a largely steady but overall considerable decrease in 2024/2025 of 10% (69 Plans). CFIP support has been a key contributor to reducing CP Plans where safe and appropriate. From September 2024 through to March 2025 CP numbers have remained below the year target of 661 CP Plans.

The number of CLA has seen a largely steady and overall increase as such CLA numbers have remained consistently above the year target of 635.

Safeguarding OM has started to review all Dual Plans (CP and CLA) on a regular basis and report on this to senior managers. The majority of dual plans is limited to the period between the date the child(ren) are placed in care and the date the Initial My Voice Matters Meeting is held, because a Review Conference is usually held on the same day to consider ending the CP Plan. There are only few cases each month where a multi-agency decision was made to retain the CP Plan alongside the CLA plan due to the on-going presenting risks to the child (i.e. children subject to S.20 outside of the court arena).



## Issues Resolutions (Raised by CPAs & IROs as part of the Quality Assurance role)

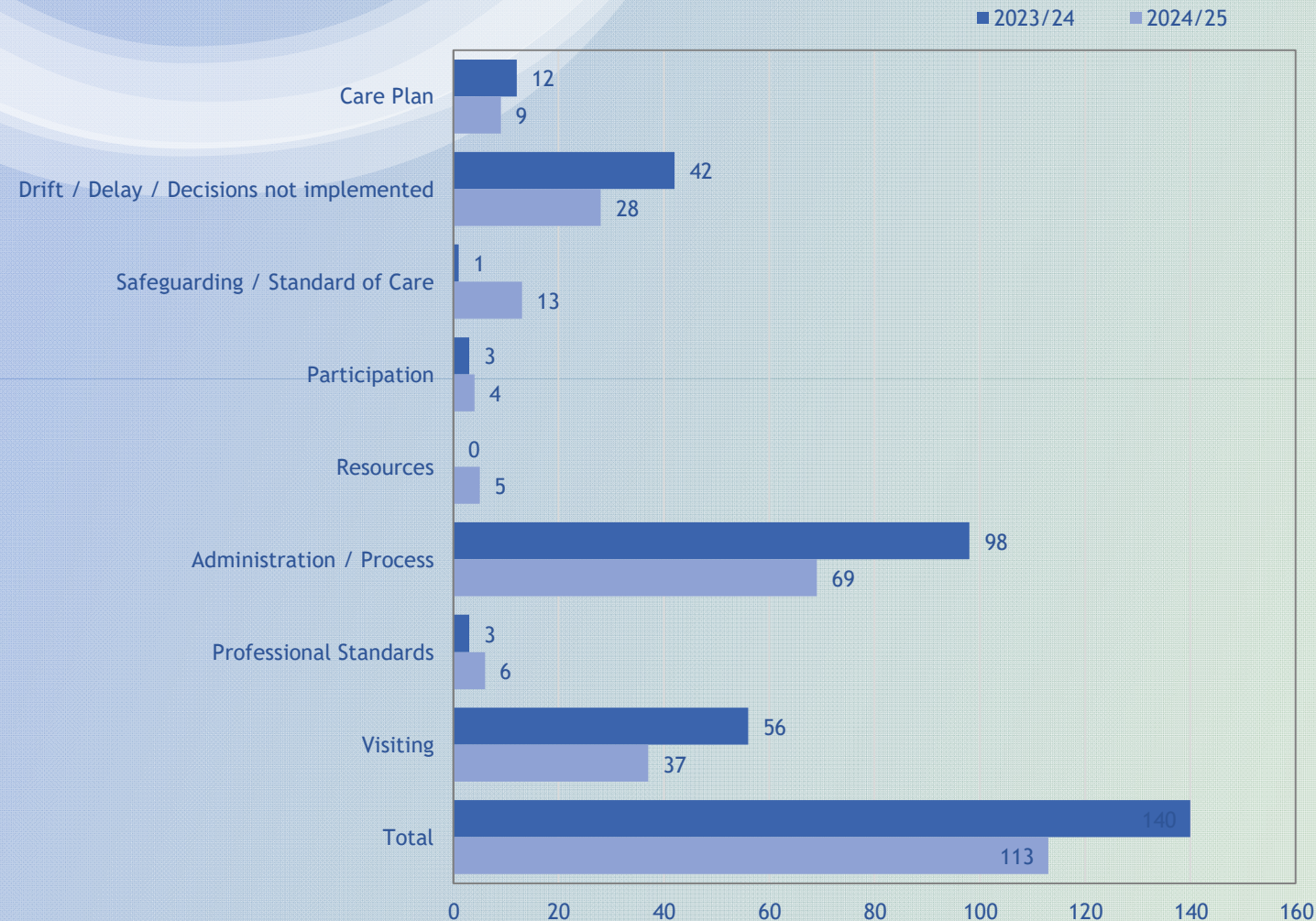
Quality Assurance Monitoring and independent challenge are statutory requirements for both the CPA/IRO roles. The Safeguarding Unit ensures a consistent approach across these services, with a focus on documenting effective challenge in children's files.

- 134 Issue Resolutions (IRs) were raised and 100% were resolved by 31 March 2025.
- 91% were resolved within 20 working days.
- Resolution requires a response from the Practice Manager and agreement from the CPA/IRO.
- 9.2% of IRs were escalated to the Operations Manager, with only 1 case going beyond that level.
- Common issues include missing pre-meeting records.

Issues Resolution	Child Protection Conference	My Voice Matters meeting
Care Plan	3	6
Drift & delay	19	9
Safeguarding/standards of care	11	2
Resources	5	0
Participation	3	1
Visiting	21	16
Administration/Process	42	27
Professional standards	6	0



# Issues Resolution comparison 2023/24 and 2024/25



Care Plan including when SW Team has not updated the CP/Care Plan between Conferences/Reviews. Care Plan does not identify needs.

Safeguarding includes concerns regarding robustness of plans, concerns regarding standards of care, timeliness of response regarding safeguarding issue.

Participation can include poor core group attendance or failure to include family members e.g. fathers

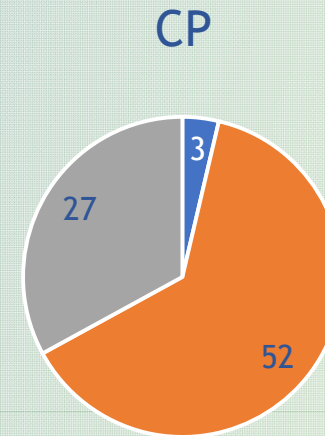
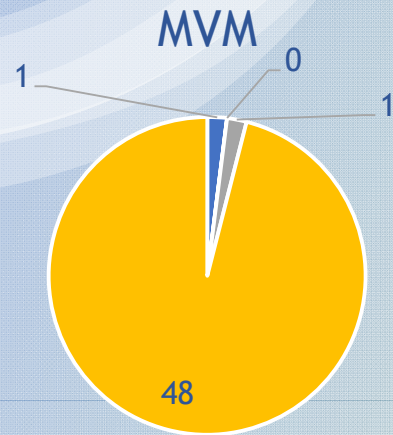
Administration/process includes pre-meeting reports not completed (on time), invitations not sent or sent delayed, meeting could not go ahead because SW unavailable

Resources including Concerns arising about inadequate health or education provision. Concern around the suitability of the placement to meet the child's needs

Professional standards can include delay in allocating a social worker or concerns about professional practice.



# Consultation & Feedback



- parentscare plan consultation
- professional feedback
- carer/parent feedback
- carer/parent consultation

- carer/parent feedback
- professional feedback
- carer/parent consult

The consultation and feedback forms for Child Protection Conferences and My Voice Matters meetings are now used as standard.

As a Unit we made the decision not to use these forms with children as they are able to access the Mind of My Own app either with their social worker or independently.

The numbers of completed consultation and feedback forms remains low and therefore we will be looking to review, amend and improve these forms. Given the levels of feedback received it has not been possible to identify any themes on good practice or improvement. We plan to have the new forms in use by October 2025, to produce more efficient monitoring of the service.



# Quality Assurance Audits

## 1. Monthly Audits by CPA/IROs

A total of 78 monthly audits were completed by CPA/IROs, contributing to Children's Social Care audit activity. Key findings include:

- 82% of audits showed consistency or improvement in practice.
- Improvements noted in SMARTness of Children's Plans, Core Group activity, up-to-date recording, and addressing current child needs.
- 16 Children Looked After (CLA) and 4 Care Leavers were reviewed.
- 69% of these cases maintained or improved quality of practice.
- Significant rise in Life Story work and use of the Mind of My Own app.

Areas for further development include:

- Continued expansion of Life Story work.
- Updating Placement Plans.
- Improving Chronologies to strengthen the voice of the child.

## 2. Thematic Audit: Midway Reviews

This audit evaluated the effectiveness of Midway Reviews in supporting the progress of the Child's Plan. Key points include:

- 16 cases audited (50% CLA, 50% Child Protection).
- Midway Reviews found to be valuable and purposeful.
- Embedded in 88% of cases with evidence of influencing progress.
- Useful tool for CPA/IROs to maintain oversight of case progression.
- Development needed to ensure outcomes and actions are connected across the system.
- Social workers report the process is helpful to their practice.

## 3. Timeliness of Initial Child Protection Conferences

To maintain oversight of conferences falling outside the 15-day timescale from the strategy discussion:

- Safeguarding Unit Operations Managers conduct weekly reviews.
- Reviews provide context to factors impacting timeliness.

## 4. Thematic Audit: Missing Children Process

Conducted by IRO Operational Manager and others, this audit highlighted:

- Most common age of missing children: 16 years.
- Two-thirds of missing children were male.
- 49% found within the first 12 hours.
- 6% were missing for over 72 hours.
- 74% were offered a Return Home Interview.
- Majority of cases showed robust triangulation of information.

## 5. Quality Assurance Integration

The Quality Assurance Operations Manager:

- Attends Safeguarding Unit meetings.
- Shares audit feedback and assesses changes required during the review period.



# During this year, the IRO service has been able to:

As the Operations Manager for IROs I observed some staff completing their day-to-day dual roles, it was great to see the working relationships that have been built between IROs and children. It was a pleasure to observe how child focused the MVM meetings are, how information, wishes and feelings are gathered during an engagement that didn't feel formal but did feel important to the child.

## The statutory duties of the IRO are to:

- Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relations 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; and
- Perform any other function as prescribed in the regulations.

***Good Practice Example:** Just to thank you for continuing to embrace the case audits every month despite the huge pressures on your time and capacity, as well as making the audits count. Your audits are so fab - thanks, really appreciate the effort you've put in!*

- **Ensure** that the My Voice Matters Meetings remain a child-led and focussed meeting, with children being supported to say who should attend and where they take place. If required IRO will hold a series of meetings to ensure they are able to fully review the Care Plan. Both IROs and Social Workers are creative in how children participate in their My Voice Matters (Looked After Reviews) but we are aware we need to improve participation.
- **Increase** the progression of children having their permanency secured through Long-term fostering. Joint working between the Children Looked After, Fostering and IRO teams to ensure all children placed with the same foster carers for 12 months where the court proceedings have been concluded progress the care plans of Long-Term fostering. The assessment fully explores the attachments made and the carers understanding of the needs of the child. The joint working identifies children, the discussions needed or held and monitors the progression on the assessment. We have seen the positive impact of this work in this review period, with an increase of 2% more children in long-term placements.
- **Review** the timeliness of My Voice Matters meetings, recording if any delays were purposeful and seeking to understand the reasons when meetings are held late. We have also been reviewing and monitoring the timeliness of children receiving their IRO Outcomes letter, again so the meeting is meaningful and holds purpose.
- **Support** children staying in contact with people that are important to them. This has included changes in how children are able to stay connected to the people who are important to them, that seeing friends and family goes beyond just seeing parents. Lifelong Links has supported children in re-establishing relationships with people they had lost contact with.
- **Strengthen** our monitoring and quality assurance role through midway reviews to prevent drift and delay, alongside building upon working relationships with the social work teams.
- **Work collaboratively** with our neighbours, to support and share ideas around working. We meet with East Sussex Safeguarding Team quarterly. We are also members and co-chairs of NIROMP & SEIROMP.
- **Promote** reunification, and support of these plans being stronger, with clear Operational Instructions, attendance at Valuing Care Panel to address any barriers in the supports offered alongside of the allocated social worker. We have seen an increase of 1% more children being placed with their parent.
- **Recognised** that more effort and support was required to engage parents in the My Voice Matters process, especially parents who didn't attend the care plan review meetings. New consultation record created so parents could still share their views around their child's care, even if they are not able to attend the meetings. Request made to reflect in the IRO outcomes parental participation, to promote parental involvement.



# My Voice Matters Meetings

This is the ESCC approach to statutory LAC Reviews.

The outcomes from the MVM meeting is written to be accessible to the individual child. An Outcomes Letter is written to each child, and copies shared with carer or placements and parents as appropriate. Outcome Letters to younger children are held on file, until they are old enough for them to be shared.



CPA/IROs encourage social workers to support children to use the app to gain their views prior to conferences and MVMs

## Timeliness of My Voice Matters meetings:

**89% of all My Voice Matters Meetings were held early or on time in 2024/25.**

Some reviews held late to ensure IRO continuity to the child; some reviews adjourned but recorded as late on the system. Some MVM meetings were moved to priorities ICPCs, however this is now being addressed and should not impact in the next review period.

- 2022/23 - 95%
- 2023/24 - 90%
- 2024/25 - 89%

## Participation: children make their voices heard in lots of different ways:

**92% of Children aged 4+ participated in some way in their review process during 2024/25.**

Further work needs to be completed to look at why there has been a drop in participation, to look at recording and being creative in how children participate so their voice is present and heard.

- 2021/22 - 97%
- 2022/23 - 97%
- 2023/24 - 92%

*Feedback Example: I can tell, my IRO tries to get to know me, but it is hard when you only meet 2 times a year as I am not the same person I was a year ago.*



# Knowing our Looked After Children

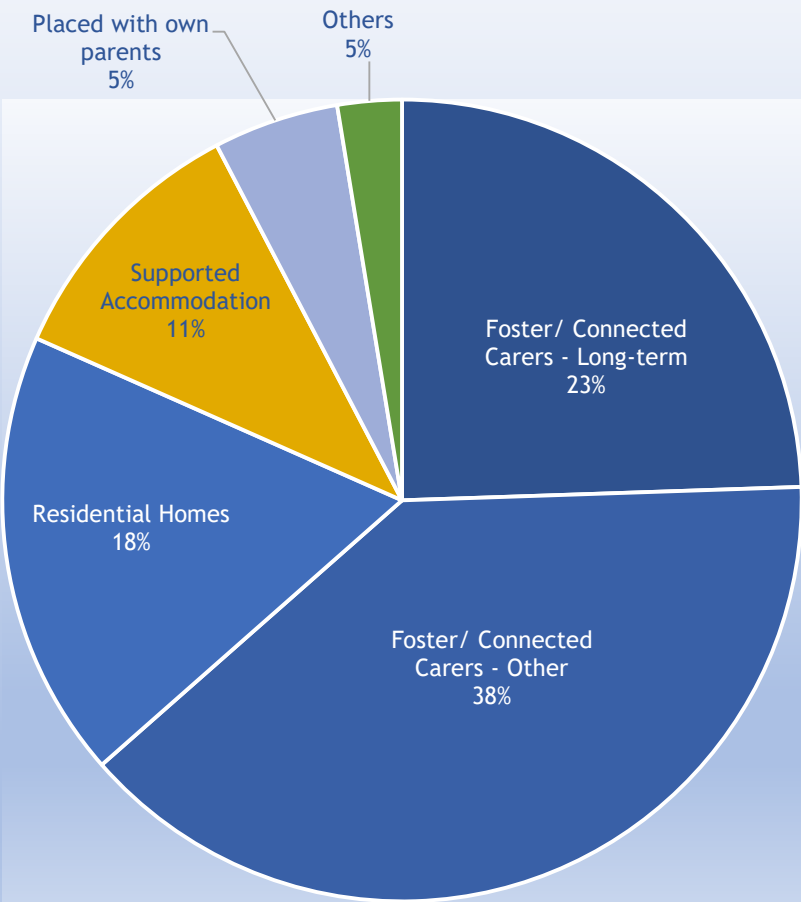
End of March 2025 66% of our children lived in family settings' this mirrors last years figures and shows the support for preferred family settings, reducing the need to place children in residential placements. Valuing Care Panel is supporting social worker in achieving step-downs back to family setting placements where it is deemed appropriate for the child based on their progress and needs.

- End of March 2023 - 69%
- End of March 2024 - 66%
- End of March 2025 - 66%

17 children looked after were allocated to the children with disabilities service. (2.5%)  
 3 children were accommodated during the year under short term breaks.

55% of our looked after children were male.

**Good Practice Example:** IRO was newly allocated to a child, and he did not want to engage in the MVM meetings or meet with the IRO. Before each MVM the IRO would try to engage and always sent an outcome letter offering the child to attend next time. After 18mths of attempts the child agreed that they would meet the IRO if they came to watch them at trampolining club. The child was extremely happy when the IRO arrived and agreed to 'try' the MVM meeting.





# Knowing our Looked After Children cont.

26% of placements for Children Looked After by ESCC were out of County end of March 2025.

- End of March 2023 - 22%
- End of March 2024 - 23%

68% of Looked After Children under 16yrs in ESCC had been accommodated in the same placement for at least 2 years (as at March 2025). This is lower than our Statistical Neighbour group (69% as at March 2024)

- March 2023: 71% same placement for at least 2yrs (under 16yrs)
- March 2024: 67% same placement for at least 2yrs (under 16yrs)
- March 2025: 68% same placement for at least 2yrs (under 16yrs)

During the review period the numbers of looked after children has risen and fallen, with April and August having lower numbers of around 675-676 children and during October and December the highest figures seen of 701-703.

End of March 2025 we were looking after 688 children equivalent to 66.4 per 10,000.

*Feedback Example: From a social worker to the IRO  
'I really like your style of writing your outcome letters to the children'*

*Feedback Example: From a social worker following a MVM 'thank you so much for yesterday, you are honestly amazing with everyone, and I learn so much from you 😊'*



# Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

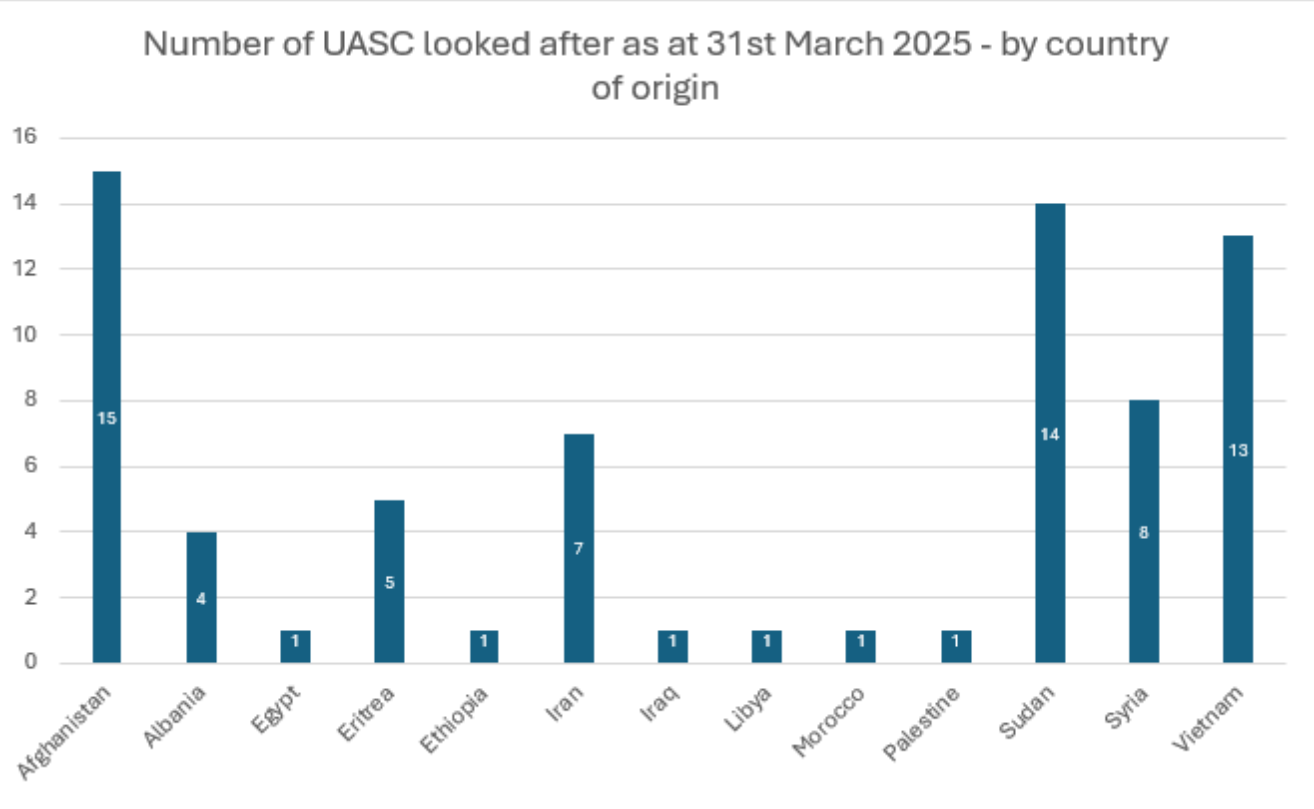
End of March 2025 ESCC were looking after 72 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children.

UASC Age	Number of Children
14	2
15	6
16	23
17	41

*Good Practice Example: My IRO always sounded like he was sticking up for me in the meetings, which I liked.*

As per published DfE figures there were:  
 End March 2023 - 72 UASC  
 End March 2024 - 73 UASC  
 End March 2025 - 72 UASC

UASC represent 43% of all ethnic minority children looked after at 31st March 2025  
 As at end of March 2025 - 88.9% of UASC are male





# Ethnicity of the children looked after population

28% of our looked after children identify as ethnic minority or mixed heritage - this includes our UASC

Row Labels	Count of CHILD
Any Other Ethnic Group	40
Any Other Asian Heritage	13
Any Other Black Heritage	3
Any Other Mixed Heritage	22
Any Other White Heritage	22
Black African	26
Black Caribbean	4
Gypsy/Roma	11
Indian	2
Pakistani	1
Traveller of Irish Heritage	2
White and Asian	4
White and Black African	7
White and Black Caribbean	10
White British	521
Grand Total	688

*Good Practice Example: My IRO has tried to get to know me as a person , like who I actually am, rather than what has happened to me which is really important as I'm still me no matter what.*



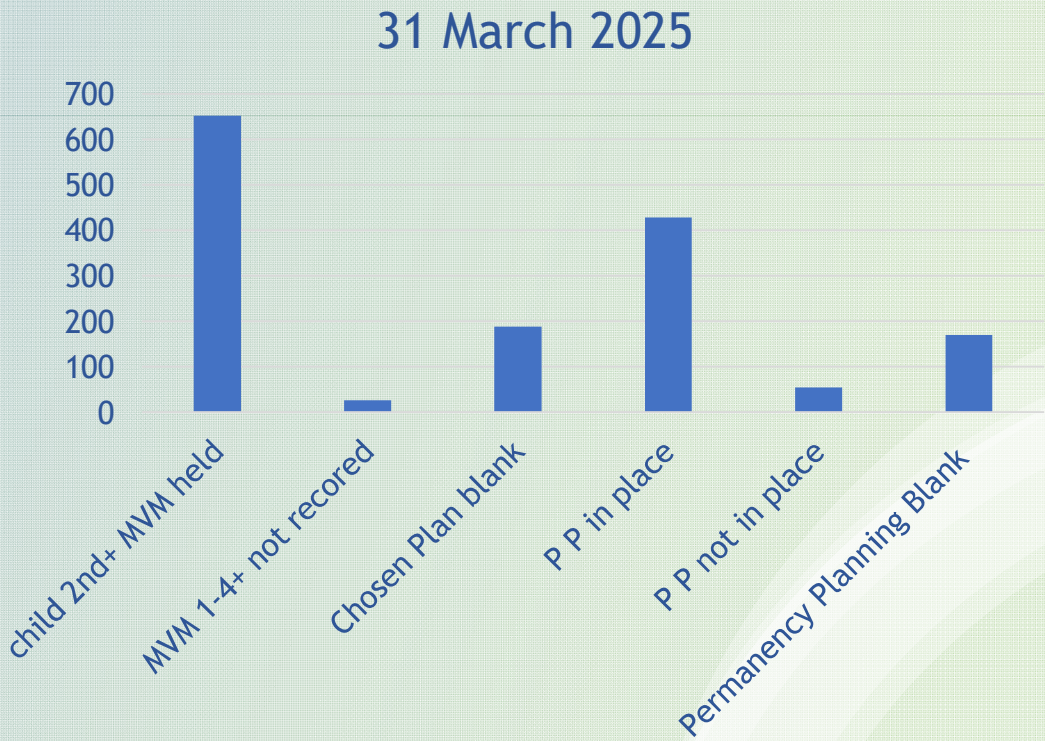
# Achieving Permanence

## IRO Handbook: Permanence planning

3.50 - Permanence is the framework of emotional permanence (attachment), physical permanence (stability) and legal permanence (the carer has parental responsibility) which gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity. The objective of planning for permanence is therefore to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond. Permanence provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and families from family support through to adoption. One of the key functions of the care plan is to ensure that each child has a plan for permanence by the time of the second review, as set out in the statutory guidance to the 2002 Act.

The pre-meeting report/care plan and IRO outcomes were updated in August 2024, with the Permanency Planning Question added to ensure that all 2nd MVM meetings captured that permanency planning was being considered and monitored. It should be noted that the permanency planning is only captured in Care Plans & IRO outcomes for children under the age of 16yrs. Children aged 16yrs+ have Pathway Plans and different IRO outcomes.

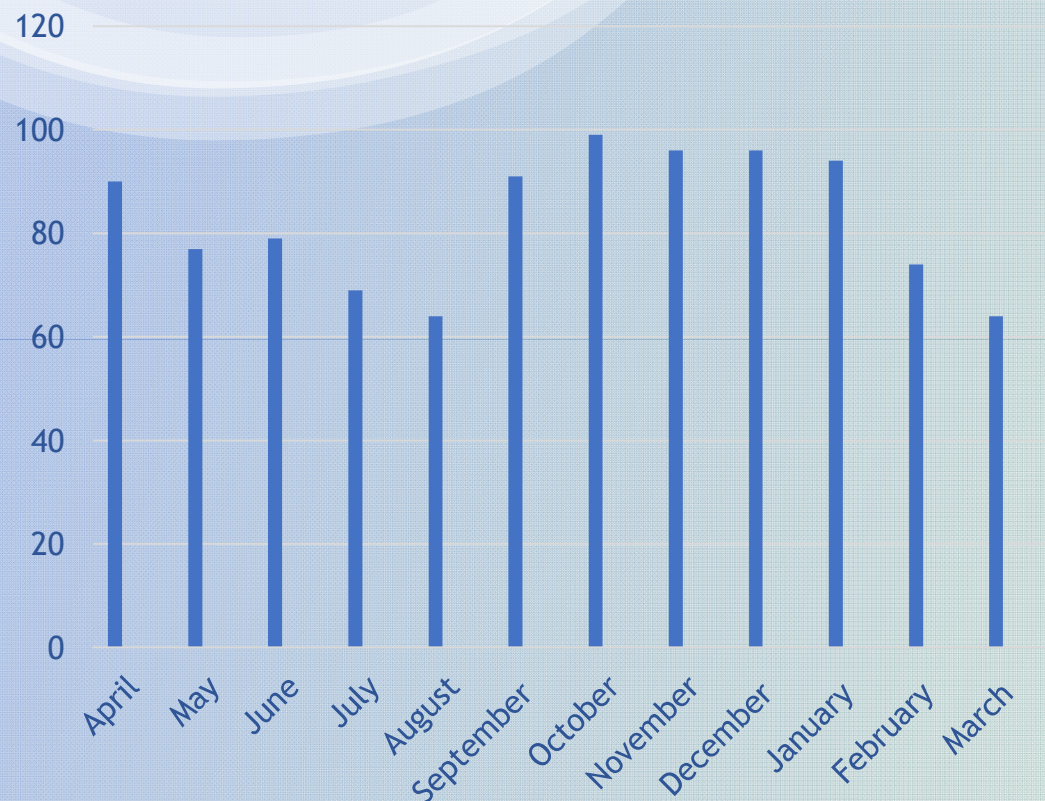
*Good Practice Example: I was given a choice between 2 IRO's which I thought was good as I felt like I had a say in it all.*





# IRO Oversight

## Midway reviews completed



Monitoring the case on an ongoing basis as noted in the **IRO Handbook**:

The monitoring role of the IRO is set out in the 1989 Act [section 25B, 1989 Act].

Between reviews, if the care plan continues to meet the needs of the child there may be no need for any communication between the IRO and social worker or the child.

However, there is a clear function of the IRO role to monitor the child's case on an ongoing basis. In East Sussex we achieve this through the reviewing of every looked after child's care plan and through midway reviews. The midway reviews reduce drift and delay in the decisions made within care plans.

**Feedback example:** From a manager to an IRO 'I really appreciate the amount of effort you put into both building working relationships with children, families and professionals alongside staying up to date with recordings'



# Continued Development - Looking forward to 2025-2026

## Reunification

This will remain a focus for IROs and they will continue to promote reunification where it meets the child's needs. A tracker will be created to monitor children returned home, ensuring Care Orders are discharged within appropriate timescales. Progress will be reviewed at My Voice Matters (MVM) meetings.

## Valuing Care

All children under 16 now have a Valuing Care Profile embedded in their care plans. Moving forward SW teams and IROs will use the radar tool to track progress and identify needs. IROs should promote the Valuing Care Panel to support step-downs from residential care or reunification. OM and IROs will attend the Valuing Care Working Group. A hearts and minds session will help IROs apply the profiles and radar tool effectively, in the reviewing of care plans and monitoring that children's needs are being appropriately met by the Local Authority.

## Permanency Plans

We are now able to monitor that all children at their second MVM now have permanency plans recorded. Accuracy of recordings will be reviewed through audits and data analysis. New recording methods will help identify and address drift and delay. OM will continue to attend Permanency Through Long-term Fostering meetings to track progress and ensure IROs are promoting the care plans and achieving permanency. Work with TCT to agree how permanency is recorded in Pathway Plans for 16-18-year-olds. IT and LCS will be asked to prevent blanks in permanency planning fields.



# Continued Development - Looking forward to 2025-2026

## Missing Children

IRO outcomes to include information about missing children, to ensure this remains on the agenda in MVM meetings and appropriate plans are in place.

IROs to remain vigilant around the reasons why children are missing, clarify return home interviews are meaningful and supports in place to reduce missing episodes and exploitation.

Share the IRO handbook 'when to inform IRO' with all CLA, TCT and locality OMs - this includes when children are missing.

## Lifelong Links

OM will continue attending meetings and encourage IROs to promote referrals.

The goal is for every care leaver to have at least two supportive relationships in their lives to support them through the transition into adult hood.

## Family Network Meetings and Kinship Carers

OM will contribute to the working group as part of the transformation process.

## Partnership with Parents

Aim to ensure all parents are involved in care plan reviews and have access to consultation documents, even if they cannot attend the My Voice Matters meeting.

Changes made in the IRO outcomes for parental participation to be more accurately recorded.

If parents cannot attend other arrangements are made for their involvement in the review process.

## Timeliness of MVM meetings & Outcome letters

Monthly tracking of reasons for late MVM meetings to be monitored and cross-referenced with LCS, to ensure accurate recordings.

Themes causing delays will be monitored and addressed.

Ensure IROs have enough time to complete meaningful outcome letters for children so meetings are meaningful and statutory timescales met.



# Glossary

ASO – Administrative Support Officer  
CFIP – Connected Families Intervention Practitioners  
CiCC – Children in Care Council  
CP – Child Protection  
CPC – Child Protection Conference  
CPA – Child Protection Advisor  
CSC – Children's Social Care  
ESSCP – East Sussex Safeguarding Children Partnership  
GDPR – 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  
LCS – Liquid logic Children's Service (IT system)  
LSCLG – Local Safeguarding Liaison Group  
MACE – Multi Agency Child Exploitation  
MVM – My Voice Matters  
OLA – Other Local Authorities  
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  
TCP – Transfer CP Conference  
UASC – Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child