

**Thurrock Children's Services  
Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**2017 -2018**

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## **1. Introduction and Purpose of the Annual Report**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to meet the statutory requirement for the IRO Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Board, established by the IRO Handbook (2010).

1.2 Following presentation to the Thurrock Corporate Parenting Board, Overview and Scrutiny and the Thurrock Safeguarding Children's Board, this report will be placed on the Council website as a publically accessible document.

1.3 Where possible, this Report refers to Children Looked After (CLA). Such use reflects the views and wishes of children and young people about their own identity and the way in which they prefer to be referred to by professionals.

## **2. Reporting Period**

This report covers the period from 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2017 until the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2018. Some of the data sets vary slightly from those published by children's social care due to minor variations in the timeframe for data capture, and the uploading of data onto various systems.

## **3. The Legal, Statutory and National Context of the IRO Role**

3.1 The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

3.2 In March 2010 the IRO Handbook was issued, providing Local Authorities with statutory guidance on how the IROs should discharge their duties. Significantly, the Handbook stated:

*The IRO has a new role conferred upon them to monitor the child's case as opposed to monitoring the review, effectively monitoring the implementation of the Care Plan between reviews (at para. 3.74)*

The Handbook goes on to state that the primary role of an IRO is:

*To ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child (at para. 2.10)*

3.3 In discharging this role, the Handbook notes (at para. 2.14) that the IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including:

- *promoting the voice of the child*

- *ensuring that plans for looked after children are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs;*
- *making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one;*
- *offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for children looked after and the delivery of services to them; and*
- *monitoring the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands*

#### **4. Local Context – Thurrock Council as a Corporate Parent**

As a Corporate Parent, the Council is ambitious to ensure that children achieve their best possible outcomes while in the care of the authority, and that all children are helped to find a long term permanent home.

The IRO service plays a key role in monitoring and supporting plans to achieve this ambition.

#### **5. Thurrock Council IRO Service**

5.1 During the reporting period, the IRO service has remained very stable with no changes in personnel. The Service continues to comprise of five, permanent Independent Reviewing Officers, all of whom are experienced and authoritative social work practitioners with social work management experience.

5.2 All five IROs working for the Service are qualified Social Workers registered with the Health and Care Professionals Council and subjected to regular Disclosure and Barring enhanced checks. All have relevant and appropriate skills, bringing to the role specialist knowledge and experience, including Children's Social Care safeguarding management. All have substantial experience of effective direct work with children and young people.

5.3 There are 4 female and one male IRO and 60% of IROs are from non-white backgrounds, ensuring young people in our care can be allocated to IRO's across a range of ethnic groups.

5.4 All five of the IROs are independent of Thurrock Social Care and are not involved in preparation of children in care plans or the management of children in care cases or have any control over resources allocated to a case.

5.5 During the reporting period the IROs were line managed by the Service Manager for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance.

## 6. IRO Caseloads and Services Performance.

### **IRO Case Loads**

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Average Case Load	56	67	67	61
Case Load Range	58 - 62	62 - 67	60 - 68	62 - 65

6.1 The average IRO case load increased from 56 individual children in 2015 to a high of 67 children in 2016 and 2017, but has since reduced to an average of 61 children in 2018.

6.2 In 2016 - 2017, due to illness, changes in working arrangements (one IRO was given a lighter case load) within the service, and an increase in Unaccompanied Asylum seeking children case loads did vary, and at a high point three of the IROs were carrying up to 80 cases for a couple of months. Additionally, from February to June 2018 one IRO was on long term sick leave which meant that case load had to be carried by the remaining IROs.

6.3 To contextualise the caseloads, the IRO handbook suggests that an average IRO caseload should be between 50 - 70 children and young people for a full time post (FTE). However, the average IRO caseload is a crude indicator of the work undertaken by the IROs, as children and young people's circumstance and situations vary in complexity, and in distance which needs to be travelled to placements. Children who are recently accommodated, placed at distance, involved in care proceedings or have placement disruption require a higher level of scrutiny and oversight than children who are in long term settled foster placements. There additionally needs to be enough flexibility in the service to respond to peaks in demand and associated workload, whilst maintaining a focus on quality and oversight.

### **Number of Child and Young Person in Care Reviews**

Due in Month	Apr-17	May-17	Jun-17	Jul-17	Aug-17	Sep-17	Oct-17	Nov-17	Dec-17	Jan-18	Feb-18	Mar-18	Year To Date
Total Due	67	82	60	64	68	65	64	58	61	61	26	74	750
Total Held	67	82	59	63	64	62	62	53	52	58	22	63	707
Total Held In Timescale	62	79	50	53	55	59	60	52	47	52	19	54	642
Percentage of 'Total Due' Held In Timescale	93%	96%	83%	83%	81%	91%	94%	90%	77%	85%	73%	73%	86%
Due in Quarter	Q1 209			Q2 197			Q3 183			Q4 161			
Average % of 'Total Due' Held In Timescale	91%			85%			87%			77%			

6.4 During the performance year April 2017 – March 2018, the IRO service conducted a total of 707 reviews, which is a slight increase on the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held in timescale, fluctuated during the year, being as high as 96% in May of 2017 and as low as 73% in March of 2018. The average for the year was 86%. Factors which affected performance related to:

- The IRO service not being notified early enough that children had become looked after and so there was a delay in booking the 1<sup>st</sup> review meeting.

- Changes of social worker and communication problems, which meant that a date for the next review had been set by the previous social worker but actions had not been carried forward by the new social worker and so the review had to be rescheduled
- Problems on the day of the review, social worker, carer, or report not available and so the review had to be cancelled
- The IRO report of the previous meeting had not been completed in a timely way and so there was a delaying in acting on recommendations leading to the review being rescheduled

Improving the timelessness of reviews is a key objective in 2018/2019 to achieve performance of 92%– 95%, which will be in line with statistical neighbour best performance. To achieve this all of the points above will need to be addressed.

### **Children and Young People’s Participation in Reviews:**

<b>Participation</b>	<b>Total</b>
PN1 Child attended & spoke for self	332
PN6 Child not attended, views sent	122
Not Recorded	105
PN0 Child aged under 4 at time of meeting	85
PN7 Child not attended & did not send views	83
PN5 Child not attended, advocate briefed with views	12
PN2 Child attended - advocate spoke	5
PN4 Child attended without contributing	4
PN3 Child attended - gave views non verbally	2
Grand Total	750

Children participated in person or through an advocate or by another means in 71% of their reviews (excludes Children under 4 years of age). In 13% of reviews the child or young person did not attend or send their views.

The IRO services key function is to promote the child’s voice within their review and for those children and young people who have not directly been involved in their review the reasons are always closely scrutinised. During 2017-2018, reasons given for non-attendance related to – older children making an informed choice that they did not wish to attend their reviews, illness affecting the child’s ability to participate and in some cases the child not being able to attend the meeting due to their behaviour. In these circumstances the IROs work closely with the connected network of the young person to gain as full a picture of the child’s life as possible.

The level of child participation is lower than would be expected and during 2018-19 the service will review methods for encouraging child participation with a view to significantly increasing the level of child participation.

### **Completion of Review Reports**

On completion of the child’s review the IRO is expected to complete a report on the children’s social care computer system. The report provides a note of the review and its discussions and the recommendation made by the review. During January

and February 2018, an audit of the system found that a number of reports had not been completed in a timely manner by the IRO. A tracking system was introduced to monitor performance in this area and set targets for improvement. The target has been set at the IRO uploading their review report within 20 working days from the review and this will be closely monitored and reported on during 2018 - 2019 to ensure improvement.

### **The use of Feedback and Consultation Forms**

The IROs have generally received positive feedback from young people. Key comments from young people have been

- The IRO has been a consistent person in their life and has followed them through care
- They have advocated for them

Although consultation forms are sent out prior to all reviews and IRO's are using feedback forms with young people, the results need to be more systematically used to ensure they drive service improvement. An objective for 2018 - 19 will be to involve young people in the redesign of consultation and feedback forms and also to look at the possibility of using different communication methods such as texting or the MOMO app.

## **7. Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock**

### **Numbers of Children in the care of Thurrock**

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Number	284	284	333	334	308
Rate per 10,000	68	68	79	80	74
UASC	25	39	64	55	32
Adopted	12	13	7	9	7

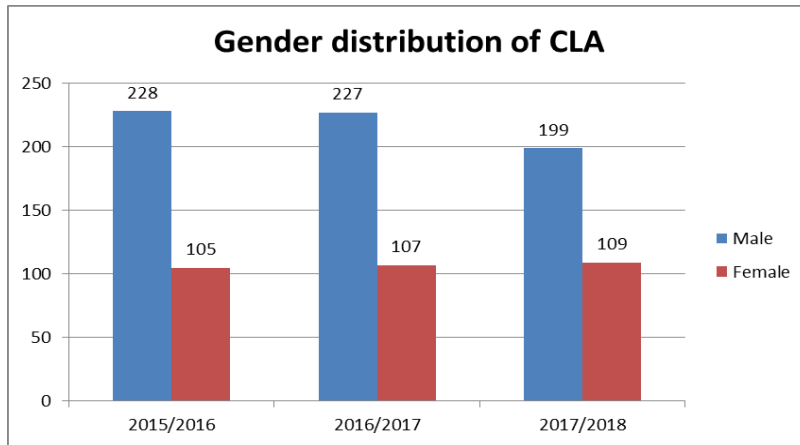
There has been a reduction in the number of children Looked after from March 2017 to April 2018. This has included a reduction in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children down to 32 from 64 in March 2016.

Thurrock's rate of children looked after in 2018 was 74 children per 10,000 of the child population which is a reduction from the previous year; but remains high in comparison with statistical neighbours which saw an average of 62 children per 10,000 for England as a whole and, 64 per 10,000 for authorities which are statistically similar to Thurrock. (Comparison figures are based on the 2017 results, the 2018 results will not be available until the autumn of 2018)

There were 7 adoptions completed in 2017/2018, which is lower in comparison to performance achieved in 2015 where 13 children were adopted. A significant factor for this performance has been changes to case law which has stressed that Adoption should only be used as a last resort where no other order will do. The implications for the IRO service are that although children looked after numbers are lower than last

year and therefore case loads are manageable, IRO's will need to carefully consider permanency planning for children and be alert to the potential for drift.

### Gender of Children and Young People in Care:



Over a three-year period the gender distribution of children looked after in Thurrock is interesting. The number of girls has remained fairly constant; the number of boys has reduced in this year, partly reflected in the reduction of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

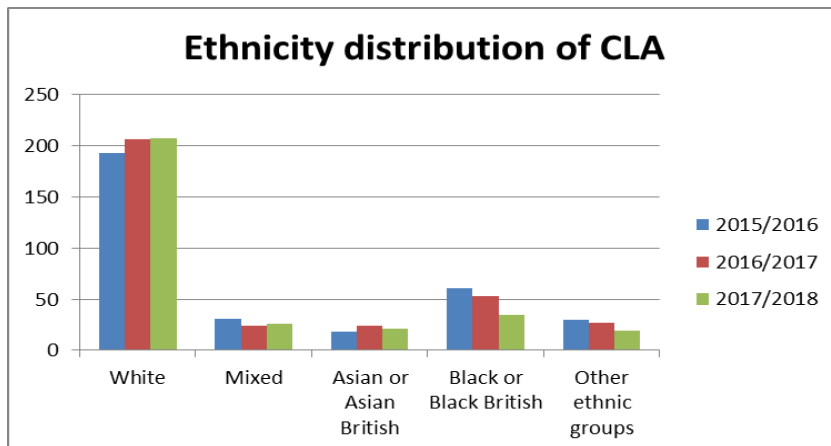
There is still a higher proportion of boys looked after, factors which can be affecting this relate to issue such as youth offending, aggression and non-school attendance, all of which put boys at higher risk of coming into care.

### Ethnicity of Children and Young People in Care:

The ethnic profile of Thurrock

	Thurrock Council	England
White <b>British</b>	80.91%	79.75%
All non-White <b>British</b>	19.09%	20.25%
All black, <b>African</b> , Caribbean and black <b>British</b>	7.82%	3.47%
All <b>Asian</b> and <b>Asian British</b>	3.77%	7.82%





The number of children looked after in Thurrock from a white background has remained relatively stable over the past three years, once you allow for the changing numbers of children looked after, there has been a decline in the number of Black or Black British children and children from other ethnic groups.

Children from Asian/Asian British backgrounds represent 8% of the children looked after in Thurrock as opposed to 3.7 % of the total population of the area and Black/Black British children represent 10% of the looked after population as opposed to being 7.82 % of the total population.

There has been a positive reduction in the number of Black/Black British children in the past year. There are also a significant number of other ethnic groups, which include a number of children from Eastern Europe.

Identity is a core factor considered within the dimensions on developmental need (Care Planning Guidance 2015). This domain concerns the child's growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. It is important for a child who is in care to know who s/he is and where s/he has come from, and also to understand, as far as s/he is able, why s/he is being cared for away from home. Race, religion, age, gender, sexuality and disability all contribute to a child's sense of identity, as well as feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society, including other cultural groups. The importance of understanding who we are and where we come from is recognised in good social work practice, for example through undertaking life story work or other direct work.

It may be difficult to translate the concept of identity into specific actions for social workers, carers and other practitioners, which can be set out in a care or placement plan. Nevertheless enabling a child to develop a positive self-concept and self-esteem is another basic task of parenting, which usually happens naturally in families but may be more difficult in a care context.

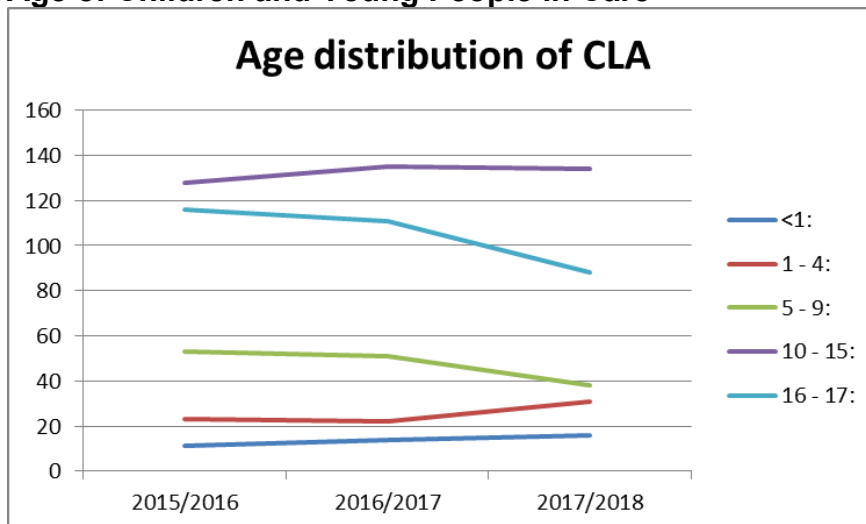
Racial and cultural identity is an important aspect of identity for many Children Looked After. Dual and multiple heritage children are over-represented in the care system nationally and in Thurrock represent 7% of the looked after population. In Thurrock only 2% of the population were registered as dual heritage in the 2011 census. A child in this situation will need to have his/her sense of racial and cultural identity not only preserved but positively promoted. The assessment of each individual child's needs alongside the child's own views will determine the actions

which should be put into the care plan to ensure that s/he is able to develop a strong sense of identity and self-esteem. This will act not only as a strong protective factor against unhealthy risk taking behaviours, but enable the child to maximise his/her talents. Disabled children may also need particular help in developing a positive sense of identity in the face of negative public stereotypes about disability.

The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 set out the information, which must be provided in the placement plan [regulation 9 and Schedule 2]. The carer will need to know about the child’s family, his/her race, religion and culture, the language spoken at home and any disabilities or other special needs.

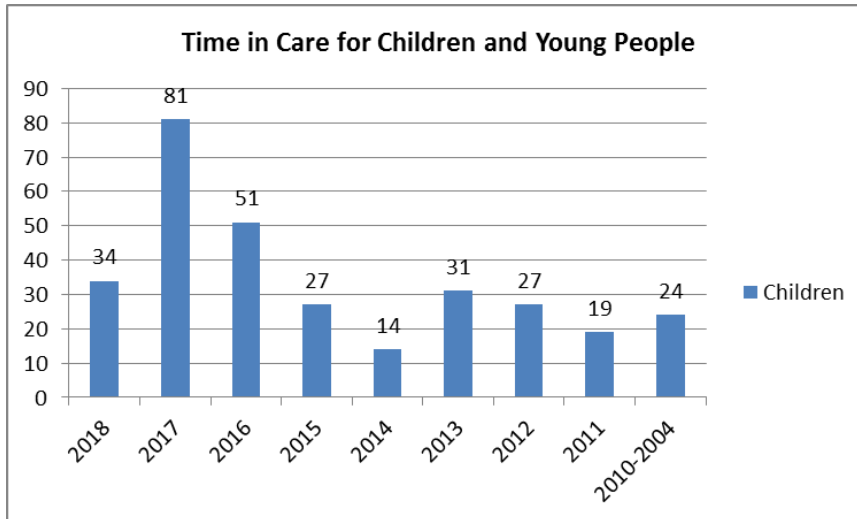
The challenge for IROs and the service has been in ensuring appropriate matching for children seeking placements and in making recommendations for how a child will be supported in the placement. An action for 2018 - 2019 will be to audit the impact of reviews on this vital area of work.

### Age of Children and Young People in Care



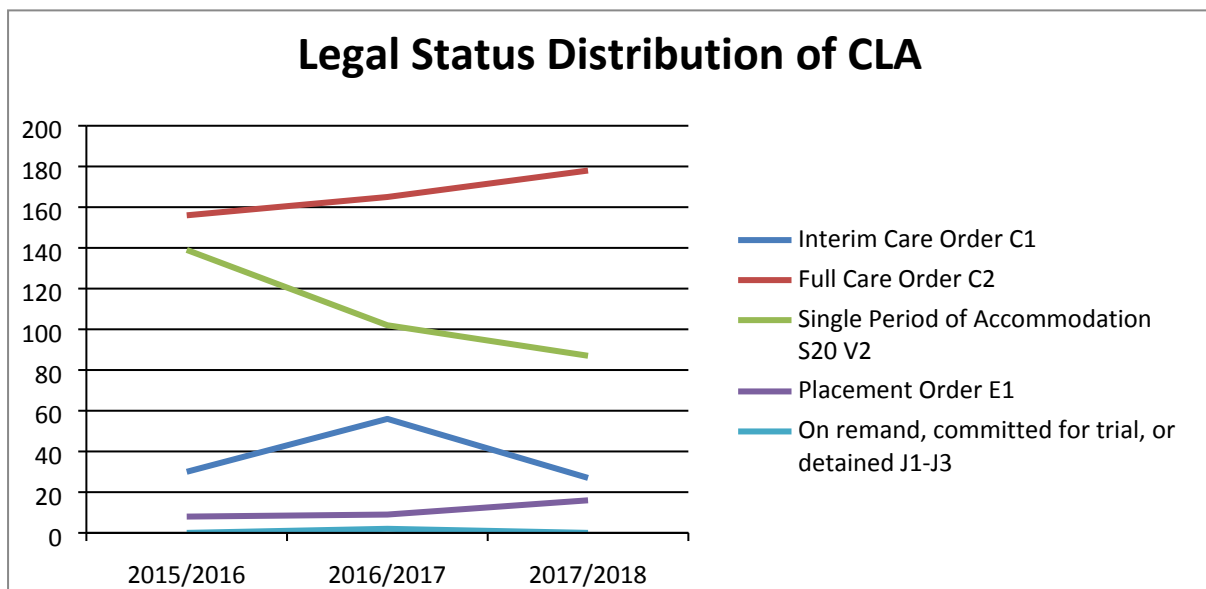
There has been an increase between 2016/17 and 2017/18 in the number of children under one (4 more children) and between one and 4 (10 more children), permanency planning will need to ensure that these children are progressed speedily through the care system, and could lead to a rise in the number of children seeking SGO’s and Adoption in 2018-19. There has also been a reduction in the number of 16-17 year olds which relates to fewer young people remaining in care until they reach 16 and 17 and fewer older children being brought into care.

### Time in Care for Children and Young People



The graph above shows the distribution of children according to when they came into care. From this we see that 166 children came into care in the last three years and are still being looked after. There is a significant drop in the number who are still in care who came in during 2015 and 2014, this is to be expected as the majority of children who were brought into care between four and five years ago should have been helped to find long term permanent care either through returning to their family, an SGO arrangement or adoption. The remaining children who came into care more than 5 years ago are likely to be in the long term care of the authority until they reach 18. The challenges for the IRO service are in ensuring that there are effective permanency plans for all children and ensuring cases do not drift. There is also a need to work with long term foster carers to explore whether an SGO would be more appropriate for a child who may have been in placement for over five years.

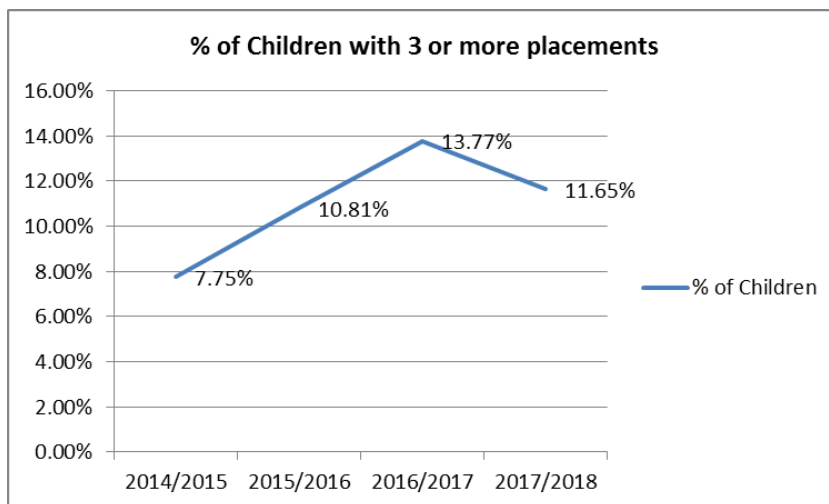
### Legal Framework for Children in Care.



There has been a significant reduction in the use of section 20 voluntary accommodations over the past three years. This could relate to the legal judgement by the former president of the family division justice Munby that advised local

authorities against using section 20 for over 6 months without a clear plan for reunification or where a care order may be more appropriate. It could also relate to further diversion work in respect of requests for care for adolescents. The number of children subject to care orders has continued to rise over the past three years (12% increase) in line with the national trend which has seen a 14% increase in care proceedings overall. The out turn for 2017/18 from CAFCAS has indicated the first year when applications fell by 2.7%, and so there may be a further reduction in proceedings in 2018/19. The current situation though is that the majority of children looked after by Thurrock are subject to legal orders which can be seen as good practice. The challenge for the IRO service is to ensure that assessments are accurate and care plans properly reflect the complexity of need.

### Placement Stability of Children and Young People in Care.



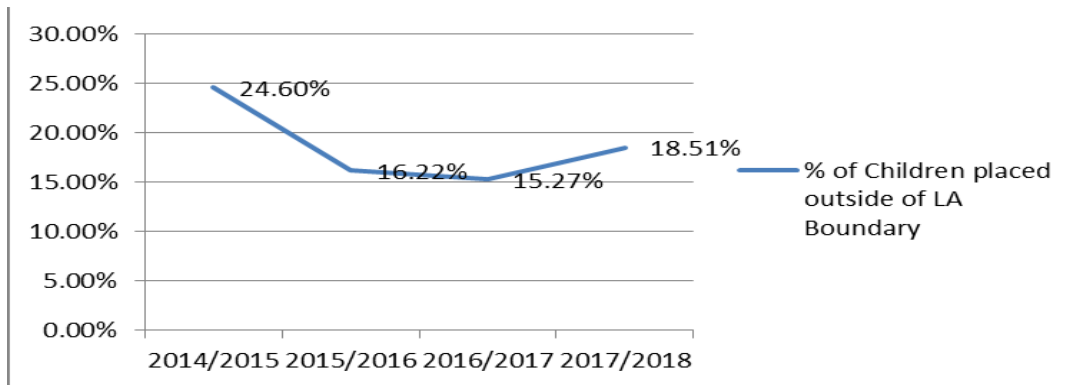
The impact on placement stability relates to the increasing complexity of children's needs as shown by the rise in care orders. The number of children requiring three or more placements had been steadily increasing, until this year when the trend was halted and there was a 2% reduction, this is improving practice. Factors which greatly affect placement stability are the amount of planning before a child comes into care and the quality of the matching of the placement to the child's needs. Where children come into care in an emergency, the initial placement choice is more likely to be determined by availability rather than need and there is a higher risk of the placement breaking down.

Placement stability is strongly correlated to the progress that children and young people make in care, as moves caused by placement breakdown can negatively impact on a young person's sense of worth, emotional resilience and is disruptive to developing friendship and support networks and educational achievement. Therefore

a key role of the IRO is to support placement stability through scrutiny of placement plans. Placement stability in Thurrock is at 11.65% in comparison to the England and statistical neighbour averages of 10% and the IRO service will continue to monitor this area carefully.

### Placement Location of Children and Young People in Care

Percentage of children placed more than 20 miles from their home address

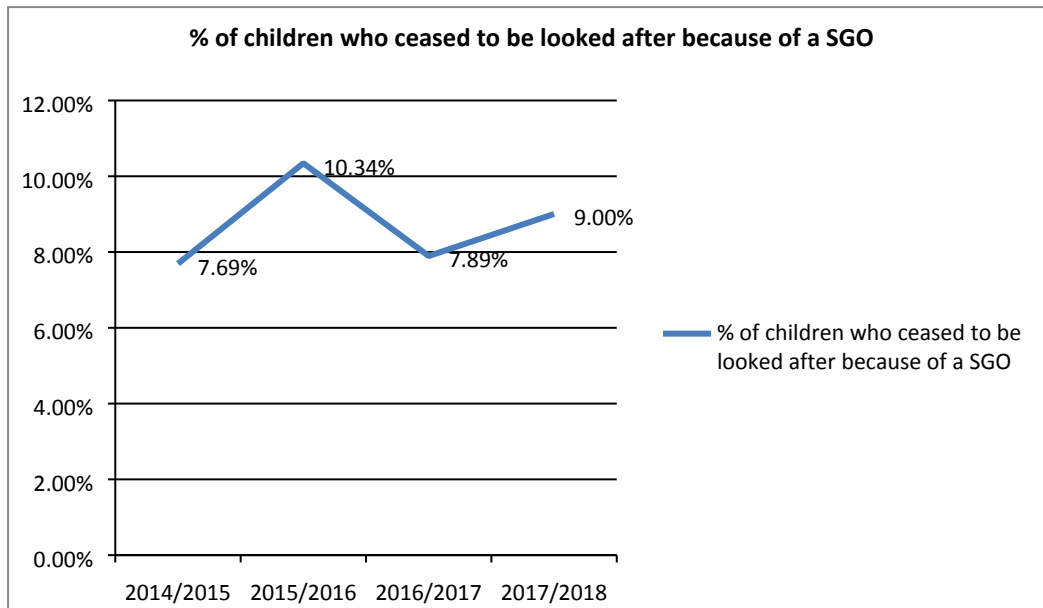


The above summary chart is showing the percentage of children placed more than 20 miles from their home address. The service recognises the need for every effort to be made to place children as close to their home and community as possible so far as is consistent with their need to be safeguarded, or to have access to specialist therapeutic services.

The IRO service have highlighted that for a small minority of children in care who have complex needs and extreme behavioural support needs there are very limited local options for appropriate placements, and these children are often those which end up placed at distance. The IRO service will monitor these placements closely to ensure that any opportunity to bring them closer to home is taken.

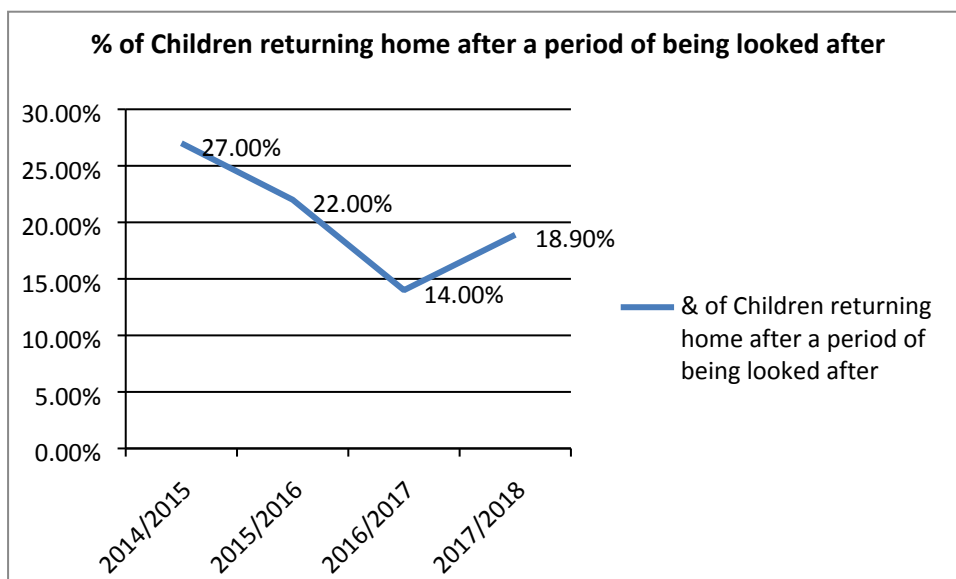
### Use of Special Guardianship

A special guardianship order (SGO) is an order appointing one or more individuals to be a child's 'special guardian'. It is a private law order made under the Children Act 1989 and is intended for those children who cannot live with their birth parents and who would benefit from a legally secure placement. It is a more secure order than a child arrangements order because a parent cannot apply to discharge it unless they have the permission of the court to do so, however it is less secure than an adoption order because it does not end the legal relationship between the child and his/her birth parents. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced Special Guardianship and Special Guardianship Orders.



Special Guardianship Orders can be used in care proceedings when looking at placing the child away from parents with friends or family members and offer a child a more “normal” childhood experience. They are also used to convert long term fostering arrangements, again the reason is the child is not subject to the formal statutory reviewing procedures, and provides for a higher degree of commitment from the carer and a better chance of long term permanency for the child. In Thurrock 9% of children left care through special guardianship as opposed to 11% in the Eastern Region, and 12% nationally. We need to consider if we could make more use of special guardianship, and the reviewing service will need to carefully look at plans to identify the possibility of using special guardianship.

### Returning home from care



This graph allows us to consider how care is being used in Thurrock with the aim of working with parents to return their child to their care. This figure neatly maps

against the previous graph which showed 80% of children are subject to care orders. We can see from the graph that 19% of children last year returned to their parents care, and the majority of these did so between their 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> year. The issue here is the use of local authority care is increasingly happening where there are high risk issues, formal legal proceedings are required and the child or young person is increasing less likely to return home. It would be worth considering this hypothesis and auditing reunification plans to see how successful they have been.

## **8. IRO Service impact on the outcomes for children and young people.**

### **Dispute resolutions and escalation**

One of the key functions of an IRO is to oversee the needs and rights of every young person in the care of the Local Authority. This responsibility is outlined in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2015 and IRO Handbook 2010. Every child in care has an Independent Reviewing Officer appointed to ensure that their Care Plan fully reflects their needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the Local Authority's legal responsibilities towards them as a child or young person in care.

An IRO will ensure that the wishes and feelings of the child are given due consideration by the Local Authority throughout the whole time the child is in care and will monitor the performance of the Local Authority in relation to the child's case. On occasions this means that it will come to the attention of the IRO that there is a problem in relation to the care of a child or young person, for example in relation to planning for the care of the child, or the implementation of the plan or decisions relating to it, resource issues or poor practice by the Social Worker. When this happens the IRO is required to seek a resolution.

It is acknowledged that the resolution of disputes can be time consuming and can create tensions between the IRO and the Local Authority. Nevertheless, the child's allocated IRO is personally responsible for activating and seeking a resolution, even if it may not be in accordance with the child's wishes and feelings if, in the IRO's view, it is in accordance with the best interest and welfare of the child, as well as his or her human rights. In compliance with the IRO Handbook 2010 there is in place a formal Dispute Resolution Process whilst acknowledging and giving primacy to informal resolution where possible.

Thurrock's IRO's manage most disagreement and challenge very effectively and on an informal basis. More often than not, discussion with social workers and their managers is effective in achieving the progress required. That said, achieving a culture of effective challenge is difficult and success is ultimately rooted in confident and respectful professional relationships. At its best, challenge is perceived as helpful and supports professional learning and development which social workers and managers take forward in other cases and elements of their practice.

A Dispute Resolution Process is only effective if IROs, social workers and managers all perceive it to be effective and this remains an area which requires further and continued monitoring.

## Formal Disputes Raised 2017-2018

The IRO Service recorded 67 completed dispute resolutions which were about the following issues.

Number	Area of Practice Raised
11	Pathway Plan for child leaving care not completed
2	Permanency Plan for the child was not robust enough and had to be changed
24	Report had not been prepared for the review meeting
3	An issue regarding the plan for the child's education had to be addressed
3	Child's Health Assessment needed to be completed to address a specific issue
1	An SGO application needed to be made for the child ( case drifting)
2	Specific Assessment for the child had not been completed
3	There was a concern that the placement was not meeting the child's need

## Feedback from the Children in Care Council

The Children in Care Council was asked to provide feedback on the IRO service and made the following points

- Individual IROs were seen to be child centred and committed to their young people
- Young People said they trusted their IRO
- For some young people the IRO was the most consistent person – *“I've had her all the time I've been in care “*
- One young person felt their IRO was a good advocate – *they got things done!*
- Young people wanted more contact with their IRO
- Young people wanted to be able to talk to their IRO between reviews
- Some young people didn't see the point in going to reviews
- Some young people felt they got told off at reviews
- *They act as independently as possible and are not afraid to challenge other professionals on behalf of their young people.*
- *IRO's don't follow up on recommendations and chase up Social Workers actions until the following LAC Review and often nothing has been done within the six months between the reviews. It would be good if they could do this between reviews.*

It is positive that young people appear to value their IRO's and want more contact with them. During 2018-2019 the service will implement mid-point reviews, where IRO will make contact with their children and the placement to monitor the progress of plan and build their ongoing relationship with the young person in between reviews.

## Audit Activity



In preparation of this report an Audit was undertaken of CLA reviews (30) by the Service Manager safeguarding and Quality Assurance.

#### Key issues from the Audit

Current IRO practice is variable although there were some good examples and some very good recording of children's views and wishes; this was not always consistently found in the cases audited.

#### Practice issues, which need to be addressed

- Review Minutes not written up in timescale - some IROs were completing their write ups on time and in some cases within 2 days of the review, others were not completing them until a few weeks before the next review
- Child Participation was only recorded in detail in a minority of reviews
- Quality of recommendations - in some reviews there were clear child focussed recommendations. In a small number however there were too much reliance on stock phrases, or simply statements such as - continue to monitor contact
- Challenge to care planning - some cases showed robust and well thought out challenge. However in a minority of cases where planning was weak and care plans lacked focus and direction there was insufficient challenge from the IRO.

#### **9. Next Steps for the IRO Service: 2018 - 2019**

- 1. Implement IRO review minutes tracker and ensure all reviews to be on the system within 20 working days of the meeting**
- 2. Complete workshop with IROs and team managers on improving the quality CLA reviews**
- 3. IROs to complete development project with children in care council on child participation. IROs to review training needs on child participation. Aim to raise the level of participation in reviews to 90%**
- 4. Introduce compliance audit of all CLA reviews to monitor and ensure minimum practice standards (In place as of 1<sup>st</sup> July 2018)**
- 5. Review the dispute resolution procedure and tracking mechanism (Completed and implemented from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2018)**
- 6. Complete Audit of reunification plans**
- 7. Complete review of potential SGO cases – in conjunction with Permanency Panel**
- 8. Redesign of consultation and feedback forms and also to look at the possibility of using different communication methods such as texting or the MOMO app.**
- 9. Follow up audit of CLA reviews January 2019**
- 10. Deliver a set of practice standards for the IRO's by October 2018**
- 11. Develop and implement – midpoint reviews for all children looked after by December 2018**

